

## Delight, Desire and Drag

### The Saga of the Gibeonites and the Queering of Covenant Theology

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#### Abstract

Walter Brueggemann (1999) describes the biblical covenant relationship as the realization of two partners' (the "self" and the "other's") authentic "delight and desire." When defined as the task of relating to one another in an effort of mutual accountability, covenant is an understandably attractive concept. Yet an analysis of covenant-making in the Hebrew Bible reveals a paradoxical practice founded on an exclusionary arrangement between Israel and Yahweh in which the underlying binary assumptions of ethnicity, class, and sexuality undermine the principles through which covenanting with other "others" outside of this relationship may be possible. Bringing these dynamics to light necessarily calls into question the efficacy of the covenant model for diverse communities today seeking more egalitarian models for community building. This paper interrogates the eroticized foundations of covenant theology from its biblical foundations to its reception in biblical scholarship, followed by a queer reading of Joshua 9 that illuminates how the Gibeonite use of "drag" both challenges and amplifies the notions of "self" and "other" upon which the biblical covenant turns most heavily. "Cross-dressing" their way into covenantal relationship with Israel, the Gibeonites expose the nominal nature of covenantal identity and provide the raw material to begin to covenant differently.

#### Keywords

Biblical studies; Biblical theology; Walter Brueggemann; covenant; disidentification; drag; Gibeonites; hospitality; Joshua 9; queer theory

With the opening lines of her poem, aptly titled "The Purge," Marge Piercy offers a provocative backdrop against which to begin queering covenant in the Hebrew Bible:

*Beware of institutions begun with a purge,  
beware of buildings that require the bones  
of a victim under the cornerstone, beware  
undertakings launched with a blood  
sacrifice, watch out for marriages  
that start with a divorce.*

Piercy's words echo as the drama of the Hexateuch unfolds and the relationship between Yahweh and Israel culminates in a mass extermination of Canaanites. The concluding admonition, "watch out for marriages that start with a divorce," underscores queer theory's fundamental assertion that personal relationships are implicated in "systems of meaning that structure whole persons and whole worlds"

(Schneider 2000, 211), no matter how well concealed the foundations—or bones—of such systems may be. This article explores how the covenant relationship between Israel and Yahweh is shaped by such a system of meaning, or what Michel Foucault describes as the “multiplicity of force relations [and] ... points of resistance” that function within a matrix of power relations (1978, 92-5). At times in the covenant drama of the Hebrew Bible, these “force relations” produce, as we see in the bloody conquest of Canaan, profoundly catastrophic results. Joshua’s charge to take full possession of the Promised Land (Josh. 1:3) in accordance with the covenantal promises made to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) and Moses (Exod. 19:5-6) requires an adherence to Yahweh’s instruction to annihilate all the peoples of Canaan in order to purify the land (Deut. 20: 16-18), a policy known as *herem* or “the ban.” However, despite the ostensible need for this *herem* for the covenant’s fulfillment, the Gibeonite resistance to it may provide deeper insight into the dynamics of covenant relations than other texts traditionally associated with Israel’s pact with God (e.g. Genesis 12, 15, 17; Exodus 19-34; Deuteronomy 5-11; Josh. 24:1-28).<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the Gibeonite episode highlights the ways in which the elements of ethnicity and class coupled with sexuality and gender can produce, reinforce, and undermine the structures through which the covenant is established.<sup>2</sup>

A queer hermeneutic typically places into question the stability of the heterosexual/homosexual binary and assumptions about the natural gender complementarity of men and women. As has been noted in critiques of queer scholarship in general as well as of queer biblical studies in particular,<sup>3</sup> issues of co-constitutive minoritized identities and intersectional oppression have rarely been taken up, rendering queer studies a largely white, Western enterprise that ironically sets up non-white and non-Western subjects as concealed “others” in a discipline intended to challenge the normative. The Gibeonite text may provide one site through which to address these “constructed silences” (Goldman 1996, 175) within queer biblical discourse and to provide further grounds for a more multivalent analysis of identity construction and performance in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>4</sup> With these concerns in mind, this essay has three interrelated aims: (1) to examine how the readers of the Bible in both academic and religious circles have typically—and uncritically—thought about covenant theology in binary terms through the writings of one of its major proponents; (2) to offer a queer reading of Joshua 9 that illuminates how the Gibeonite use of “drag” both amplifies and challenges dualistic categories of “self” and “other” upon which the biblical covenant turns most heavily; and (3) to consider, with the lessons of the Gibeonites in mind, the ongoing efficacy of covenants for diverse communities today. While many religious

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical references apply to the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> Special thanks to Tim Sandoval who first turned me on to the complexities of the Gibeonite story many years ago.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Goldman (1996, 169-82) and Stone (2001, 21-2).

<sup>4</sup> I say “further grounds” to acknowledge as important the contributions of Randall Bailey (2010), Patrick S. Cheng (2002), Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (1994), Jeremy Punt (2010), Ken Stone (2004), Eric A. Thomas (2015), and Manuel Villalobos (2011) who have each contributed analyses of biblical texts with attention to the way in which categories of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality co-constitutively intersect in the production and effects of identity. The fifth chapter of my own recent work, *Narrative Desire and the Book of Ruth* (2018) examines the co-constitutive nature of ethnic and heterosexual melancholia in the book of Ruth. If I have omitted other persons or examples, the error is mine.

congregations and denominational bodies seeking to foster a message of welcome are drawn to covenantal language to delineate communal values and structure community relations, the Gibeonite story illustrates that what may appear ideal in theory falls short in practice. For contemporary transgender, bisexual, lesbian, and gay persons in particular, who have experienced *unwelcome* from many quarters of the religious world, more egalitarian models for community building are vital if a more pluralistically inclusive vision is to be realized.

The queer lens I employ here is informed largely by queer theorists working at the intersections of sexuality, race, class, and gender, including scholars focused on drag performances as sites of cultural meaning. By invoking drag, I do not mean to draw direct equivalencies between the Gibeonites' trickery and the gendered performances of contemporary drag artists (although gender dynamics do emerge in the narrative). Rather, I intend to demonstrate how the Gibeonites' subversion of covenantal identity can be *illuminated* by drag performativity. Just as drag theatrically exposes the nominal nature of an original or primary gender identity, the Gibeonites, by "cross-dressing" their way into covenantal relationship with Israel, creatively unmask the social construction of the biblical covenant and the instability of the identities forged therein.

### **Walter Brueggemann's "Delight and Desire"**

Perhaps more than any other current biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann has written prolifically about what he deems the central theme of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>5</sup> I choose Brueggemann as my focus not only for his writings on covenant, but because he possesses a wide readership, and thus a significant influence, in both academic and religious circles. Covenanting, generally defined as the task of relating to one another in an effort of mutual accountability, is an understandably attractive idea. Brueggemann asserts that the endeavour to learn to relate to and be concerned for "the other" is a lifelong journey. In his most extensive treatment of the subject, *The Covenanted Self* (1999), he makes a persuasive argument for the use of covenant theology as a radical alternative to the predominant consumer ideology of our contemporary world. Brueggemann argues that we do not bring just any issue to God in covenant, but those matters which reflect the meaning of the Exodus—the liberation of the oppressed and the rejection of socioeconomic systems that exploit the vulnerable for material gain.

Of immediate suspicion to the queer reader, however, is the sexual dimension Brueggemann employs in his analysis. He eroticizes the covenant relationship between Israel and Yahweh and between the self and the other as the ideal aim of both partners' authentic "delight and desire" (Brueggemann 1999, 35-47). He suggests that the exploitative economic practices of the Canaanites serve as a seductive threat that is always potentially drawing Israel away from its covenant partner, to whom she is "bondaged" (24, *passim*). Moreover, the exclusive bond(age) between Yahweh and Israel, self and other, is, according to Brueggemann, one of the fundamentally defining aspects of the covenant relationship. Yahweh and Israel enter into this relationship for the sake of the other, barring all other "others." Such

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<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann's work on covenant has been put forth as a theological resource and organizational model for many, from Cuban political exiles, Mexican immigrants, and disaffected white middle-class Americans, to major denominations. See Brueggemann (1989, 6-22); Brueggemann (1991); Hoffman (2008); Isasi-Díaz (1995); and Stout (2004).

other “others” (the Canaanites) exist ironically outside of this idealized self/other paradigm. Before discussing this matter further, it will help to briefly examine some of the core ideas that shape Brueggemann’s theology of covenant.

