

# Kinship, Incest, and Slavery: A Thematic Constellation in the Triteuchal Political Theology of the Divine Name

Bruce Rosenstock (1951–2023)

*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; hlmurav@illinois.edu*

## ■ Abstract

Incest (“revealing the nakedness of the flesh of one’s flesh”) and slavery are presented in the Triteuch (Gen 1 through Lev 26) as twin threats to kinship creation (becoming “one flesh”) as the uniquely human matrix for fulfilling the commandment “be fruitful and multiply.” The serpent’s duplicitous nakedness symbolizes incestuous reproduction; the Tower builders, who seek to preserve their “one lip,” acquire one name, and avoid fragmentation into distinct kinship groups, “imagine” (*zāmam*, suggesting incest) a new way to reproduce themselves and their name; Pharaoh attempts to efface Israelite kinship and its “names” with the selective genocide of the males. The divine name YHWH, glossed as “I will be,” represents the freedom to give names to one’s children—the expression of the continuity of kinship creation (antitype of slavery)—and also the indexical uniqueness of each “I”-sayer—the interlinguistic basis of the oneness of humanity (antitype of the Tower).

## ■ Keywords

incest, slavery, kinship, the name YHWH, Triteuch, political theology, one flesh, serpent, Tower of Babel

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the President and Fellows of Harvard College. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

HTR 116:1 (2023) 1–23



*I wonder where is all my relation/ Friendship to all—and to every nation.  
(David Drake, enslaved African potter; inscribed beneath the lip of a pot.)<sup>1</sup>*

## ■ Introduction

The aftermath of the attempt to impose “kinlessness” upon the enslaved African peoples was the focus of Hortense Spillers’s classic essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.”<sup>2</sup> Building on the work of the anthropologist Claude Meillassoux’s argument that slavery constitutes the “antithesis of kinship,” Spillers proposes that the Middle Passage was nothing less than an attempt to undo the humanity of the African slaves by undoing their past kinship identities and their capacity to create new kinship bonds. As she put it, “[t]he human cargo of a slave vessel—in the fundamental effacement and remission of African family and proper names—offers a *counter*-narrative to notions of the domestic.”<sup>3</sup> In “The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight: In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers,” Spillers continues her project of tracing the impact of slavery upon the construction of Black kinship.<sup>4</sup> In examining the incest theme in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and in Alice Walker’s story “Child Who Favored Daughter,” Spillers argues that incest in these texts represents “nightmarish undifferentiation, whose leading exemplar had been diasporic slavery.”<sup>5</sup> Incest in these stories, in other words, represents the violent *but also tempting* undoing of kinship from within the “precincts of the intimate” itself. Ellison’s and Walker’s literary figuration of incest

<sup>1</sup> For the story of David Drake, and a photograph of this pot, see Jori Finkel, “The Enslaved Artist Whose Pottery Was an Act of Resistance,” *New York Times*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/17/arts/design/-enslaved-potter-david-drake-museum.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987) 65–81. Spillers uses the term “kinlessness” on p. 74 and references Claude Meillassoux’s “Female Slavery” as the source of her association of slavery with an assault on kinship. See Claude Meillassoux, “Female Slavery,” in *Women and Slavery in Africa* (ed. Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983) 49–67. In his later book on the anthropology of slavery, Meillassoux declares that “slavery is the antithesis of kinship.” See Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 100. Building on Meillassoux’s earlier work, Orlando Patterson wrote the now classic study of slavery as the imposition of kinlessness and “social death” upon the enslaved individual. See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). For a more recent examination of the legacy of Patterson’s book and its place in the study in slavery today, see *On Human Bondage: After Slavery and Social Death* (ed. John Bodel and Walter Scheidel; The Ancient World: Comparative Histories; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017). For kinlessness in the Black Atlantic context, see Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 72.

<sup>4</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight: In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (ed. Hortense J. Spillers; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 230–50.

<sup>5</sup> Spillers, “Peter’s Pans: Eating in the Diasporas,” in *Black, White, and in Color* (ed. Spillers) 1–64, at 23.

shows how “incest had to occur in order to be ‘defeated’ in the preservation of *exogamous* social relations. . . .”<sup>6</sup> Slavery and incest are, for Spillers, twin “antitheses of kinship,” where incest symbolizes the nightmarish correlate of slavery arising from within the most intimate space of kinship itself. Kinship is poised between incest and slavery.

Building upon Spillers’s insight that kinship, slavery, and incest form a powerful thematic constellation in the Black cultural imaginary, I will explore the way that this constellation can also be found within the narrative-legal material constituting the Pentateuchal complex that some biblical scholars have come to call the “Triteuch” (Gen 1 through Lev 26).<sup>7</sup> Recently, Mark Brett has argued that the Triteuch, largely shaped by late Priestly compositional and recensional activity, “contains a complex interweaving of narrative and legal traditions” that are unified by “a single political theology.”<sup>8</sup> Brett does not insist that the Triteuch ever took the form of a single written document, but only that it reflects a Priestly “political imaginary” that came to expression over perhaps a number of generations.<sup>9</sup> I am not competent to address the thorny issues surrounding the scholarly debate around the “recensional hypothesis” concerning the Priestly strata within the Pentateuch.<sup>10</sup> My argument in this article is not dependent upon the postulation of a postexilic Priestly Triteuch as a self-standing document (one or more scrolls) in the compositional history of the Pentateuch. I choose to use the term “Triteuch” to refer, as Brett does, to “a complex interweaving of narrative and legal traditions” that seems to reflect a coherent political-theological vision of the holiness of Israel.<sup>11</sup>

Brett argues that the Triteuch’s political theology centers on the idea that Israel’s holiness is grounded in the presence of the divine name YHWH “in *every* place that I [Yhwh] cause my name to be remembered (Exod 20:24).”<sup>12</sup> Brett understands this verse to be an affirmation of the people’s possible “communion with the divine” outside the boundaries of a single cultic center and in the absence of a royally

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Rainer Albertz, *Exodus 1–18* (ZBK. Altes Testament 1; Zürich: TVZ, 2012) 22–23; idem, “The Recent Discussion on the Formation of the Pentateuch/Hexateuch,” *Hebrew Studies* 59 (2018) 65–92, at 85.

<sup>8</sup> Mark G. Brett, *Locations of God: Political Theology in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) 55.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 56–57.

<sup>10</sup> For a brief exposition of the debate, see Jakob Wöhrle, “The Priestly Writing(s): Scope and Nature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the The Pentateuch* (ed. Joel S. Baden and Jeffrey Stackert; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) 255–75.

<sup>11</sup> Previously, Seth Kunin and Calum Carmichael studied the relationship between Levitical incest legislation and Genesis narratives, but neither entertained the possibility that a single political theological vision was discernable in this material. See Seth Daniel Kunin, *The Logic of Incest: A Structuralist Analysis of Hebrew Mythology* (JSOT 185; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995); Calum Carmichael, *Law, Legend, and Incest in the Bible: Leviticus 18–20* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Brett, *Locations*, qtd. on pages 62 and 69 (emphasis Brett’s).

controlled territory.<sup>13</sup> I will argue that kinship, a network bound together through nodes of conjugal “one flesh” (Gen 2:24), is viewed within the Triteuchal political theology of Israel’s holiness as one of the primary sites of Israel’s “communion with the divine.” What begins as a universally accessible site of divine-human communion in Gen 2 comes to be so corrupted (“all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth,” Gen 6:12 KJV) that the place of human kinship in YHWH’s created order can, it seems, only be secured by a unique, i.e., holy, kinship group.<sup>14</sup> In the Triteuchal narrative-legal complex, Israel’s enslavement in Egypt is represented as a threat to the continued reproduction of this kinship group, and therefore it poses a new, postdiluvian, threat to the place of human kinship within YHWH’s created order. Indeed, enslavement is represented as a direct response to the apparently irrepressible hyper-fertility of the kinship group, the “children of Israel” (see Exod 1:7). I will argue that the narrative of YHWH’s revelation of his name in Exod 3 (and its connection with the first person singular of the verb “to be,” *’ehyeh*) is an integral part of the Triteuchal political theology of names (*šēmôt*, the second word of Exodus) and naming as the foundation of kinship.

