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BIBLICAL REVISION BOTH ANCIENT AND MODERN

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A thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Jamie Willeford

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Advisor: Alison Schofield

Author: Jamie Willeford  
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Advisor: Alison Schofield  
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## ABSTRACT

Biblical revision has been a part of the Jewish tradition since the Bible began to be canonized in the Second Temple period. Many authors throughout the centuries have seen fit to revise the biblical text: creating a literary genre that is in this paper termed “rewritten Bible.” Maxine Grossman’s literary critical method, as advocated in *Reading for History in the Damascus Document: A Methodological Method*, helps us to understand the different types of meaning that can be created from a text, including meaning that is created outside the intent of the author, as it is in the genre of rewritten Bible. The text of *Jubilees* and Shulamith Hareven’s novel *Thirst: The Desert Trilogy* serve to demonstrate both the continuity of the act of revision in the Jewish tradition as well as how rewritten Bible has functioned in different societies in various time periods.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Shulamith Hareven's *Thirst: The Desert Trilogy* is a modern retelling of Exodus, Joshua and Judges through the voices of those marginalized by the original narrative. It is a contemporary example of a Jewish literary genre that dates back to ancient times, a genre for which I will use the label "rewritten Bible." One ancient example of this genre is found in *Jubilees*, which dates back to the Second Temple period. *Jubilees* retells the canonical books of Genesis through Exodus with special emphasis on genealogy and explaining the biblical text. Both works represent the tendency in the Jewish tradition to rewrite the text of the Bible to account for shifting cultural paradigms. An examination of the two will serve to show the continuity of biblical revision within the Jewish tradition, as well as how the historical situations motivating revision have changed over time.

Maxine Grossman, through her work on the Dead Sea Scrolls (among which *Jubilees* was found), can help us understand, theoretically, how the genre of rewritten Bible has been received and how it has functioned in different historical communities. Her literary critical approach emphasizes that legitimate meaning can be created in a text through audience participation. In light of this theory, as a reader I must acknowledge my own complicity in this process. As an American reader steeped in post-modern ideology, I am in a privileged position to see, appropriate and understand the enterprise of re-written Bible in a new way, a way that understands both the historical and social context of the genre, as well as its possible future.

The *Desert Trilogy* represents a modern Jewish manifestation of rewritten Bible, a kind of literature that has an important role to play within the ever-evolving Israeli society. Its role is important not only in addressing contemporary issues, but also because Hareven participates in the historical tradition of biblical revision. “Sacred texts serve the moral dilemmas of the present” and so for many modern Israeli writers “scripture is not studied for its own sake but for its continuing impact” (Omer-Sherman 2004). The impact of scripture on Israeli society is difficult to overestimate, and Hareven’s trilogy has functioned in a very particular way in that society. It has provided a necessary counter-narrative to the Zionist meta-plot by providing a voice for those who are left out of the mainstream narrative.

The three novels that make up Hareven’s Desert trilogy are *The Miracle Hater*, *The Prophet*, and *After Childhood*. *The Miracle Hater* tells the Exodus story with a twist. It is the story of Eshkar, a young man who, after a perceived injustice involving the woman he loves, decides to live his life on the fringes of the society of Hebrews who leave Egypt to dwell in the desert. Eshkar becomes the hero of a counter-biblical narrative. He gathers a few followers in opposition to Moses, and their story, the story of women and other societal rejects, represents the voices of those written out of the Bible itself. *The Prophet* tells the story of Hivai, a Gibeonite prophet with failing visions. The story takes place mostly inside the walls of Gibeon on the eve of the Hebrew onslaught. This story puts the Israeli reader into the uncomfortable position of seeing him or herself as an outsider, one who has usurped the land from previous inhabitants, an idea that has obvious bearing on Israeli society today. Finally, *After Childhood* tells the story of Salu, another outsider whose father’s near sacrifice of him as a child has marked him as a

social outcast. Again, he is a character who exists on the fringes of society, and his particular tribe of Hebrews itself exists on the outskirts of Joshua's conquests. They are content to live a desert existence, and even begin to feel trapped after they start to settle the land, to build houses and grow crops. Salu's wife, Moran, is a strong woman, a proto-feminist even, who scorns the need for any authority; she has no use for either men or Gods. She loves the freedom of desert life, which can be read allegorically as both pro Diasporic and anti-Zionist.

Ultimately, all three books subtly advocate a similar way of reading the biblical text: each emphasizes the Exodus narrative's universal call for freedom from oppression. Through her use of marginal characters, social outcasts who do not fit any niche in a society that refuses to create one for them, Hareven critiques traditional biblical interpretation that leaves out their voices, the voices of those uprooted and oppressed by the biblical narrative. These novels represent something of a contradiction; they provide a postmodern worldview in which the universe is chaotic, but somehow not without meaning. The Bible itself is not devoid of these currents; but because the Bible has been used to justify oppression, Hareven chooses to revise the part of the text with which she disagrees. Thus her novel joins a long tradition of Jewish literature that can be categorized as "rewritten Bible."

## **CHAPTER ONE: JUBILEES**

The Book of *Jubilees* provides an ancient example of rewritten scripture. A comparison of the motivating factors behind this text with the factors motivating Shulamith Hareven will serve to highlight the continuity of the revisionist genre in the Jewish tradition. It is inappropriate to use the term rewritten Bible for this book because at the time of its composition the canon was not completely closed. “The word Bible evokes the image of a unified book, a codex, a unit, a collected anthology; but this was not the case in the late Second Temple period” (Ulrich 1999, 89). *Jubilees* was re-written *scripture*. Genesis and Exodus were authoritative, but could not be considered as Bible because the Bible was not canonized yet. There was “both in explicit debate and in practice, uncertainty as to the status of books such as Qoheleth, the Song of Songs, Sirach, *Enoch* and *Jubilees*” (Ulrich 1999, 90). The idea of scripture was at this time especially fluid, so much so that *Jubilees*, a revision of other scriptural texts, was being considered for canonization itself. “By the end of the Second Temple period there were works that were considered ‘Scripture’, a canonical process, and a canon-in-the-making, but there was not yet a canon” (Ulrich 1999, 90-91).

To be able to discuss meaningfully mainstream interpretations of the biblical text as well as deviations from that mainstream, we have to understand the history of biblical compilation. The “canonization of the Bible resulted from a consensus of those to whom it was addressed and a ruling group of religious elites that established its sanctity”



(Shaked 2004). The idea of consensus verification indicates that there was a variety of Jewish literature vying for sanctification at the time the canon was cemented. Ultimately however certain texts prevailed and “the canon of twenty-four books became the underlying foundation of Jewish culture” (Shaked 2004).

There is an ongoing debate about when exactly *Jubilees* was written, but most scholars believe it to have been some time in the second century. Multiple copies from Qumran have been paleographically dated to 125-100 BCE (Vanderkam 2008, 408). *Jubilees* is a revision of Genesis 1 through Exodus 24 (Vanderkam 2008, 405), which, as will be discussed later, is some of the same material that Hareven covers. *Jubilees* has survived to modern times in Ge’ez, the ancient language of Ethiopia. Western Scholars first became aware of its existence in the mid- nineteenth century, and it became even better known after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Bits and pieces of fourteen different copies of the book were found in cave 1 at Qumran (Vanderkam 2008, 406). The Hebrew copies do not add up to all the text we have available of *Jubilees* in Ge’ez; however they do show that the original text was adhered to remarkably closely, especially for having gone through multiple translations (Vanderkam 2008, 407).

Because copies of *Jubilees* were found at Qumran, it has been suggested by some scholars that the community wrote this text. This, however, was not the case. *Jubilees* “antedates the founding of the community that eventually made its way to Qumran”; however, *Jubilees* eventually became very influential in that community (Vanderkam 2008, 409). James C. Vanderkam understands the text to be a unified work that “does not express a separatist or sectarian point of view” (2008, 409). This is strange for us to think about today. When we hear rewritten scripture, many of us would assume some

kind of break with the original religious group that wrote that scripture. This is not the case with *Jubilees* and neither is it the case with Hareven, as we shall see later. The revisionist attitude stems from a desire to reform the tradition rather than separate from it. There are also other ancient examples of rewritten scripture when the authors did not desire to break with the Jewish tradition. *Jubilees* is one example; *1 Enoch*, *Aramaic Levi*, *Genesis Apocryphon*, and Josephus' *Antiquities 1-10* are others (Vanderkam 2008, 409). For the authors of these works “the scriptural text supplied a basic framework for their compositions, but they felt free to revise it through addition, subtraction, and other changes” (Vanderkam 2008, 409).

In the case of *Jubilees*, the author uses the narrative structure of Genesis 1-Exodus 24 but changes it greatly so that the reader understands the story the way the author of *Jubilees* wants him or her to. The author finds authority for his interpretation in the highest possible source, revelation from God. Chapter one records the words of a conversation between God and Moses, while Chapters two through fifty are “words the angel of the presence by divine order dictated to Moses from the heavenly tablets” (Vanderkam 2008, 410). Because of this ingenious participation in divine authority, the author is free to take liberties with the canonical text. The liberties taken with that text are far from a rejection of the original text but rather “a means of participating in the authority already held by the base text” (Vanderkam 2008, 410). In fact, the author of *Jubilees* did not intend for his work to be a replacement of the base text but to be read in conjunction with it. Evidence of this can be found in *Jubilees* 3.12, the passage that describes the rape of Dinah. The angel of the presence says to Moses: “for this reason I have written for you in the words of the law everything that the Shechemites did to Dinah

and how Jacob's sons said: 'We will not give our daughter to a man who has a foreskin because for us that would be a disgraceful thing'." The Angel clearly means for his address to provide an explanation (rather than a replacement) of why he had "written for you in the words of the law," the law being the biblical text (Vanderkam 2008, 410). The same can be said for Hareven's novel, that although it is a revision of biblical text, it becomes richer when read with knowledge of that text. Neither *Jubilees* nor *Thirst: The Desert Trilogy* are meant replace the Bible but to critique and enhance it.

### *Treatment of Women in Jubilees*

One of the ways *Jubilees* attempts to enhance the biblical text is through its treatment of women. In Genesis women have children, scheme on a small domestic scale, and for the most part do little else. In *Jubilees*, however, women are much more prominent. In some cases they even "play key roles in the sacred drama" (Vanderkam 2008, 420). This may seem surprising as the author also advocates strict obedience to Mosaic Law and traditional ways. However, before jumping to conclusions about the author being some kind of proto-feminist, a closer examination of the text will show that women in *Jubilees* are merely a subcategory of a larger theme: the purity of the chosen line (Vanderkam 2008, 420). Women are included as part of the genealogies with which the author is obsessed because they serve to show that the Hebrews remained pure and did not marry outsiders. The text really says nothing about the intrinsic worth of women. Ultimately the concern of the author of *Jubilees* lies in "retelling the past for the

edification of his contemporaries” (Vanderkam 2008, 423). Although Hareven’s portrayal is decidedly different, her goal in retelling the biblical text is the same.

