often rallied by singing psalms, to the terror of Catholic opponents, and Huguenot martyrs recited psalms at their deaths, including the imprecatory Psalm 79.6 Indeed, it’s highly likely that many lay readers will inevitably take the Psalms as theirs to own: the only question is how, and how well? Returning these passages to the lectionary and to pulpit use affords an occasion to shape Christian piety by the wider considerations that commentators of the past and present have regularly voiced.

4. LAMENTS AND IMPRECATIONS MUST NOT BE MISAPPROPRIATED. The history of Christian anti-Jewish exegesis — along with other variations that have come and gone, by which the enemies of God or Christ are identified among our contemporaries — ought to stand as an object lesson of what not to do with the Psalms.

Finally, a warning. However urgent it is to appropriate the laments and imprecations of the Psalms today as a means of recognizing the godlessness of injustice and evil and enlisting against it, the witness of history also urges us to do so self-critically — and in two ways. Traditional interpreters were quite capable of seeing their complicity in evil as individuals; that’s largely what Origen meant when he allegorized the “little ones” of Babylon in terms of our own illicit desires. But there is also danger in uncritically identifying the enemies of Christ with the enemies of our church, or (more likely) our part of it. It would be churlish to scold Christians of the past — say, the martyrs — because they prayed for vindication from lethal enemies. In many cases, having identified their enemies, Christians were content to leave vengeance to the Lord. In other cases, the enmity was mutually mortal, as in the French wars of religion. If Calvin was concerned to remind his hearers that today’s enemy may be tomorrow’s penitent, the point may have been unaffordable to his Huguenot colleagues in the press of bloody battle. Nonetheless, the supposed enemies of the church in past days — and, truly, they may have been such! — are not necessarily to be demonized in perpetuity. They may have repented. We may have been wrong. In recovering the imprecatory psalms, we must be skeptical of our ability to know for certain who our real enemies really are, when it’s enough to know that God is our ally.

Chapter Four

Patriarchs Behaving Badly

How Should We Follow Saints Who Lie, Cheat, Break Promises, Commit Insurrection, Endanger Women, and Take Extra Wives?

In the introduction to this book, I recounted the tale of a pastor whose strategy for upholding marriage included a remarkable bit of advice for the Christian wife, namely, that she should submit to her husband no matter what he might ask, even if her conscience should object. His proof-text was the example of Sarah, who submitted to Abraham’s scheme to lie and tell everyone that his beautiful wife was really his “sister” — whereupon she was taken by Pharaoh to be betrothed, or worse. What a loyal wife! Or, what a cowardly husband. I wish I could say that my tale of the cavalier pastor was the only time I’ve heard of someone appealing to a patriarch’s unusual, not to say immoral, deeds in order to justify some equally dubious act, but I can’t. In fact, it is nothing unusual for readers’ curiosity to be piqued when the great characters of the Bible bend or break the rules. My colleagues who teach the book of Genesis tell me that students are always eager to see how these pre-Christian “saints” can be got off the hook. But the history of exegesis also testifies to the abiding interest in these stories. After all, most of the big names in the Old Testament are cited in the New Testament, usually as examples of faith for us to follow. How intriguing, then, when these exemplars act like cads or scoundrels!

 Instances of such behavior on the part of the patriarchs of the Old Testament abound. In Romans 4, Abraham is praised by Paul as the father of those justified by faith. That evidently did not stop him from deceiving
Pharaoh about Sarah; indeed, the lie was so successful that he repeated it, some years later, to King Abimelech of Gerar, upon whom Isaac tried the same trick still later. Lot is called “righteous” in 2 Peter 2:7, despite having offered his daughters to the men of Sodom and later commiting incest with them. Jacob is praised for his faith in Hebrews 11, but the rest of his résumé was a string of lies and sharp dealing: he took advantage of his brother Esau, deceived his dying father, and traded swindles with his father-in-law by clever sheep-breeding. Jacob’s sons, patriarchs of the twelve tribes, were scarcely better. Along with their collective treachery toward the Shechemites, whom they slaughtered after having made treaty with them, one may recall Judah’s incest with Tamar and Joseph’s deception of his brothers. Sometimes the patriarchs’ misdeeds are less obvious to modern readers, as when Abraham took up arms against the four kings who had kidnapped Lot. But earlier readers wondered how Abraham, a mere nomad, had the right to wage a war. Holding unrivaled fascination for traditional readers, however, was the apparent endorsement of polygamy that seemed to shine forth from the behavior of Abraham and Jacob, not to mention the later actions of David and Solomon.

Silence Isn’t Always Golden

In the case of the patriarchs, none of these deeds is explicitly censured by the Bible itself. Once again, what Scripture does not say creates a bigger problem than what it does say. Throughout the ages, enquiring minds have wanted to know: if the saints of the Old Testament can do these things, why can’t we? Just as often, Christian commentators (themselves usually pastors, too) have burned the midnight oil to bar these stories against such casual imitators — and not without cause! We’ll have occasion below to note how some Bible readers thought the patriarchs’ example of polygamy — never clearly condemned by the Bible, after all — might be worth reviving in their own day. But even as this chapter was being written, the State of Florida put to death Paul Hill, an anti-abortion activist who shot and killed a doctor at a women’s clinic in 1994. The story of Abraham’s self-authorized defense of Lot against the four kings — approved, apparently, by the absence of any scriptural word to the contrary — was a significant warrant for Hill’s decision to kill in cold blood. Is the silence of Scripture meant to be as permissive as this?

In Search of Inspired Excuses

The question of how traditional commentators dealt with the patriarchs’ dubious deeds is complicated. Not only is Scripture mostly silent about the ethical significance or precedent to be found in what are generally recognized as scandalous acts, the acts themselves are diverse, as are the approaches and attitudes of commentators. In this chapter, I will try to blend two agendas. One priority is to survey the various Bible passages that tell these tales of indiscretion. I’ll do that by grouping them in four categories: lying and deception; endangering the chastity of a wife or daughters; polygamy; and insurrection, or any unauthorized use of force. A second priority is to keep track of the varied arguments commentators invoke to explain the patriarchs’ actions and often to excuse or ameliorate their deeds. By and large, “excusatory” arguments are of only two sorts: either these Old Testament saints were acting in accordance with a special or secret divine permission or inspiration; or else there were extenuating circumstances, perhaps easily overlooked by us, that cast a different light on matters. We’ll track these natural and supernatural excuses as we look at each of our four categories.

