

Sharon H. Nelson

JERUSALEM THE GOLDEN:¹
TEXT,² ANNOTATIONS,³ SUBTEXTS⁴

¹ *The Zohar* [V:221a], quoting Psalm 147, tells us: "'The Lord buildeth Jerusalem' — He and no other. It is for this building that we are waiting, not a human structure which cannot endure." A later reference to the same quotation is "This work . . . has been deferred to the end of days in the last deliverance." See *The Zohar*, tr. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon (Hertford: Soncino, 1934, rpt 1970), Vol.V, pp. 330 and 331. Not only in *The Zohar* or in Judaism's mystical traditions but at many levels of Jewish discourse, Jerusalem is not only or even essentially a physical place. More even than a sacred centre, Jerusalem is a symbol. In scripture, and especially in the books of the prophets, both the people of Israel and the city of Jerusalem often are represented as a woman, and in the case of the city of Jerusalem, as a woman's body. See, for instance, Jeremiah 31:3-4 "I have loved you with an everlasting love; . . . /Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel." Jerusalem is not always envisioned or portrayed as virginal. See, for instance, Ezekiel 16:1 "Make known to Jerusalem her abominations" and 16:15 "But you trusted in your beauty, and played the harlot. You lavished your favours on every passerby"; and Jeremiah 30:14 "All your lovers have forgotten you; they care nothing for you."

² The poem was printed first as the opening poem in my first book, *A Broken Vessel* (Montreal: Delta Canada, 1972), pp. 7-9.

³ References to Biblical passages are based on annotations made when the poem was constructed during 1967-68.

⁴ Subtexts accreted during discussions with anthology editors, critics, readers, and especially out of the need to introduce/frame the poem for a listening audience.

the body is a myth
my sculpted form
passes for body or dumb flesh

In Judaic and Christian cultures, in general, a dichotomy is posited that separates "body and soul" or "flesh and spirit." The visible body is perceived as "real" while the spiritual component is posited as mythic[al]. The poem contradicts.

My mother phones to say that N called, arrives Friday and expects me at the airport. He has left no number, gives me no chance to decline or respond, expects me to be at the airport when he arrives. N, a man I don't know, met briefly in New York while travelling. [In which fairy tale am I a princess waiting for his touch?] I work full-time in a crazy and demanding job, carry a course overload at university, am involved in theatre and scholarship and with a lover. I have no time.

I don't know what N wants, why he is arriving, why at this time. He has not contacted me since we met socially in New York where politely, as one does, I gave him a phone number in Montreal when he expressed interest in visiting the city. It is my mother's phone number; I move around a lot.

"Passes" as "blacks" or Jews have used the term. In Judaic and Christian myth-making, which, in its literary versions has been male-centred and male-voiced, it is the female form that "passes for body or dumb flesh". "Dumb" as "incapable of speech" and in reference to an incapacity for intelligent speech attributed by men to women. It is easy to forget during an era of negotiation of women's [human] rights how recently theologians discussed whether woman had a soul/was human.

and you don't understand why I write like this
that it is not a matter of will
or that my mouth is small

The woman Israel addresses the Hebrew god. The woman Jerusalem addresses Israel in its male-identified persona. The female writer addresses the male intellectual/tradition of intellect as male. A woman addresses her male lover. Just as in some traditions the poet speaks for the community and the male poet speaks for and on behalf of everyman, so in "Jerusalem The Golden" the female voice represents female experience and speaks for womankind but speaks also for all humankind, most of which is not in a position of "dominance".

This stanza may be paraphrased: "Why can't this woman sound more like a man?" Why not "pass" - for white, for not-Jewish, ungendered and unsexed. In general, culturally, now as when the poem was written 30 years ago, the default value is male; one/everything is presumed male unless specified/demonstrated "other" wise. The persona is self-admittedly constitutionally incapable of adopting masculin[ist] disguise, of clothing the female body in the conventions of male rhetoric.

I have no time to think about N, but I respond to the alarm clock, drive dangerously fast to Dorval airport. N, looking splendid, unruffled despite the August heat and humidity, the discomforts of air travel, steps towards me with complete certitude as if we had long been lovers. What is he doing here?

you want to take me
to the subway
where your electric mind trains
a supple gymnast
so that the noise will hurt me

and you don't understand why I am like this
laying down my last ticket for a nowhere subway
branching like a dead-end city
or why the building with no architect is a myth

Met through a mutual friend with whose brother I'd had a brief relationship. Surely not on such a basis? [Hearsay, inadmissible in court, "the stuff of which we make our lives".]