## ■ One Flesh: The Origin of Kinship

Let me now turn to examine more closely the text of Gen 2:23–24. Genesis 2:23 presents the first quoted speech of the first man. Genesis 2:24 is the narrator’s announcement, based upon the man’s identification of the woman as “bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh,” that a man and a woman’s becoming “one flesh” will be the uniquely human manner through which they will reproduce.<sup>15</sup> The preceding verses account for the uniqueness of humanity’s “one flesh” manner of reproduction. We are told that YHWH formed land animals and birds from out of the earth and then brought them to the human being “to see what he would name them” (Gen 2:19). Not having found a “helpmeet” among the animals, the human is then caused to

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Brett argues that the Triteuch neither endorses strict endogamy nor the “holy seed” theology of Ezra-Nehemiah. I would add that, according to the Triteuchal political theology, if Israel’s kinship identity is holy it is because it reflects the anti-incestuous created order of all human kinship. See *ibid.*, 55, 64, 73; see also Mark G. Brett, “YHWH among the Nations: The Politics of the Divine Name in Genesis 15 and 24,” in *The Politics of the Ancestors: Exegetical and Historical Perspectives on Genesis 12–36* (ed. Mark G. Brett and Jakob Wöhrle; FAT 124; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018) 121–24.

<sup>15</sup> My treatment of Gen 2:24 builds upon the article of Angelo Tosato in which he argues that the verse should be placed in relation to the Priestly incest legislation in Leviticus. See Angelo Tosato, “On Genesis 2:24,” *CBQ* 52 (1990) 401 n. 30, 407, 409. For the view that Gen 2:24, with its stress on the man leaving his natal family, might stand in contestation with the “holy seed” theology of Ezra-Nehemiah and therefore in contestation with the interdiction on intermarriage, see Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (OTR; London: Routledge, 2000) 31. For a fuller argument in favor of Brett’s claim, see Megan Warner, “‘Therefore a Man Leaves His Father and His Mother and Clings to His Wife’: Marriage and Intermarriage in Genesis 2:24,” *JBL* 136 (2017) 269–88. What all these texts share is a view of Gen 2:24 as having something to do with the priestly concern with how Israel’s holiness is embodied in its kinship practices.

fall into a deep sleep. YHWH makes a woman from the human's "rib" (or "side"). Awakening from his sleep and encountering the woman, the human (*hā'ādām*) says: "This one, this time, is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman' [*'iššā*], because from a man [*'iś*] was she taken" (Gen 2:23; trans. mine). After this verse, the narrator adds: "Therefore, a man shall leave his mother and his father and he shall cleave to his wife [*'iššā*], and they shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:23–24; trans. mine).

Becoming "one flesh" is tantamount to creating a new kinship relationship between a man and a woman, one that did not exist before. What the first man says in Gen 2:23 amounts to a declaration that *this one is my kinswoman*. Being of the same "bone and flesh," beyond the *literal* significance it has for the first human pair, is the way that Hebrew expresses the property of sharing a kinship genealogy: a man and a woman who have the same "bone and flesh" are "blood" kin, what anthropologists call "consanguineal" kin.<sup>16</sup> In the narrative describing how the patriarch Jacob met Rachel in Gen 29, Jacob tells his future wife that he is her father's "brother" (*'āh*), the son of her father's sister, Rebekah. When his "brother" Laban comes out to greet him, Laban says, "Surely thou art my bone and my flesh" (Gen 29:14 KJV). Thus, by extension, Rachel is also Jacob's "bone and flesh," but the two are divided from one another because they belong to different "houses" (Gen 28:2) within their shared genealogy. But even if a husband and wife do not begin as consanguineal kin (as Isaac and Rebekah do), *they become the most intimate blood kin through cleaving*. That is what it means for a man and a woman to become "one flesh."<sup>17</sup> Marriage as the creation of "one flesh" is a legal-social constructive performance that creates a consanguineal kinship relation that is viewed as the equivalent of descent from a common ancestor. In other words, becoming "one flesh" involves more than a contractual relationship between two individuals. It is the matrix within which consanguineal kinship is re-created.

Of course, "one flesh" not only means that husband and wife become performatively birthed into a consanguineal kinship relationship through the act of cleaving. It also means that their new kinship identity will be shared with their child's "one flesh." The final phrase of the narrator's announcement in Gen 2:24, "one flesh" (*bāśār 'eḥād*), therefore, can be unpacked in three ways, as referring to (1) husband-and-wife; (2) each child of their union; and (3) the unity of parents and child(ren).

While kinship creation is represented as a universal capacity of the human being in Gen 2:24, the actualization of that capacity is not presented in Genesis as a merely natural phenomenon. Kinship creation involves navigating a choice between

<sup>16</sup> Although I disagree with his interpretation of the merely metaphorical meaning of husband and wife being kin relations, for the evidence that "bone and flesh" refers to kin relations, see Walter Brueggemann, "Of the Same Flesh and Bone (Gn 2,23a)," *CBQ* 32 (1970) 532–42, at 532.

<sup>17</sup> For an excellent brief survey of the way that "one flesh" has been interpreted, see Joseph E. David, *Kinship, Law, and Politics: An Anatomy of Belonging* (Law in Context; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 26–37.

kinship and *anti-kinship*. The challenge to kinship creation through becoming “one flesh” comes with the knowledge of nakedness that is acquired by the first humans through the intervention of the serpent. I argue in what follows that the serpent is the symbol of incestuous procreation and that the knowledge of nakedness is the condition of the possibility of choosing to reproduce through “one flesh” kinship creation and also of choosing an anti-kinship manner of procreation, i.e., incest.

To understand how the knowledge of nakedness is linked with the possibility of transgressing “one flesh” kinship creation through incest, we need first to examine how the “one flesh” idea informs the Levitical incest prohibitions. Apart from the Karaites, late antique and medieval Jewish marriage law makes no apparent use of the “one flesh” idea in Gen 2:24.<sup>18</sup> It has, therefore, not been widely noted how deeply embedded the “one flesh” idea is within Leviticus’s incest prohibitions. However, not only is it present in Leviticus, we also find the “one flesh” doctrine attested throughout the Jewish literature of the Second Temple period,<sup>19</sup> and it appears quite prominently in the New Testament.<sup>20</sup> And it was absolutely central to the Church’s marital legislation and associated incest legislation.<sup>21</sup>

The Levitical incest prohibitions are introduced with this verse: “None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover *their* nakedness: I *am* the LORD” (Lev 18:6 KJV). The phrase translated as “near of kin” is, more literally, “flesh of one’s flesh” (*šē’ēr bēšārō*). To understand how “flesh of one’s flesh” is related to the “one flesh” manner of human procreation, consider Lev 18:16: “Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother’s wife: it *is* thy brother’s nakedness” (KJV). Here a husband and wife are assumed to have, in some sense, one body with one nakedness. In their studies of several problematic passages in Leviticus dealing with sexual ritual purity, Richard Whitekettle and Jonathan Magonet found that these passages can best be understood against the background of the idea that a conjugal pair becomes “one flesh.”<sup>22</sup> Magonet claims that “the

<sup>18</sup> For the Karaite views about marriage and “one flesh,” see Joseph E. David, “‘One Flesh’ in Ecclesiastical Tradition and in Karaite Law,” *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 8 (2019) 151–73; idem, “Selfness and Kinship in Medieval Karaite Incest Laws,” *JQR* 109 (2019) 173–202. The Qu’ran inherits the biblical incest legislation and bases its own prohibitions on the Levitical prohibitions. See Holger Zellentin, “Law in the Medinan Qu’ran: The Case of Biblical Incest Law and Its Qu’ranic Reiteration,” in *Unlocking the Medinan Qu’ran* (ed. Nicolai Sinai; Leiden: Brill, 2022) 313–87.

<sup>19</sup> Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 58–61.