Although no one is sure who exactly wrote *Jubilees*, since ancient authors do not divulge their identity the way that we do today, there are a few educated assumptions that can be made about him (Vanderkam 2001, 141). He was scholarly, and probably a priest. Evidence of his alleged priestly nature can be found throughout the text. One example is the fact that the leading characters all perform priestly duties like sacrifices. Another can be found in the treatment of Levi, who in *Jubilees* 30-32 is appointed to an eternal priesthood and performs priestly duties, whereas in the Bible he is the ancestor of the priests but does not perform these duties himself (Vanderkam 2001, 141-142). Along with the author’s probable identity, the text of *Jubilees* more than hints at his agenda. Yes, he wrote the text for the edification of his contemporaries, but it is possible to be more specific. The main concern of the author seems to be with Israel’s status as a people set above others, with emphasis on the additional special nature of the priests within this already special group. Other nations are lost to God, but “regarding the Israelites it has been written and ordained: ‘If they turn to him in the right way, he will forgive all their sins’” (Vanderkam 2001, 122). They are God’s chosen, singled out among the nations for his covenant, alone allowed to observe the Sabbath (Vanderkam 2001, 122). This status has to be maintained at all costs and “the book surely slants the scriptural story in such a way that it more powerfully emphasizes the keeping of covenantal laws and separations from the nations” (Vanderkam 2001, 135).

The scriptural narrative is adapted to address the concerns that the author found important in his time. His probable time can be fixed to the Hellenistic period of Second

Temple Judaism. This is based upon the author's knowledge of prophetic literature and other sources, most notably 1 Maccabees. Regarding the time of Antiochus Epiphanes (175-164 BCE) 1 Maccabees maintains "In those days certain renegades came out from Israel and mislead many, saying, 'let us go and make a covenant with the gentiles around us, for since we separated from them many disasters have come upon us.'" The people then accept this proposal, followed by the king to whom it is brought (1 Maccabees 11-13). The Hellenizing reform of Jerusalem, involving setting up a gymnasium, reversing circumcision, and abandoning the covenant, is subsequently described (Vanderkam 2001, 139). Related attitudes are found in other texts of this era and at different times in Jewish history, and the author of *Jubilees* retold the beginning of the Bible mostly likely in opposition to these attitudes (Vanderkam 2001, 140). The author of *Jubilees* refutes the merit of Hellenization or of any effort of assimilation on the part of Jews. They are a people to be kept separate and thus special in the eyes of God.

Ultimately, *Jubilees* hints at its own genre and places itself as a text that fits in the history of biblical revision. In one passage, "He [Jacob] gave all his books and the books of his fathers to his son Levi so that he would preserve them and renew them for his sons until today" (45.16). Vanderkam believes that "the renewal envisaged is probably the process of making the old legislation and the principles behind it applicable to new situations- just as happens in the book of *Jubilees*" (2001, 141). The influence of this revision can be seen through its importance for the Qumran community. The large number of copies found is the first indication of its likely importance. Secondly the fact that the text of *Jubilees* is quoted as authoritative in multiple places in the scrolls (CD 16.2-4, 4Q228) and has clearly made its imprint on the writing in others (4Q217 reflects

the language of *Jubilees* 1.26-29) is even more suggestive of its influence (Vanderkam 2001, 144). Cited texts were very influential in the Qumran community, the fact that they were cited usually hinted at their status as scripture. Because we know that *Jubilees* was almost canonized by the Jewish community at large it is a relatively safe assumption to say that it most likely was considered scripture at Qumran. This serves to show the profound influence the genre of rewritten scripture had on the Jewish tradition during Second Temple Times, and as we will see this influence has continued throughout the centuries.

## **CHAPTER TWO: MAXINE GROSSMAN'S CRITICAL METHOD**

Although it has been long established that biblical revision is acceptable within Jewish tradition, the complicated matter of what to do with the different meanings these revisions creates is still problematic. Not every revision or interpretation is accepted with open arms. One has only to look at the Mishnah to find a long history of arguments over interpretation. Although these arguments will always occur, the literary criticism Maxine Grossman advocates in her book *Reading for History in the Damascus Document: A Methodological Method* can prove helpful in allowing conflicting interpretations to exist simultaneously. Grossman's type of literary criticism offers a shift in paradigm, a new way to read the Bible and understand how different Jewish communities have interacted with it throughout the ages. She provides a shift "away from 'original meaning' of the text and toward a discussion of a construction and reconstruction of meaning in readings of the text throughout the history of its use" (Grossman 2002, 4). Grossman uses the *Damascus Document* to show how one ancient Jewish community extrapolated its own unique meaning from the biblical text. One very important element of Grossman's method, particularly relevant to both *Jubilees* and Shulamith Hareven's modern retelling, is that this method "also emphasizes the significance of events that occur after the text is composed: the adaptations and interpretations of it by a variety of audiences, and the development of new understandings of history based on those adaptations" (Grossman 2002, 4). As we have seen, *Jubilees* reflects conflicts over assimilation during the Second

Temple Period, and later we will examine the very significant event taken into account in Hareven's work, the creation of the State of Israel.

Whenever reading a text in light of Grossman's method, one must be aware that although "a text may be intended to present a specific view, this in no way ensures that the text will be understood in terms of its original claims" (Grossman 2002, 5). This in no way lessens the legitimacy of finding meaning in the text that the author or authors might not have intended. Rather it creates a responsibility for the reader to be aware of his or her own participation in the creation of meaning. "Some readings can be judged to be wrong, but no reading can be proven right" (Grossman 2002, 38). Because no absolutely correct interpretation ever exists, the possibilities for new creations of meaning are infinite. Grossman could have taken this argument even further, especially with regards to the Bible. The concept of authorship in antiquity was quite different from our modern concept. The Bible we have today is the result of the work of multiple authors and editors who often did not claim their identities. And although Grossman understands that the Bible is "the product of a series of redactions," (2002, 11) she does not quite acknowledge as much as she should that the canonized Bible is already a product of multiple creations of meaning from countless individuals over a long period of time. She could easily have acknowledged this more thoroughly given that her approach allows for "multiple 'original' meanings and also for ongoing changes in textual meaning over time" (Grossman 2002, 10). To further complicate an already complicated situation, Grossman makes the point that "constructions of meaning may occur in the mind of the writer, in the text as an [artifact], or in the reader's experience of the document" (Grossman 2002, 14). Given this new perspective, we now have to see the Bible as a text



not only created by multiple authors and even containing conflicting agendas at the time of its compilation, but also as an evolving entity with new meaning being created through each reading of it.

### *Applying Grossman's Method*

Grossman was speaking of the *Damascus Document*, but could have just as easily been discussing the Bible, when she said that at any time “the text might support a number of different (and even conflicting) agendas, overlaid upon one another by a series of authors/editors whose own agenda led them to reconsider and even rewrite the text” (Grossman 2002, 17). It is this variety of agendas already present in the Bible that provides authors in the genre of rewritten Bible with an excellent rationalization to emphasize one biblical truth over another.

This variety of agendas leaves a revisionist like Hareven with ample ammunition to engage the text of the Bible legitimately. She does not merely take the stories of the Bible and change them, but interacts with threads of meaning that already exist within the biblical text itself. She has merely to pick up on a manifestation of the meaning she is looking for. For example, she has only to universalize the Exodus story, apply this same theme of throwing off the yoke of oppression, and apply it beyond the scope of its biblical root. Her work often alludes to the injustices perpetrated against the Palestinians, and parts of the Exodus story could just as easily be applied to any oppressed minority. The Exodus story advocates not only the Hebrews' dramatic exit from Egypt, but also their conquering of the “region of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites

and Jebusites.” Exodus 3:8 (New JPS). Thus the text, almost in the same breath, advocates freedom from oppression and the conquering of others.

There are two important types of biblical revisionists to distinguish between when discussing the idea of biblical “truth”. One type believes him or herself to be in possession of the “hidden meaning” in a text, while the other changes meaning intentionally. The difference between unveiling hidden meaning and intentionally changing meaning is actually vast. To claim to have uncovered *the* hidden meaning is to tacitly acknowledge that everyone before you has been reading the text imperfectly. To take a text and rewrite it to include your own perspectives also acknowledges that the people before you were finding imperfect meaning, but does so in a very different way. To rewrite a text you do not necessarily have to negate all meaning people have found in the base text before you rewrote it, but merely include your own agenda. Revisionists are not always concerned with claiming to be in possession of the only meaning, thus rendering any previous meaning meaningless, but quite the opposite in fact. They very much acknowledge previous meaning and exist in contention with it. They recognize that this was the meaning created by others and revise to show that they disagree. This is what most Jewish authors have done throughout the history of biblical revision; *Jubilees* and Hareven’s trilogy are but two examples.

Some Jewish writers have not only not deemed it inappropriate to deny the authority of previous creations of biblical meaning, but also have actually used the authority the text has gained through these creation to validate their own work. Because biblical revision uses the sacred text as its base, it seems that authors, even those who make great innovations from the base text, get to participate in the authority the Bible

claims. Those who choose to rewrite the Bible are generally aware of its status, and that is precisely why they choose to rewrite it. Hareven was raised in Israel during a time in which the Bible was incredibly culturally important. She saw how it was used to validate things she disagreed with, such as the displacement of the Palestinians, and she recognized the need to revise the narrative to include the voices of those who were silenced.

Hareven and other authors of the texts that comprise the genre of rewritten Bible take their participation as audience members much further than merely reading the text. We can see reflections of Hareven's experience as a reader who participates in the creation of biblical meaning in *Thirst*, and we can experience the unknown priest's creation of meaning in *Jubilees* because they wrote them down for us. If Grossman's method is to be followed to its logical conclusion, I must include myself as a reader who participates in the creation of meaning in all of these texts: the Bible, *Jubilees*, and *The Desert Trilogy*. The ever evolving creations of meaning this method acknowledges do not indicate that with each reading of a text we are getting further and further away from the "original" meaning, but rather that each reader brings new layers of meaning which add to the text rather than subtract from it.

In Hareven's case she completely re-imagines the text from alternative perspectives and records these imagined perspectives in *Thirst*. Her portrayal of marginal characters, men and especially women who are left out of both the biblical text and the traditional understanding of that text, provides a veiled critique of the modern Zionist enterprise. In general, modern Israel has endorsed a very particular way of reading the

Bible, one that supports this Zionist enterprise. An examination of the function of the Bible in modern Israeli society is necessary to understand Hareven's critique.

### **CHAPTER THREE: THE BIBLE IN MODERN ISRAEL**

From examining the role of the Bible in the Second Temple period, during the time *Jubilees* was written, and understanding how multiple meanings are created in any given text, we will move on to examine the role of the Bible in modern day Israel. It may seem that we are leaving out a few thousand years of Jewish literary history, but in my opinion this omission closely parallels what the Zionist creators of modern Israeli identity attempted to do for themselves. All of the thousands of years of Diaspora history were discarded in order to create a new identity that was heavily based upon the Bible. Given the fact that to create the language of modern Hebrew an ancient liturgical language had to be reworked into the vernacular, and that the biblical text served as the blue-print for this transition, it is easy to understand the influence of the Bible on early Israeli society. The “Bible’s role in creating a laic Hebrew” influenced “a whole slew of writers who wrapped their messages in biblical dates and images” (Shapira 2004). Hebrew speakers could not help but interact with biblical words, metaphors and ideas because their language was ultimately based upon the text. However, the Bible was not used indiscriminately, from the Haskalah period on the Bible has been understood in a very particular way.