Lies and Deception

Lying is common in the book of Genesis. The best-known patriarchal lies are Abraham’s and Isaac’s dissimulation regarding the true identities of...
their wives; Jacob’s deception of his father, in which his mother really served as mastermind; and Jacob’s manipulation of Laban’s flocks to maximize his own. There are, to be sure, other patriarchal lies, but we’ll have to restrict our survey to these few.

Although there are many instances of deceit in the Old Testament and many analogies to those listed above, the interpretation of the patriarchs’ lies is complicated in two more ways. First, these men are supposed to be heroes, the good guys of the history of Israel and thus of the Christian church. As already noted, many of them are accounted as such in the New Testament, and commentators have traditionally expected them to be especially holy. Writing in the fourth century, Ambrose found in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob “a pattern of how to live,” that we may “follow in their shining footsteps along a . . . path of blamelessness opened up to us by their virtue.”4 But not all of their footsteps prove to be equally shiny! Second, in many cases there are few if any clues in the text to indicate whether these lies were a good idea, divinely approved, or if they were wrong.

Lying as the Lesser of Two Evils?

All commentators were disturbed by the patriarchs’ lies, but a high-water mark of worrying was established early on by Augustine, who wrote not one but two treatises on lying.5 Augustine pondered all sorts of lies, ranging from those told merely as jokes to those meant to help or harm, but he concluded fairly quickly that virtually all lies are evil and endanger the soul of the liar. Where he came nearly to a standstill, however, was over lies told in the hope of avoiding a greater evil. This particular ethical dilemma came to be known as compensatory evil. It’s concisely stated in a rhetorical question scorned by Paul in Romans 3:8: “Why not do evil that good may come?” But the dilemma is also framed by the familiar if excruciating twentieth-century question: If a Nazi soldier came to your door and asked you if you knew where any Jews were (and you did), what should you say? Unfortunately, the world continues to witness endless variations of this “tragic moral choice,” not only in episodes of genocide and ethnic cleansing but also in personal moral decisions. Understandably, Augustine wavered. Lying is evil, without a doubt. But Augustine knew as well as we do that there are so many other horrifying evils that can be done to oneself or to others, including forced idolatry, sexual abuse, and torture. Nonetheless, after making and unmaking his mind more than once, Augustine concluded: all lies are always evil.

Not surprisingly, all the commentators concurred with St. Paul and Romans 3, if not with Augustine — at least in theory! Indeed, the Apostle’s sarcastic dismissal of the question virtually mandated agreement. And so, when these interpreters commented on the behavior modeled by the holy patriarchs, they could not easily commend these lies. Instead, they had to add some kind of qualification. Let us turn to the stories to see what they did.

Abraham’s Charade: Lying by Permission, or as a Mission

No one thinks it a good idea to endanger one’s wife by telling the sort of lie that Abraham and Isaac used. But the scale of ethics changes when God becomes a factor, that is, when or if God were to issue a special command. God, after all, is the lawgiver; and the lawgiver — in the eyes of traditional commentators, at least — is above the law. Accordingly, some set forth as an unimpeachable defense that Abraham acted with God’s permission. So argued Huldreich Zwingli in the 1520s, but it was no new idea that Abraham secretly had God’s approval or that he had been assured (on the basis of a special revelation) that Sarah would be protected from Pharaoh. This argument was advanced in one form or another in the patristic era by Augustine and Chrysostom, reiterated for medievals by Nicholas of Lyra and Denis the Carthusian, and adopted by several Reformation interpreters.6 The problem for all these writers, though, was in finding textual evidence to support the claim.

Consequently, many commentators found ways to repackage the bare assertion that Abraham had special permission or a secret revelation. Three variations may be noted, all of which sidestepped the missing evidence. One variation derives from Augustine (inspired by Ambrose and Origen), who heralded the prophetic or typological role the patriarchs often played. The argument draws an analogy from Galatians 4, where Paul argued for the allegorical significance of Hagar. Augustine and Ambrose, however, added what Paul did not: that Abraham’s polygamous union was divinely arranged for the sake of the later allegory. We’ll revisit the question of polygamy below; the point here is that Augustine could make the same case for Abraham’s dissimulation. Thus, when Abraham hid the
truth that Sarah was his wife, he offered us a prophetic foreshadowing of the church, which is the “secret spouse” of Christ. Such divine lessons allegedly resolve moral offenses by changing them into symbols.

A second variation credits the patriarchs as having a **special divine mission**. As Chrysostom described it, Abraham’s “mission” was to spread true religion, and to this end God drove him from place to place and led him into all sorts of scrapes so that, by rescuing and vindicating him, Abraham’s virtue was made conspicuous and the fear of God was instilled in all who heard of it. In effect, Abraham’s intention (even when driven by fear) was superseded by the divine plan, which overrode lesser moral concerns, as if *means* are a minor issue when the *end* is directed by God. Excuses based on Abraham’s special mission were invoked in the late Middle Ages by Paul of Burgos and Denis the Carthusian, and in the Reformation by Conrad Pellican, Johann Oecolampadius, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Wolfgang Musculus, and Martin Luther. John Calvin, however, was not a member of this club.

A third variant calls attention not to the patriarchs’ special mission, but to their **special gifts**. After all, in Genesis 20:7 the Lord told Abimelech that Abraham was a prophet. This argument was also suggested by Augustine, but it was amplified by Lyra and Burgos, who claimed Abraham foreknew that his ruse would result not in Sarah’s violation but in her deliverance and his. Hence he is scarcely to be blamed, since nothing was risked. Although Pellican and Vermigli also adopted this line, most Reformers did not. Indeed, Luther, Musculus, and Calvin seem deliberate in rejecting it.