<sup>20</sup> Not only do we find it in the famous “What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” of Matt 19:6, but it deeply informs the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline conception of the flesh of Christ as creating a new kinship lineage. See Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> For the history of the Latin Church’s “obsession” with incest, see Karl Ubl, *Inzestverbot Und Gesetzgebung. Die Konstruktion Eines Verbrechens (300–1100)* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Richard Whitekettle, “Leviticus 15.18 Reconsidered: Chiasm, Spatial Structure and the Body,” *JSOT* 16.49 (1991) 31–45; Jonathan Magonet and John F. A. Sawyer, “‘But If It Is a Girl, She Is Unclean for Twice Seven Days. . .’: The Riddle of Leviticus 12, 5,” in *Reading Leviticus: A Conversation with Mary Douglas* (ed. J. Sawyer; JSOTSup 227; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic,

writers of Leviticus took quite literally the view expressed in Gen. 2.24,” namely, “that the act of intercourse creates a single entity, ‘one flesh,’ and both are affected equally by the status of uncleanness of the other.”<sup>23</sup> This claim, applied to the Leviticus incest prohibitions, might be challenged by the view that the difference in nakednesses is not superseded by a single conjugal nakedness, but that one party’s nakedness (the woman’s) is said to belong, jurally, to another party (the male head of household). In her study of the incest legislation in Leviticus, Madeline McClenny-Sadler analyzed the way that certain verses provide the rationale for the prohibition against “revealing the nakedness of x” because “it is the nakedness of y” (Lev 18:7, 8, 10, 14, 16). She shows that this conflation of one nakedness with that of another cannot be simply reduced to the jurial claims of a father or husband over female members of his household. Rather, there is a “hierarchy of duties” associated with rights that are invested in both males and females who are considered to be “flesh of one’s flesh.”<sup>24</sup> Although McClenny-Sadler does not invoke the idea that the conjugal pair become “one flesh” to explain the rights of both men and women in the household, her analysis can be further supported if we place the use of “nakedness” in Lev 18 within the context of “one flesh” marriage as Magonet argues. (I will presently discuss how Gen 2:24 is immediately followed by two verses where “nakedness” is the primary subject, so we should not be surprised at the linkage in the incest prohibitions.) Let us consider the final prohibition against sexual relations with one’s wife’s sister, whose nakedness is described as being that of the wife’s nakedness (Lev 18:18). McClenny-Sadler views this to be a case of the “wife’s rights” in relation to individuals who are “affinal kin” to “Ego” (the addressee of the prohibitions).<sup>25</sup> But this is precisely where the idea of “one flesh” marriage helps us to understand the unity of all these prohibitions as falling within the category of incest: there is no distinction in these verses between consanguineal and affinal kin.<sup>26</sup> Both are “flesh of one’s flesh.” Because a husband and wife become “one flesh,” when the husband has intercourse with his wife’s sister this is tantamount to having intercourse with his own sister.<sup>27</sup> I am not denying that there are rights and duties obtaining between the members of the group defined as “flesh

---

1996) 144–52.

<sup>23</sup> Magonet and Sawyer, “‘But If It Is a Girl,’” 150–51.

<sup>24</sup> Madeline Gay McClenny-Sadler, *Recovering the Daughter’s Nakedness: A Formal Analysis of Israelite Terminology and the Internal Logic of Leviticus 18* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007) 76–93.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>26</sup> For a nuanced discussion of how the Karaite understanding of Levitical incest legislation was based upon the “one flesh” idea of marriage, a reading that Joseph David explains as due to the apparent lack of differentiation between consanguineal and affinal ties as equally able to fall within the category of “flesh of one’s flesh,” see David, “Selfness and Kinship.”

<sup>27</sup> For an attempt to understand why intercourse with “two sisters” falls under the rubric of incest in Leviticus, see Françoise Héritier, *Two Sisters and Their Mother: The Anthropology of Incest* (trans. Jeanine Herman; New York: Zone Books, 1999). For a critique of Héritier that explains the “two sisters” incest prohibition differently, on the basis of the “one flesh” idea of marriage in Genesis, see Maurice Godelier, *The Metamorphoses of Kinship* (trans. Nora Scott; Verso Books, 2012) 340–417.

of one's flesh," nor that most of these rights are invested in the male householder, but I believe that the justification of the general rule governing all of them (the affirmation "I am YHWH," Lev 18:6) suggests that the political-theological vision that has shaped these laws places them within the perspective of YHWH's created order (articulated in Gen 1 and 2), a perspective which may overlap with but is not reducible to that of the patriarchal structure of the Israelite household.

To sum up: the verse in Gen 2:24 closing with the words "one flesh" is part of an overarching understanding of kinship's most intimate flesh ("flesh of one's flesh") as a primary site of Israel's holiness and, therefore, as vulnerable to impurity. The act which most particularly threatens the holiness of kinship flesh is incest, what the Levitical legislator calls "revealing nakedness." This takes us back to the verses that immediately follow the final words of Gen 2:24 ("one flesh"). In these verses, the nakedness of the first human pair is the central subject: "Now the two of them, the human and his wife, were naked but were not ashamed" (Gen 2:25; trans. mine). There is, in antiquity as today, a general social norm that one is not supposed to be naked in public.<sup>28</sup> But, as scholars have previously argued, the theme of the exposure of one's own or another's nakedness in Gen 3 should be placed in the context not only of the general social norm about the shamefulness of public nakedness, but also in the context of the subsequent episode in Gen 9 that also involves the exposure of nakedness, namely, the exposure of Noah's nakedness in his tent and his subsequent cursing of Ham. Anthony Tomasino, for example, argues that the "Fall" narrative in Gen 3 is mirrored in nearly every point by the postdiluvian story of Noah's drunkenness and exposed nakedness.<sup>29</sup> For example, Ham "tells" his brothers about the nakedness of their father (a nakedness of which he is both unaware and unashamed, since he fell asleep in a state of inebriation) in the same way that the serpent "tells" Adam and Eve about their nakedness (of which they were unaware and unashamed), according to YHWH's question "Who told you that you are naked?" (Gen 3:11: the same Hebrew verb is used in both cases).

The story of Noah's exposed nakedness and Ham's violation of his father's nakedness in Gen 9:20–27 also has a wider context. It points beyond itself to the incest prohibitions of Lev 18 and 20. Ham's action in both viewing his father's nakedness, then telling his brothers about it and inviting them to come and view it with him, has been understood to be an allusion to the first prohibition in Lev 18 against "revealing the nakedness of one's father." In other words, Gen 9 intimates that Ham sexually violated either his father or his mother (who is identified as sharing the "nakedness of your father" in Lev 18:8).<sup>30</sup> Noah's cursing of Ham's

<sup>28</sup> Brian Rainey, "Indecent Exposure: Social Shame, 'erwā and the Interpretation of Gen 9:20–27," *VT* 70. 4–5 (2020) 674–95.

<sup>29</sup> Anthony J. Tomasino, "History Repeats Itself: The 'Fall' and Noah's Drunkenness," *VT* 42 (1992) 128–30.

<sup>30</sup> For arguments in favor of the more likely allusion to incest with his mother, see Erica Lee Martin, *Incest and Inner-Biblical Exegesis* (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2009); Stanley Gevirtz, "A Father's Curse," *Mosaic* 2.3 (1969) 26–31; Frederick W. Bassett, "Noah's Nakedness and



son Canaan thus presents the aetiology of the alleged propensity of the Canaanites to incest (Lev 18:3).<sup>31</sup> Although the shame experienced by Adam and Eve when their eyes were opened to their nakedness, taken separately from Noah's revealed nakedness and Ham's violation of it, may not seem to have anything to do with the violation of kinship through incest, the narrator/redactor of the Eden story has left us a number of textual clues to lead the reader to at least suspect that Adam and Eve's shame is associated with their coming to consciousness not merely of the social norm against having one's nakedness exposed in public, but against incest, "revealing the nakedness" of one's closest kinship flesh. The most significant textual clue that Adam and Eve's nakedness is connected to the theme of incest involves a wordplay found in the verses that immediately follow upon the words "one flesh." This wordplay connects the nakedness of the humans to the nakedness of the serpent, and the nakedness of the serpent, I will argue, alludes to incest ("revealing nakedness"). The claim, which I will presently defend, that the incest motif which appears in Gen 9 is "set up" by the serpent's unique nakedness among the "animals of the field" (Gen 3:1), may seem at first to be an interpretive stretch. But it is made more plausible if we attend to the importance of the theme of nakedness and its exposure in both Gen 3 and 9. This intertextuality allows us to recognize that the serpent's nakedness may also have something to do with the incest motif. Joseph Blenkinsopp provides additional support for reading the Eden narrative through the lens of abominated Canaanite sexual practices when he argues that this narrative may allude to Canaanite garden cults focused on fertility and female erotic power (he also reminds us that the very name "Eden" means "pleasure").<sup>32</sup> But let us attend to the nakedness of the first humans and the unique nakedness of the serpent.