In *The Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (1997), Brueggemann writes at length about the historical emergence of covenant theology within biblical interpretation. As a rejoinder to the zeitgeist of Enlightenment rationalism, early nineteenth-century scholars like Karl Barth, Albrecht Alt, Gerhard von Rad, and Walther Eichrodt sought to recover the internal theological claims of the Hebrew Bible (Brueggemann 1997, 6-42). Von Rad in particular stressed the distinctiveness of Israel’s covenant with Yahweh and the narrative structure it provided for Israel’s faith (1966). Arguing that the historical recitations of Deut. 6:20-24, 26:5-9 and Josh. 24:1-13 formed the basis of Israel’s earliest corporate theology, Von Rad envisioned early Israel’s cultic life to include a periodic reaffirmation of covenant loyalty, liturgically updated as new historical events unfolded (Von Rad 1966, 68-74; discussed in Brueggemann 1997, 31-4). While the historical basis of von Rad’s reconstruction has been widely disputed, the innovation of his conceptualization, according to Brueggemann, is that “each new generation is invited to participate in this ongoing, normative, norm-giving process” (1997, 34).

Also of interest to Brueggemann is Eichrodt’s (1961) concept of *covenantal relatedness* (Brueggemann 1997, 28).<sup>6</sup> Writing approximately twenty years before von Rad, Eichrodt was the first to develop a full-blown biblical theology of covenant in which he argues that Yahweh and Israel exist as bilateral, interactive, and interdependent entities (Eichrodt 1961, 36-69). This framework of mutuality, as Brueggemann would similarly argue in his own work, stood in contrast to the “rationalistic individualism” espoused in the modern era (Eichrodt 1961, 12). “For, as Eichrodt understood,” writes Brueggemann, “‘being’ in the Old Testament means ‘being with’: being in the presence of, being committed to, being identified with, being at risk with” (1997, 28). Eichrodt’s contemporary, Martin Buber (among others) would similarly articulate covenant relations as the “dialogical principle,” (commonly termed the “I-Thou relationship”) in which the human I is “faithed” into existence by a preceding Thou (see Brueggemann 1999, 1).<sup>7</sup>

Finally, in *The Covenanted Self*, Brueggemann moves to develop the concept of covenantal relatedness further by incorporating contemporary paediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott’s theory of Object-Relations. Winnicott postulated Object-Relations to explain the way in which children develop personhood. In contrast to Freud’s theory of intrapsychic personality formation, for Winnicott, a child cultivates ego-strength through the primary relationship with the mother, who is an identifiable, external other (Winnicott 1971, 1-34, 115-127; discussed in Brueggemann 1999, 3-4). A “good enough mother” is one who teaches the child to balance a sense of omnipotence with an ability to yield to her. If a mother fails to encourage this balance between assertion and yielding during infancy, “the outcome is a phony self in which all sense of the real is ceded over to mother, and the baby

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<sup>6</sup> “Covenantal relatedness” is Brueggemann’s term for Eichrodt’s covenant theology. Eichrodt does use the term “bilateral” (1961, 37, 57, 66).

<sup>7</sup> Franz Rosenzweig (1921), Ferdinand Ebner (1921), and Gabriel Marcel (1935) developed similar concepts to Martin Buber’s (1923) “I-Thou” relationship.

never receives or embraces or enacts a full true self, but is devoted to mother in a life of bribery” (Brueggemann 1999, 4).

Brueggemann posits we must learn, like the child relating to the mother, to balance our dependence on God with our own agency. We live within an enduring creative tension, asserting and yielding to a God who both exists incommensurate to us and desires mutual relationship with us (Brueggemann 1999, 5-6). Likewise, we must learn to relate to our neighbour in ways that liberate both the self and the other. We enact our true identities as relational beings, and if we do not learn to “other well” we develop a “false self,” causing us to expend energy on “false issues” (6).

In summary, Brueggemann understands covenant to be the primary normative claim of the Hebrew Bible, characterized by a bilateral relationship of covenantal relatedness between Israel and Yahweh. Israel (and by association, we) realize a true self by learning to assert ourselves and yield to God and others in ways that promote justice and peace. Foremost for Brueggemann, service to neighbour stands in fundamental contrast to exploitative economic practices. Pharaoh’s bricks are rejected for a new social vision (Brueggemann 1999, 24). The Israelites enter the land of Canaan to introduce the Deuteronomic Sabbath programme and transform the society into a more just and egalitarian civilization. In this civilization, Brueggemann contends, “Canaanite” is not an ethnic term, but “a pejorative code word used to refer to modes of public power and social relationships that are exploitative and oppressive ... Or in Israel’s frame of reference, ‘Canaanite’ means ‘anti-covenantal’ or ... ‘anti-neighborly’” (1999, 99):

The “Canaanites” are the “other” to Israel who are seen to constitute a threat (putting Israel’s place at risk) or a seduction (persuading Israel to abandon its covenant vision of the land). While this antithetical mode of social organization signaled by the term “Canaanite” does not justify all the violence present in Israel’s land tradition, it does help us understand why Israel concluded that Canaanite systems of land management must be eliminated, if the land of promise was to be a land of neighbourliness. (Brueggemann 1999, 99-100).

Brueggemann’s rationale for Israel’s genocidal campaign of “neighborliness” may seem to strain credulity. Yet, as Helen Paynter reminds us, “hospitality is held in tension with holiness” throughout the Hebrew Bible (2018, 47-48). Israel is often challenged by the competing obligations to welcome the stranger and to prevent the corruption of the land by idolatrous “foreigners.”

That said, Brueggemann’s use of the Canaanites as a foil in his covenant theology is clearly contradictory to his own theology of “‘othering’ with grace and courage” (1999, 1-17).<sup>8</sup> The *sexually-laden* derogation of the Canaanite as a seductive force and the antithesis of Israel’s true “delight and desire” reflects a particularly insidious tendency in biblical scholarship to characterize Canaanites as sexually deviant. Until very recently, the polemic against Canaanite sexual practices, both

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<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann’s usage of the term “Canaanite” is also puzzling given his own admission that the overstated contrast between “Israelite religion” and “Canaanite religion” in early twentieth-century German biblical scholarship was problematically deployed to uphold Israel’s cultic distinctiveness (1997, 33).

within biblical texts and within modern biblical scholarship, went largely unchallenged. In passages like Leviticus 18, the biblical writer(s) attempt to set apart the Israelites from the Canaanites by expressly forbidding certain sexual behaviours such as incest (vv. 6-18), sex during menstruation (v. 19), adultery (v. 20), child sacrifice (argued by some to be a form of cultic prostitution) (v. 21),<sup>9</sup> male-male intercourse (v. 22), and bestiality (v. 23) that were purportedly practiced by Canaanites. While religious rites in ancient Near Eastern cultures typically reflected a concern for agricultural reproduction, Canaanite practice is frequently characterized in early twentieth-century biblical commentary as a “fertility cult” involving forbidden sexual acts (Stone 2004, 397-411). Tikva Frymer-Kensky deftly observes that historical and archaeological evidence does not support a Canaanite “sex cult,” and such notions are “the product of ancient and modern sexual fantasies” (1992, 199).