### *Background: The Haskalah Movement*

This emphasis on the importance of the Bible had been minimized in the Diaspora, until the mid nineteenth century when “it became the book of books for the Haskalah movement...” (Shaked 2004). It is important to understand the Haskalah movement because ideas that stemmed from it have remained influential, the “*KultureKampf* that began in the eighteenth century continues still today, especially in Israel” (Rosman 2007, 136). During this movement “readers and artists regarded the Bible as a source to draw on for creating new literary works” (Shaked 2004). There was a revival of the old tradition of interpretation and even downright deviation from the biblical text. As with *Jubilees* and *Thirst*, these artistic works were not meant to supplant the Bible; rather the Bible became a source of inspiration and artistic outlet. This type of interpretation became more and more emphasized later in Israeli society, “as the Bible became more and more accepted as the classic literary foundation of the old yet new culture, it became more open to humanistic and artistic interpretations” (Shaked 2004). These interpretations for the most part were independent of religious beliefs (Shaked 2004).

Hareven’s work somewhat falls within this category, as she undoubtedly takes artistic license with the Bible. However, her reading is not completely devoid of religious belief. God is ever-present in the trilogy, even if he is disparaged more often than praised. Her characters are not secular, merely ignorant. They seem content to follow what little they know about their religion. A question is asked of a Hebrew man in *The Prophet*: Is the Law given by Moses a secret matter or can it be discussed? The man does not really know but proceeds to inform the inquirer, “he had never studied it much. He knew that it

forbade a man to murder or bear false witness. Truly, he did not know much more than that, but everyone knew that the Law was very good” (Hareven 1988, 106). In this way Hareven does not secularize the story so much as comment negatively on the way many people experience religion, as something that exists but is not particularly meaningful. Hareven reacts to the way the Bible has been used since the Haskalah period. She is reacting to the fact that “from the beginnings of the Haskalah period of literature, the use of Biblical material gave a quasi legitimization to the idea of introducing romantic and pro-nationalistic views into literary texts” (Shaked 2004).

These new nationalist interpretations beginning in the Haskalah period “constituted a significant Midrashic force, giving it new life for its own generation” (Shaked 2004). This force paralleled what midrash (generally speaking the interpretation of Torah), had always done in the past: interpret the Bible in a way that was meaningful for each subsequent generation (Shaked 2004). This “demand for the ‘New Hebrew’ who would replace the ‘ancient Jew’, who would be bound by different traditions and would create for himself new ceremonial rites” (Shaked 2004) was not as new as it sounded. The values created in the new Midrash were different, but the idea that new values can be created has remained constant in Judaism throughout time. It is counterintuitive that a religion so dependent upon tradition has also been so consistently dynamic and fluid. However we have the idea that interpretation, even radical interpretation, is acceptable to thank for that. The Haskalah and later Zionist Midrash may represent a change in values, a change toward secularism even, but it was still a Jewish secularism because this did not constitute a change in the way the Bible could be interpreted or how it had functioned in Jewish culture.

### *The New Hebrew*

The ideal of the “New Israeli’ or the “New Hebrew” created in this Midrash had very specific characteristics. The New Hebrew was a “warrior: close to nature, preferring esthetics to ethics, open to every current, and unwilling to fault any stream of thought in the name of abstract Jewish principles” (Shaked 2004). This created ideal demanded both a “tie in to tradition and a distancing from it” (Shaked 2004). Midrash has always done this for Jewish culture because tied to the biblical text it could always be justified as part of the tradition no matter how much the ideas contained within it deviated from prior interpretation. Similarly, the New Hebrew was supposedly an entirely new breed of Jew, completely opposite to his Diaspora counterpart. However, he was still a Jew because the ideals he embodied were derived from the Bible. The Bible remained the “source for symbols for identity and jointly held myths” (Shaked 2004) even if that identity and those myths were secularized. The Bible has traditionally been read in Israel as literature not scripture, making it possible to accept certain aspects and reject others. And as “the biblical canon became a central source from which Jewish and Israeli societies could each draw its self-identification,” it was through “specific choices from the Canon” that different parties defined their ideologies, giving each of them canonical legitimacy” (Shaked 2004).

Zionists emphasized certain parts of the canon, such as the Song of Songs because of its focus on nature, and by this and other appropriate “random” choices they in essence created an anti-canon, using the canon itself (Shaked 2004). It has previously been



discussed that there are so many conflicting threads within the Bible that it can be used to support any and all ideologies, and Zionists used this to great effect. Haskalah authors operated under the assumption that “reinterpretation of the past legitimizes the present” (Shaked 2004). It has been claimed that this attitude began in the Haskalah period, but as we have seen with *Jubilees* that is simply not true. Throughout the history of Judaism, ever since the Bible was canonized, authors have used those texts authorized as sacred to legitimate their own interpretation and present circumstances, especially when that interpretation seemingly contradicted the biblical spirit. There is nothing more historically Jewish than an interpretation that seems to contradict the biblical text while at the same time deriving its justification from it. Gershon Shaked would have acknowledged this perfectly had he included the entirety of Jewish tradition rather than just the Haskalah period and later when he said that Hebrew Literature “needed the canonical text, and by means of it attempted to give the present a legitimacy derived from the past...” (2004). What was gained from the Haskalah period was not the idea that the Bible could both be interpreted and used to legitimate its own interpretation. Rather, Moshe Rosman, in a paraphrase of Shmuel Feiner’s book *The Jewish Enlightenment*, describes the ramifications of the ideas of the Haskalah period.

Straight lines from eighteenth-century Orthodoxy to the re-ascendant fundamentalism of our day; from the German-Jewish intellectuals to the postmodernists and post-Zionists; from the non-ideological libertines to the masses of modern “assimilated” Jews; and from the maskilim to the embattled representatives of an authentic, rational Jewishness—many of them scholars of Jewish studies (e.g., Feiner himself ) (Rosman 2007, 136).

Whether or not one agrees with the entirety of this statement, it is clear that the Haskalah movement has had a large impact on modern Israeli society.

## *The Creation of the State*

Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, wrote in 1953: "only with the renewal of the homeland and Hebrew independence have we been able to reassess the Bible in its true, full light" (Shapira 2004). As we have seen, Maxine Grossman's approach legitimates this sort of textual reading. Ben-Gurion's biblical reading reflects Grossman's notion that historical events can be taken into account in the creation of meaning in a text, even if those events occur long after the text in question was written. Ben Gurion's attitude demonstrates not just the cultural importance of the Bible, but also the belief that the creation of the State of Israel necessitated biblical revision. The *Desert Trilogy* is evidence that Hareven also feels comfortable with the certain extent of iconoclasm evident in this Zionist attitude, as she also finds revision necessary. The difference is that she believes the Zionist attitude itself needs revision. Ahad Ha-Am, the "pathfinder of the Jewish national persona" described this iconoclastic attitude well, saying, "I may treat the beliefs and opinion passed down to me by my forefathers as I see fit, without fear that this will cut me off from my people" (Shapira 2004). This was a revolutionary definition of Jewish identity (which had previously been based largely upon adherence to tradition), indicative of the Zionist ideals of a new beginning. This attitude justified a severance with tradition, which provided a means for Zionists to cut themselves of from their exilic past and create the New Hebrew identity.

What this means for the genre of rewritten Bible is that questioning or even outright revising biblical stories does not make one any less of a Jew. Although the Bible was still important, it was important in a way that it had not been previously. "In this new

definition the Bible played a key role, it was the bridge between past and present” (Shapira 2004). The Bible did not need to be thrown out for the New Hebrew; it was, in fact, a vital link to Jewish identity at the time of nation building. In a society comprised of immigrants from disparate backgrounds in which the “beliefs and opinions” of the forefathers could be neglected at will, almost nothing but this understanding of the Bible was left to tie the new Israeli secular Zionists to their Jewish roots. Rather than possessing religious meaning, the Bible provided the necessary link for these Zionists to somehow both hold onto their Jewish past and at the same time deny their Diasporic roots. The New Hebrew acknowledges his or her history as written in the Bible but is not limited by any of the Bible’s religious restrictions.

Ben Katznelson described this Zionist model as patriotism fundamentally grounded in the ancient text. He said, “Our patriotism sprung from the book, clung to the verses. The historical names. We loved an abstract homeland and we sowed this love within ourselves throughout generations, carrying it from place to place” (Shapira 2004). Yearning for a homeland, or in Hareven’s book the “Ancestral land,” has been for Jews the dominant form of relation to that land because throughout history the land has been more of an idea than a physical home. For many who actually immigrated to Israel or before that to Mandatory Palestine, the reality of the landscape conflicted jarringly with the idea of what the land would be like. “The Bible was the bridge between the land they had imagined and what actually awaited them after their arrival” (Shapira 2004). Unfortunately for the new immigrants, “the language of the Bible was at odds with grim experience” (Shapira 2004). This situation was highlighted in Y.C. Brenner’s story *Nerves*. In this story the companion of the narrator says, “Here we lie in self imposed

poverty, a village barely 25 years old...and lived in by whom? Ha. Why just today your innkeeper said to me: I should let my son grow old in this hole like myself? I'd see him dead first..." (32). The idea of living in the almost mythical land of the Bible had, for these characters as well as their real life counterparts, set them up for disappointment when arriving in the actual land.

This propensity towards disillusionment has waxed and waned in Israeli society, but mostly it has waxed. For a brief period after the War for Independence in 1948 "the conquest of extensive areas of country, and mass immigration were all perceived as the realization of scriptural substance: the past became an active ingredient in the present" (Shapira 2004). At this time Ben-Gurion started to use biblical language in earnest. After the military victory in the war, Ben-Gurion said: "None of the Biblical commentators, neither Jew nor gentile, neither in the Middle Ages nor in our own time, could have interpreted the chapters of Joshua as did the facts of the Israeli Defense Forces [IDF] this past year" (Shapira 2004). But this certainty was not echoed for long in Hebrew literature.

Shortly after the war there was a radical change in theme; the focus changed from the idyllic sense of belonging exhibited by the "Palmach" generation (approximately 1948-1958) to the loss of this feeling, and the "emerging void led to a search for the meaning and justification of life" (Balaban 2004). Although she came of age in the "Palmach" generation, Hareven falls more in line with the post-1948 authors. By questioning the morality of the book of Joshua, Hareven thus appropriated the language of the state to question the validity of that very state. By setting her second story, *The Prophet*, largely within the walls of Gibeon on the eve of the Hebrew onslaught, Hareven

calls attention to the price the previous inhabitants of the land paid for the establishment of the nation of this upstart people. Trapped inside their walled city the Gibeonites die off as their food supply dwindles.

Anger stalked the houses. A woman seized a sharp spike and killed her neighbor's cow for eating her squashes. A man brutally thrashed his own brother for stealing broad beans from the man's wife. Soon the whole city will be a desert, cried the women. Soon it will be a wilderness (Hareven 1988, 77).

A desert or wilderness exactly like the one the Hebrews recently left.