Immediately after the verse that says that the man and the woman are "naked" (*'ārūmīm*) but not ashamed (Gen 2:25), the following verse (3:1) introduces the serpent as "the most subtle" (*'ārūm*) of all the animals of the field. What is the narrator signaling with this play on words, where "naked" and "subtle" in these two verses appear in forms that make them into homonyms?<sup>33</sup> Blenkinsopp suggests

---

the Curse of Canaan: A Case of Incest?," *VT* 21 (1971) 232–37; John Sietze Bergsma and Scott Walker Hahn, "Noah's Nakedness and the Curse on Canaan (Genesis 9:20–27)," *JBL* 124 (2005) 25–40.

<sup>31</sup> David Frankel offers a persuasive defense of the sexual nature of Ham's offense, and he provides an account of how the story may have toned down the overt reference to incestuous sex, whether with the mother or the father, based on his claim that the original story involved Ham as victim and Canaan as his violator. If this reconstruction is right, it shows how the redactor, whom Frankel argues is Priestly, wants to raise the stakes of this incident from one that concerns only the sons of Ham to one that involves all of humankind (the relations among Shem, Japhet, and Ham), even if the curse falls, as it did in the original telling, on Canaan. David Frankel, "Noah's Drunkenness and the Curse of Canaan: A New Approach," *JBL* 140 (2021) 49–68.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation: A Discursive Commentary on Genesis 1–11* (London: T&T Clark, 2011) 66–67.

<sup>33</sup> The singular form of *'ārūmīm* is *'ārōm*, "naked." In the plural, the adjective undergoes a vowel shift that creates the homonymy with *'ārūm*, "subtle." Of course, the unpointed written forms of

that the wordplay points to the fact that the snake lacks “hide, fur, or feathers” and is therefore, *qua* animal of the field, “most naked” while also, in his likeness to the (post-Edenic) “wise person” of the sapiential tradition (where *’ārûm* is found in this sense), being “most subtle” in the sense of being “no fool and no simpleton.”<sup>34</sup> Blenkinsopp adds that the wordplay draws our attention to the ensuing story being one that traces the human transition “from naked to clothed, from nature to culture.”<sup>35</sup> Perhaps we can follow Blenkinsopp’s lead and ask, Can the serpent’s being “most subtle” be connected to the way that he is also “most naked”? The serpent not only lacks “hide, fur, or feathers,” he also sheds his skin. The serpent’s “most naked” condition has to do both with his appearance of extreme nakedness (no “hide, fur, or feathers”) and with the shedding of the skin. His nakedness can be viewed as a certain kind of clothed nakedness that is also a naked clothedness. The serpent dissimulates (innocent) nakedness. The use of double skins to dissimulate one’s identity is a feature he shares with the most famous trickster figure in Genesis, the patriarch Jacob, who deceives his father by placing a goatskin over his own smooth skin.<sup>36</sup> And recall that Jacob, like the serpent according to YHWH’s cursing of him (Gen 3:15), attacks the heel (*’āqēb*) and is, indeed, named for his relationship to the heel. But the serpent’s double nakedness not only makes him a fitting symbol of the trickster’s dissimulative powers, it is also the basis for the serpent being a widely attested symbol of immortality. Having drawn attention to the serpent’s subtle (double) hyper-nakedness, the narrator also has drawn the reader’s attention to the more common theme that is associated with the serpent’s skin-shedding ability. The serpent can regenerate its flesh, or so it seems, and therefore the serpent is associated with immortality (as in the Gilgamesh epic).

To draw all of this together, we may say that the serpent’s duplicitous hyper-nakedness represents the “subtlety” that also grants him his knowledge of how to rejuvenate his skin. When the serpent sheds his skin and reveals the nakedness that lies beneath it, he manifests the real meaning of his “subtlety,” his knowledge of how to regenerate his flesh from out of his own flesh. And now we may see how the serpent can mediate the transition not only from nakedness to clothedness, but also “from nature to culture.” The latter transition, understood as a “fall” from paradise, involves the loss of immortality, which transforms human reproduction (“cleaving” to become “one flesh”) into a necessity for the survival of the human presence on the earth. If the loss of immortality is part of what it means to transition from nature to culture, then “one flesh” kinship creation is, we might say, a recuperated form of quasi-immortality. Although the serpent himself never attains the level of culture, the serpent’s unique purchase on quasi-immortality—his apparent ability

---

both words *look* identical regardless of how they are vocalized.

<sup>34</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 73.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> On Jacob as trickster, see John E. Anderson, *Jacob and the Divine Trickster: A Theology of Deception and YHWH’s Fidelity to the Ancestral Promise in the Jacob Cycle* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011).

to rejuvenate himself—alludes to the very opposite of kinship creation: it alludes to incest, both as “revealing nakedness” and as reproducing one’s flesh by means of one’s own flesh (one’s shared “one flesh”).<sup>37</sup>

We earlier noted the connection between the serpent’s duplicitous nakedness and the trickster nature of Jacob. Now we may note an additional point of comparison, Jacob’s own connection to incest. Recall not only Jacob’s incestuous marriages to two sisters, but, no less significantly, Jacob’s duplicitous trick against Laban involving the inbreeding of the “speckled and spotted” sheep (Gen 30:31–43), which has been described as “probably the first recorded use of selective breeding in livestock.”<sup>38</sup> Selective breeding always involved mating siblings who display the desired traits, even if it may also have been accompanied by the performance of sympathetic magic (Jacob’s striped sticks).<sup>39</sup>

It should probably come as no surprise to modern readers that the narrator/redactor of Gen 2–3 may have considered incest to be an ineluctable part of human sexual desire as it is shaped by culture, given our familiarity with the theories of Sigmund Freud. But the Genesis narrator did not wish to present the primal scene of an Oedipal psychodrama as the coming into existence of human sexuality under the “Law of the Father.” In the Triteuchal political theology expressed in the Garden narrative, the serpent, as the figuration of both the power of the trickster and the power of regenerating flesh out of one’s own flesh, raises incest (“revealing the nakedness of the flesh of one’s flesh”) to the level of a theopolitical challenge to YHWH’s created order and the place of “one flesh” kinship within it.<sup>40</sup> In the ensuing

<sup>37</sup> In *Paradise Lost*, Milton represents Sin, a “snaky sorceress” (II.724), as the daughter of Satan whose incestuous mating with him produces Death (cf. II.746–814). Milton thus understands the events in the Garden as introducing sin, incest, and death into the world.

<sup>38</sup> Bernardo Chessa et al., “Revealing the History of Sheep Domestication Using Retrovirus Integrations,” *Science* 324.5926 (2009) 532–36, qtd. 535.

<sup>39</sup> This is not to say that Jacob is portrayed in a completely negative light, given his symbolic relationship with the serpent, but rather that the Jacob cycle seems to be driven by an internal struggle against the temptation to use serpentine duplicity as the sole means of ensuring the survival of the kinship lineage. There is a Zoharic midrash (3:111b) that interprets Jacob’s incest within the wider Genesis context of the incest theme. The Zoharic midrash is based upon an earlier midrash that Adam was given six commandments by God. The six were: set up courts of justice; do not practice idolatry; do not blaspheme, murder, commit incest, or steal (Midrash Genesis Rabbah 16.6). The Zoharic midrash says, without specifying the acts, that Adam sinned against three of these commandments: murder, idolatry, and incest, but the merit of Israel’s forebears cleansed Adam of these sins. Abraham’s shedding of the ram’s blood in place of his son’s blood cleansed Adam of the sin of murder; Abraham’s destruction of Terach’s idols cleansed Adam of the sin of idolatry, and Jacob’s marriage of Rachel and Leah cleansed Adam of the sin of incest. For a discussion of this Zoharic passage and the more general Zoharic understanding of Jacob as struggling with “Samael who rides upon the serpent,” see Elliot Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 143–46.