Sexualized rhetoric is not benign in its effects. As Foucault writes, “Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality; useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies” (1978, 103). Put more succinctly, sexual language has profound definitional power. When scholars uncritically impose sexual fantasy and innuendo onto the Canaanites, they are better able to mould them to suit their interpretive purposes. Brueggemann’s use of sexual rhetoric serves as a Foucauldian “linchpin” for his theories about the Canaanites’ economic exploits that are then easily mapped on to a discourse of religious and ethnic denigration.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, by framing the covenant in terms of our “delight and desire,” we as readers, by way of our identification with the Israelites, are endowed with the power to define pleasure. With this power, cultural theorist Amber Ault argues, we are apt to “discount, negate, erase and depoliticize” those other “others” outside of the covenant relationship (1996, 207). This practice of “neutralization” renders such others at best invisible or at worst maligned and abused.<sup>11</sup> If we uncritically accept the rhetorical strategies which define the Canaanites as antithetical to our own pleasure—however defined—we are likely to dismiss their fate as a consequence of their outsider status.

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<sup>9</sup> As many commentators have noted, the injunction against the sacrifice of offspring (or seed, *zera*) to Molech in v. 21 is peculiar given the rest of the chapter's emphasis on sexual prohibitions. Lev. 20:1-5 discusses the prohibition in more length, characterizing its practitioners as “those who prostitute themselves” (*haz-zō-nîm*) (v. 5, author’s translation), leading Norman Henry Snaith to conclude that parents were giving over their children to be trained as temple prostitutes (1967, 125). Martin Noth suggests it is the mentioning of seed that connects the verse to the rest of the passage (1965, 136); in turn Timothy M. Willis argues that the sacrifice of offspring may have been viewed “as a dishonoring of the family unit akin to elicit sex” (2009, 162).

<sup>10</sup> That Brueggemann develops his arguments with almost full attention to economics and falls short of critically examining how gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity impact the covenant relationship is surprising. In his writing, ministry, and teaching, Brueggemann publicly supports the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons in the United Church of Christ. In *The Covenanted Self* (1999, 4), he even notes, rightly, that our society habitually calls for conformity with regard to sexual practices and self-indulgence in matters of consumer economics.

<sup>11</sup> In her study of the impugning of bisexuals by gays and lesbians, Ault identifies four distinct strategies of neutralization: suppression, incorporation, marginalization, and delegitimation.

Given that one of queer theory's central insights is that claims to "essential" or "true" identities are in reality the means by which to substantiate and elevate normalized categories of sex and gender against their binary opposites (e.g. heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, cisgender/transgender), Brueggemann's ideological framework contrasting the "true" self with the "false" self also invites deeper inquiry. A "true self," he argues, is one who finds joy in living out her covenant responsibilities of economic justice and mercy (Brueggemann 1999, 35-58). With this definition, Brueggemann implies that one need only live into that identity. However, the biblical basis for this self/other paradigm is constructed in relation to a marked absence through which the biblical writer(s) fulfil a narrative vision. Presumably for Brueggemann, the Canaanite represents the epitome of the "false self," as one who supposedly does not honour the command to love God and neighbour.

Nonetheless, the Canaanite presence *is required* for the relationship between Israel and Yahweh to persist. Though "neutralized" by virtue of their delegitimation and suppression, the Canaanites play a critical role in stabilizing covenantal relations. As historian of science Evelyn Hammonds argues in her discussion of the invisibility of black lesbians in queer studies, where discussions of subjectivity are "defined with white as the normative state of existence," those outside the conversation are nevertheless fully present as "black (w)holes" in the discourse. Drawing on the lessons of modern physics, she explains:

we can detect the presence of a black hole by its effects on the region of space where it is located. One way that physicists do this is by observing binary star systems. A binary system is one that contains two bodies which orbit around each other under mutual gravitational attraction. Typically, in these systems one finds a visible apparently "normal" star in close orbit with another body such as a black hole, which is not seen optically. The existence of the black hole is inferred from the fact that the visible star is in orbit and its shape is distorted in some way or it is detected by the energy emanating from the region in space around the visible star that could not be produced by the visible star alone. (Hammonds 1997, 149; cf. Wallace 1990, 218).

The study of black female sexualities, Hammonds concludes, must take into account this susceptibility to distortion, and progressive change requires "think[ing] in terms of a different geometry" (1997, 150). Hammonds' physical analogy here calls to mind Eichrodt's notion of a bilateral relationship between Yahweh and Israel. In this "interstellar" arrangement, the Canaanites are the "black (w)holes" of the covenant system, and they must exist as a cosmic *distortion* in order for Israel to justify an ongoing exclusive, dichotomous relationship with Yahweh. An idealized relationship between the Israelite (self) and God/neighbour (other) depends on the presence of the Canaanites, who provide a solid position against which to identify (Stone 2001, 7). As the antithesis of the good, they lack the ability to define their own personhood. In a certain sense, such an arrangement exceeds the goal of eradication that the Canaanite ban is intended to accomplish. As Judith Butler laments, "It is one thing to be erased from discourse, and yet another to be present within discourse as an abiding falsehood" (1993, 312).

Brueggemann's conceptualization of the covenant falls short of his vision for a just and interconnected human community. In turn, we must ask if the covenant

as it is set forth in the Hebrew Bible is hopelessly flawed or if it can be redeemed as a model for relationship. Will applying a queer lens to the biblical covenant provide us with new insight through which we might appropriate it differently? How fixed are the identities of those representing a “true” and “false” self, and what is the fate of those who resist such categories? We now direct our attention to Joshua 9 to explore these questions further.

## The “Drag Kings” of Gibeon

The book of Joshua depicts the military campaign of Joshua and his armies as they lay siege to the Promised Land and endeavour to displace its inhabitants. Following the dictates of the *herem* the Israelites successfully storm the wall of Jericho (Joshua 6) and ambush the city of Ai (Joshua 8), obliterating nearly everything in their path.<sup>12</sup> As John Collins notes, the ban “was essentially a religious act, like sacrifice. It not only condoned indiscriminate slaughter; it sanctified it and gave it legitimation” (2018, 205). It requires an imaginative—and intrepid—act on the part of the Gibeonites to interrupt this theologically-sanctioned campaign. Having heard of the devastation that occurred in Jericho and Ai, the Gibeonites “on their part [act] with cunning” (Josh. 9:3), pretending to be from a far-off country. They then go on to plead with the Israelites to make a treaty with them by capitalizing on a clause in Deut. 20:10-15 (cf. Josh. 9:26) which requires the Israelites to treat those “in towns that lie very far from you” with lenience. Negotiations ensue, as we will see, in which the boundaries of the covenant will be tested.

Who were the Gibeonites? From what one may infer from the archaeological record, it appears that Gibeon was likely inhabited as early as the eighth century BCE through the early Persian period in which Joshua 9 was likely written.<sup>13</sup> Although Neh. 7:25 lists the “sons of Gibeon” among the post-exilic *gōlāh*, Diana Edelman points to the fact that there was a consistent settlement in the area of Gibeon throughout the Neo-Babylonian period (2003, 157-8).<sup>14</sup> This suggests that the majority (though if we believe Nehemiah, not all) of the Persian-period inhabitants of Gibeon were among those “people of the land” with whom Ezra and Nehemiah vied for land rights and forbade intermarriage. It is possible that Gibeon retained an ongoing association with Saul from the monarchic period,<sup>15</sup> and that the Persian-era tensions were fuelled in part by the historical memory of conflicts between Israel and Judah (ibid., 163-5).

Joseph Blenkinsopp asserts that the Gibeonites were “ethnically distinct” from the Israelites (1972, 28), although more recent archaeological discussions about ancient Palestinian peoples suggest there is considerable uncertainty on this

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<sup>12</sup> The “sin of Achan” (Joshua 7) provides a brief interruption to Joshua’s military success when it is discovered that one Achan of the tribe of Judah withheld some of the “devoted things” that were supposed to be sacrificed to Yahweh. This leads to God allowing the killing of thirty-six Israelite soldiers by the men of Ai.