**Abraham’s Charade: Lying as a Form of Prudence**

Not all excuses prized by commentators had to discover divine approval. There were other, more common explanations ready to hand. Of course, not all these **explanations** served as **excuses**: for instance, some commentators were content to say that Abraham lied simply because he was afraid. Others note the obvious point that Abraham didn’t so much lie as tell a half-truth, since Sarah was his sister, though in a more distant sense than usual. Some assert that despite the formal deception, Abraham’s intention was not at all malicious. Alert readers may complain that all three of these options look like forms of compensatory evil, in that Abraham chose a less-than-virtuous path regardless of why. The observation is sound, for although many commentators thought his fault was reduced by considering his motive or wording or intention, most still held his lie to be a moral fault.

The most interesting of the non-supernatural explanations, however, is the appeal to the obligation of prudence. As this argument goes, God gave human beings the gift of reason and judgment so that they might use it. To fail to act with prudence and to presume on some sort of divine rescue or intervention verges on the serious sin of tempting God. Accordingly, Abraham was simply doing what he could to avoid disaster, and trusting God for the rest. Who could fault that? But Abraham’s prudence was actually better gauged and less fear-driven than one might suppose. On the one hand, he was quite right to worry about the loose morals of the Egyptians. On the other hand, he had good reason to think that Sarah would be in no immediate danger of joining Pharaoh’s harem, at least not until a twelve-month period of purification had passed. These bits of “inside information” from Josephus and Jerome were cited by many as significantly reducing the scandal by enhancing Abraham’s prudence. (The purification is not mentioned in Genesis, of course, but inferred from the book of Esther.) Some commentators liked this amelioration; others found it farfetched.

**Abraham’s Charade: Lying as a Form of Sin**

There is yet one more line of argument regarding the lies told by Abraham and Isaac: they sinned. They may have been filled with fear or they may have had reason to think lying was a shrewd strategy, but it was wrong. Of all the commentators I’ve read, this conclusion is argued most forcefully by John Calvin and Wolfgang Musculus, though Luther sometimes inclines to this view. Musculus and Calvin dismantle all the would-be ameliorations offered by other commentators, especially the appeals to prudence that would seem to be easiest for us to appropriate. For Musculus, prudence is obliged only where it does not act against God, against another’s well-being, or against decorum. Abraham violated all three: “It’s no work of faith,” Musculus wrote, “to do what is unjust and dishonorable in order to obtain the promise of God.” Even if, by the grace of God, Abraham’s plan turned out well, his actions remain sinful. Calvin, too, faults Abraham: not
for his supposedly great faith but for his unbelief — for not casting his cares upon God. Far from modeling prudence, Abraham acted rashly and with presumption. In short, Abraham did not avoid tempting God, for ultimately he did tempt him.\(^\text{16}\)

The exasperation of Musculus and Calvin should probably be read as a rebuke of their predecessors. But it would be wrong to think that only Musculus and Calvin were worried about casual imitators of Abraham and Isaac. The exegesis here is constantly disturbed by dissonance. Traditional commentators are disposed to admire Abraham and the other patriarchs. They don’t want to set them up as villains. But neither do they want to foster what we would call copycat crimes. Consequently, while we ought to concur with the harsher judgments of Calvin and Musculus here, we should not ignore what else is intended by even the more improbable excuses offered above, namely, that Abraham’s excuses — whether extraordinary or fragile — are almost certainly not available to us. Precritical commentators do hope to excuse Abraham, but not at any cost.

Jacob the Trickster

Although there are many things not to like about Jacob, his most notorious misdeeds are the deception that he perpetrated on his dying father in order to receive the blessing meant for Esau, and his use of peeled sticks (Genesis 30:37) to manipulate the flocks of Laban, his father-in-law, so that the speckled and spotted sheep Laban had granted him would be more numerous and stronger.

In both cases, most of the excuses offered on behalf of Abraham’s lie are also extended to Jacob, including various appeals to divine permission, typology, good intentions, and the obligation of prudence. The scheme of Jacob and his mother, to be sure, benefits from the oracle to Rebekah (Genesis 25:23) that “the elder will serve the younger.” Some take this as implicitly granting her divine permission to redirect her husband’s misplaced affection for Esau. Luther’s bold comments are of particular interest. Comparing Jacob’s lie to the Israelites’ spoiling of the Egyptians on the eve of the exodus, he asserts that “to take from another by deceit what God has given you is not a sin,” but rather (if done by divine command) “a saintly, legitimate, and pious fraud.” Indeed, he compares Jacob’s trick to the deception which Christ practiced upon the devil and by which we were redeemed.\(^\text{17}\) Calvin, by contrast, is disinclined to excuse Jacob at all.

Luther is equally outspoken, and perhaps equally worrisome, in his account of Jacob’s sheep-breeding. In his view, the ploy was “necessary” on account of Laban’s “unjust rapacity,” and he adds that looking after one’s own family is a matter of both divine and human law. (Several commentators cited 1 Timothy 5:8 for the same point.) Did Jacob really cheat Laban, then? Yes, but Luther provides three excuses: Jacob is excused by human right, as well as by natural and civil law, according to which those who serve unjust masters without pay may recover what is owed to them, so long as they do not act to their master’s detriment. Jacob is also excused by divine authority and by what Luther terms extreme necessity, essentially a corollary of the first excuse. In a postscript to these excuses, Luther belabors Jacob’s hardships and his benefits to Laban so as to stress how rare Jacob’s circumstances were — and how unlikely it is that anyone else would ever have cause to take him as an example. Nonetheless, the appeal to natural rights implicitly furnished a rationale for resisting oppression that, once spoken, Luther could neither deny nor call back.\(^\text{18}\)

Once again, Calvin writes in contrast to Luther. While he, too, knows that our duties to our families are prescribed by Scripture — that is, by divine law — he frets over the quick application of “natural rights” to Jacob’s case, for the Bible also says we are not to avenge ourselves. Although Calvin does excuse Jacob in this instance, he prefers to think God led Jacob to this plan, as seems implied by the dream Jacob narrated a few verses later.\(^\text{19}\)

Still, one may wonder whether Calvin is worried more by Luther here than by Jacob.