<sup>40</sup> If it is true that the Triteuchal stratum was given its final form some time in the early Persian period, one might see in the incest theme a possible reflection upon incestuous Persian royal marital practices, or stories about them. The figure of Jacob ambivalently represents someone who, as I explained above, has in effect married his own sister. See the previous note for how this ambivalence

Genesis narratives where the incest theme continues to unfold and build up further associative linkages with this opening narrative, we will also find that incest has profound theopolitical implications, apparent also in the Tower of Babel episode.

## ■ The Tower of Babel Episode

After the episode of Noah's cursing of Ham (which falls upon Ham's son Canaan), an episode that, as I have argued, should be read in light of the "revelation of nakedness" prohibitions in Lev 18, the next chapter (Gen 10) provides the genealogies of the lineages of Noah's three sons, Japhet, Shem, and Ham, in the so-called Table of Nations. The last verse in each genealogy concludes with a formulaic statement that each nation had its own "tongue" (*lāšôn*) (10:5; 10:20; 10:31). Without specifying in which generation the Babel episode took place, Gen 11 begins by simply asserting that "the whole earth" had "one lip" (*šāpā*), a metaphor for "one language," and that "words were one" (Gen 11:1). I will discuss the phrase "one lip" in what follows, but let us begin with the second phrase. The phrase "words were one" uses the adjective "one" (*'eḥād*) in the plural ("ones") as a predicate for the plural noun *dābār*, which can mean either "word" or "thing." Although the phrase clearly means that there was a single lexicon that all humans shared ("everyone's words were the same"), this point would have been clear from the first part of the verse, "the whole earth was one lip"; that is, everyone spoke one language. Why add the phrase, especially since the use of the "one" in the plural is peculiar in itself?<sup>41</sup>

With the phrase *dēbārīm 'āḥādīm* ("words were one(s)"), the narrator may be playing on the ambiguity of the word *dābār*, which can mean both "word" (the signifier, as we would say) and "thing" (the object referred to by the signifier). Saying that *dēbārīm* were *'āḥādīm*, the narrator may be suggesting that, for each Babelian *dābār*, the signifier and the object it referred to were in a certain sense one rather than two distinct entities.<sup>42</sup> One way to imagine this oneness would be

---

plays out in later rabbinic literature. For the rabbinic treatment of incest in the much later Persian context, see Yishai Kiel, *Sexuality in the Babylonian Talmud: Christian and Sassanian Contexts in Late Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 144ff. For a discussion of Jacob's marriages being a variant on wife/sister marriage, see Kunin, *The Logic of Incest*, 120–22. For a discussion of the available evidence concerning Achaemenid royal incest (or Magian incest), see Joan M. Bigwood, "'Incestuous' Marriage in Achaemenid Iran: Myths and Realities," *Klio* 91 (2009) 311–41.

<sup>41</sup> The plural of "one" is used to modify "days" in Gen 27:44, meaning "a few days," and this is also the meaning of "ones" in 29:20 as well, "a few days." Could *dēbārīm 'āḥādīm* thus mean that the Babelians had only a "few words"? This interpretation of the phrase seems easy to rule out, since a group of humans with only a few words in their language would hardly be in a position to build the city of Babel, nor would confusing their language be of much consequence.

<sup>42</sup> This possibility is supported by the only use of "one" in the plural outside of those in Genesis, in Ezek 37:17 where God tells the prophet to take two sticks, one with "Judah" written on it, the other "Ephraim," and "put the one together with the [other] one so that they become one[s] in your hand." Two names with two referents become one name with a single referent. In the Babelian language, *dābār* (word) and *dābār* (thing) are not yet divided, therefore all their *dēbārīm* are ones,

if the signifier was the natural rather than conventional representation of what it referred to, the way “buzz” *is* (sort of) the sound that a bee makes. According to the Peircean triadic division of signs (icon, index, symbol), such a word would be categorized as an *icon* of the thing it represents.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, in Gen 11:3 we are allowed to hear the speech of these “one-lipped” humans, although the Hebrew they speak is probably not supposed to be taken for an actual fragment of the original Babelian language. However, Hebrew can be used in such a way as to represent the formal properties of the Babelians’ language. The Babelians say, “Let us brick bricks [*nilbēnâ lēbēnīm*] and fire [them] in fire [*nišrēpâ lišrēpâ*],” using a single root for the verb and its nominal complement. This formal structure is not the onomatopoeic oneness of word and object, but it does indicate an intimate tie between the verb that is spoken and the object that is produced. Just as the word “buzz” can be said to make a buzzing sound appear in reality, so the utterance of the verb for brick-making as a command (*nilbēnâ*) makes bricks appear (*lēbēnīm*). Indeed, the verse reports the success of the brick-making activity as if the bricks suddenly appeared: “and brick came to be for them [to serve] as stone,” using a phrase previously found after several of God’s creative speech acts in Gen 1 (“God said, let there be light and light came to be”). The narrator seems to be describing a kind of speaking that, first of all, is instantly intelligible not only because all Babelians share one language but also because Babelian words, once they are spoken, transparently and unambiguously convey their meaning to the hearer. They are univocal (one sound with one meaning). And, more significantly, the Babelians’ performative speech acts seem to be immediately realized, so that a hortatory command to perform an activity is tantamount to having brought its product into reality. One may imagine that in the Babelian language all such performative utterances (commands, curses, blessings, and so on) are realized instantly, *magically*.

The visible manifestation of what is wrong with a humanly created linguistic-kinship oneness is the Tower and what it portends: “Let us make a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make a name [*šēm*] for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11:14 KJV). True to the magical power of Babelian speech, they do in fact make a city and tower, but they do not make a name for themselves, since the city is given its name by YHWH. The “one lip” that humans speak (with) has a certain magical power, it seems, that is achieved only when they *literally* speak with “one lip,” that is, when they speak the same words as a “we.” The quoted speech of the Babelians is only in the first-person plural. Their speech acts fuse their bodies into a single body with “one lip.” The Tower becomes, in effect, the index of their fusional “we” body. Indeed, by means of the Tower, their fusional body’s “head” reaches heaven. But they never speak their own name in the biblical account, just as they do not succeed in avoiding

---

that is, unities of word and thing.

<sup>43</sup> For one of the clearer discussions of Pierce’s semiotics, see Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) 31–33.

fragmenting into linguistically distinct peoples (each with its own name) “across the face of the whole earth.” Just as they fail to avoid fragmenting into distinct kinship groups spread across the face of the earth, they fail to achieve one name for themselves, a name for themselves as an undifferentiated (lacking distinctly named kinship groups) totality. Though clearly human, the Tower builders seem to wish for a collective name that resembles the kind of name given by Adam to each animal species or “kind” (*mîn*). They want to be identified as reproducers of one “kind” and not as creators of kinship networks, each node being a unique “one flesh.” This claim needs further unpacking.

As we have seen, the building of the “city and tower” is undertaken by Babelian humanity in order, as they say, to “make a name [*šēm*] for ourselves.” This means, on the face of it, that these humans desired to acquire as a collectivity what the homeric poet is said to give to the individual Greek hero, namely, “undying glory” (*kleos apthiton*). The Babelians want, as it were, to achieve a collective epic deed that will be remembered forever. This would be their purchase on quasi-immortality, their effort at transcending the post-Edenic human condition. Their city with its tower whose head is in the heavens would be an undying memorial to the greatest achievement of united humankind. The place where this will be accomplished would bear a name that will, synecdochally, also name this *new* “people of renown” (*ʿanshê šēm*, Gen 6:4, referring in that context to the descendants of the “sons of God” and “daughters of man”). Instead of giving themselves a name, YHWH will name their city ironically: its name, Babel, will testify to the confusion of words that forced humanity to spread across the face of the earth. YHWH recognizes the danger of one people with one self-given name: “And the LORD said, Behold, the people *is* one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do” (Gen 11:6 KJV). As I have said, this is a humanly created oneness of a fusional social body that clearly does not correspond to YHWH’s intentions. The key to understanding why it does not correspond to YHWH’s intentions lies in the connotation of the word translated here as “imagine” (*zāmam*). Typically, interpreters of the Babel episode have emphasized YHWH’s reaction to the overweening ambition of the Babelians in their desire for quasi-immortality through a “name” that will recall some glorious deed. A minority view stresses the desire of the Babelians to avoid fragmentation and dispersion over the face of the earth as what elicits YHWH’s reaction.<sup>44</sup> But, following John Day, I believe that these are not incompatible interpretations.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, Day does not spell out exactly how hubristic ambition and the desire to resist fragmentation go together. Peter J. Harland points toward an answer. He argues that the two Babelian “sins” are related to the two meanings of *šēm* in this

<sup>44</sup> For the minority view, see Ellen van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds: Semantic Studies of Genesis 1–11* (BibInt 6; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 84–89. For a fuller analysis of the two interpretations of the “sin of Babel,” see Peter J. Harland, “Vertical or Horizontal: The Sin of Babel,” *VT* 48 (1998) 515–33.

