

CSWS Research Matters

“I have come to my garden”: Ancient Jewish Constructions of Space and Gender

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Poor Susanna. The beautiful, pure, and faithful Jewish heroine walks into her private garden in order to bathe. Unbeknownst to her, two corrupt judges hide there and sexually threaten her. They do not lay a hand on her but demand that she have intercourse with them. If she does not submit, they will accuse her of adultery. They will tell her husband, a leader of the community whose home is used for town meetings and trials, that she met with a lover in the garden. Susanna chooses the fictitious adultery rather than actual adultery. She chooses certain death over breaking a commandment. Fortunately, at the critical moment of her death sentence, as she cries out to God to save her, a young lad named Daniel comes forward to rescue her. In his first of many prophecies and judgments, the young Daniel separates the lecherous men and asks each, “Under which tree did the lovers meet?” One wretch declares it was a mastic tree, and the other asserts it was an oak. Susanna is saved.

There are many messages in this Hellenistic Jewish tale. One is that Jewish women should model themselves after Susanna. They should be loyal to Judaism and God’s commandments even if it means death. Another is that power corrupts, not in all cases, but in many. The narrative also instructs that the court of God is more just than that of society. Only God’s chosen one, in this case the prophet Daniel, can truly discern who tells the truth.

But these didactic points merely skim the surface of the story. A feminist reading might point out the violence that runs throughout the narrative—from the original threat of sexual assault to the death sentence against Susanna.



Susanna and the Elders by Jacopo Tintoretto (*Susanna im Bade* | Jacopo Robusti gen. Tintoretto) / by permission of Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna.

Even the trees mentioned have violent allusions in Greek (the language of the text). The “mastic tree” brings to mind the word “to cut,” and “oak” is related to the word “to split.” Daniel makes the connection explicit when he describes that soon the angels will punish the judges by cutting and splitting them in two. A feminist reading would also point to Susanna’s lack of agency. She is left with two bad choices: rape or death. She is so marginalized in this society that she is rendered mute against her accusers. The story tells us that at the moment she was to die, all her family and friends, even her maid servants, were crying, distressed, and surprised. But it does not say that they argued for her cause or came to her defense. Her husband was in the room but did not speak at all. He did not save her and she could not save herself. Daniel did that.

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While many scholars have written on these aspects of the narrative, in my current project I am more concerned with other sub-surface aspects of the narrative: the sexual tension; how gender plays out in the story; the garden itself, its flora and fauna and its space; and why and how these aspects come together so often in post-biblical interpretation. I work with the biblical texts and the Jewish interpretive texts that date from the Hellenistic period through the late Roman period in the land of Israel (~300 B.C.E. – 400 C.E.). My overall goal is to understand how daily experience influences interpretation and the theological or didactic claims that Jewish elites (all males) put forth. I translate and analyze the literature and then study the material culture and history. With my grant from the Center for the Study of Women in Society (CSWS), I was able to focus on the literary part of my study.

As I delved into the mysteries of the garden, I noticed that the narrative of Susanna has deep connections to two other mythic gardens: the Garden of Eden and the garden in the Song of Songs (aka the Song of Solomon). In each of these texts the space of the garden is problematic. In Susanna's story, the garden adds to her vulnerability because the judges can hide from her view. But

the garden also redeems her, since the judges are unable to identify the tree of the fictitious suitor. The relationship of garden and home is also peculiar. The home is the locus of the woman, and it is private space. But Susanna's home is anything but private. Because of her husband's high standing in society, the elders and judges congregate at the home to hear and decide cases. As for the garden, it too should be closed and private, and Susanna believes that it is so. She ensures her privacy by asking her maids to close the gates when they go to retrieve the ointments for her bath. As it turns out, the garden is extremely dangerous, both because the sense of privacy is false and because the garden's fecundity further stimulates the men's arousal.

The story of Adam and Eve, which no doubt served as a template for the Susanna story, also addresses the extreme danger of the garden. Eve believes the garden of Eden is safe because it is her home. Nevertheless, she is tricked by the serpent into eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Then she gives it to Adam, and he eats. In the end, God punishes all three of the participants: the serpent, Eve, and Adam. Notably, Adam doesn't speak at all. In the interpretative traditions of Judaism and Christianity, however, Eve becomes the

primary recipient of blame. The ancient rabbis of the late Roman period blame Eve for bringing death into the world, and they extend that blame to women in general. But there are other rabbinic traditions as well, and in these, as we see in Susanna, the female is beyond reproach. In the rabbinic retelling of the banishment from Eden, some rabbis blame Adam. God tells Adam not to eat from the tree, but Adam tells Eve not to touch it. Once the serpent proves to Eve that she won't die from touching the fruit, Eve no longer believes Adam and eats at the serpent's suggestion. The rabbis argue that Adam is a bad teacher, a bad *rabbi*, because rather than simply communicate the law ("do not eat the fruit"), he attempts to build a "fence" around the law ("do not even touch the tree"). The fence is too high and too strict, and therefore collapses. Akin to Susanna's husband, Adam does not speak; he simply eats. And, why does the snake seduce Eve? The rabbis say the snake saw Adam and Eve in coitus, and his jealousy and desire motivated him to bring about Adam's downfall.

The funding from CSWS has granted me the opportunity to unpack numerous parallels among these ancient texts. This has been a vital step within my larger project, and has set me up to explore the material culture of ancient gardens with much greater direction and precision. ■