<sup>13</sup> Nadav Na’aman dates Joshua 9 to the seventh century BCE, arguing that Josiah’s closing of the shrine at Gibeon led to the anti-Gibeonite polemic reflected in the text. While I am more persuaded by Diana Edelman’s argument for a later dating, there is nothing to suggest that prior Israelite and/or Judahite conflicts with Gibeon might not have also shaped this text and its reception in the Persian period. See Edelman (2003) and Na’aman (2009, 109-17).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Pritchard (1962).

<sup>15</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Blenkinsopp (1974).



point.<sup>16</sup> In the text, the Gibeonites are somehow synonymous with the Hivites (Josh. 9:7). This may be an ethnic or territorial designation, although it may also be a rhetorical device to negatively link the Gibeonites with the descendants of Ham, as the Hivites were among those groups listed explicitly in the Table of Nations in Genesis 10. Patrick Cheng, in his study of the various terms used to label the concubine in Judges 19, argues that multiple naming is a literary strategy deployed at times to distance readers from the personhood of the one(s) named (2002, 123). Certainly, the unexplained shift from “Hivites” (Josh. 9:1) to “the people of Gibeon” (v. 3) to, again, “Hivites” (v. 7), followed by a permanent shift back to “Gibeonites” (v. 16) for the rest of the chapter, is an odd detail that immediately draws our attention to issues of identity in the text.

Whatever their origins, narratively the Gibeonites are, above all, inhabitants of the “land of Canaan” and (under their alternate name, the Hivites) among those groups designated for destruction under the ban (Deut. 20:17). Canaan, according to Niels Peter Lemche, is “the land of promise, and thus the place where the anti-place, Israel, has to go in order to become unified with its place” (1991, 120-21). The indigenous Canaanites have little to no independent role in the historical narratives of the Hebrew Bible, and, from Lemche’s perspective, any departure from their consigned function has little effect on the aims of the biblical storytellers.

What does happen when a group of Canaanites depart from their assigned position? The trickery of the Gibeonites stands out as the only successful corporate challenge to the ban of the Canaanites in the book of Joshua.<sup>17</sup> The Gibeonites are part of a long line of crafty tricksters<sup>18</sup> in the Hebrew Bible that includes Jacob and Rebekah, Rahab, Ruth, and Esther.<sup>19</sup> Scholars writing from a postcolonial

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<sup>16</sup> Historically, in fact, most likely the opposite was true, and “Israelite” was likely a subsection of Canaanite culture. In this essay, I use the term “ethnicity” to reflect the narrative presumptions about the differences between the Israelites and the Canaanites, although the historical record is considerably more complicated. For a helpful analysis of how the historical distinction between Israelites and Canaanites became overstated in biblical scholarship, see Stone (2004, 113-19). Discussions regarding ethnicity in ancient Palestine and its environs are too complex to be addressed here, but perhaps it bears some significance in relation to Joshua 9 to note that in the ancient world, what we today think of as an “ethnic” identity seems to have been more akin to a territorial designation, based more upon geographic, cultural, and mythological origins than any assumptions of biological ones, an understanding of which would of course be anachronistic. Also significant is Philip Esler’s observation that in the Persian period, it seems that the concept of “a people” evolved into “a new style of ethnicity” as the *gōlāh* “selected, plotted and interpreted” events of the past and present to conform with a particular pre- and post-exilic identity (2003, 420). This effort towards an imaginative reconstruction of history also draws our attention to the fact that Joshua 9 was likely written during a time in which the boundaries between insiders and outsiders were highly contested.

<sup>17</sup> Even when God allows Ai to strike Israel as punishment for Achan’s sin, this is only a temporary setback to their conquest. Once the deed is discovered and Achan is punished, Joshua and his men return to Ai, destroy the city, and hang the king.

<sup>18</sup> Here, I am following Susan Niditch’s definition: “The trickster is a subtype of the underdog. A fascinating and universal hero, the trickster brings about change in a situation via trickery ... [Tricksters] never gain full control of the situation around them and often escape difficulties in a less than noble way. Their tale does not end with unequivocal success, but they survive to trick again” (1987, xi).

<sup>19</sup> For interesting comparisons of the stealing of Isaac’s blessing by Jacob and Rebekah and the trick of the Gibeonites, see García-Treto (1996, 79) and Niditch (1987).

perspective in particular have celebrated the Gibeonites as politically savvy indigenous peoples who successfully dupe invading imperialist forces.<sup>20</sup>

To better understand the dynamics of Gibeon's trickery and its implications for the intersectional queer reading I propose, we can turn to gender and queer theorist Judith Halberstam's (1998) discussion of "kinging," a term she coins for drag humour aimed at unmasking masculinity. Drawing a distinction between the drag king and the male impersonator, Halberstam writes:

A drag king is a female (usually) who dresses up in recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume. Historically and categorically, we can make distinctions between the drag king and the male impersonator. Male impersonation has been a theatrical genre for at least two hundred years, but the drag king is a recent phenomenon. Whereas the male impersonator attempts to produce a plausible performance of maleness as the whole of her act, the drag king performs (often parodically) and makes *the exposure of the theatricality* of masculinity into the mainstay of her act. (1998, 232, emphasis mine)

The "performance" of masculinity by the drag king is inherently ironic, however, for what chiefly defines male masculinity, and especially white male masculinity, argues Halberstam, is precisely the assumption of *nonperformativity*. As she explains, "current representations of masculinity in white men unfailingly depend on a relatively stable notion of the realness and the naturalness of both the male body and its signifying effects" (1998, 234). The very notion of "performance anxiety" during sex points to the fear experienced by (chiefly heterosexually-identified) men when the effort to "be" masculine is exposed (235).

The performance of nonperformativity by the drag king, then, is a "reluctant and withholding kind of performance" (Halberstam 1998, 239) that generally "demands a paring down of affect and a reduction in the use of props" (258; cf. 259-65) Yet, to enact such a semblance of the real while also exposing its artifice requires denaturalizing the normative structures upon which dominant masculinity depends. The female performer must appropriate the role, learn its contours, and perform it to such perfection that it produces a "comic disarticulation" of men from maleness (255).

In a display reminiscent of drag king performance, the Gibeonites find the perfect means with which to destabilize Israel's nominal identity, justify their right to covenantal relations, and secure their survival. They dress themselves and their donkeys in worn-out sacks, carry dry, mouldy bread and burst wineskins, and claim to be from a far country (Josh. 9:4-5, 12-13)—Deuteronomic images evocative of Israel's own wilderness journey. Technically, their appearance represents a reversal of Israel's appearance in the Sinai desert—God reminds Israel in Deut. 29:5-6 that during her years of wandering, "The clothes on your back have not worn out, and the sandals on your feet have not worn out; you have not eaten bread, and you have not drunk wine or strong drink, so that you may know that I am the Lord your

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Boer (1996, 129-52); García-Treto (1996); Havea (2013); Miles (2013); Schmid (2012); and Sharp (2012).

God.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the correspondence of images would surely incite Israel’s collective memory and may even, through Gibeon’s ironic “naturalization” of what it *actually* means to be a nomadic wanderer, call into question the authenticity of Israel’s wilderness story. What we might call Gibeon’s “reverse mimicry” is what performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz terms *disidentification*, a form of resistance that plays on sameness and difference to “[reconfigure] identity for a progressive political agenda” (1999, 7). I will expand on this idea further below.