Hareven cleverly turns the tide of dominance in her ancient story just as it was turned in life with the creation of Israel. At first the Hebrews in *Thirst* are powerless slaves in Egypt, but they become the conquering force very quickly after leaving. In *The Miracle Hater*, Hareven turns the ancient Hebrews into an allegory of modern day Palestinians. In Egypt the Hebrews:

Descended on the province, innumerable flocks of men and women who stood long hours in the sun, or sat in the shade of baked-brick walls, looking for work. The Egyptians would come, take the five or ten of them that they needed, and drive the rest off (Hareven 1988, 7).

This is exactly how Palestinians in Gaza look for work from Israelis (Khas 1978), an observation that is by no means unintentional on Hareven's part. This comparison forces Israelis to notice, and hopefully accept, that they have something in common with Palestinians. There is also the possibility that it will force them to admit their complicity in the Palestinians' plight. Hareven's choice to voice this critique in biblical language makes it even more powerful to Israelis.

## *Negation of the Diaspora*

An important Zionist ideology that was read into the biblical text has to do with the “negation of exile,” which boosts the idea of Palestine at the expense of the Diaspora (Shapira 2004). In creating the State of Israel, Zionists had re-conquered biblical territory and since they had re-established themselves in the land they believed themselves to have also negated their previous diasporic existence. To this end, “Bible instruction was to serve as a crucial ingredient in the consolidation of the new, young, daring nation” that would not define itself with inspiration from contemporary Jewish society, the members of which were almost entirely living in the Diaspora, “but from the glorious past of the First Temple Period as portrayed in the pages of the Bible” (Shapira 2004). The Bible was to be read as part of the cultural heritage of the Jewish people. The Bible was not treated as the word of God handed down to Moses at Sinai, but rather a national-cultural text. Hareven can be placed within the Israeli trend to read the Bible in this somewhat secular manner, however; this reading of the Bible is the polar opposite of what the author of *Jubilees* tried to convey, which serves to show that revision remains constant but the motivating factors behind it do not. At this time the Bible was taught in secular high schools as literature that could be analyzed critically, in the same way other nations studied their classics (Shapira 2004). For example, some prophets were taught as historical and others as legend, and the curriculum distinguished between the creation story and science (Shapira 2004). “The Zionist educational system set the study of the Bible and biblical scholarship as essential elements of education in Israel,” but secular Zionist society emphasized the literary and artistic elements rather than the religious

(Shaked 2004). It is important, however, not to forget the voices in Israeli culture that argued against placing all of Jewish identity in the biblical text. Many argued that it was foolish to ignore the thousands of years of Jewish cultural proliferation between the time the Bible was written and the establishment of the State of Israel. The author Haim Hazaz for example said, “We do not live by the Bible. The oral law is what kept us a people, not the Bible” (Shapira 2004).

To create an identity that severs almost all ties to the past in the name of an unknown future is a very dangerous endeavor. Hareven parallels the plight of this modern Israeli creation of identity with that of the ancient Hebrews leaving Egypt. As a young boy, Eshkar, the main character in *The Miracle Hater*, is incredulous that the Hebrews belong anywhere other than in a state of exilic wandering in the desert. Speaking to the girl who raised him, “once he [Eshkar] told her [Baita] that he no longer believed there was such a place as Egypt. There was no Ancestral Land either. It was all fairy tales” (Hareven 1988, 19). The Hebrews in this novel leave subservient lives to find themselves not better off, but rather completely aimless and impoverished: “They had no purpose to their lives, it simply was not Egypt. Slavery was over but nothing had taken its place” (Hareven 1988, 20). Here Hareven alludes to the plight of modern Israel, and the striving to create a national identity. The frightening idea that if the new national endeavor fails, the people will be left with no identity is also expressed in Haim Hazaz’s “The Sermon.” In this story Yudka, the speaker, says, “what if its true that Judaism can manage to survive somehow in Exile, but here in the land of Israel, its doubtful?” (1962, 81). Judaism will no longer be Judaism if Israel fails, for Jews will have no past to fall back on.

The choice to sever tradition was not an easy one, and Hareven demonstrates this beautifully in the character of Moses. He is a man who blushes when he accidentally speaks Egyptian, embarrassed by the revelation of his past. Speaking about him, “some said that he had two hearts in his breast, one Hebrew and one Egyptian, and that he had murdered the Egyptian one so as to leave no trace of it” (1988, 11). The transition from Hebrews to Israelites, just like the transition from Diaspora Jews to Israelis, is not smooth or easy; in fact it involves the murder of the people’s previous identities.

Theodor Herzl, the father of the Zionist movement, would likely not have approved of it. In his essay *The Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution to the Jewish Question*, warning against assimilation, he said “our national character is too historically famous, and, in spite of every degradation, too fine to make its annihilation desirable” (1988, 91). Israeli Zionists, not too long after Herzl, attempted to annihilate their “national character” not because they desired to assimilate but because they disagreed that the national character was something worth protecting. They created their New Hebrew ideal completely in opposition to this perceived character. And as a consequence, “the Jewish struggle for a coherent identity is intensified by existential as well as political debates over territorialism and occupation” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 6). What manner of people were Israelis to be, strong people with a divine right to the land, or peacemakers who choose to exist with others?

Not only does Hareven warn against the creation of an identity that negates the history of the people who participated in that identity, she challenges another Zionist ideal that it is *this* land that is important. For Moses, in *The Miracle Hater*, it is not the



Land that is important but the fact that they have left Egypt and are no longer being persecuted. One passage illustrates this idea perfectly:

There were among them, they said to him, some who talked a great deal about returning to the Ancestral Land. Yes, Yes, he [Moses] answered distractedly, as if the point lay elsewhere. The point was to go, all of them. Even those who were still in Egypt. To become one clan, together. Together (Hareven 1988, 12).

Here it is becoming a people that is important, not becoming a nation that holds territory. This idea, unlike that of the negation of the Diaspora, is reminiscent of the Zionism of Theodor Herzl. He wanted a safe haven for Jews, but not necessarily a return to Palestine. He believed that “wherever they [Jews] live in perceptible numbers, they are more or less persecuted” (1988, 85) and that the answer was for Jews to be granted sovereignty “over a portion of the globe large enough to satisfy the rightful requirements of a nation” (1988, 92). This land did not necessarily have to be the actual land of Palestine. In fact he asks, “Shall we choose Palestine or Argentina? We shall take what is given us, and what is selected by Jewish public opinion” (1988, 95). He goes on to argue the merits of both, acknowledging pragmatically that because of the connection to their biblical roots, Palestine would be better for fundraising purposes (1988, 96).

Similarly, the earlier Second Aliyah generation (approximately 1904-1914) did not read the Bible as a proof of ancestral right to the land or divine promise of God’s covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15:19 (Shapira 2004), but more much practically. The Zionism of this time period “stemmed first and foremost from a perception that in a world divided into nations the Jewish collectivity had no future unless it adopted the national model” (Shapira 2004); and so it was the biblical model of the Israelite nation that was emphasized. Hareven disagrees with the elevation of this ideal and criticizes the

national model. She chooses to write about the wandering desert Hebrews rather than the established First Temple period Israelites because, “returning to the liminal desert affords Hareven a space to write outside the Zionist meta-plot of territorialist-redemption, to mount a spirited critique of the very idea of nation” (Omer-Sherman 2004). Hareven is very much a part of the history of Jewish writers who have used the desert landscape as an ideologically open area, a convenient location from which to criticize those in power.

### *The Desert or Wilderness Theme in Hebrew literature*

One author who is representative of this critical use of the desert landscape in Hebrew literature is H.N Bialik. His famous poem *The Dead of the Desert* is based upon Talmudic exegesis, (Omer-Sherman 2006, 98) one explanation of which was written by R. Akiba who said “the generation of the desert has no portion in the world to come, as it is written—in the wilderness shall they be consumed and there they shall die” (Shaked 2004). As modeled in this quote, the words ‘desert’ and ‘wilderness’ will be used interchangeably in this paper because in general they translate the same Hebrew word (Schofield 2006, 1). Bialik’s poem takes as its theme the same generation of ancient Hebrews as does Shulamith Hareven’s novel. It is also a retelling of the desert generation’s experience in the biblical Exodus (Omer-Sherman 2006, 98). Written in 1905, this poem exemplifies the theme in Jewish literature of the desert as liminal space. In the poem, “there is an eternal curse on both the dead of desert and the desert itself” and there is a “blurring of the line between the characters and their setting” (Shaked 2004). The desert is a place in the Jewish literary imagination where normally firm barriers can

be crossed. Moses first speaks to God in the burning bush in the desert, it is the place God makes his covenant with the Hebrews at Sinai, and later Jews, most notably the community at Qumran (in which as we remember copies of *Jubilees* were found) actually decide to move there. The Qumran sectarians “embodied the wilderness sojourn of the Israelites in a literal way, settling in a remote area of the Judean Desert” (Schofield 2008, 2). It is also a place of questioning, which is true even for Bialik the “great national poet of the first generation of Zionist settlement” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 98). Precisely at the moment that this people is re-entering the land of its ancestry, Bialik writes a poem “triumphantly embracing exilic existence” in which the “immobilized but untamed dead still seem to be rising against the very notion of national destiny and homecoming” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 98).

Bialik’s “unconventional meditation on disobedience, so strongly resistant to both Zionist optimism and religious piety, is actually an ingenious Midrash” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 100). He acknowledges “this is the generation who was defined by conflict with God” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 100). This idea of conflict with God seems to be subversive, but it has actually been accepted within the Jewish tradition that the desert generation did not live up to its end of the covenant, especially in the obligation to obedience. But disobedience alone does not define this generation nor does it define the desert in which this generation dwells. The desert is a contradictory place in the Jewish literary imagination. “Although the period following the exodus sees Israel’s rise to nationhood, it is also remembered as a time when the Israelites murmured, complained and even rebelled” (Schofield 2008, 4). While the desert actually becomes a symbol of this rebellious behavior (Schofield 2008, 4) it is also understood to be sacred space because it

was the scene of the revelation of law and the place in which God was most accessible (Schofield 2008, 7). The paradoxical nature of the desert was fully realized in the Dead Sea Scrolls. It can be generally concluded that in the literature found at Qumran “although the image of the wilderness is not entirely divorced from the negative historical events that happened there, the sought-after features of the wilderness have been highlighted and thematized” (Schofield 2008, 6).

This complex imagining of the desert is not limited to the Dead Sea Scrolls. In Bialik’s poem as well as in Hareven’s novels, the “wilderness landscape becomes a kind of mythic persona” (Shaked 2004). Bialik’s poem, while seeming to fall in line with the Midrashic tradition that the desert and those who dwell within it are cursed, is actually more reflective of the paradoxical desert motif at Qumran. Like Hareven’s novel the poem has an “extra historic meaning that changes the myth of Exile and redemption, the foundation of both Judaism and Zionism” (Shaked 2004). For Bialik the desert generation finds a kind of redemption in their exile. The dead of the desert defy God, “their foreheads are stubborn and bold, defying the wrath of the heavens” (Bialik 1905), much like the “stiff-necked people” of Exodus. The desert itself is personified, and since the space here is liminal, this personification is inextricably connected to the people as a whole. The “mutinous desert” “rebels against immutable silence, rises in insurrection to avenge its desolate state, breaks out in tempests, and raises pillars of whirling sand...” (Bialik 1905). These pillars not only rival the pillars of smoke and fire that represent God on earth in Exodus, but also here they signify the desert rebelling against its very creator. The people, inextricably connected to the desert they inhabit, also have no use for God and give him no credit. They cry, “We are the brave. Last of the enslaved! First to be

free! With our own strong hand, our own hand alone, we tore from our neck the heavy yoke” (Bialik 1905). Here Bialik defies God’s frequent reminder throughout Exodus: “I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the region of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites” (Exodus 3:8 New JPS). In their defiance this generation finds a kind of freedom.