<sup>45</sup> John Day, *From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1–11* (LHBOTS 592; London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 83.

episode: “If the story is one of pride, then *šēm* is to be taken as a name in the sense of fame, but if the story concerns the desire of the people not to be scattered over the earth, then *šēm* is the title by which the group is to be known.”<sup>46</sup> Harland explains that the desire not to be scattered represents a refusal to accept the divine command to “be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28). But the Babelians have not foresworn intercourse, only the kind of intercourse that would fragment their oneness of name into many kinship group names. This requires not going outside the sphere of the flesh of one’s flesh to find one’s sexual partner. In the same way that animals reproduce their single *mîn* (“kind”) without apparent concern for avoiding mating with close kin, the Babelians would seek to avoid fragmenting into “peoples” (*gôyîm*) by rejecting the principle of “one flesh” kinship creation, i.e., leaving one’s natal oneness of flesh in order to create a new kinship bond that might, as happened with each generation in the Gen 11 genealogy, produce a new people. Even if the Babelians were to fill the space of the earth, they would then not cease to have one *šēm*, in both senses of the word. The Babelian desire for quasi-immortality, their desire for an immortal name, is predicated on the oneness of their group name, and this depends upon resisting the differentiating force of marriage prohibitions. Their purchase on quasi-immortality depends upon incest, what Spillers calls “nightmarish undifferentiation.”

Let us recall that the prediluvian history of humanity up to Gen 11 had indeed been one of “nightmarish undifferentiation,” the (sexual and violent) corruption of the “flesh” of the humans and animals. The first postdiluvian episode that is recorded involves the cursing of Ham’s son Canaan for a violation of the nakedness of Noah. This, as I argued, is directly connected with the incest laws of Lev 18. The episode involving the building of the city and tower of Babel seems, at least as far we have so examined it, to lack any sexual undertones and therefore my claim that their resistance to fragmenting into peoples entails the practice of incest may seem unwarranted. But the verb *zāmam* (“imagine”) that is used when YHWH describes the consequence of humanity’s linguistic oneness (“and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do,” Gen 11:6 KJV) has root consonants *zayîn* and *mēm* that are found also in the noun *zimmâ*. This noun is frequently translated as “wickedness” or “lewdness,” almost always with a sexual connotation. Its first occurrence in the Hebrew Bible is in the incest laws of Lev 18, where it is used to describe incest (“revealing the nakedness”) with the daughter or granddaughter of one’s wife (whether or not one is the biological father; see Lev 18:17). It is used in Lev 19 to characterize a land (full of *zimmâ*) in which one “profanes one’s daughter into prostitution” (Lev 19:29; the verb “profane”—*hālal*—is the same verb translated as “begin” in Gen 11:6, “and this they begin to do”). It is used again in Lev 20 to describe the incestuous sexual union with the mother of one’s wife. The prophet Ezekiel uses the noun *zimmâ* thirteen of the twenty-seven times it occurs in the Hebrew Bible, indicating its

<sup>46</sup> Harland, “Vertical or Horizontal: The Sin of Babel,” 529.

provenance in Priestly circles. In Ezekiel, as in Leviticus, *zimmâ* is associated with transgressive sexuality in general and incest in particular (as it is in the one specific case mentioned in Ezekiel, sexual union with one's son's wife or with one's father's daughter; see Ezek 22:11).<sup>47</sup> The verse that says that humanity cannot be restrained from whatever they "imagine" seems to be alluding to a sexually illicit imagination, especially one that is set upon the unfragmented and "undifferentiated" condition produced by incest. The fusional body of the Babelians desires to name itself with "one lip" and reproduces itself out of its "one flesh."

The claim I am making about the connection between the Tower of Babel and incest is the subject of a discussion related to this biblical episode in the last pages of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. His analysis allows us to understand how the quest for (quasi-)immortality is linked not only to incest, but also to the kind of language where "words are one(s)." Although Lévi-Strauss offers no textual evidence in the Hebrew Bible for his claim, his analysis of the Babel episode in light of the incest prohibition remains of considerable significance for my argument in this article. Lévi-Strauss suggests that it is the Babel story, not (or not only) the Eden story as Blenkinsopp suggested, that narrates in mythic form the transition from nature to culture.<sup>48</sup> For Lévi-Strauss, all human culture "after Babel" involves two interrelated "communication functions," namely, symbolic language (with conventional phonemic signs) and rules governing the exchange of women.<sup>49</sup> In certain cultures, according to Lévi-Strauss, when language is "misused" in a way that makes sound value prominent and meaning secondary, such as the "imitation of the calls of certain insects or birds," such misuse is often prohibited and "grouped together with the incest prohibition, or with acts evocative of incest."<sup>50</sup> To "misuse" language in ways that circumvent or undermine its post-Babel communicative function is to evoke a mythic world that is, in the final words of the *The Elementary Structure of Kinship*, "eternally denied to social man, . . . a world in which one might *keep to oneself*."<sup>51</sup> The Babelian desire to remain unfragmented and to stay in one place reflects this mythic world, a world before language fell under the rule of the arbitrariness of the signifier and before reproduction fell under the rule of the incest taboo. Lévi-Strauss helps us to see the connection between the Tower builders' resistance to acceding to the fragmentation

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of Ezekiel's use of the language of Lev 18 to connote sexual-theological transgression, see Eve Levavi Feinstein, *Sexual Pollution in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 132–41.

<sup>48</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (trans. James Harle Bell and Richard von Strumer; Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) 496; for a reading of the Bantu myth of how cultural diversity arose as a transition from incest to exogamy, see Luc De Heusch, *The Drunken King or the Origin of the State* (trans. Roy Willis; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) 93–96.

<sup>49</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 494. I am aware of the feminist critique of his view about the place of woman as a "sign" that is "communicated," but my interest here is to note the interrelationship between incest prohibitions and symbolic language.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 495.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 497 (emphasis in original).



of humanity brought about through the creation of kinship and their language in which words and things were iconic “one(s).” In place of humanity’s dream of one iconic name for one undifferentiated human “kind,” YHWH causes this people to possess an ironic name—“Babel, because the LORD did there confound [*bālal*] the language of all the earth” (Gen 11:9 KJV)—that signifies neither humanity’s unity nor its glorious achievement, but its differentiation into kinship groups scattered across the earth.

The narrator of the Babel episode affirms that YHWH, not the collective body of the Tower builders, is the master of the humanity-unifying “name.” Immediately after YHWH imposes linguistic fragmentation upon the Babelians, the narrator provides a listing of the descendants of Shem, whose name means “name,” up to Terach and his sons Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Humans fail to acquire a purchase on quasi-immortality by a single collective name, but there will be one particular kinship group, descending from Shem, who will represent YHWH’s name on the earth. YHWH’s name, as it were, will dwell with this kinship group as a permanent check to any further attempts to erase that name from the earth and impose a new name, and a single kinship identity, over the earth in its place.

The contest between YHWH’s name and humanity’s self-given name is very clearly settled in favor of YHWH by the end of chapter 11. But the multiplicity of kinship groups and the multiplicity of languages make it necessary to find another pathway to unifying humanity. Within kinship itself lies a trace of the original unity of the first humans, their “cleaving” to form “one flesh.” The challenge is to find a way to reveal the universal significance of “one flesh” kinship creation rather than to see kinship, as the Babelians did, as the permanent and irreparable fragmentation of human oneness, and therefore the perceived loss of human stature and dignity. This challenge, as I argue in the next section, is answered with the revelation of the name YHWH and the redemption of the children of Israel from Pharaoh’s attempt to put an end to the continuity of their “names” (the second word of the book of Exodus, and its title in the Jewish tradition). The name “Israel” will come to signify, together with the name “YHWH,” the potential, latent within the power to become “one flesh,” to sustain the unity of humanity even in the midst of its division into different peoples—and unique individuals—spread across the face of the earth.