The Gibeonites go on to convince the leaders of the congregation to swear an oath invoking the Deuteronomic loophole requiring clemency for those not among the Canaanite nations. They are so convincing that Joshua and the other leaders of the congregation forgo asking for Yahweh’s direction in the matter (Josh. 9:14). Read queerly, the Gibeonites’ pious, pitch-perfect appropriation of Deuteronomic memory and law has all of the elements of a flawlessly lip-synced production number. Even when they are discovered, they are able to once again appropriate Mosaic law, for as the Israelites have now incorporated them as resident aliens (Heb. *gerîm*) the Gibeonites are entitled to the status of “hewers of wood and drawers of water” (see Deut. 29:11). Though the writer(s) of Joshua do not spell it out, the oath signifies that they have also entered into covenant with Yahweh (see Deut. 29:12). Moreover, the entire episode takes place in the environs of Mount Ebal, the last site at which Moses charges the desert wanderers with their covenant responsibilities (Josh. 8:30, 33; cf. Deut. 27:4). Although the Gibeonites meet a less than ideal end, their ruse is a drag show *par excellence*. Israel’s identity is hijacked and her hegemony displaced, at least temporarily.

As Halberstam argues, kining unmasks the theatricality of nominal identity and brings to light the hidden anxieties of being found wanting. A closer investigation of Joshua 9 reveals several puzzling elements that point to such anxieties on the part of Israel.<sup>22</sup> At the outset, Gibeon presents itself as Israel’s inferior, citing fear that they would meet the same fate as Jericho and Ai. Later, they are incorporated into the covenant as a lower class of *gerîm* (Blenkinsopp 1972, 34). However, the Gibeonites so upset the equilibrium of the community that they seem to compromise or upend the authority of Joshua and the leaders of the congregation. At first, Joshua and the leaders make peace with the tricksters (v. 15); however, when the Gibeonites are discovered, it is the leaders (*sans* Joshua) who, against the rumblings of the wider community, make the decision to allow the Gibeonites to live (vv. 18-21). The very next verse seems to suggest that Joshua is unaware of what has transpired, as he expresses his own dismay at the deception, and then makes another pronouncement of their status as servants (vv. 22-3). The narrator adds that it is Joshua who saves the Gibeonites from the Israelites’ anger (v. 26), though the leaders made a like judgement just verses before (Rosenberg 2014, 78-9).

<sup>21</sup> As Gil Rosenberg observes, there may be a foreshadowing of the Gibeonite account at work in Deut. 29:5-6. The inconsistent relationship between the length of Israel’s journey and the state of the provisions (long journey, fresh provisions) mirrors its opposite (short journey, deteriorated provisions) in Gibeon’s deception. The preceding reference to misunderstanding in v. 4 (“But *to this day* the LORD has not given you a mind to understand, or eyes to see, or ears to hear”), Rosenberg argues, foretells Israel’s inability to recognize Gibeon’s trick (2014, 74-5); cf. Hawk (2000, 136-7).

<sup>22</sup> For complementary discussions of the textual oddities in Joshua 9, see Begg (1997); Boer (1996); Hawk (2000, 135-49); and Rosenberg (2014).

Though Gibeon shows deference, it is Israel who swears her allegiance to Gibeon when the treaty is made. Oaths are usually sworn by the subordinate party in a protectorate or suzerainty treaty (Blenkinsopp 1972, 40), a fact that seems to preoccupy the narrator. Roland Boer (1996) notes that there are three successive references to the swearing of the oath (Josh. 9:18, 19, 20) and three mentions of the phrase “hewers of wood and drawers of water” (vv. 21, 23, 27). These textual repetitions, or “tics,” he suggests, reflect a Freudian “compulsion to repeat,” indicative of an unspoken trauma related to Israel’s troubled identity (146-7).<sup>23</sup> Stone similarly refers to this psycho-literary phenomenon as “border anxiety” (2004, 123).<sup>24</sup> The post-exilic Deuteronomistic author(s), he argues, work assiduously to forge distinct Judahite identity boundaries during the Second Temple period. “The border anxiety arises,” he states, “as a part of an attempt to establish those boundaries more firmly and to avoid the ‘fear, nervousness and aversion’ (Young 1990: 146) that result from any fluidity in those boundaries” (407). If indeed the Gibeonite narrative is told to explain the incorporation of certain “foreign” elements into the post-exilic community, the community’s scribes face the dilemma of how to tell the story without compromising Israel’s (i.e. the *gōlāh* community’s) distinctiveness. When threatened, the biblical writer(s) have to continually reassert Israel’s dominance over those incorporated (as “hewers of wood and drawers of water”) in order to re-establish a stable sense of self.

In addition to these illustrations of textual anxiety, the treatment of the provisions gives the reader pause. At first, they are presented as dry and mouldy—evidence of the length of their journey. Later, however, the leaders of the congregation “partook” (Heb. *wayyiqhū*) of the bread and wine (Josh. 9:14) in what appears to be part of the treaty-making ceremony (v. 15).<sup>25</sup> “At first mention (9:4-5),” Boer writes, “[the provisions] are worn out, torn, tied up, patched, dry and moldy or crumbly, only to become fresh or hot and new in the mouths of the Gibeonites as they relate their story (9:12-13), and then once again dry, burst, worn and old” (1996, 144). The leaders’ acceptance of the provisions, whether hot or cold, is clearly juxtaposed with the observation that they “did not ask direction from the Lord” (v. 14). Nonetheless, from a practical point of view we wonder how the leaders of the congregation could be so easily fooled by doctored provisions. Are they going along with the deception? Whether they are genuinely duped or secretly complicit, they are clearly willing to accept this ambiguity. This, again, is consistent with the experience of a drag performance in which the majority of participants (but perhaps not all) engage in a willing suspension of disbelief for the sake of a certain

<sup>23</sup> A similar compulsion to repeat the covenant between Israel and Yahweh may also be said to occur throughout the Torah. In Genesis alone, the Abrahamic covenant is confirmed and reconfirmed no less than seven times (see Gen. 12:1-3, 13:14-17, 15:1-7, 17:1-8, 17:15-21, 26:3-5 and 28:12-16).

<sup>24</sup> Stone borrows the concept of border anxiety from feminist political philosopher Iris Marion Young (2011).

<sup>25</sup> Scholars debate whether or not the Israelites actually eat the provisions as part of the covenant ceremony. For arguments that support this view, see, for example, Noth (1953, 265); Fensham (1964); and Kalluveetil (1982, 117-18). Sarah Lehar Hall takes an opposing view, arguing that the Hebrew verb *lqh* should be taken to mean “taking in hand” as in “examining” since the term is not used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to refer to eating. Yet, even if she is correct, does “taking in hand” preclude then consuming the food? Moreover, as Hall (2010, 152-5) herself acknowledges, the literal translation of “did not ask direction from the Lord” is “did not ask the mouth of the Lord” (*pi yhw h lō šā’ālū*) This may in fact function as a word play signalling that while the leaders should have consulting the mouth of Yahweh, they were instead filling their own mouths with unholy provisions.

narrative fulfilment. In this case, the Israelites may intuit that something is awry, but they nevertheless fulfil their Deuteronomic obligation, conceivably to save face.

While I have up until now drawn only a structural analogy between drag performance and Gibeon's actions, the destabilization of gender roles that characterizes drag could also be at play here. While the provisions do not literally change, Boer (1996) contends that the allusion to the once fresh provisions introduces a feminine element into the story. While women are excluded from the action in the narrative, these textual references to home and a domestic economy upset an unspoken gender equilibrium. Signifying by means of the phony provisions both male and female spheres of life, the Gibeonites make it difficult for the Israelites to fully situate themselves as superior (male) or subordinate (female) in their psychic give-and-take with this band of "sojourners" (144-5).