The defiance against the divine expressed here is very similar to the attitude of Moran, the wife of the main character Salu in the third book of the *Desert Trilogy*. When the elder who brought her from the mountains to the camp of desert dwelling Hebrews comes to visit Moran he blesses her saying that “God should always be with her” (Hareven 1988, 183). Moran scandalously replies that she wishes for God to leave her alone, “Let him ignore her in his heaven, because the gods burned all when they came. They brought death and sickness and drought. It’s all we can do to make good what they ruin. Spare us both their honey and their sting” (Hareven 1988, 183). The desert existence seems to bring about a feeling of independence in many characters of Hebrew literature. Again we encounter a desert paradox. In the place where the people are the closest to God they also feel independent. This independence often extends even to a feeling that God himself is unnecessary. These proud, resilient early desert Hebrews parallel not too distantly the later New Hebrew Israeli ideal, which is perhaps why Hareven and Bialik chose them as literary subjects. This desert generation can be used effectively to critique Zionist paradigms and at the same time to validate some of its values.

The desert is a place of both extreme skepticism and, again paradoxically, a place where commonly held values can be strengthened. In a paraphrase of Emmanuel Levinas' work, Omer-Sherman explains in his book *Israel in Exile: Jewish Writing and the Desert* that "by privileging anecdotal narratives of protest and spiritual restlessness alongside the law and ritual, the Bible credits the desert as the site of supreme skepticism" (Omer-Sherman 2006, 13). However, later Sherman seemingly contradicts this writing, "throughout the Jewish epic of time and space, the desert is employed as a potent trope to strengthen, renew, and reconfirm certain core values" (Omer-Sherman 2006, 14). These statements only seem to contradict each other because the desert itself is a contradictory place where both can be true at the same time.

An example of this contradiction can be found in *The Miracle Hater*. Hareven's first story ends with the Hebrews triumphantly entering into the "Ancestral Land," indicating that this is a good thing, the reward of their struggle for surviving the harsh existence in the desert. Those who crossed the river into the Ancestral land "stood in a broad, spacious plain whose light was white and expansive" (Hareven 1988, 61). However, even in this triumphant moment there is a shadow of the trouble to come for the Hebrews immediately begin to look "covetously at the inhabited city" (Hareven 1988, 62). This trouble comes to fruition in the next story, which is told from the perspective of the victims of the Hebrew onslaught into this land. The Gibeonites wait fearfully inside the city walls anxiously, "it was from the East, from the Desert, that evil would come" (1988, 266). This is a direct inversion of Jeremiah 1:14 "From the North Evil will come" (Omer-Sherman 2004). By not only portraying the Hebrews as the "bad guys"

immediately after they enter the land, but also using biblical language, Hareven forces modern Israelis to examine their own situation as conquerors.

Hareven's portrayal of the chaos the Hebrew conquest causes is perhaps an allusion to the biblical admonition from God in Jeremiah 2:7 that reads, "I brought you to this country of farmland to enjoy its fruit and its bounty. But you came and defiled my land, you made my possession abhorrent" (New JPS). The Hebrews went into the Promised Land and found violence and discord. Ranen Omer-Sherman believes that *Thirst* "is a cautionary tale of the dangers present when we create identities agonistically, by violently stressing the difference between ourselves and those we label as the 'other'" (2004). The Hebrew identity in the novel is created in opposition to the surrounding cultures, with disastrous consequences. Interestingly, this is again the polar opposite of the message of our other revisionist text, *Jubilees*. *Jubilees* advocates creating an identity in opposition to all other groups because that is what keeps the Jews special, while Hareven warns against this very attitude. Sherman also believes the trilogy succeeds in providing "a generous reading of the Hebrew Bible's own complex ethical currents," which can help "contemporary readers recognize that postmodern ambivalences over identity, the coherence of the nation, the sanctity of territory vs. human life, are already woven into the strangely rich fabric of the ancient Bible" (Omer Sherman 2004). To interpret the Bible as simply a divine justification for nationalist aggression is to cheapen the message of the text.

This kind of reading undermines the universal aspect of the narrative, and it is this universality that Hareven reclaims with her story. She does this by telling her story from multiple perspectives (women, Gibeonites, Hebrew outsiders etc), perspectives that

remind the reader that the experience of Exodus and the conquest of Canaanite land in Joshua affects much more than one group. Although the way in which the book of Joshua condones atrocities during the conquest of Canaan is morally reprehensible, “as Hareven is clearly aware, Joshua is also a text configured by contradiction and ambivalence in ways that might just as easily inspire the writers ethical response to contemporary crisis” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 51). Because although outwardly it seems as if the biblical text is about boundaries, defining the nation of Israel against any and everyone else, a careful reading will show that Joshua at times also “seems to argue for moderation, seeing Israel as only one of several disparate peoples who inhabit the land God ostensibly reserves for them” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 51).

Alongside the desert being used to question the idea of ownership of the land, it has also has been used in Jewish literature to “transcend the neat antithesis between homeland and exile” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 4). Hareven employs this conception of the desert well. In fact, the idea of homeland is never uttered by any of her characters. Rather they are returning to the “Ancestral Land” and the idea of this land being home never really enters the story. Once her Hebrews become more established, once they begin to build crude stone dwelling and grow crops, they begin to long for their nomadic existence in the desert, when they had no ties to any land or nation. Hareven sums this up in her third story *After Childhood*:

Some said it was foolish to work the land. They were a people of shepherds, and shepherds they would always be, wandering untrammelled from place to place with their flocks....Their birthplace was the desert, stone houses were not for them; they and their children were meant for mats and booths, free to come and go as they pleased” (Hareven 1988, 107). And “sometimes hot and fierce, a desert wind blew through the camp, they would stand for a moment gazing silently



eastward, breathing the wind in deeply, with endless longing (Hareven 1988, 108).

The attitude of Hareven's characters, this longing for a return to their desert existence indicates "nostalgia for a morally unblemished exile that resists the triumphal Zionist assumptions about destined homeland and territory..." (Omer-Sherman 2006, 55).

For these characters the desert was more of a home than the "Ancestral Land"; born in that historic exile they did not feel exiled. By setting her story in the liminal space of the desert, Hareven has been able to use the desert landscape as a way to "transcend the well worn binary opposition of Diaspora versus Israel that has often dominated discussion of contemporary Jewish identity" (Omer-Sherman 2006, 2). With her work Hareven boldly states that the ancestors of modern day Jews only became a people during the period of desert wandering. A contrived "homeland" was not an essential component of this evolution, nor is the Zionist vision of Israel an essential component of Jewishness today.

The desert experience was much more than a hiatus between slavery and territorial redemption (Omer-Sherman 2006, 3). What finally transforms the desert into something more is the fact that it is the mythic scene of arguably the most foundational moment in Jewish history, the revelation of the Law at Sinai. Again this is a contradictory desert moment, so quintessentially Jewish and yet at the same time universal. This momentous event seems to transform the ground itself into something sacred, an idea that we have already seen was expressed in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In this regard, *Jubilees* is paradigmatic of the desert theme in the Scrolls. "The author of *Jubilees* directly connects a strong theological understanding of covenant, which was so central at Qumran, to the

events that took place in the wilderness” (Schofield 2008, 16). Ultimately, the fact that the Law was given by God in the desert saves the desert from having completely negative connotations in the Jewish imagination. In Exodus 3:5 God warns, "Do not come closer" and orders, "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground" (New JPS). The ground becomes sacred through the event at Sinai yet, “in spite of this tangible suggestion of sacred ground, the desert of Exodus offers a stern rebuke to those who would fetishize place” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 4). Even Hareven’s Hebrews, who grow restless with their settled existence, never become nostalgic about their desert life because of the greatness or comfort of the desert itself, but for the freedom they had there. Ultimately it is not the place itself that is important. If it were, Hareven’s novel would be little more than a tweaked Zionist vision. The desert is important for what it *means*, not what it is.

The very landscape of the desert has served to remind many Jewish writers that, “alienation and exile remain the human condition despite Zionism and other territorial nationalisms” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 2). This is partly because the desert seems to transcend national identity no matter what people “owns” it (Omer-Sherman 2006, 7). As in Bialik’s poem, the desert is an entity unto itself; it cannot be controlled or subjugated by any nation. There are Midrashim that explain that the Torah was given in the desert so that everyone would have a claim to it, not just the people of a single nation (Omer-Sherman 2006, 12). The desert was chosen precisely because it had no nationalist ties. The event at Sinai brings us back to a discussion of the universal aspect the desert. “When considering the contemporary moral imagination of secular writers, it is important to note that desert translates as one of the Hebraic imagination’s most pervasive symbols

of universality” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 12). The desert is a place where the Hebrews exist in limbo; they are not members of any state and they recognize no divine right to the land itself. Thus they can be used in literature as a universal people. Hareven finds justification for this use of the desert and its people from within the text of the Bible, and “outraged by Jewish fundamentalism’s failure to understand the revolutionary spirit of the prophetic text” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 49), she revises the text to make that spirit more clear. She transforms the narrative from the story of one tribal group into a universal narrative.

To affect this transformation Hareven has to re-imagine parts of the biblical narrative. Although her work retells the text of Exodus, Joshua and Judges, she also confronts the idea of difference as expressed in Deuteronomy. The true problem with entering land that is already inhabited in Deuteronomy seems to be in the confrontation with difference. The problems this confrontation creates, problems of assimilation, intermarriage and fidelity to the Hebrew deity are the same ones encountered later by the author of *Jubilees*. The issue of assimilation destroying the special nature of the Jewish relationship with God runs throughout the tradition, as we have seen in both *Jubilees* and Theodor Herzl’s comments. In the Bible, the Hebrews should fear the Canaanites not because they are more powerful but because they are different (Omer-Sherman 2006, 51). Hareven sets her work completely in opposition to this long-established trend. Hareven uses the character of Hivai in *The Prophet* to demonstrate the lack of official boundaries between the Hebrews and other Canaanites. In *The Prophet*, Hivai joins the Hebrew camp with little resistance, his difference not being as large a problem as the Jewish tradition has usually maintained. However, his presence does pose a dilemma for the

Hebrews. Is he a “convert or is he merely other, and hence a polluting presence?” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 52).