Pandering and Endangerment

To some extent, the chief instances of endangering another person’s chastity — specifically, Sarah’s and Rebekah’s — have already been introduced. Nonetheless, these particular patriarchal misdeeds elicit other comments that go beyond the question of lying and deception. And there is also the notorious incident in Genesis 19 to consider, where Lot offered his daughters to be ravished by the men of Sodom.
Exposing a Wife to Adultery

What should be added to our earlier account of the deception practiced by Abraham and Isaac in calling their wives “sisters” is some notice of the greater gravity attributed to sins against chastity. Luther again serves as a case in point, for while he might be willing to excuse Abraham’s lie, he refused to excuse him for exposing Sarah to adultery. Writing in another context, Luther stated categorically that “the Holy Spirit does not move or impel anyone to fornication and incest.” Luther was not alone in abhorring sexual crimes and infidelity. Writing against Peter Comestor’s assertion in the twelfth century that Abraham received a dispensation to adultery, Denis asserts that no one in Scripture was ever dispensed to adultery by God. It’s no surprise, then, that with respect to Abraham’s endangerment of his wife, Lot’s willingness for his daughters to be ravished, and the incest later committed by Lot and by Judah, almost no one will posit a special dispensation per se, despite the common assertion that these misdeeds served good ends.

Acting as a Pander for One’s Daughters

When commentators turned to Lot’s offer of his daughters to the men of Sodom, they were uniformly astounded and scandalized. In the face of Lot’s repugnant act, they were driven to look for some amelioration only by two items of contrary testimony: first, despite this deed, he was deemed worthy of angelic rescue; and, second, 2 Peter 2:7 calls Lot — probably in light of his rescue — both “righteous” and “godly.” In other words, Scripture itself seems to get Lot off the hook. But was his endangerment of his daughters (not to mention his incest later on) therefore commendable? Or even understandable?

As already noted, virtually no one suggests that Lot was in any way divinely prompted to offer his daughters to be raped. God may be rescuing Lot, but risking his daughters’ chastity was clearly his own idea. And not a good one! So the best that commentators can do for the “righteous” Lot is to ameliorate his misdeed. Some conjecture that Lot hoped the very outrageousness of his offer would shock the townsfolk into shame and a change of heart. Others impute to Lot a monumental faith in providence, that God would intervene.

Of special interest, however, is Augustine. His two treatises on lying were mentioned earlier, but it’s worth noting his deliberations on Lot, which are peculiar — and shifting. In the first treatise, Augustine addresses the view of Ambrose, one of the few commentators who excused Lot by appealing to compensatory evil. Ambrose’s logic could scarcely be more offensive to modern readers: Lot did well, risking a lesser evil to avoid a greater, for it would be less unnatural for women to be defiled by the men of Sodom than for Lot’s male guests to suffer the same. Although Augustine does not dispute Ambrose’s judgment that it is more evil for men to be raped than women, his first treatise does reject Ambrose’s defense of Lot and concludes that Lot did, in fact, sin. What makes the second treatise so striking, then, is that Augustine begins by setting aside Ambrose’s “lesser evil” defense and eventually settles on what we would call a plea of insanity: “[Lot’s] mind was so disturbed that he was willing to do that which God’s law declares must not be done. By fearing other men’s sins, he was so perturbed that he did not attend to his own sin and willingly subjected his daughters to the lusts of impious men.” This is a radical shift! Augustine has abandoned all arguments from prudence. Lot’s horrible deed, at best, signals a mental breakdown. At worst, it is merely “his own sin,” and totally unexcused.

Feminist writers have had a field day against the assumption of Ambrose and Augustine that women’s bodies are of less value than men’s — and rightly so. Although the assumption is rooted in deeper notions about how “nature” embodies the teachings of divine law, what really lurks behind the curtain is a deep-seated fear on the part of Ambrose, Augustine, and most Christian writers of homosexual intercourse. The point to be taken here, however, is that while some later writers agreed that Lot must have been deranged to make this offer, the argument was not meant to excuse — only to explain. Augustine himself asserted that Lot had no “paternal” right to force such evil on his daughters. Later commentators agreed, rejecting the appeal to compensatory evil and, moreover, condemning Lot’s deed as shameful, unlawful, a great and atrocious crime, even though (as Pellican observed) the Bible does not condemn Lot. Luther liked to think that Lot possessed a great faith, but Luther’s feelings were undisguised: “Lot failed abominably in his duty toward his daughters, whose honor he should have defended from danger with his own life.” Calvin was sharper still. Lot acted unforgivably, “pandering his own daughters as prostitutes.” Better he should have “died a thousand times” at his doorstep than to try such a thing.

80

Patriarchs Behaving Badly

81
In the case of Lot’s endangerment of his daughters, the inclination of precritical commentators is clear: despite their often convoluted deliberations, they are scarcely interested in excusing Lot’s behavior. They are vehemently opposed to seeing him imitated. He may have been righteous in some other way, but his treatment of his daughters was no part of whatever righteousness Lot possessed.

Polygamy

Although Genesis 4 reports that the first polygamist was Lamech, a direct descendant of Cain and evidently a murderer as well, it is the polygamous marriages of Abraham and Jacob that draw the most attention. Unlike these patriarchs, Lamech is not taken as a model of Christian behavior. In their attempt to reconcile the patriarchs’ multiple wives with their role as exemplars, most commentators use the same lines we have already examined, especially the idea that they had special permission from God. Now if their exegesis of these texts were nothing more than the boilerplate application of standard excuses, we could simply note that fact and move on. But under this heading we’ll actually discover both surprises and complicating factors. First, there are provocative variations on the appeal to secret permission. Second, the issue of patriarchal polygamy proved to have much more urgency than one might ever expect. For us, polygamy is rarely more than an occasional headline or the substance of a banal joke. For some of our forebears, the precedent offered by the patriarchs was fraught with religious and political consequences.

Excuses for Polygamy: The Usual Suspects

We saw earlier that it was exceedingly rare to claim that God simply permitted Abraham to take a second wife — particularly since there is no sign of such permission being sought or received. Given that commentators were much more disturbed by sexual crimes than, say, by lying, those who appealed to a special dispensation as excusing Abraham’s polygamy almost always added other considerations. Augustine publicized many of these factors, including a case for finding special permission implied by the typological significance of Abraham’s polygamy.