Gibeon may also challenge Israel at a deeper level by exposing and undermining the sex and gender dynamics that define her relationship to Yahweh. As Howard Eilberg-Schwartz argues, the operative assumption of "natural complementarity" between a masculine deity and a feminine Israel complicates the relationship between the patriarchs and Yahweh:

The threat to Israelite masculinity was part of a complicated process in which a complementary model of two genders or sexes (male/female) was imposed on a ménage a trois: God/Israelite man/Israelite woman. Because the desire of heaven was nearly always imagined as male and heterosexual, Israelite women theoretically should have been the appropriate objects of divine desire. The insertion of Israelite men into this equation required their unmanning. (1994, 138)

That the masculinity of the biblical patriarchs is in constant jeopardy provides at least partial explanation for the misogyny reflected in biblical texts. Israelite men have to exclude women from the cultic life in order to justify their privileged relationship to God. Miriam, in Numbers 12, for example, is stricken with snow-white scales for challenging Moses' authority while inexplicably Aaron is not. The likely reason for her banishment, explains Eilberg-Schwartz, is that she is a more natural intimate of God than Moses or Aaron and therefore serves as a threat to their access to the sacred (1994, 148). The sex and gender dynamics at work in the Sinai covenant are also evident in Exodus 34 when Moses appears before God to restore the commandments and then shares them with the people. Moses returns from the divine encounter with horns atop his head, a symbol of strength and virility. Yet his appearance so frightens the people that he must place a veil over his face when speaking to them (143-5). With these alternating images of sexual potency and emasculation, the episode illustrates the heart of the patriarch's dilemma: "[Moses] is caught between genders," writes Eilberg-Schwartz, "a man as a leader of Israel, a woman as the wife of God" (145).

The unmanning of Israel is also evident in the many of stories of childbirth in the Hebrew Bible, which, as I will suggest below, may have symbolic significance for the sowing of Israelite "seed" in the Promised Land. In the stories of Rachel, Ruth, and Hannah, each woman experiences a reversal of fortune as God "opened her womb" (Gen. 30:22), "made her conceive," (Ruth 4:13), and "remembered her" (1 Sam. 1:19). The theological point of all such stories, argues Eilberg-Schwartz, is that God oversees fertility and *a fortiori* the future of Israel (1994, 139). The patriarch

may provide the sperm, but his procreative role is upended and reduced to the physical.

The work of Eilberg-Schwartz demonstrates that gender oppression is part of a larger dynamic in the covenant arrangement. The paradigm of “natural complementarity” functions as a kind of “hetero/ethno-normative imperative” which drives the performance of Israelite men, who must continually shore up their nominal status. Covenantal identity, like heterosexual identity, is always in a state of jeopardy. According to Butler:

Heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself—and *failing*. Precisely because it is bound to fail, and yet endeavors to succeed, the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself. Indeed, in its efforts to naturalize itself as the original, heterosexuality must be understood as a compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the effect of its own originality; in other words, compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of “man” and “woman,” are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real. (1993, 313; original italics)

Covenant functions according to a similar set of dynamics that depends upon essentialized identities of male/female and Israelite/Canaanite. Men’s and Israel’s relationship with Yahweh is continually at risk of being subverted, and even failing, if fully exposed. The Gibeonite story can be understood as a challenge to the hetero/ethno-normative imperative writ large. Both Israel’s masculinity and her “natural complementarity” as a covenant partner are rendered unstable when the Gibeonites appropriate the part of wanderers in the wilderness. Instead of God/Israelite man/Israelite woman, the “ménage a trois” equation becomes God/Israelite/Gibeonite. While a compromise is made, some delicate matter still hangs in the balance (pun intended), as Israel is, at least momentarily, rendered infertile. If read as a metaphor for reproduction, the conquest of the land is jeopardized as those chosen to spread their seed are displaced by others. Playing on these heavily eroticized symbolic processes, the Gibeonites threaten Israel’s exclusive role of co-creator with Yahweh.

It is not only this gendered configuration that produces these narrative anxieties, however, nor do the “gendered” and ethnic identities of Israel and Gibeon merely exist on parallel tracks in the text. In her analysis of the racial dynamics that emerge in kinging, Halberstam observes that performers of colour are often deemed the most believable because “masculinity becomes visible as masculinity once it leaves the sphere of normative white maleness” (1998, 247-8). Masculinity and whiteness are presumed as co-constitutive; however, the introduction of difference is often what reveals our normative presumptions. To again draw the analogy to Joshua 9, the Israelite response to the revelation that the Gibeonites are ethnically Canaanite is *not* to attack or malign them, but to direct their anger inward as the congregation grumbles against its leaders for their lack of discernment. The narrator uses intriguing language to describe the discovery of the deception: “they heard that they were their *neighbours* (*qěrōbīm*) and were living among them” (v. 16). One might expect the Gibeonites to be described at this juncture with a term like “the people of the land” (*‘am hā’āreṣ*) whom Ezra rails against as usurpers of the *gōlāh* community’s

inheritance in the post-exilic period. Instead we find connotations of kinship.<sup>26</sup> It is curiously at the moment where sameness and difference converge that the narrator betrays a hint of recognition that Israel's exclusive identity is not self-evident. And it is at this point, after the Gibeonites' Canaanite identity is revealed, that the textual "tics" discussed above accelerate, and Israel's anxieties more fully emerge.

### **Sub-version or subversion?**

By now it should be easy to see that the covenant, as carried out in Joshua 9, does not fully allow for the emergence of a "true" self. To gain admission into the covenant the Gibeonites are forced to present a distorted image of themselves, both as Israel's inferior *and* a more natural complement to Yahweh. While they brilliantly deploy various facets of identity to play on the Israelites' insecurities, they too lose a measure of subjectivity. They temporarily destabilize the *herem*, or ban, but they do not completely overturn Israel's exclusive status, emerging instead as a "sub-version" of inferior covenantal standing.

Cultural theorist Ki Namaste (1996, 183-203) reminds us that queer scholars are often tempted to appropriate drag performance to further their arguments while ignoring the racism, sexism, and homophobia that often shapes the lives of its performers (as well as those outside of drag who identify as transgender in daily life). Correspondingly, while the Gibeonites brilliantly undermine the ideological underpinnings of the covenant, one must recognize that their actions are shaped by material circumstances and the need to survive. Where Brueggemann upholds the covenant as a paragon of economic justice, here we see how the covenant system is complicit in the class divisions within Israelite society. Far from equalizing the neighbour, the covenant naturalizes the economic disparity of the *gerîm* as a nominal pre-requisite for entrance.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, Gibeon's story *is* one of subversive resistance, specifically the resistance of disidentification. Whereas the strategy of disidentification can be mapped somewhere along a continuum between accommodation and absolute defiance, Muñoz (1999, 18) argues that its underlying intent is anti-assimilationist in nature. Disidentificatory subjects "must work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates" in order to "transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance"

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<sup>26</sup> There are various applications of the root of *qērōbîm* (*qrb*) in the Hebrew Bible, ranging from descriptions of geographical nearness to nearness of relationship. Among its uses in the Pentateuch, the term is used to describe familial relationships in Lev. 21:2, 3 and 25:5, and to express the nearness of God in Deut. 4:7 and 30:14.

<sup>27</sup> To the best of my knowledge, Brueggemann has not written any commentary on Joshua 9. He has written a short commentary on Joshua 11, *Divine Presence Amid Violence: Contextualizing the Book of Joshua* (2009), in which he argues, consistent with his emphasis on the economic justifications of the Canaanite ban, that the conflict between the Israelites and King Jabin of Hazor represents a cosmic battle between Yahweh and the "horse and chariot," which he understands as a motif used throughout the Hebrew Bible to describe those oppressive royal leaders who exploit the landless (20-24, 55-65). The Gibeonites' recourse to a treaty, however, complicates the view that all of Canaan's inhabitants had access to unmitigated military power in the story world of Joshua (that they eschew an alliance with other groups as suggested in Josh. 9:3 indicates that they felt compromise to be a more palatable option). This is most likely more consistent with the varied socioeconomic stratification of the *gōlāh*'s neighbours in Yehud.