Hivai is never fully accepted, and he eventually is forced to leave the Hebrew camp, but nevertheless his participation in the story demonstrates that not all of Deuteronomy’s provisions against contact with outsiders need be observed. The characters even debate the merits and problems of his presence. “*The Prophet* challenges the exclusivist boundaries set out in Deuteronomy, ultimately expanding those boundaries to address the current tensions between contemporary claimants to the land of Israel/Palestine...”(Omer-Sherman 2006, 53). And it is “at such temporally ambiguous moments as this” it is clear that the desert “the most liminal geography on the Jewish map of the world, remains the most apt landscape for a Hebrew writer to plead for the rights of minorities without altogether repudiating the justice of the Zionist cause” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 53).

Ironically, the exclusivist Exodus narrative, used to legitimate the Zionist cause, also contains the Bible’s greatest argument for liberation and freedom from oppression. This is very convenient for a modern author who seeks to advocate for the rights of those whose oppression has been justified by the very same narrative. Ambivalence about Israelite superiority is also expressed within the text of Deuteronomy. Although ostensibly the text seems to be “occupied with group survival,” it is true that “a careful reading reveals another current, one that seems to argue for moderation, seeing Israel as only one of several disparate peoples who inhabit the land ostensibly reserved for them” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 51). An example of this moderation can be found in the story of Rahab and the Gibeonites, in which “Israel not only accommodates outsiders but

punishes an insider for the crime of appropriating Canaanite plunder” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 51). This story shows that within the biblical text itself there exists a certain amount of ambivalence about Israel’s primacy in the eyes of God. The nation is not given carte blanche to take over their enemies. Their strict superiority over the other peoples of Canaan seems to be questioned, and Hareven had only to pick up on these themes rather than invent them. This is further evidence that her work does not constitute a severance from Jewish tradition, but a commentary upon that tradition. Her work emphasizes that the Bible does not have meaning just for the triumphant, but for the downtrodden and oppressed especially. All that Hareven has to do is identify with this ambiguity already present in the Biblical text.

For Hareven, the desert wilderness of Exodus provides a “meeting point for past and present, a spatio-temporal deconstruction of nation-building and an interrogation of home and dwelling in both myth and contemporary politics” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 24). Hareven understands the conquest of land and the possession of this sacred space to be idolatrous (Omer-Sherman 2006, 24). And as she understands the current Israeli/Palestinian situation, that same idolatry perpetrated by Joshua’s conquest is taking place today. By setting her story in the desert, she partakes of its liminality that allows for the blurring of lineal time and makes her ancient story currently relevant. To this end Hareven makes “faint yet insistent allusions to the seeds of the present struggle between Israelis and Palestinians” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 24). She makes it clear that suffering does not belong to one people alone. Jewish culture has, over time, begun to see itself as having cornered the market on suffering, and this reliance on “eternal victim hood” has proven to be inhibiting when it comes to empathizing with others (Omer-Sherman 2006,

41). Hareven points out that empathy is in fact needed. She does this by casting her narrative “on the side of universal victims of conquest and war by invoking a new reading of one people’s myth” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 37).

It is true that it is almost impossible to say anything definite about the moral ideas in the Bible because of the multiple currents of meaning running throughout the text. For Jewish literature the desert has proven to be the best place to explore these often-conflicting currents. The geography of the desert or wilderness “serves not just as an austere retreat from civilization but as a discursive battleground for the explorations of conflicts that divide the Jewish self” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 9). It is a place where “individual consciousness emerges,” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 44) and individuals can rise and question communally held values. The values Hareven questions in her work are the preference for Zion over the Diaspora, the patriarchal power structure inherent in Jewish religion, and the idea that the Nation takes precedence over humanistic values. The desert is ideal for questioning because in the Jewish imagination the desert has always been a transitional place. As Athalya Brenner noted in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus through Deuteronomy*, the desert is the place of “passage from loosely-defined population into ethnicity; a passage from a ‘religion of the fathers’ ... to a communal covenant bound, legally grounded, exclusive monotheism” (quoted in Omer-Sherman 2006, 36). Because the Jewish religion was so transformed in the desert, it stands to reason that the desert is also the best place to question the religion that was formed there.

## *The Bible Post 1967*

This Jewish proclivity toward questioning, most eloquently expressed in the idea of the desert, has manifested itself in the process of conquering the land of the Bible. During this process many became disillusioned with both the greatness of conquest and of the land itself. We have already noted a sense of disillusionment after the War for Independence. This kind of disillusionment was heightened after the Six Day War in 1967, when Israel gained territory, including Jerusalem, Jericho and Bethlehem that had previously only been experienced as part of the biblical narrative. Similar to the earlier generations' encounter with the land of Mandatory Palestine, "the encounter with the land of the Bible" "destroyed the romance of the Bible" (Shapira 2004). The land they had gained seemed foreign, and was inhabited by a foreign people (Shapira 2004). The conflict with the Palestinians was far too real, and far more intense than it had been following 1948; it buried the "book memory" Israelis had previously held of the land. Modernization, as well, rendered the fabled biblical land unrecognizable. Israeli Amos Keinan expressed his anguish eloquently saying, "the State destroyed the homeland for me" (Shapira 2004). A fact that still holds true for many Jews today.

Compounding this sense of disillusionment was the hard reality that the land was already settled. Like the ancient Israelites before them, modern Jews were confronted with the realities of a struggle for dominance. It seems that this struggle has been repeated again and again throughout Jewish history. We have already seen that the author of *Jubilees* was dealing with the struggle for dominance with the Greeks in the Second

Temple period. The moral implications of this same struggle, realized yet again much later in history, are beautifully rendered in *Thirst*. “For Hareven the book of Joshua’s grisly slaughters and conquests form the cultural palimpsest for present-day violence and the threat of the ever-threatening disorder” (Omer-Sherman 2004). However, what Hareven’s novel does is not so black and white as to suggest that the violence is one-sided. Even leaving the desert behind there is a double identity found throughout modern Jewish literature that Eliezer Schweid calls “identification with the Zionist realization and identification with its victims” (quoted in Omer-Sherman 2004).

During the first waves of Jewish immigration and in the early period of Israeli Statehood, interpretation such as Hareven’s that acknowledged the complex currents within the Bible, and could identify with both Zionists and the victims of their cause was in vogue. But after the 1967 war this message was forgotten. The Bible was “embraced by religious Zionism as legitimacy for a raw nationalism decreed from on high” (Shapira 2004). Even secular high schools that had read the Bible critically started to move towards a more religious view (Shapira 2004). “Verses like Deuteronomy 7:2 ‘and you shall not show mercy on them’ were taken as license for the Palestinian expulsion” and “the combination of religious-nationalism’s appropriation of the Bible,” which included the teaching of the Bible as a religious text together with the end of the ideological era “told the knell for the Bible’s centrality in Israeli identity” (Shapira 2004).

The completion of that knell was sounded in the 1970s and 1980s. During this time period the Bible began to lose ground as “the ultimate identity text” (Shapira 2004). Religious-nationalism’s appropriation of the text described above was only one of the two sides responsible for the Bible’s falling out of cultural importance. On the other side



of the debate, leftists tried to debunk the validity of Joshua's conquest. Professor Ze'ev Herzog published a paper entitled, "The Bible: No Facts on the Ground" which claimed to disprove the validity of Joshua's conquest and debunk the myth of the glory of the Davidic monarchy (Shapira 2004). In this paper he claimed that nothing in the Bible could be corroborated and maintained that while Israeli society was partially ready to "acknowledge the injustices done the country's Arab inhabitants, and is prepared to accept women's social inequality" it was "still not strong enough to embrace the archaeological facts that have shattered the biblical myth" (as quoted in Shapira 2004). Herzog tried to incite political reaction to this paper; he claimed that there was a fear that disproving biblical reality had the potential to undermine historical Jewish rights to the land of Israel (Shapira 2004). Herzog may have been right in what he said about the country's strength, and he was certainly right about the fear, but his method of reading the Bible as literal fact which could either be debunked or believed was the real problem.

It is ironic that both the Zionists of this time period and their opponents like Herzog both read the Bible in a similarly limited way, at times as nothing more than literal history. Had the Bible solely been embraced as literature in Israel, rather than as *national* literature, these problems might never have existed. That stink of nationality has resulted in parts of the Bible being read literally, which in turn has given people like Herzog the right to debunk these literalist claims. Hareven does something resembling the leftist side of the debate, invalidating Joshua's conquest literarily rather than archaeologically; however there is a major difference in her work. The difference lies in the fact that for Hareven the lack of factuality of the Bible, and even her disagreement with some of the themes found within it, does not mean that the text should be discarded

altogether. Hareven's work exposes the fact that both sides of the ideological divide were, paradoxically, reading the Bible in a similar manner. The right wing nationalist branch read it as a record of factual history that justified their "land-grabbing colonizing power" (Doob-Sakenfeld 2008, 13), and the left, as represented by Herzog, also saw the Bible as a record, but tried to disprove the Bible as fact so that it could not be used as justification. In the same way both sides forgot their Israeli cultural heritage of reading the Bible as literature that was important not because it literally happened, but because as Ahad Ha'am pointed out in 1912 it was "a work sanctified for generations by the Jewish people and, as such, reflected the spirit of that people" (Shapira 2004).

It would have been different had the Bible been understood solely as literature, valuable for its contribution to human knowledge in the form of its wisdom and power to enlighten rather than grant claims to actual physical land. However that was not to be for the political right. And, in complete opposition to the right's way of thinking, for the many people who subscribed to Herzog's theories "there was something attractive about a thesis that historically negated Joshua's conquest and the cruelties ascribed to it" (Shapira 2004). The tug-o-war, with the Bible at the center of the argument for both the right and left, ultimately "demoted it in Israeli culture among center groups" (Shapira 2004). Thus the Bible fell out of general cultural importance. This has created a crisis of identity in Israel. Because Israelis no longer have the Bible to fall back on as an identity affirming mechanism, what now, is left?

In the 1980s and 1990s Hebrew literature was characterized by a major shift in focus, which had enormous repercussions for how the Bible was used. In the Hebrew "postmodernist" fiction of this time period, "biblical allusions are less likely found, and

their functions have fundamentally changed” (Balaban 2004). When biblical allusions are used in this work it is typically to show that “biblical expressions are vestiges of obsolete language that has lost its vitality...” (Balaban 2004). This way of using the Bible is completely oppositional to modernist writers’ use of it. Whereas modern writers (of the 1940s through 1960s) had used the Bible to imbue their text with layers of meaning that would have to be decoded, postmodern authors have created a literature that “emphasizes its secular nature and does not accede to the demands that the literary text be rich, compact, and rife with meaning” (Balaban 2004). The lack of meaning in the text reflects the state of the postmodern universe; the universe itself is meaningless and devoid of justice.

This literary transition took place in the mid 1980s, and Hareven’s novel was first published in 1988. Many postmodern themes are reflected in her work. These include the elusiveness of justice, the idea that the condition of humanity is characterized by alienation (signified in her wandering desert Hebrews) as well as the novel’s tendency towards chaos and disorder all are postmodern traits. However, the first glaring difference in her work is her obvious use of biblical allusion. “‘Postmodernist’ Hebrew fiction depicts protagonists for whom the Bible, its language and its characters form no part of their experience...” (Balaban 2004). And yet Hareven, writing in the postmodern period, writes about the experiences of these very characters. In her use of biblical characters she is closer to the modernist school of writing.