Now here is N, full of myths and expectations. The products of his lust/ imagination [pornographic images? tenderness? poems he claims to write?] are palimpsested over my image, overlie my presence so that "I" cannot be present. He reaches for "me", an object of his imagination, subject of his imagining he enfolds in his arms. N: Narcissus expanded to encompass all. In theory, an end of object/ification, but there remains an object, though it/she is not me, certainly not I.

The electric mind of the sophist is sharp, probing, volatile, heavily charged, a supple gymnast descending to the depths and creating noise that is painful to hear. Such sophistication/electric minds create [senseless] noise and spread confusion and pain. Also, sub/way: in London, "The Underground", sub/terrain, the depths; and thus, as in a number of creation myths, chaos, which the sophist courts.

and you are bored and tired of beauty
Beauty, trees or even cities
myth-song or body
the whine of time is like electric wheels
scissors churning in the stems like heathens

Which genres/disciplines/personae/mythologies intersect? Which "me" writes to an inquiring critic that there are several "voices" in the poem and several kinds and levels of address. The voices flow/blend into each other, and the images and what they symbolize are conflated. Israel often is represented in the Old Testament as the bride of the Hebrew god. In the Judaic tradition, the people Israel is represented as a female body yet the voice of Israel is always male. In "Jerusalem The Golden", Israel speaks out of a female body to the Hebrew god who is supposed to be her husband, lover, protector. Similarly, the city of Jerusalem, represented as a woman and as an embodiment of Israel, has something to say. And then there is an impatient young woman complaining to her lover, or complaining about her lovers, or complaining about men and their propensity for myth-making.

Now, 30 years later, I remember a previous experience, as a woman even younger, barely a woman, on whom these experiences were/are [super]imposed. L was staying with relatives at a cottage in the Laurentians, a colony of pious Jews. I was surprised he spoke to me, even in public, at the beach, exposed as I was in a swimsuit. I was 12, L 16? On the basis of his letters over several years, I thought him naive, unworldly, over-protected. He imagined me not on the basis of the letters I wrote to him but as a future wife, virginal, pious, shaven-headed, suitable.

you are dead
a stoned Goliath⁵
blighting the land with rot
and the pestilence of pharaoh⁶ to count yearly the generations
or the sons of sons of sons of sons repeating: plagues
locusts serpents babies⁷
and a waterless well⁸ that has no depth but salt⁹

⁵ Goliath, like the golem, symbolizes brute force without a spiritual component.

⁶ See Exodus 10:1-3 "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go in to Pharaoh; . . . that I may show these signs of mine. . . and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and your sons' son . . . what signs I have done.'"

⁷ See Exodus 10 and also Exodus 11:5: "and all the first-born in the land of Egypt shall die." The list of plagues is repeated annually during the commemoration of the Passover.

⁸ See Proverbs 10:11 "The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence." Throughout the Old Testament, the well and its water are symbols of prosperity, fruitfulness, fertility, and god's "steadfast love". Both the well and water often are associated with a woman, as in Genesis 24 with Rebeckah, or in Genesis 16, where the pregnant Hagar, at "a spring of water", is told by the angel of the Lord: "I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude." Water was central to the existence of pastoral peoples, as innumerable references in Genesis show. A well is a blessing [Gen 25:11] and comes to symbolize oaths and covenants [Gen 21:25-30 and 26:18-31]. In Genesis 29, Jacob meets Rachel at a well. Moses is so named "Because I drew him out of the water." [Ex 2:10] and in Exodus 2:15, "Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well." There he met and aided Zipporah, who later became his wife. The importance of water to the Israelites is clear from Numbers 21:16-20, where "the Lord said to Moses, 'Gather the people together and I will give them water.'" The line in Isaiah 12:3, "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation", is echoed in the New Testament in John 4, and especially in 4:13-14 "Jesus said to her, 'Every one who drinks this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'"

you want to know what is this structure,
why that fool, David,¹⁰ mad with fear,
outgrew even his senile harp and found a stone
lodged always in the cup of Israel's crown;
why a divided kingdom¹¹ yielded
to a forked twig¹² bent in the shape of a man¹³

Perhaps the questions themselves are less important than wanting to know, which is the mark of humankind and the hallmark of science, philosophy, and mathematics, which offer solutions different from those of most theologies, which propound the necessity of denying the "want to know". The body of pronouncements of privileged, literate, dominant males is not necessarily much less alienating for most "ordinary" men than it is for many women.

⁹ In the Old Testament, salt is symbolically the opposite of water and is associated with blight, sterility, violence, alienation, and betrayal. See, for instance, Jeremiah 17:5-8 "Thus says the Lord: 'Cursed is the man . . . whose heart turns away from the Lord . . . He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.'" But "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord . . . He is like a tree planted by water"; and in Deuteronomy 29:23-28 "the whole land brimstone and salt, and a burnt-out waste, unsown and growing nothing, where no grass can sprout, . . . because they forsook the covenant of the Lord".