The patriarchs and prophets... understood by the revelation of the Spirit of God... how God appointed all these sayings and actions as types and predictions of the future. Their great desire was for the New Testament, but they had a personal duty to perform in those predictions. In other words, Abraham’s polygamy was staged, for the sake of the allegory that Paul would construct from Sarah and Hagar in Galatians 4:24.

Augustine’s suggestion drew followers even among Reformation writers, but there were other arguments, too. Chrysostom asserted that Abraham was merely obeying the original command to “increase and multiply,” a command that Ambrose found especially relevant after the Flood had depopulated the earth. Augustine, never short of arguments, amplified these insights by suggesting that the patriarchs lived in an age before Christ, that is, back when polygamy was neither forbidden by law nor driven by lust — as it would be were we to revive it. Augustine also voiced an argument that Luther especially liked, that the patriarchs’ polygamy was driven by their knowledge that eventually the promised Messiah would be born of their line. Polygamy was a way to hasten that blessed day. All of these arguments had in common that they posited a world or a culture where the divine imperatives or laws worked differently than they do now. Consequently, none of these excuses could possibly apply to us today, and that is clearly why commentators liked them.

Motives: Defending the Bible, Coping with Monarchs

As peculiar as some of these lines of excuse or amelioration seem, it would be wrong, again, to suppose that precritical commentators were trying to exonerate the patriarchs at any cost. We’ve already seen that some excuses were dismissed as invalid, even as some actions were virtually impossible to defend, no matter who committed them or what the Bible might say elsewhere in defense. Any discussion of patriarchal misdeeds would inevitably also be a course in Christian ethics for the readers of these commentaries. When interpreters interrupted the flow of their exegesis with lengthy digressions on patriarchal morality, their motivations were always pastoral, at least in part, because prudent congregations and readers always wanted to know the standards by which God would judge their own behavior.
However, other motives were also at work. Much of Augustine's defense of the patriarchs' behavior was crafted less as pastoral care or catechism than as apologetic — specifically, as part of his response to the slanders of Faustus. Writing sometime around 390, this Manichaean bishop severed the Old Testament from the “true” Christianity of the Manicheans, indicting the deity portrayed there as a fraud and charging the patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets with carnal immorality. Augustine's burden was to refute Faustus and retain the character of Christ and Christianity as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, not its repudiation. To this end, he felt compelled to portray the patriarchs in as favorable a light as possible.

Something quite different was at work in the sixteenth century. The 1530s saw three separate scandals in which the polygamy of Abraham and Jacob was invoked as a precedent. First was the “great matter” of Henry VIII of England, whose quest for a male heir led him to ask the pope either to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon or allow him to take a second wife. Another such petitioner was Philip of Hesse, Luther's prince, whose unhappy marriage had not saved him from frequent infidelities nor from a deservedly anguished conscience. Between these two fell the short-lived seizure of the city of Münster by Anabaptist radicals in 1534-35, which revived polygamy as part of a restoration of the kingdom of Christ in which Münster was to be the New Jerusalem. To a profound degree, Protestants and Catholics alike were forced to reckon with the political implications of patriarchal polygamy. While many commentators were inclined to defend the patriarchs, some also argued (more or less after Augustine) that polygamy was not outside divine law, even if current laws and customs had come to reject the practice. It will be instructive here to poll three such commentators, including Cardinal Cajetan, Martin Luther, and Martin Bucer — Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed.

Cajetan's views emerge in his commentaries, but he also may have been consulted by Pope Clement VII over the problem of Henry VIII. Cajetan opposed divorce but took the patriarchs as proof not only that having a second wife was not contrary to divine law, but also that no special divine word was required.38

Luther, too, had been asked to advise Henry. Like Cajetan, he was opposed to divorce and advised bigamy,39 but other details reveal him as more cautious. In particular, Luther's exegesis of Genesis tried to balance excusing the patriarchs with minimizing the potential for imitation. So while the patriarchs acted with good intent (to obtain the "promised seed," Christ), and in accord with custom, and with special dispensation, none of these considerations apply to us. Yet Luther also warns of violating equity in the name of consistency — hinting that he might allow polygamy in the present.40 In fact, the guarded remarks in his commentary are fully consistent not only with his advice to Henry VIII but also with earlier statements, including his 1526 response to Philip of Hesse (long before Philip's bigamous marriage came to pass early in 1540). There, Luther said that polygamy is not to be generally re-instituted; it is allowable only as an exception in case of “necessity” (say, if one's wife were leprous), on the condition that one has a special word from God as the patriarchs had, or as a means to avoid a greater evil such as divorce or unchastity.41 The last factor was decisive in his reluctant approval of Philip's bigamy.

The messy affair found Luther in close agreement with Martin Bucer, also a trusted advisor to Philip. Bucer embraced the same assumptions as Luther, listed above, and added that Old Testament practices and privileges were permitted to Christians unless explicitly forbidden. It's no surprise, then, that Bucer had also advocated bigamy over divorce for Henry VIII, at least in his preliminary opinion.42

Both Bucer and Luther were effectively trapped in their words, then, when Philip of Hesse claimed, late in 1539, that his salvation and conscience were in danger from his own unchastity and begged them to endorse his planned bigamy. Luther was thereby implicated in the resort to compensatory evil that he elsewhere condemned. Indeed, desperate to keep the bigamy secret, both Reformers urged Philip to tell “a holy lie” like the one Abraham used (Bucer) or simply “a strong lie” (Luther). The threat was greater than merely the scandal of bigamy, for Philip — leading prince of the Protestant faction — threatened to withdraw from leadership and seek rapprochement with the Catholic forces of Emperor Charles V. Neither Luther nor Bucer wanted to change the marriage laws and customs of Europe in favor of plural marriage — though they worried that Philip might do so. Yet they did give Philip's conscience the final say. The “special word from God” that Luther would have liked to hear proved to be something mediated wholly by Philip's own conscience and reports of his heartfelt prayer. No other evidence was sought or demanded.43

We cannot go far into the aftermath; suffice it to say, the damage was immense. Luther and Bucer were accused of Münsterite ways, and Catholic writers discredited Protestantism in general. It's especially worth noting
that the scandal was a catalyst for later exegesis. Bullinger attacked these modern defenders of polygamy in his 1542 commentary on Matthew, and Vermigli's remarks on polygamy may also have been shaped by this affair. Bucer himself may have joined his own critics, adding "proofs" for monogamy in his late lectures on Ephesians. And Calvin, beyond his peers, dismissed virtually every defense offered by his predecessors. Not only did he argue that monogamy has always been the divine order, but he also contradicted Henry VIII's "advisors" by asserting that polygamy is a worse crime than divorce — not vice versa. Thus, though the patriarchs did commit polygamy, Calvin says "it was not therefore lawful." However much Calvin might have agreed with Bucer that what God permitted to the patriarchs is that much more permissible for us, his point is that God never permitted polygamy to anyone.