## ■ The Pronoun “I” and the Redemption of Kinship

We are now in a position to examine the revelation of the name “YHWH” and its associated verbal gloss, *’ehyeh* (“I will be”) in Exod 3.<sup>52</sup> If I am right that the Tower builders want to preserve themselves from fragmentation into distinct kinship groups by proclaiming, in the voice of a unified “we,” their unique *šēm*

<sup>52</sup> For a useful overview of the scholarship on the divine name and its revelation in Exod 3, see Austin Surls, *Making Sense of the Divine Name in the Book of Exodus: From Etymology to Literary Onomastics* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017). Surls does not connect the theme of the name to the Babel episode, nor does he discuss the indexicality of the “I.”

(name), then we may read the revelation of the name “YHWH” as *’ehyeh* (“I will be”) as a counter speech act to that of the Tower builders. The revelation of the name YHWH is nothing less than a metapragmatic discourse about the redemptive power of the universal human capacity to say “I.” We are especially encouraged to read these dual speech acts of name giving as antitypes of one another by the fact that the Tower of Babel episode is sandwiched between two genealogies of Shem (“Name”), the first an expanded list of twenty-six descendants and the second a reduced form of the list (only the direct lineage of Abram).

The opening chapters of the book of Exodus draw the reader’s attention to proper names and the speech act of name-giving.<sup>53</sup> Chapter 1 of Exodus begins with names: “These are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each one and his house came.” The “new king” who arises who no longer “knows Joseph” not only has no knowledge of that personal name, he no longer views the children of Israel as a kinship group with individual names and houses. Rather, he views them only as an undifferentiated quantity of reproductive flesh whose potency is “greater and stronger than us.” He finds an antidote to their reproductive fecundity in the imposition of harsh labor conditions, but this only increases their fecundity. At the end of Exod 1, the king issues a command to kill every newborn male, thus threatening the end of Israelite kinship in what Helen Fein, a sociologist and historian of genocide, has described as a “program of selective genocide.”<sup>54</sup> The fact that the king wants the daughters to be kept alive suggests that he wants to give them to other non-Israelite male slaves to be used as valuable breeding stock, considering their remarkable fecundity. As Fein explains, the king may have reasoned that while “the females could be enslaved, taken as wives by Egyptians, and be assimilated if they were isolated,” if the males survive, the Hebrew kinship group remains a threat and therefore “the males must be destroyed to break the identity of the group.”<sup>55</sup> The narrator makes it clear that the goal of Pharaoh is to destroy the threat of a fecund non-Egyptian kinship group within his land and that when the harsh labor of slavery failed to diminish Israelite fecundity, the next step was the genocidal destruction of the kinship group and the appropriation of the source of its fecundity for the continued procreation of slaves.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> For a narratological study of the revelation of the name “YHWH” in Exod 3, see Jean-Pierre Sonnet, “*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* (Exodus 3:14): God’s ‘Narrative Identity’ among Suspense, Curiosity, and Surprise,” *Poetics Today* 31 (2010) 331–51. More recently, van Wolde builds upon Sonnet’s essay and argues that the past names of YHWH (“God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”) and the time-independent name of God, YHWH, are tied together in the revelation. See Ellen J. van Wolde, “Not the Name Alone: A Linguistic Study of Exodus 3:14–15,” *VT* 71 (2021) 784–800. Neither Sonnet nor van Wolde attend to the relationship between the Tower of Babel episode and Exodus revelation.

<sup>54</sup> Helen Fein, “Genocide and Gender: The Uses of Women and Group Destiny,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 1 (1999) 46.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>56</sup> For a detailed commentary on the decree to kill the male children, see Gordon F. Davies, *Israel in Egypt: Reading Exodus 1–2* (JSOTSupp 135; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992) 64–85.

The theme of names and name-giving continues in Exod 2 with the naming of Moses by the king's daughter and the naming of Moses's son, Gershom, by Moses. In both cases the name is glossed with a first-person utterance linking the speaker to a particular event or to a particular condition involving the speaker ("I drew him out of the water"; "I have been a stranger in a strange land"). I will explain in what follows the significance of these naming speech acts being anchored by a reference to the "I" of the speaker of the utterance. Let us, however, first consider Exod 3, where the name theme reaches its apogee.

YHWH calls out Moses's name (repeating it twice, which seems to reflect type scene requirements, as in the calling to Abraham or Samuel) from the burning bush. In reply, Moses uses the particle *hinnē* with the first-person pronoun affix, *nī*, to index his own self-presentation: *hinnēni*, "Here I am."<sup>57</sup> This, as linguists put it, is a purely indexical utterance. Its semantic content corresponds exactly to the self-presentation of the utterer of the statement at a particular space-time location ("here"). After being told by the voice speaking from the flame that "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," Moses is told that he must go to Pharaoh and bring out "my people" from Egypt (3:10). Moses requests to know by what name he is to identify the one who sent him on this mission, beyond the descriptive phrase "the God of your fathers" (3:13). "God of your fathers" is a description, but Moses seeks to know God's proper name that reveals not a set of properties but his sheer reality. That is, he seeks a response from God that exactly corresponds to his own indexical self-presentation, "Here I am." The philosopher Agata Bielik-Robson speaks of God's "*pure name* where no auxiliary description is involved, no compromise with the order of conceptuality."<sup>58</sup> Bielik-Robson is right to emphasize how God's name (and every proper name) is independent from "the order of conceptuality." As the linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein explained in his classic essay "Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description," the "semantico-referential function of speech," which he characterizes as "communication by propositions," what Bielik-Robson calls the "order of conceptuality," is distinct from the "indexical token in speech" (Silverstein offers the examples of "I" and "you") whose "greatest apparent work" is "to be the very medium through which the relevant aspect of the context is made to 'exist.'" Silverstein calls this speech function "indexical creativity."<sup>59</sup> While Bielik-Robson emphasizes how the proper name of God points to a "singularity . . . that cannot

<sup>57</sup> For a treatment of the grammatical function of the particle *hinnē*, see C. J. Labuschagne, "The Particles *hen* and *hineh*," *OtSt* 18 (1973) 1–14. For a discussion of the elements of the call narrative, and the function of the respondent's "I" as "in dialogue" and "in action" with YHWH's "I," see Norman Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *ZAW* 77 (1965) 309–14.

<sup>58</sup> Agata Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity: Philosophical Marranos* (Routledge Jewish Studies Series; London: Routledge, 2014) 249 (emphasis in original).

<sup>59</sup> Michael Silverstein, "Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description," in *Meaning in Anthropology* (ed. Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby; Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976) 14, 34.

be exhausted by any set of meanings,” a point with which I agree, I want to emphasize how indexical creativity establishes the possibility of the *interlinguistic comprehensibility* of these terms. Indexicality is the linguistic bridge that opens a space of communication after YHWH’s fragmentation of humanity’s linguistic unity. This interlinguistic comprehensibility cannot be properly achieved with a God who is known only as “the God of *your* fathers” if the addressee, unlike Moses, does not count Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as his progenitors. Only a proper name that is uniquely tied to God can provide interlinguistic comprehensibility. Proper names do not require translation. But, even more than the proper name, interlinguistic comprehensibility and freedom from the “order of conceptuality” is achieved through the gloss that God provides on his name, even before he reveals it. The gloss on the divine name—“I will be who I will be”—is a perfect case of indexical creativity.<sup>60</sup>