In addition, as has been discussed previously, her work is not entirely secular. Her characters may doubt and belittle God and think they have no need of him, but their universe is not entirely religiously meaningless. In the end of each of the three novels

some small semblance of peace and meaning is gained. Eshkar enters the Ancestral land with his newly acquired family, Hivai's visions are restored, if only on a small scale, and Moran finds a measure of comfort in her independence. Hareven, although she remains skeptical, refuses to give up on the idea that there just might be some meaning in life. As a woman who came of age in the modernist "Palmach" generation and who wrote in the postmodernist age, her work reflects trends in both periods, but can be classified as neither.

### *Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew literature*

Throughout Jewish history whenever crises of identity have occurred people have turned to the text of the Bible to solve them. The author of *Jubilees* had to go so far as to rewrite and clarify aspects of the Bible that he felt were unclear in order to warn against the dangers of assimilation. But where are postmodern authors to turn to now that the possibility of biblical redemption is seemingly lost? What is left to turn to now that the Bible has fallen out of cultural importance and in the last few decades and writers, Hareven excluded, tend to view the Bible as not just unnecessary, but a way to further highlight the lack of meaning in the universe? This will likely be a temporary trend. If Hareven's work is any indication, writers will eventually turn back to the Bible. Historical precedent is on the side of the Bible; Judaism has gone through many major transitions and the Bible has always been there, a source of continuity. In fact, not only has Jewish identity been maintained in periods of crisis, it has largely been formed through periods of exile. As Maxine Grossman has described, the forging of the Jewish

identity has traditionally involved “the notion of exile, as communal experience, and possibly a place of origin” (Grossman 2002, 2).

Jewish identity has been created and recreated in periods of exile. The first exile was the sojourn in the desert that Hareven’s trilogy describes. Hareven goes back to this period because it was the first formative period in the history of Judaism; it was when the Hebrews, previously Egyptian slaves, first become Israelites. The next truly formative exile befalls the Israelites at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BCE. This is the famous exile of Lamentations and of Psalm 137:1 “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion” (New JPS). The first temple had been destroyed and, no longer able to rely on the same temple-based religious hierarchy, the Israelites are forced to reinvent their religion. In this period the largely oral scriptures begin to be transcribed. Hundreds of years later, after the return to the land and the rebuilding of the Temple comes what could have constituted the end of Judaism, the destruction of the Second Temple at the hands of the Romans in 70 CE. “With the ravishing of the Jerusalem Temple the religious life of the nation had been broken” (Mintz 1996, 19). However, rather than fade into obscurity, Judaism was transformed. No longer the temple based sacrificial religion of priests, it became the Judaism of synagogues and rabbis, much more closely resembling the religion we know today. With postmodernist literature bringing (about or perhaps merely acknowledging) a self-imposed catastrophe in the form of the identity crisis created when the Bible fell out of cultural importance, it seems that people like Hareven are again returning to the biblical text to find meaning.

This response pattern in Judaism, in which a catastrophe occurs and the Jewish religion is reinvented, was put into place at a very early stage. It was the covenant at

Sinai that set the stage for Jewish response to catastrophe. The “consequences of betrayal are set forth in Deuteronomy 28: famine and devastation, alienation from the land, persecution in exile” (Mintz 1996, 19). We may “define catastrophe generally as a destructive event whose horror derives from its bursting of the available paradigms of explanation” (Mintz 1996, 21). When catastrophic events have occurred, Jews have returned to the Bible and reexamined the paradigms of explanation that are no longer adequate. *Jubilees* was composed during Hellenistic-Roman subjugation of Judah, when “who is a legitimate Jew?” was being asked and Jewish sovereignty over the land was threatened. Although the Israelites had been under the authority of different kingdoms before, the Assyrians, the Babylonians and finally the Persians, the cultural devastation of the Hellenistic period was unprecedented. This was because the Greeks believed in more than military victories. “They were also committed to disseminating their way of life—their institutions, norms and ideas—to the world of the barbarians (as they called non-Greeks)” (Levine 1999, 231). The Jews of this period had to deal with a governing body intent on destroying their way of life through assimilation, a crisis in the Jewish imagination that no other conqueror had subjected them to. Similarly Hareven’s *Thirst* was written not just as a response to the identity crisis that has characterized postmodern literature but all of modern Israeli society as well. Israel was created only through the immigration of a diverse group of people from all over, having just endured one of the most catastrophic events in world history, the Holocaust. There was no way in which an identity crisis was not inevitable. *Thirst* and *Jubilees* are but two literary examples of many that follow the pattern of turning to and re-imagining the text of the Bible in times of Jewish identity crisis.

## **CHAPTER 4: JEWISH FEMINIST REVISION**

Feminist revisionists are a group of people currently attempting to solve their Jewish identity crisis. Because for so long they have belonged to a religious tradition that has not truly afforded them equal status alongside their male counterparts, many feminists have experienced conflicting feelings about being Jewish. Hareven falls squarely within the category of feminist revisionists. *Thirst* is “gender critical struggle against canonical interpretations towards the original [Biblical] text” (Omer-Sherman 2004). Characters marginalized by society narrate all three stories *The Miracle Hater*, *The Prophet*, and *After Childhood*. Hareven uses these characters to criticize the patriarchal nature of both ancient Israelite and modern Israeli society. This is not as radical a project as it sounds. As I have stated previously, her revision falls within the range of the well-established genre of rewritten Bible that dates back to ancient times.

There are different feminist strategies on how to read the biblical text. “One aim of feminist readings of scripture is to identify neglected text and begin to build a tradition of interpretation around them” (Harrison 2007, 152). For example, In Genesis 1 the first man and woman are created equal. However, In Genesis 2, the more widely cited version, Eve is created out of Adam’s rib. Feminists can attempt to emphasize the first rather than the latter. That we even have these two stories illustrates the fact that for feminists the biblical text does not need to be thrown out entirely. It is possible to find passages that can be interpreted to support a feminist viewpoint.

What Hareven does with the biblical text is both more and less subtle than this strategy. The fact that she rewrites the text is not subtle at all, but the way she injects her feminist vision is. Hareven's work "unmasks the women's and children's stories that are obscured by the patriarchal text" (Omer-Sherman 2004), and their obscurity in that text is undeniable. Judith Plaskow, author of *Standing Again At Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, points out that at the most seminal moment in Jewish history, when the Hebrews wait at Mt. Sinai to receive the covenant, "when Israel stands trembling waiting for God's presence to descend upon the mountain, Moses addresses the community only as men..." (Harrison 2007, 152). Hence, the crisis of identity many women have experienced in trying to syncretise their Jewish and feminist identities.

The experience at Sinai may in fact be the core experience of the Jewish identity. We have already seen that this event was sufficient to transform the desert into a sacred place, and Plaskow maintains, "traditional Jewish identity is bound to a consciousness of membership within a community that is unique in having entered into a covenant with God" (as quoted in Harrison 2007, 152). From the biblical text we know nothing of women's experience at the time this covenant was made, and to be a Jewish feminist is to make women's experience your concern. This is exactly what Hareven does. She gives us an example of women's experience at this seminal moment in the history of Judaism. In *The Miracle Hater*, the mute woman Yonat serves as a representation of the squelched voice of women in the Bible.

Always, though, her eyes were big, and worlds came and went in them as she listened to the men talk. She herself, born mute, had never been heard to utter a word; yet they always knew what she felt, for her emotions seemed to emanate through her black dress with a fiercely domineering smell. She had in her the



power of all pent up things. Though they ignored her presence, they were strongly aware of it (Hareven 1988, 46-47).

By drawing attention to the fact that Yonat, because she is a woman, is intentionally ignored by the community Hareven demonstrates that women were not merely unnoticed but purposefully excluded. She makes this obvious through Yonat's inability to speak. However, more subtly, Hareven alludes to how much the men are missing by ignoring Yonat; whole worlds pass through her unnoticed. Yonat makes ignoring her impossible at Sinai. She rips out her earrings and runs about the camp frantically demanding gold from everyone, and "no one dare[s] resist her" (1988, 47).

Yonat leads the camp into frenzy; she is followed by men who strip the gold ornaments from anyone who is reluctant to give of their own accord. Finally all the gold is collected, piled and melted down. The people wait around to see what will happen when "All of a sudden there is a there was an unaccustomed, a springlike, a disquieting lightness in the air. Without a God, without a leader, they inhaled smoke and waited" (Hareven 1988, 48). A few things can be garnered from this passage. First, there is another hint of that desert freedom inherent in Hebrew literature; the freedom that comes from being attached to nothing, not even God. Secondly there is an unwillingness to recognize Yonat as the leader of this event, because she is a woman (and not only a woman but a woman who undermines the traditional patriarchal authority of Moses). When the gold is cooled from the fire it appears in the shape of an ox, a miracle! Eshkar, the miracle hater, is told, "no one touched that gold with his hand, Eshkar, and still it turned into an ox" (Hareven 1988, 48). It is this event that finally pushes Eshkar over the edge into complete solitude; he will have nothing to do with this mob. The gathering

degenerates further, into a festival of slaughter that leaves thousands of corpses and in which “it was later said that Joshua himself ran his brother Yahkin through” (Hareven 1988, 49). The mob again relies on miracles to its own detriment, and in the end no miracle even takes place, there are “wilted flowers drooping from the golden idol that no longer looked like anything at all” (Hareven 1988, 50).

After this tragic event Hareven’s Hebrews “buried their dead and submitted to the Law” (Hareven 1988, 50). It is almost as if her Hebrews needed one more rebellion, one more taste of their free desert existence, before they could give themselves over to submission. The violence is also reminiscent of the violence in Exodus. One example of which occurs when the sons of Levi follow Moses’ command to kill those whom, given the choice to join the Lord’s side, do not. The sons of Levi are rewarded, by each sacrificing at least a son or brother in the slaughter, they bring a blessing on themselves and are ordained as the Lord’s priests (Exodus 32: 27-29 New JPS). Hareven’s novel lacks this added element; in the postmodernist fashion her story is chaotic and devoid of meaning, the people want nothing more than to forget this incident. There is no divine blessing to redeem their deed.

Yonat’s story is important because it is impossible to be both a Jew and a feminist and not reconsider the Sinai story that caters only to men. Because for Plaskow to be Jewish means to participate in the events at Sinai and to enter that covenant is, “to start with the certainty of our membership in our own people is to be forced to re-member and recreate history, to reshape Torah” (as quoted in Harrison 2007, 153). It is for this reason that Hareven engages with the text rather than dismisses it. She involves women in the Sinai experience in a way that is not altogether unrealistic. Hareven does not

misleadingly write an idyllic portrayal of women. In fact Yonat is the perpetrator of one of Israel's greatest sins in the eyes of God, the golden calf. This illustrates the fact that women for Hareven are not deserving of a history because of their greater spiritual worth or elevated status but because of their essential humanity. Her characters are not heroines; they are very human women who deserve a voice not because they are special but because they were *there*, a part of the history that has until very recently excluded them.