The polygamy scandals of the 1530s found commentators torn between exegesis and pastoral worries, between the silences of Scripture and the realities of politics. Some took an absolutist stand, faulting both the patriarchs and their modern imitators. Others compromised, hoping to preserve at least some biblical values while bending others. But though the latter group theorized that the Bible's silences were to be read permissively, they cringed when faced with the demand for such permission, discovering the hard way that the patriarchs' examples precipitated only disaster, not deliverance.

Insurrection and Self-Authorized Violence

In the United States, it's impolitic to speak against the American revolution — the war against Britain for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that has shaped so much of American identity. But what now looks like such a justified and heroic emancipation from tyranny could have been described in far different terms in 1776 — terms that indicted colonists for rebellion, insurrection, and the overthrow of divine order. After all, Romans 13:1 says that "there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." Would'n't this have applied to King George III? Indeed, in the face of today's terrorist threats, calls to "resist tyranny" seem suddenly unpatriotic when we hear them directed against America.
himself to initiate a public war. Calvin was worried enough that he offered not one but two possible excuses. First, Calvin thinks Abraham acted in obedience to a secret prompting of the Spirit, “armed with a heavenly command, lest he transgress the bounds of his vocation.” This traditional excuse would occasion no comment, were it not for the fact that Calvin almost never invokes it. His second excuse is more subtle. It’s not necessary to see Abraham as a private person, says Calvin. After all, Canaan was promised to Abraham and his seed, making Abraham the legal ruler of that realm, even if no one knew it yet. As the king (that is, the king-to-be) of that region, he was fully within his right and office to undertake a war.

**From Public to Private Resistance**

Aside from Zwingli’s rash remark, there is a consensus among these Reformers that Abraham offers no precedent and that private resistance is normally unlawful. (Zwingli, too, espouses this view in other writings.) Calvin’s comparison of Abraham to Moses is of special interest, since in sixteenth-century discussions of tyranny, “Moses” was a code-word for the divinely-sent help that oppressed Christians of private status might pray for but which was not theirs to initiate. Significantly, while Calvin was willing to justify Abraham on the basis of special dispensation, he clearly preferred to cede public office to Abraham and avoid the problem of private resistance altogether. Calvin did not deny that deliverers might arise from the private realm, but he clearly hoped to see Protestants in France freed not by private avengers but by the intervention of a public body such as the Estates General. Calvin’s reluctance to resist tyranny on any other than constitutional grounds puts him in the company of most Reformers of his day, as Luther and Vermigli illustrate. Thus the patriarchs, like Moses and the judges, turned out to be as circumspect about their private status as Calvin and his colleagues would have been. This is surely no coincidence.

Obviously, sometime between Calvin and 1776, things changed. Actually, theories of resistance and views of patriarchal precedent changed very soon. As the situation of Protestants in France worsened, and especially after the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre in 1572, there was a profound shift in “political exegesis.” A hint of the change can be seen in the comment of Calvin’s successor, Theodore Beza, that the Israelites were delivered by extraordinary means only because “they were too stupid to see that they might have resisted tyranny without it.” Beza thus expanded the list of excuses based on prudence so as to include new ideas about what made a monarch legitimate. Nonetheless, this more permissive reading of patriarchal precedent was accompanied by the bloody European wars of religion, as well as later revolutions. Its continuing use as a religious pretext by individuals bent on resorting to violence might suggest that the older exegesis deserves to be respected and reconsidered.

**Negotiating Excuses and Exceptions**

The traditional commentators examined here do not wholly agree on how to appropriate or apply the Bible’s reports of patriarchal misdeeds. They range from maximizing excuses (Augustine) to a principled resistance to what are deemed simply sins and cautionary tales (Calvin). None of these writers was eager to see these dubious deeds break out in their own churches, yet no one — not even Calvin — would dare to say that God is not free to direct something similar today.

Consequently, these pastors and preachers also thought about how they might test claims to such exceptional privilege. We’ve seen some of these criteria, such as possessing a special call or word from God. Sometimes Luther could leave this qualification to be verified by one’s conscience, but at other times (as in his dealings with the peasant uprising) he would demand exceptional claims to be corroborated with signs and wonders — the same demand some Catholics made of Calvin to verify his claims and teachings. (One corollary is the demand for success or results: if Muntzer was really raised up by God, why did he fail?) We have also seen excuses that appeal to prudence, necessity, “lesser evil,” or the principle of equity or natural right. Commentators generally disliked such appeals, especially when they served to justify some act that was otherwise clearly wrong. Nonetheless, as Luther and Bucer illustrate, they sometimes found themselves on the horns of exactly that ethical dilemma.

The criterion that was probably of greatest weight in evaluating morally suspicious actions, however, was Scripture itself. Were there other passages in the Bible that might clarify, contradict, or trump the idea that one might be specially permitted to engage in some improper act? This criterion is sometimes described as the rule of faith or the analogy of faith.
The first phrase looks for conformity to the apostles' main teachings; the second phrase takes the whole Bible as a standard, interpreting unclear passages by those that are clearer. The analogy of faith was at work in Luther's and Denis's flat denial that God ever permits incest or adultery. Calvin, too, was precise on this point: "whatever is opposed to the nature of God is sinful." For Luther, conformity to right doctrine was an even stronger proof than performing miracles. But Calvin, as usual, could go further: "These days, God does not reveal the future by [oracles or] miracles. The teaching of the law, the prophets, and the gospel . . . is abundantly sufficient for the regulation of our course of life."