God answers Moses at first not with his proper name, but with *’ehyeh ’āšer ’ehyeh* (“I will be who I will be”). YHWH then instructs Moses to use the first-person verbal form *’ehyeh* as his name: “Say to the children of Israel, I-will-be (*’ehyeh*) has sent me to you” (Exod 3:14). God’s refusal to immediately share the proper name “YHWH” only draws more attention to the revelation of the name “YHWH” in the next verse, which is further described in the final words of the verse: “this is my name forever and this is my memorial from generation to generation” (3:15). The open-endedness of “I will be who I will be” not only checks any claim to compel YHWH to serve the will of those who know his name, as many commentators have pointed out,<sup>61</sup> it also opens a space of interlinguistic intelligibility in which each human can fully grasp both the uniqueness and the universality of what YHWH’s name signifies. The linguistic indexicality of the pronoun “I” is one that holds true for all languages. The revelation of the name and its gloss “I will be who I will be” is the opposite of an initiatory ritual in a mystery cult where a divine name is revealed, but the initiate is sworn to keep it secret. I therefore cannot agree with the biblical scholar Yisca Zimran who argues that *’ehyeh* in 3:14 “conceals more than it reveals, retaining the unbridgeable gap between God and a human.”<sup>62</sup> YHWH’s “I am” does not seem to widen the gap between divine and human speaker but to authorize the human hope of the slave, to whom YHWH’s revelation is ultimately addressed, that her flesh, what she indexes with her “I,” will once again become her own flesh and not the property of Pharaoh. The ability to articulate the “I” which indexes one’s unique presence in the world

<sup>60</sup> For an excellent discussion of how the revelation of the divine name is both indexical (context-dependent upon the speaker’s presence) and creative (bringing the context into being through the calling of the addressee’s name), see Naomi Janowitz, “Re-Creating Genesis: The Metapragmatics of Divine Speech,” in *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics* (ed. John Arthur Lucy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>61</sup> Sonnet, “*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*,” 336.

<sup>62</sup> Yisca Zimran, “Multiple Facets of God: Divine-Human Relations in Exodus 3:1–4:17,” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 34.1 (2020) 238.

is the antithesis of the “nightmarish undifferentiation” of the fantasized collective body of the Babelians, but it also challenges Pharaoh’s view of the Israelites as (dangerously fecund) reproductive flesh.

Opposed to both the fantasy of undifferentiated unity represented by the Babelians’ “one lip” and to the namelessness of enslaved flesh (recall that Pharaoh did not know [the name of] Joseph), kinship creation—giving names to one’s children, biological or adopted—seems to be built upon the articulation of the “I.” It is in relation to her “I” that the princess names Moses, and in relation to his “I” that Moses names Gershom. And it is in relation to his “I” that YHWH names himself so that he may be recognized as the one who redeemed his “firstborn son” (Exod 4:22) from slavery. These “I”-based name-givings, and YHWH’s self-revelation as “I am” whose firstborn son is Israel, when set against the background of Pharaoh’s attempt to efface Israel’s names, shows the importance of kinship itself as the matrix within which the oneness of God and the oneness of humanity in the midst of fragmented kinship groups can be known. Michael Silverstein points out that “such lexical items as so-called kinship terms or personal names in any society can hardly be characterized by a ‘semantic’ analysis.”<sup>63</sup> Kinship is the matrix within which the irreducible “I”-ness of each human comes to be indexically named. The human “I” who participates in kinship creation, insofar as this “I” reveals the creative power of unique oneness of YHWH’s “I” by cleaving to engender a new and unique “one flesh,” is not just a placeholder within a semantico-referential system, where, for example, today’s “daughter” becomes tomorrow’s “wife.” “Wife” (*iššā*), whatever its semantics, indexes a unique individual, “this one” (*zō ḵ*). Nor is each “one flesh” just a fragment of an undifferentiated collective body. By being able to say “I,” each person indexes his or her *unique* participation in the ongoing creation of human “I”-sayers that YHWH initiated when he presented the first woman to the first man. And this ability to index oneself with the pronoun “I” as a unique adult participant, whether male or female, in the creation of “one flesh” is itself an index of the common origin of humans despite their division into distinct kinship-language groups. Furthermore, the ability to say “I” makes it possible to respond to a call from the paradigmatic “I”-sayer, YHWH, to say “Here I am.” The “I” indexes the difference between reproducing the image of God and reproducing a “kind,” the difference between kinship and the effacement of kinship.

The revelation of the divine name to Moses explains why this God is especially concerned with the condition of the slave: this God, whose name is transposable with the affirmation “I will be who I will be,” an affirmation of this God’s freedom to name himself, invested the human being at creation with the freedom to give names to others: YHWH does not know in advance what name the human will give to the animals (Gen 3:19). As we have seen, Hortense Spillers has argued that the power to give names to one’s children is what slavery threatens when it undercuts the kinship bonds of the enslaved peoples. The restoration of Israel’s power to give

<sup>63</sup> Silverstein, “Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description,” 52.

and remember names (*šēmôt*), however, does more than restore a particular kinship lineage and its relationship with its ancestral God. Rather, it places that lineage into relationship with the interlinguistic Name of the God who created humanity with the power to “abandon” one’s father and one’s mother in order to become an independent “I”-sayer who freely chooses to create a kinship bond in the form of a unique and new “one flesh.”<sup>64</sup> The children of Israel will be the “people of the name” not by means of the (Babelian) fusion of their flesh into one and the same collective body, but by giving expression to the power to say “I” with a unique indexical creativity (to say “here I am,” in other words) while also re-creating a new “one flesh” through which the “I” rises beyond its unique singularity (“It is not good for the human to be alone,” Gen 2:18). The Triteuchal thematic constellation of kinship, incest, and slavery presents a political theology in which Israel’s holiness as a kinship group resides in its revelation of what kinship means within YHWH’s created order. Israel’s *meta-kinship* identity reveals how the oneness of humanity (the goal of the Babelians) and the differentiation of humanity into kinship groups (that which incest and slavery threaten to efface, as Spillers teaches us) are mediated through the power vested by YHWH in the first humans to create life (“be fruitful and multiply”) in the image of, and with the freedom to say, “I will be.”

The epigraph at the head of this essay is a poetic inscription carved beneath the lip of one of David Drake’s pots. The first verse, “I wonder where is all my relation,” testifies to the attempt to destroy kinship on the part of those who enslaved him. Deprived of all “relation,” Drake’s “I” is singular, but, like his pot, empty. The following verse, “Friendship to all—and every nation,” offers a new “relation” in place of the “relation” that has gone missing: a relation with all humanity, but also and at the same time with every kinship group (“nation”). The pot first speaks its “I” through its “one lip” in emptiness, then affirms a new fullness of meaning. The physical inscription indexes David Drake’s creative hand. It also compels the viewer/reader to assume the role of speaking the “I” of the pot, to give it voice (either literally, by reading it aloud, or in internal speech), and thereby take responsibility for speaking David Drake’s irreplaceable and unique “I” once again, but this time freed from the deadness of the materiality of the inscription and the emptiness contained within that dead materiality.<sup>65</sup> The pot and its reader thus enter into the

<sup>64</sup> Megan Warner has argued, I believe persuasively, that the lexical choices for the verbs in the phrase “a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife” draw attention to the freedom to choose a partner who does not necessarily fall within the kinship group’s narrow understanding of the “purity” of its borders. She situates this in the context of the intermarriage debates in the early postexilic community, the period when the Triteuch is likely to have been coming into form. See Warner, “‘Therefore a Man Leaves.’”

<sup>65</sup> The classicist Jesper Svenbro has argued that in ancient Greek tomb inscriptions, the “I” (“I am the tomb [*sēma*] of so-and-so”) calls upon the reader (who would have read the inscription aloud) to reanimate the dead one buried beneath the tomb. “At the moment of reading, the reading voice does not belong to the reader, even though he is the one using his vocal apparatus to ensure that the reading takes place. If he lends his voice to these mute signs, the text appropriates it: his voice becomes the voice of the written text.” Although this reduction of the reader’s “I” to an

“relation” of “friendship” that renews or revivifies the “I” of each. I would call this the redemptive pragmatics of the “I.” I have argued that it is this redemptive pragmatics that is memorialized with the Name “YHWH.”

---

instrument of another’s reanimation from written sign to vocal presence may seem to model a master-slave relation, Svenbro shows that it can be reframed as a way to bring the reader into a relation of mutual friendship, thematized, he shows, in the discussion of writing in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Assuming the role of another’s “I” can be liberating, if it makes one aware of one’s responsibility as an “I”-sayer to redeem the other from a condition where the “I” is deprived of speech. Jesper Svenbro, *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece* (Myth and Poetics; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993) 46.