(6, 11-12). Muñoz examines how queers of colour appropriate sites of identification in the dominant culture and seek to invest them with new meaning. James Baldwin's adolescent cross-identification with Bette Davis's "freakish beauty" on-screen, for example, recounted in his book *The Devil Finds Work* (1976, 7), enables him to transform an icon of white cinema into a figure of black survival (Muñoz 1999, 15-16). In such moments, writes Muñoz, queers of colour "desire [the white ideal], but desire it with a difference" (15). The "reverse mimicry" of the Gibeonite tricksters similarly fits into this paradigm. Akin to Baldwin, they seize upon the dominant culture's mythology to establish an "identity-in-difference" (Muñoz 1999, 6-7). They don their worn-out apparel and appropriate Deuteronomic law not only to forge a connection with covenantal symbols, but in order to creatively mis-invoke those symbols towards new ends.

The designation of the Gibeonites as labourers is, in a sense, à propos, for as Muñoz reminds us, the performance of identity is *work*, and in the case of disidentification, it is the work of deconstructing "true" and "false" selves. "Binaries finally begin to falter and fiction becomes the real," he writes, "which is to say the truth effect of ideological grids is broken down" (1999, 6). Disidentificatory subjects break the representational contract, exposing the fragilities of the social order (*ibid.*). As we have seen, the Israelites' participation in the ruse betrays the writers' doubts about Israel's mythic history (Boer 1996, 147), or at least their secure position within it. Whereas the Gibeonites may fail to transform the covenant into a more egalitarian institution, they nonetheless disrupt the assumptive world upon which Israelite normativity depends.

Even the fact that the Gibeonites fall short of complete success in their trickery proves revelatory for Israel's self-understanding. Deliberating on the political impact of failures of identification, Butler writes, "It may be that the affirmation [of a slippage in identification] ... is itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference" (1993, 219; cf. Muñoz 1999, 12). If we again consider closely the larger narrative framework of Joshua 9, we find that the Gibeonites, simply by way of their assimilation, remind Israel of the *heterogenous* nature of her identity, constructed though it may be. Recall from Deuteronomy 29 that the *gerîm* are *among those addressed* when the dictates of the covenant are set forth by Moses. Not only are they included in the covenant ceremony, they are invited to take on Israel's history as their own as Israel's sojourn in Egypt is remembered (Deut. 29:16) and the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are invoked (Deut. 30:20). The narrative possibility exists, therefore, that there are those *within* Joshua's congregation who are *gerîm* or the children of *gerîm* inviting new *gerîm* into their midst. For post-exilic readers, the Gibeonites stand as a reminder not only that the Israelites were once foreigners, but that "the other" lies already within, a reality consistent with their own circumstances in and surrounding Yehud. "It is not so much the Gibeonites who are 'hewers of wood and drawers of water,'" writes Boer, "but the Israelites, or rather the Gibeonites as Israelites; the treaty is important not so much for the Gibeonites but for the various elements that make up Israel" (1996, 148).



## A New Covenant?

The Gibeonites assert their subjectivity and resist the ban, but can their story offer a new model for covenantal relations? In an interview with Liz Kotz, Butler contemplates the political impact of drag performance, contending that “for a copy to be subversive of heterosexual hegemony it has to both mime and displace its conventions” (Kotz 1992, 84). For our purposes, I take this to mean that a challenge to covenant dynamics requires an upending of those structural elements that lead to the marginalization and oppression of the Canaanites. While few would argue the Gibeonites are treated as full equals, there are those who maintain that an inclusive and humane vision lies at the heart of this story. Francisco O. García-Treto (partially quoting Walter L. Reed) takes this view:

“God meets his people personally and continuously,” eliciting in dialogue a response of assent and obedience. Even in that paradigm, however “there are significant moments when God allows his purposes to be shaped, even changed, by human objections to the way he has initially presented them” ... The covenant has been changed by the challenge: while, on the one hand, the survival of the Gibeonites – and others, notably Rahab and her family – is indeed a subversion of the prophetic ideal of an exclusive covenant between Yahweh and Israel, it is, on the other hand, an extension of that covenant toward an inclusive vision that would save the God of Joshua from merciless despotism and the people of that God from unspeakable inhumanity. (1996, 76-77; quotations from Reed 1993, 53)

Yet neither in the case of Rahab nor the Gibeonites are the Canaanite peoples saved from “merciless despotism” or “unspeakable inhumanity.” Though Gibeon is protected for a time,<sup>28</sup> the Israelites continue their genocidal campaign, as subsequent chapters of Joshua attest.

To decline to label the Gibeonites’ actions as transformative is not to downplay their accomplishment in temporarily expanding the boundaries of Israel’s communal identity. Of Joshua 2-11, Carolyn J. Sharp writes:

Despite its insistent rhetoric of genocide concerning the “Other,” the book of Joshua does acknowledge the subjectivity of those whom it is ostensibly concerned to exterminate. Rahab the prostitute has lived in Israel ever since her initial submission to the Israelite army, and the trickster Gibeonites, too, are present in Israel “to this day.” These outsiders resist their own obliteration and have been inscribed, however marginally, into the sacred metanarrative of Israelite identity. (2012, 152)

The Gibeonites’ dogged insistence on survival, I would agree, provides powerful counter-testimony to the dehumanizing thrust of Joshua’s campaign. Their story,

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<sup>28</sup> The Israelites fight successfully on behalf of the Gibeonites against the Amorites in Joshua 10, but the narrative fate of the Gibeonites is less secure during the early monarchic period of the Deuteronomistic History. 2 Sam. 21:2 reports that “although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had tried to wipe them out in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah.” David vows to avenge the Gibeonites (v. 6) in order to end a famine in the land that is presumably Yahweh’s punishment for Saul’s actions (v. 1). As is often noted, however, there is no account of Saul’s actions outside of this chapter, so the story may have been told as part of an anti-Saulide polemic. Regardless, the story demonstrates the limits of the Gibeonites’ incorporation into Israel.

nonetheless, demonstrates the limits of the covenant and suggest that “a different geometry” is required if we are to truly “other with grace and courage.” As Hammonds reminds us:

Visibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen. The goal should be to develop a “politics of articulation.” This politics would build on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women [and other marginalized subjects] to speak and act. (1997, 152)

Many congregations and denominational bodies today employ a variety of mission statements, slogans, and proclamations of faith that are meant to convey welcoming language. These declarations sometimes contain problematic phrases like “all people, *regardless of* [insert identity marker] are welcome,” or worse, there is no intentional reflection on the meaning of welcome at all. While semantics are just one facet of welcome, language matters. If the welcoming message effectively lifts up diversity only to minimize difference or fails to acknowledge histories of exclusion, this will undercut efforts toward establishing a pluralistically inclusive community. If instead, communities seek to name and honour the heterogenous experiences of their members, the welcome is more firmly rooted in a commitment to justice and social transformation.

It is a truism among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender church members that “church folk will let you sing in the choir (even direct it!) as long as you don’t come out of the closet.” Those of us on the margins of society must ask if the explicit or implicit covenants forged through welcoming language afford us the psychic space we need to define ourselves and speak the truth about our own experience without fear of repression or distortion. Does “come as you are” mean “stay as you are”? Can we realize the truest delights and desires of our body, mind, and spirit? Are we welcomed into the full life of the community, including its leadership? Is our incorporation at the expense of others, or can we draw on our experience to work against their delegitimation and oppression?

Stone (2004) proposes that queer readers of the Bible, rather than eschewing their association with the Canaanites, strategically identify with them in order to interrogate the definitional categories of the native and the stranger we wish to call into question. The language of inclusivity itself, he reminds us, necessitates a division between those included and those excluded, a binary opposition akin to male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, and even Church/world. The price of inclusion may be that we “actually reinforce boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, boundaries that undergird most identity categories but are themselves a primary support for stigmatization and oppression” (Stone 2004, 134). Even as outsiders-within, the Gibeonites’ position is contingent upon their loyalty to the progenitors of the covenant, and they are in no secure position to question the decisions of the leaders of the congregation (cf. Hammonds 1997, 146). As the fall-out of their story illustrates, the biblical covenant as it is constructed continuously produces other “others” to newly take on the status of outsiders. The momentous defeat of the Amorites on behalf of the Gibeonites in Joshua 10 (complete with the miracle of the sun standing still), followed by the gruesome execution of the five Amorite kings, function as additional textual tics or psychological course-correctors

that signify Israel and Yahweh's full recommitment to blotting out the Canaanite indigenes.