Following the Patriarchs and the Commentators

The disturbing deeds of the Old Testament saints offer a unique window into how earlier commentators and pastors approached the problem of divine intervention as well as questions of biblical ethics. Certain as it is that we will find something in these commentators to disagree with, there are still lessons to draw from the history of interpreting these passages that add to the lessons of Scripture itself.

1. NOT ALL OF THE BIBLE IS A MODEL FOR US. The narrative and descriptive portions of Scripture need to be handled with care, even when heroes and saints are the leading characters, lest exceptions or sinful deeds become the basis for a bad rule.

The disastrous peasant rebellion that Müntzer helped inflame and the coercive polygamy in Münster had complex causes. Both sympathetic and hostile retellings are possible. But there can be little doubt that both affairs ended badly, and that neither was well-served by the use of patriarchal examples as warrants for violence or polygamy. The sixteenth-century understanding of biblical "exceptions" was given a pair of lasting scars by these contemporary examples of applying the texts permissively. It's hard to think differently today about instances of self-authorized violence, particularly in the name of religion. For that matter, while the question of how the gospel applies to polygamous cultures has been a perennial problem, there are also Christian advocates of polygamy in North America today who are quite happy with these Old Testament examples. If there are lessons to draw from the commentary tradition, one would surely include a profound skepticism towards any uncritical or unchecked appropriation of such examples, particularly when (as Luther reminds us) there are so many other examples — and explicit teachings and commands — to comment conduct that differs from the patriarchs' misdeeds.

2. THE SILENCES OF THE BIBLE SHOULD BE FILLED BY THE BIBLE. The principle of reading unclear passages of Scripture in light of Scripture's clearer passages is solidly endorsed by traditional commentators.

In one sense, the problem of the patriarchs' misdeeds is a dilemma that is both raised and (potentially) resolved by Scripture itself. If you only knew the patriarchal narratives, or if you only knew the moral teachings of the Bible, there would be no problem. The problem arises largely because one part of the Bible collides with another. What the Bible instructs is not always what it models. (The conflict between Genesis 14 and Romans 13, mentioned earlier, is just one example.) There is therefore much to be said in favor of a solution that allows the Bible to correct itself, so that rules and pastoral counsel are derived from passages intended as rules rather than from one-of-a-kind exceptions. There is no need to fabricate implausible rules or hidden scenarios simply to get the Bible's heroes off the hook. As Calvin generalized, "whenever the faithful fall into sin, they do not desire to be lifted out of it by false defenses, for their justification consists in a simple and free demand of pardon for their sin." In other words, it is better to construe such silences in terms of the Bible's well-known pattern of sin and forgiveness, rather than invent a completely new pattern of biblical ethics or conclude that God or the Bible is hopelessly unreliable.

3. EXEGESIS CAN BE MISLED BY POWER, POLITICS, AND PRESTIGE. Although "God shows no partiality" to those supposedly of repute (Galatians 2:6), we often do. Our best exegetical instincts about right and wrong can run aground when our esteem for someone — whether in the Bible or in our congregation — distracts us from the facts of their behavior.

However slow we should be in passing judgment on the mistakes of our forebears, it's hard not to conclude that Luther and Bucer erred in encour-
aging the bigamy of Philip of Hesse and in failing to challenge his conscience to cling to the clearer teachings of the Bible rather than its more obscure examples. That's not just a modern perspective; it's also the view of Luther's contemporaries, and possibly the view of Luther and Bucer in hindsight. Unfortunately, Luther himself also allowed — in his theory and through his practice — that faults could be indulged in leaders that were intolerable in ordinary folk. He saw it in his own day, even as he saw it portrayed in the Bible. Modern society, too, is well acquainted with (if not fascinated by) the vices of the rich and famous. But this is not the pattern of biblical ethics to which we are called. In the genealogies of Jesus, the patriarchs fit in nicely next to other men and women of checkered reputation. Special deference to them, or to anyone of power or prestige, is unwarranted — as the best commentators of the past have illustrated in their own successes, as well as through their failings.

Chapter Five

Gomer and Hosea

Does God Approve of Wife Abuse?

Although women are scarcely prominent in the many books that make up the latter prophets, their few cameo appearances and the prophets' regular use of feminine imagery and metaphors have met with protests from many contemporary readers. Their objections are not surprising. At issue is not the quantity of women represented, but the quality of that representation. In a word, it seems that the prophets never mention women, whether real or metaphorical, except to serve as villains and bad examples.

Of all the women in the prophets, none is better known than Gomer, the wife of the prophet Hosea. Her story is easy to outline, if only because there are so few details. According to the book's opening lines, Hosea's first oracle was directed to himself: "Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry, for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the Lord" (1:2). Gomer was that "wife of harlotry," who bore to Hosea a son, a daughter, and another son — prophetically named Jezebel, Not-pitied, and Not-my-people. All three names signal impending judgment against Israel, even as the oracle in 1:10–2:1 goes on to anticipate a time when a repentant nation will again be prosperous, pitied, and worthy to be called God's people. Gomer, on the other hand, continues to figure through much of the rest of the book as the unnamed woman and mother who is guilty of harlotry and adultery — a figure of Israel's politi-
NOTES TO PAGES 62-67

35. For a complete listing, see Kurt Aland, Hilfsbuch zum Lutherstudien (Witten: Luther-Verlag, 1970), §§593-627.
40. In my discussion of Calvin, I have been helped by the recent work of Paul Mbugua Mpindi, "Calvin's Hermeneutics of the Imprerations of the Psalms" (Ph.D. dissertation, Calvin Theological Seminary, 2003).
42. Calvin, Commentary on Psalms 41:10 (CTS 2:123-24).
43. Calvin, Commentary on Psalms 137:7 (CTS 5:196).
44. Calvin, Commentary on Psalms 69:22 (CTS 3:67).
46. Calvin, Commentary on Psalms 109:16 (CTS 4:4283, altered).
50. Holladay, Psalms through Three Thousand Years, pp. 311-12.
52. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 153-59; discussed also by Holladay, Psalms through Three Thousand Years, pp. 296-97. For Trille's epithets, see notes 36 and 36 in Chapters One and Two (respectively).
53. Lewis (Reflections on the Psalms, p. 136) essentially follows Origen here.
55. Miller, They Cried to the Lord, p. 303; italics mine.
56. Holladay, Psalms through Three Thousand Years, p. 348.
57. Brueggemann, Message of the Psalms, pp. 20-23, 85-87; see also his essay on Psalm 109, cited in n. 51 above.