¹⁰ David, psalmist and king of Israel, who slew Goliath

¹¹ Israel and Judea/Israel and Judah; Israel was divided politically and by religious differences.

¹² David's slingshot

¹³ David, representing Israel and Yahweh, is himself made "in the Image" and carries a weapon in the shape of what has been shaped "in the Image". Also, in a later period, Christ "bent in the shape of a man", on the cross, represented as "a forked twig"; and later still, the "yielding" of Judaism and of Jerusalem, its signifier and symbol, to Christianity; the "yielding" of Jerusalem to a host of conquerors.

I feel your fingers slip
from the knot of my hair
to the stems of perfect flowers, trees,
or dig in the grass for beetles, vipers,
stalking an unborn crop or lashing out
at hostile unplucked twigs

The "knot of hair" is part of a series of "natural" objects with which the female is associated in many mythologies. The [male] [divine] fingers move from a caress to digging to lashing out. Israel as a woman is consistently accused by the Hebrew god through the Hebrew prophets of unfaithfulness and harlotry. The love promised and poetically expressed in the Old Testament often turns to accusation, threats, and punishments. Israel must pay for her purported harlotry, and the price is to suffer verbal abuse and to make burnt [flesh] offerings.

Hair. The knot of [my] hair. Jewish hair. African hair. Hair as a knot, conundrum, braid. Dreadlocks.

hair/always pinned up/tight///my secret/weapon///who knew/
how long/how strong/it was///who undressed me/in public
places///eyes full of images or/saw me naked/without a
shred/of clothing/completely open/welcoming///my hair/com-
pletely/dressed///
rapunzel saw her hairdresser/three times a week/kept her
stowed/in a back room of the tower/resisted every effort
to be shorn///fashions come and go/you never know/who
might need/a strong foothold [from "To Embrace Is To Con-
fess", *Room of One's Own* 17:2, June 1994]

and I am barren
as a building set for demolition
as a scarecrow hung on a dead man's cross or binding¹⁴
like an empty shirt that still remembers scenting
or a mongrel bitch with torn belly out of season

Hairdressers are constant, omnipresent in the lives of women. So much hair, symbol of female sexuality the Jews cut off, the Muslims cover. So much hair, hidden. Woman's hair/woman's sexuality/woman's shame.

The Old Testament pattern is of betrothal, love, accusation of betrayal/failure to abide by the terms of the covenant. The accusations and promised punishments are presented as signs of love and of the intention to forgive and to resume the love relationship, of which Israel, despite his or her transgressions, {Israel in the Old Testament is at once both a woman [physically] and a man [communally/ritually/spiritually]} is worthy.

¹⁴ The scarecrow, who is Christ, is made mad by the desertion of the divine presence, by having been forsaken by the Hebrew god-the-father, and thus the image of a straw man or a straw body bereft of a spiritual presence. The body without the spirit is a bag of straw, whether the body is female or male, human or divine. The urban building, the agricultural scarecrow, the cross are linked to destruction, death, and barrenness, the curse worse than death. Despite this barrenness, the persona remains sexual, like the shirt reminiscent of a lover's scent. On this image is superimposed that of an injured bitch presumed mistakenly to be in heat, introducing the imagery of mistaken readings of the female body and of female signals [as sexual]. The blood from damage and injury are seen in masculinist culture as sexual signals; what issues from the torn belly is mistaken for oestrus. It is important to distinguish "masculinist" from masculine or male, a crucial distinction in any discussion of gendered beliefs or behaviours.

you pause to hobble
fine flesh with green twigs
bent lashes, pebbles;¹⁵
the cold stone of the craftsman's hand hammers
straight nails in a salty rock,
and salt is blood or myth or tears
of a bent twig where a scarecrow madman
bites at the knot of his strings and seamless garment¹⁶

I dreamt I walked in a walled city
where there was no milk for the orphaned children¹⁷
and the dry breast of the rock¹⁸ formed only salt

I think of a *chignon*, a "French knot" that I wore for decades, that my fingers still can form in seconds, a few pins, a swirl of hair, a tuck, *voilà*: the knot of my hair.

However important in the formulation of a poem, do these personal details impinge on its reading? Is the physiology of an author the destiny of her writing? Shape of body/shape of mouth/shape of text?

¹⁵ The body of woman, of Jerusalem, or of Christ, is hobbled, bound, lashed, stoned.

¹⁶ Christ on the cross gnaws at the strings of the garment prescribed for Jewish males.

¹⁷ See notes below. Rachel's children, who here, by transposition, have become motherless; all children who are orphaned due to death by violence.