Our interrogation of the power relations at play in the Gibeonite story has revealed the dangers of relying on a covenant built on a dualistic foundation. What would it mean to reimagine covenant<sup>29</sup> and enact a vision of radical welcome?<sup>30</sup> A new geometry of covenant necessitates a paradigm that is not just inclusive but one that deconstructs the assumptions of hospitality upon which it depends. In his exploration of the term *hôte* (host), Jacques Derrida observes how the French word is derived from the Latin *hostis* which has the concurrent meaning of "guest" or "enemy" (Derrida 2000; 2002, 356-42; discussed in Blevins 2015, 109). Thus, we see the interrelation of such English words as "host, hotel, hostel, hostile, hostage" (Blevins 2015, 109). The internal contradiction of the root led Derrida to provocatively declare hospitality "an impossibility" only made possible when and if the etymological tensions embodied in the word are fully embraced. Pastoral theologian John Blevins explains:

Derrida argues that true hospitality (if it exists) is possible only in the moment of visitation, when the stranger, the other, shows up at our doorstep unannounced. They have taken the initiative, they have breached the distance. What do they want? Are they asking for my time, assistance, money? Are they in need? Are they merely seeking to know and be known? Are they dangerous, wishing to do me harm? At the moment of visitation of the stranger, there is no way to know; it is only at this point, says Derrida, that the possibility and the demand of hospitality are made real. (2015, 110).

There are several instructive elements to this image of visitation. First, it is the other who chooses to initiate the relationship; to "extend" hospitality becomes a bit of an oxymoron. Second and relatedly, the host is in a position of vulnerability. The one with position (of one kind or another) is asked to bear the imposition of the other without recourse to a pre-existing agenda.<sup>31</sup> The host, who, intrinsically, is also the

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<sup>29</sup> The idea of amending and expanding the covenant is not new in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Jeremiah's call for a new covenant written on the heart (31:31-4) counters the Deuteronomistic emphasis on divine reckoning with a message of mercy and unconditional reconciliation for the Babylonian exiles. Paul and the writer of Hebrews each appropriate the covenant tradition to speak of a new covenant to bind together believers in Christ. (1 Cor. 11:17-34; 2 Corinthians 3; Gal. 3:15-18, 4:21-31; Romans 9; 11; Hebrews 8). In the synoptic gospels, Jesus adopts covenant language at the celebration of Passover with his disciples, linking his impending suffering to the forgiveness of sins and the eschatological hope of their reunion in God's kingdom (Mark 14: 22-5; Matt. 26:26-30; Luke 22:14-23).

<sup>30</sup> Because I write as a Christian, I am sensitive to the risk of supersessionism in advocating for a "new" covenant to replace the "old," as the writer of Hebrews sets out to do. Yet, I would argue that the covenants set forth in the New Testament are equally problematic when it comes to exclusionary language when compared to those established in the Hebrew Bible. In Romans 11, for example, Paul suffers from the same dualistic thinking in his attempts to establish a covenant incorporating Gentiles and Jews. Even as he attempts to construct a salvific history in which the Jews are the "natural" branches in the olive tree to which Gentiles are grafted in, he indubitably casts the Gentiles as a more acceptable recipient of God's mercy due to their acceptance of Christ. Additionally, though Jesus's adoption of the covenant language is not exclusive per se, the rituals of eucharist/communion instituted in his name have nevertheless been easily proffered for theologies that demarcate those who are welcome at the table and those who are not.

<sup>31</sup> Possibly one of the most poignant portrayals of this kind of hospitality come from the director Craig Brewer's 2005 movie *Hustle and Flow*. A secondary storyline in the film shows the conflict

guest, is asked to assume the perspective of the one being hosted (Paynter 2018, 43-44).

The most suggestive element in the image, however, is the notion that the visitor may be “dangerous,” possibly even an enemy. This not only reiterates the host’s vulnerability, but it reminds us of the other’s utter alterity. We are separate from them; they are alien to us and will continue to be so even as we may seek to forge relationship. This may seem like an odd image for covenant until we consider the very nature of covenantal semantics within Jewish and Christian heritage. When covenants are made in the Hebrew Bible, they are said to be “cut,” using the Hebrew root *krt* (see, e.g., Genesis 15; Jeremiah 34). In Josh. 9:11, for example, the Gibeonites say to the Israelites, “Come now, cut a covenant with us” (author’s translation). While this is likely a reference to an ancient practice of cutting an animal sacrifice into pieces during treaty-making (cf. Genesis 15), it is nonetheless peculiar that an allusion to separation is offered up at the moment of merger.

In the New Testament, the idea of the cutting of the covenant is embedded within the Christological image of Jesus as the lamb of sacrifice (John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:18-19; cf. Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7-15). This in turn becomes a part of eucharistic practice, where in many traditions it is the “host” that literally embodies a new covenant. While this “host” derives from the Latin *hostia*, meaning “victim” or “sacrifice,” it is secondarily related to the Latin *hostis* meaning “stranger,” “foreigner,” or “enemy” (*The Merriam-Webster New Book of Word Histories* 1991, 227). Just as one cuts a covenant with those with whom one is simultaneously joined and separated, one paradoxically ingests in the host one who is both invited and castigated.

Under closer scrutiny, then, the site of covenant-making, whether in a liturgical setting, a congregational meeting, or the public sphere, can be more than a place to establish and recite conventional commitments. Rather, it can become a context in which to name and invite the risks of welcoming the stranger, the hostile, and the social outcast. Covenanting affords us the opportunity to meditate on the ways we are aliens, oppressors, and victims. Covenants that uplift the multiplicity of experience rather than those that seek to harmonize our diverse perspectives also make it more possible for us to identify the other—the Canaanite—within ourselves. Only then might we challenge our “natural” claim to belonging, perhaps even our access to the Divine.

When the Gibeonites show up unannounced at the doorstep of the Israelites, they confront them with a troubled world of faith. Perhaps rather than converting the textual trauma too rapidly<sup>32</sup> by looking toward Gibeon’s inclusion at the end,

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between the middle-class sound technician Key and his spouse Yvette, who disapproves when Key begins spending his free time helping DJay, a hustler and a pimp, to record a song. One evening when Key fails to show up for a special dinner Yvette had prepared, Yvette, in an about-face show of support, wraps up the dinner and delivers it to Key, DJay, and the prostitutes who make up DJay’s family. While hers is an act of generosity, it is much more than that; she uncomfortably crosses social and economic boundaries (likely with unresolved moral reservations in tow) and vulnerably presents herself as the stranger seeking welcome.

<sup>32</sup> Trauma theorist Robert Jay Lifton observes that often when a trauma is minimized or overlooked in an effort to progress forward, this can give rise to “false witnesses” and “designated victims” who respectively belie the suffering and bear the costs of silence (discussed in Caruth 1995, 138-9). For an interesting discussion of how the interethnic marriages mentioned in Ezra-Nehemiah can be

we should linger upon the story's "inherent ambiguity, uncertainty, multiplicity and slipperiness of language and thought" that calls Israel to its better self (Blevins 2015, 108). In today's world of overlapping forms of oppressions, we need stories that allegorize the complexity of being-in-relation and queer the boundaries of those identities that both bond us and bondage us. The Gibeonites provide the raw material to begin to covenant differently. Covenants, reimagined, can offer an effective resource for calling communities to collective commitment and accountability. Their success lies perhaps only in the measure of the distance between the stranger and the self.

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understood as an attempt to preemptively overcome the losses associated with exile, see Johnson (2011, 19-20).

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