To highlight further the absence of the female voice from the Bible, Hareven tells the story of two women looking for help for their infants who are dying of thirst. They ask Eshkar for help and he tells them to go to Moses. The woman reply that there are "more important people than themselves who had business with Moses: great crowds besieged his tent everyday, clamoring for water" (Hareven 1988, 36). In the end Moses does perform a small miracle, using his staff to cause a great stream of water to course out of a stone, but it is too late for these women. After the water begins to flow there is great commotion and the two women are unable to reach it. "Duress had overcome them and left them too weak to fight. In any case, their babies were no longer alive. Moses and his escort passed by without seeing them" (Hareven 1988, 38). Hareven writes the tales of those who were not only intentionally ignored, as was Yonat earlier, but also of those who, like these women, are not even noticed.

### *The Future of Feminist Revision and The Jewish Tradition*

As women's stories are discovered and even written into the Bible more and more, and "as women achieve greater opportunities for assessing their sacred text

themselves, this will have a growing effect on how texts are read and on the religious institutions that claim to be justified by them” (Harrison 2007, 145). Feminist critique stems from a disbelief in the idea of sovereignty. The ancient Hebrews, and much later after the creation of Israel, the Israeli government, do not, for Hareven, possess any kind of divinely granted sole sovereignty over the land of Israel. In the same way patriarchal tradition does not have a sovereign claim over biblical interpretation. Modern Jewish feminist revision holds that the text belongs to each of us if we so choose. “But text by text, each will belong to us in different, and sometimes painfully different ways” (Doob-Sakenfeld 2008, 18). The idea that no one has a monopoly on the Biblical text can only be salient if we remember Maxine Grossman’s contention that no one absolutely correct interpretation exists and allow for the possibility of disagreement. Modern feminist revision is undertaken with the understanding that disagreement with previous interpretation is not only inevitable but necessary.

Twentieth and twenty first century religious feminists have been “quick to realize that once women began to interpret sacred text for themselves they would have a powerful tool with which to mount a critique of the theological traditions that had excluded them” (Harrison 2007, 159). Religious traditions in the future are sure to be shaped by women to an extent unprecedented in world history. As women have begun to question the sexism inherent in their religious traditions, they have begun to challenge other aspects of the tradition as well (Harrison 2007, 145). One of the main aspects of the tradition that has been questioned by Jewish feminist revision is the portrayal of God. The metaphor of God the father is not meaningful for many women, and even more importantly it has been used by the establishment in the Abrahamic religions as a

justification for excluding women from cultural importance (Harrison 2007, 149).

Because of this women are finding new metaphors for God. An examination of the way God is portrayed in *Thirst* will provide some interesting examples of these metaphors.

The first image of God in the trilogy is incredibly subtle. Always in front of the camp are “pillars of smoke and fire” and to understand this as a metaphor for God one has to remember that this is the form God takes throughout Exodus as the Hebrews are led out of Egypt. In Hareven’s novel it is never explicitly stated that these pillars represent God, but these pillars resemble those of Exodus far too closely for coincidence. They are always ahead of the Hebrews. In fact, “in front of the camp, a huge bonfire, whose pillars of smoke and of fire were seen clearly by day and by night, was kept burning” (Hareven 1988, 19). And we are told, “Beyond the pillar of smoke there was nothing” (1988, 41). This is a complication of the Hebrew relationship with God that is not present in the Bible. For the characters in the trilogy there may be nothing else but God; however, God is not really present the way he is in the biblical text. The image of God the father is totally absent. In fact, the people are never really sure of where to find God, “perhaps he was in the mountains, the place of the priests and the tabernacle” anyway, they knew that “God was far away” (Hareven 1988, 133). Hareven’s use of the male pronoun does not detract from her feminist reading but actually calls attention to it. By using the “he” pronoun she not only stays true to the time period she is ostensibly writing about but also subtly makes the reader aware of the alarming fact that these people had no other metaphor for God.

The fact that the Hebrews in Hareven’s story are unsure of how to relate to their absent God is not merely a feminist critique of the patriarchal idea of the “father God”

but also another critique of male-dominated religious Zionism. The complicated relationship of Hareven's Hebrews with the divine highlights their lack of assurance in the rightness of their endeavor to conquer, and stands in stark contrast to religious Zionism's utter conviction. In *The Miracle Hater*, Eshkar knows "that he [can] not wander far beyond the pillars of smoke and fire, but still he [tries]" (Hareven 1988, 42). Eshkar tries to get away from God but is unable and knows even from the start that his effort is futile. This is the very opposite of seeking divine justification; he outright rejects the possibility of that justification. Often in Hareven's text outsiders disparage the god of the Hebrews, and rather than champion their god, the Hebrews are left doubting. They doubt both the validity of their God and their right as a people to exist in the land. An example of this is when a camp of Dedanites comes to trade with the Hebrews.

The Dedanites first request was to be allowed to pay homage to their host's god. The Hebrews say nothing. The Dedanites begin to mock them deriding their God, calling him "their little God, whom they clearly were ashamed of, since they would not show an idol or an image of him" (Hareven 1988, 29). After this exchange the Hebrews are left feeling wanting. "And yet, thought many of the camp dwellers without saying it, and yet we should have had a god to show them. So as not to be shamed" (1988, 32). Unlike their ancient Near Eastern counterparts, Hareven's Hebrews do not make "graven images" of their god, and in her novel rather than portray pride at their difference she demonstrates their shame at not fitting in, a critique of the "agonistic" creation of identity Omer-Sherman observed. Hareven portrays her Hebrews as the opposite of divinely guided conquering heroes proud of their difference (and thus superiority) from the actual native

population. Rather they are humbled by the perceived spiritual impoverishment of their tradition.

Because the Hebrews do not feel superior and therefore not justified in their conquest, this allows Hareven to question the very idea of justice itself. Her disbelief in the notion of justice both reflects postmodernist themes and serves to highlight the plight of her marginal characters. Thus illuminating the plight of those, like women, who are to some extent marginalized in every society. How can a modern Jewish feminist believe totally in the idea of justice when as Plaskow mentioned, she may have to stand and read sections of the Torah that denigrate her gender? As “a disturbing exploration of the elusiveness of justice” (Omer-Sherman 2004), the *Desert Trilogy* highlights the lack of justice in both ancient and modern society. The characters’ expectations of justice are thwarted throughout *Thirst*. In fact, Joshua tells Eshkar that the Hebrew leadership is not interested in justice but in controlling the populace through the demonstration of miracles, saying, “we work miracles. Justice is not our concern” (Hareven 1988, 23). Here is an example of one of those postmodern moments in Hareven’s work, where the universe as envisaged by the elite seems to be devoid of meaning.

Later on in the novel “even the triumph of Mosaic law over persecution is liable to succumb to tyrannical dictatorship” (Omer-Sherman 2004). At the end of *The Miracle Hater*, Moses himself becomes senile and tries to “impose more and more laws on them, a never-ending Torah” (Hareven 1988, 59). Part of Hareven’s problem with the biblical idea of justice is that all these laws, codes, and regulations cater only to men. The law is tyrannical because it does not take into account all members of the society that it is supposed to regulate.

Hareven's portrayal of "justice" in *Thirst* is also paradigmatic of the move in Hebrew literature away from collectivist to individual concerns. This is also another reason why Hareven set her novel in the desert. "The desert is a template for modern writers' explorations of the individual vs. collective" (Omer-Sherman 2006, 7). Her portrayal, however, is not hopeful. This is because the image of God that this particular society created does not always conform to individual notions of justice. In *Vocabulary of Peace* Hareven said "according to my model, very often human beings are better and have a greater sense of justice than does the God that people fashioned for themselves in ancient times" (as quoted in Omer-Sherman 2006, 39). Towards the end of *The Miracle Hater*, Eshkar is reflecting upon the nature of justice and he concludes "a man should die for his own sins alone." However, he tells himself this "knowing that that would never be. Not even with God" (Hareven 1988, 52). It will not be with the God of the Hebrews because they are divinely punished as a nation, not as individuals, and individual sin or piety seems to be immaterial.

In *Thirst*, this transition in Hebrew literature is highlighted by Hareven's portrayal of the individual conscience. "In Hareven's novel the individual's conscience is trampled and ground to bits in the hands of external justice" (Omer-Sherman 2004). Taking individual conscience out of the equation allows for a type of mob mentality to rule. To place Hareven's work within the correct historical context it is important to demonstrate that the move in Hebrew literature away from collective conscience to individual conscience did not originate with her. S. Yizhar's *Khirbet Khizeh* a much earlier novel, written immediately following the War for Independence, will serve to demonstrate the continuity of this idea in the Hebrew literary tradition. Similarly to *The Prophet*, this



book tells the story of a nation's expanding borders, borders that are expanding right over previously inhabited land. In addition to seeing the devastation the onslaught causes to those being conquered, in *Khirbet Khizeh*, we also see the questioning of an individual's conscience awash in guilt at participating in the heinous act.

As the narrator, along with the other soldiers in his unit, clear out an Arab village, they begin to shoot at people who are fleeing. At first the narrator gets caught up in the mob mentality and admits, "we were excited. The thrill of the hunt that lurks inside every man had taken firm hold of us" (Yizhar 2008, 34). But after pointing out some escaping women to his friend with the gun, something in the narrator cracks and the thrill is gone. Instead he silently prays "let him miss, oh, let him miss them!" (Yizhar 2008, 35). He then feels immediately ashamed for what he perceives as a betrayal of his group. However, by the end of the novel he comes to the conclusion that what they had done, and his individual participation in it, was wrong. The final words of the novel also echo with a haunting sense of the injustice of what they had done, as well as an indication that God was not on their side. After they are done besieging the villages of the indigenous people, there will be silence and then, in an allusion to Jeremiah, "God would come forth and see whether all was according to the cry that had reached him" (2008, 113). By thrusting a spotlight on the injustice of the idea that the ends justify the means, this novel serves as an example of what will happen if people decide to blindly follow orders. By not following orders, by deciding not to accept traditional biblical interpretation, Hareven undermines both Zionist interpretation and the entire history of patriarchal tradition that came before her.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Shulamith Harevan's revision of biblical text in *Thirst: The Desert Trilogy* does not signify a radical break with the Jewish tradition but is rather evidence of a profound dialogue with that tradition. And that dialogue with the Bible is important because, "if the *Trilogy* sets forth a rewriting of the Bible, it must therefore critique some of the most central myths upon which Western culture is built" (Omer-Sherman 2006, 42). Like the author of *Jubilees* before her, she participates in the long history of biblical revision that has enhanced the Jewish tradition and kept it alive. Her novel is a subtly feminist critique that finds a way to engage patriarchal tradition to include the voices of women rather than dismissing that tradition altogether. Both *Thirst* and *Jubilees* are excellent examples of the literary critical belief that "a text may be meaningful in ways other than those anticipated by its author, and even in ways of which an author might not approve" (Grossman 2002, 18). It is hard to imagine the "authors" of the Bible, if we can even speak of them that way, condoning all of the liberties Hareven takes with the text, and that is precisely why she needs to take those liberties. Religious traditions have changed, and thus remained meaningful era after era, largely because adherents have been willing to question their authoritative texts. With feminist revisionists like Hareven now participating in the questioning of the old patriarchal Zionist paradigm, modern Israeli identity is sure to change as well. Because "literary novels and their authors are

taken very seriously in Israel” (Omer-Sherman 2006, 6) they thus have power to influence Israeli life profoundly.

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