¹⁸ See Deuteronomy 32, where god is "the rock of salvation"; 1 Samuel 2:2, "neither is any rock like our god"; 2 Samuel 22:47, "and exalted be my god, the rock of my salvation"; and Psalms, where "god is my only rock". In the Old Testament, rock is a symbol of god's strength and sometimes of the holy countenance and often is related to water, as in Exodus 17:6 "I will stand before you there on the rock . . . and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, that the people may drink." And in Numbers 20:8 "So you shall bring water out of the rock for them; so you shall give drink to the congregation and their cattle."

Rachel,¹⁹ wailing,²⁰ devoured²¹ a soldier
to replenish her womb
though the skeletal clank of his dry bones²²
clatters to fill a rented tomb²³
there is no comfort in walls or armour
and the sick smell of flesh rotting
is the plague they do not tell²⁴

all the ceremonies finally end:
the scarecrow pulls his garment tight about him
unharried by wind,²⁵
steps down

¹⁹ Rachel is called "mother of Israel."

²⁰ See Jeremiah 31:15 "A voice is heard in Ra'mah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children; because they are not." This verse appears also in Matthew 2:8.

²¹ See Ezekiel 16:20 "And you took your sons and your daughters whom you had borne to me, and there you sacrificed them to be devoured [as food for idols]." Compare Jeremiah 7:31 and 19:5.

²² See Matthew 23, and especially 23:27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness." Compare Proverbs 17:22 "A broken spirit drieth the bones."

²³ See note 22 above; also, in Christianity, the body is a temporary and temporal abode; also, Christ's sepulchre, and by extension, Jerusalem.

²⁴ The results of armed conflicts are the plagues they do not tell.

²⁵ *Ruach Adonai*, the breath of life [which inspirits/inspires], often is symbolized as a wind, and in the case of Christ on the cross, the lack of wind symbolizes the lack of paternal/divine/spiritual intervention.

the voices that one night awoke a city²⁶
are stilled in a night that admits no miracles
while no structure can be perfect, no form complete²⁷
and a promise binds²⁸ the newborn in the flesh²⁹

I am the Rose of Sharon
the lily of the valley³⁰
the Shekinah,³¹ a broken vessel . . .³²

²⁶ The voices of the watchmen within the gates of the city raising an alarm [See *Song of Songs*]; the voices of the Hebrew prophets, especially Hosea; also, the voices that announced the exodus from Egypt or the coming of the messiah.

²⁷ Until the messiah will have come, perfection and completion cannot occur.

²⁸ See Deuteronomy 11:18 "You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul; and you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes."

²⁹ Judaism prescribes male circumcision as a symbol of the binding of Israel by the covenant. See Genesis 17:9-10 "And God said to Abraham, . . . 'This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.'" And also, Genesis 17:13 "So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant."

³⁰ Compare *Song of Songs* 2:1 "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys." The difference in texts is intentional.

³¹ Like Jerusalem, the Shekinah, a manifestation of the divine presence in the world, is associated with or represented as female. See Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3rd. rev. ed. [New York: Schocken, 1961]. See also *The Zohar*.

³² See Jeremiah 19:10 "Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended.'" See also Jeremiah 18:4-6 and especially "like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel."

Yerushaliam is a Magdalena³³
a soldier's whore . . .³⁴

Adàm, in the Image . . .³⁵

you are all³⁶
my lovers

³³ In Christian iconography, Mary Magdalene is the opposite of Mary the virgin mother. Virginity and motherhood are the two roles prescribed for woman, outside of which all is harlotry. This is not only a religious but a political construct; woman as virgin/maiden was the chattel of her father and as wife/mother the chattel of her husband. Women without male protection were outside the social order. By extension, any woman of independent action, which implies independent thought, such as Mary Magdalene, flouts the social order and aligns herself with outcasts, in the case of Magdalene, with Christ. Women who step outside the normative definitions are traditionally accused of harlotry. Compare also the Old Testament images of Jerusalem as virgin bride and as faithless woman and harlot.

³⁴ who yields of necessity to force of arms

³⁵ The name "Adam" usually is said to be derived from the word "*adamah*", which is translated as "clay" or "earth". See also Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), note 79, p.73, where he quotes the "Hasidic master Simhah Bunem of Przysucha (1765-1827) on the verse 'God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness' (Gen. 1:26): '[The word] "*adam*" (man) is derived from "*adam'h*" [i.e., I will imagine].'" Wolfson relates "image" to imaging and imagining and human creativity to the divine creative principle.

³⁶ All who are made in the image, all conquering armies, all the religions for which Jerusalem is or has been a holy centre or a sacred city.