Notes to Chapter Four, "Patriarchs Behaving Badly"

3. These remarks in The Woman's Bible are attributed to Clara Bewick Colby and Lillie Devereux Blake; see The Original Feminist Attack on the Bible (2 vols. in 1; New York: Arno, 1972), 1:42-44.
5. Augustine’s On Lying and Against Lying were written in 395 and 420. English translations can be found in NPNF1 3:457-77 and 481-500.
8. Chrysostom probably took the argument from Josephus; see Hom. Gen. 32.5, 45-19, 51.15 (FC 82:257, 479; 87:63).


12. So Augustine, as well as Lyra, Denis, and Vermigli — though the later writers also express serious reservations about this argument's weaknesses.

13. Luther, Musculus, and Oecolampadius all ameliorate Abraham's lie by registering his good intention.

14. Josephus's account in *Antiquities* 1.162, 2.201 (LCL pp. 80, 250) is cited with some favor in comments on Gen. 12:13-20 by Lyra (fol. 61r), Pellican (fol. 169), and Oecolampadius (fol. 131r). The stereotype about Egyptian morals is contested by Denis (fol. 61r), Pellican (fol. 169), and Musculus (fol. 308) — the latter two on exegetical grounds. The argument from Esther 2:12 is found in Jerome's *Commentary on Genesis* 12:15 (Hayward ed., p. 44). It was taken up by Augustine (*Quaestiones in Heptateuchum* 1.26, PL 34:555) and others (all *Comm. Gen.* 12:13-20, including Lyra (fol. 61r), Vermigli (fol. 51r), and Luther (LW 2:204). Denis (12:10b) and Musculus (p. 309) found the argument far from persuasive.


22. Denis, of course, proceeds to argue that what God dispensed Abraham from was something other than adultery; see his *Comm. Gen.* 30:4 (1:328b).

23. For a few exceptions, see my "Immorality of the Patriarchs," p. 15 n. 19.

24. For this argument, see the commentaries on Gen. 19:8 of Denis (12:59a), Cajetan (p. 92), Luther (LW 3:259), and Musculus (p. 461). The argument is disputed by Musculus, as well as by Calvin, who thinks Lot merely seized the first defense that came to mind and so erred (CTS 1:499-500).


28. For a discussion of feminist perspectives on this issue, see *Writing the Wrongs*, pp. 180-85, 216-21.

29. After Augustine, some sort of mental disturbance is imputed to Lot by Lyra, Denis, Luther, Zwingli, Vermigli, and Musculus — but not by Calvin.


31. Pellican actually blamed Lot for seeking worldly affluence and thus preferring to live among the worst sort of people; see *Comm. Gen.* 19:8 (fol. 247).


34. One clever hypothesis was that Abraham simply assumed — from the fact that she gave Hagar to him (16:2) — that Sarah must have received such permission.


39. Luther to Robert Barnes, 3 Sept. 1531 (LW 50:33).


42. Bucer drew on the example of David (Eells, *Attitude of Martin Bucer*, pp. 33-42, 125).

43. Bucer set out three criteria — prayer, advice, conscience — in his *Argumenta Bucerii pro et contra*, written late in 1539; see Eells, *Attitude of Bucer*, p. 100.

44. Bullinger excused the polygamy of Abraham and Jacob by special dispensation, yet also said their plural wives were not from God but from human error — from Sarah's presumption and Laban's fraud (Eells, *Attitude of Bucer*, pp. 181, 233-17).


50. For Vermigli, see *Comm. Gen.* 14 (fol. 56v). Because his arguments mirror Cal-
vin's, his views will not be presented separately. Note, however, that it is hard to tell which of these two Reformers might have used the other; see my "Patriarchs, Polygamy, and Popular Resistance," p. 17 n. 45.


52. Luther, Comm. Gen. 14:15 (LW 2:375). No appeal to Genesis 14 survives in Müntzer's writings, though he surely did see himself in the mantle of the patriarchs, the judges (including Gideon and Samson), and other biblical heroes; see Letters 71, 72, 84, 88, and 89 in The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer, ed. Peter Matheson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), pp. 135-36, 151, 156-57.


54. In his comments on the patriarchal misdeeds in the book of Genesis (up to twenty instances), Calvin appeals to special dispensation only three times.

55. Calvin, Comm. Gen. 14:13 (CTS 1:383); the same excuse is applied to Moses.

56. Calvin draws a parallel from Abraham's war not only to Moses' slaying of the Egyptian but also to Israel's deliverance by Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson; see Comm. Gen. 14:13 (CTS 1:383) and Serm. Gen. 14:13-17 (pp. 8-10). "Wait for a Moses" represents common advice, given by Luther (to the peasants, in "Admonition to Peace," LW 46:35), by Zwingli (Commentary on True and False Religion 27, ZSW 3:880), and by Calvin (Institutes 4.20.29-30).

57. Calvin mentions this as a possibility in his Institutes (4.20.30) from the earliest edition through the last: "Sometimes [God] raises up open avengers from among his servants ... to deliver his people." But the expectation remains problematic, especially in light of Calvin's dislike for enthusiasts and conspirators.


59. For Luther, see Bainton, "Immoralities of the Patriarchs," p. 44. Calvin replied to demands for miracles in his Prefatory Address to Francis I in the 1536 Institutes.

60. For a more detailed account, see Writing the Wrongs, pp. 247-49.

61. See their comments at notes 21 and 22, above.


65. Such groups can easily be found on the Internet, as at www.polygamy.net.
