Polygyny as political fiction in the Hebrew Bible.
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Abstract.

Biblical examples of polygynous marriages have had consequences over the ages, which continue today where polygynous communities have been Christianised. This paper seeks to demonstrate the literary nature of biblical stories about polygyny, underpinned by the need for fictive kinship relationships in order to create and explain the political status quo after the Babylonian exile. It examines the stories about polygyny in Genesis as later means of creating fictive identity national identity. I examine the depiction of slave-wives and concubines in law and literature, and the use of harems as literary mimics of Persian rulers. Through the lens of polygyny, the paper explores emerging national identities in the postexilic period, and how marriage is viewed politically. A new history of biblical polygyny is attempted.

Preface

My PhD on Ancient Hebrew Marrage and Family (supervised by Arnold Anderson and examined by John Gray in 1975 at a time before feminist research was the force it is today combined historical source analysis, archaeology and anthropology, more conventionally than I approve of today. In that period, scholars began to challenge the traditional methods of historical and source criticism. My edited collection *Creating the Old Testament* (1989) took seriously the obvious fact that someone created the OT books, for some purpose unknown, and at some date unknown. The 15 scholars and SOTS members who contributed attempted this perspective in different ways. Today, this perspective is more widespread and less controversial, and I apply it to OT texts on marriage, and in particular on polygyny.

Marriage and family customs and laws in the Bible have influenced parts of the world influenced by Christianity. Yet Biblical passages are far from simple. Interpreters have wrestled with issues about dates and chronology. A century ago, many interpreters were influenced by evolutionary schemas – that humanity evolved from 'primitive promiscuity', through polygyny to monogamy. They sought 'vestiges' of earlier stages in biblical stories, which they viewed as early traditions.

Stories involving details of marriage and family are contained in longer narratives written by authors unknown, for purposes unknown. Our first task is to work out as much as we can about these purposes, and put ourselves in the position to see the wood from the trees, the rhetorical purpose from the likely sources. It is true that scholars have been

working on the issues for two centuries, but they have not produced consensus. This has not been helped by their radically differing views on the status of Bible texts, either as authoritative religious text ('word of God') or simply ancient source material. If a writer is concerned not to offend Christians and Jews, nothing would ever be written. Let me simply say that for me, the Bible is an historical source and nothing more. No appeal to divine inspiration with impress me in the least.

Thus, I begin to unravel those aspects of Bible writing which uncovers the politics of the writers and their circle. That the books were written is the only certain thing we know; we seek to discover who by, when and why – which are much more problematic. For our focus on marriage and family life, the authors cannot be assumed to have reflected any time but their own. We have therefore to be content that we can discover very little about the times of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or even David. We have stories which tell us something, but not about the times of these individuals. The story of creation is a theological makeover of the ideal of marriage, and the reality. The patriarchal stories show that far from modelling contemporary behaviour on these 'ancestors', they were not worthy of later veneration (a point made strongly by Mary Douglas). From the sexual chaos within the patriarchal stories, that soap before soaps, the pure bloodline was imposed by God in spite of the humans He had to work with.

The various biblical texts relating to marriage come from texts which have their own agendas. The trouble is, that those who revere the text (Christians and Jews) are unlikely to appreciate what the original authors were trying to say. For instance, divorcing 'foreign' wives, (i.e. non-believers), as Ezra demanded, is a current issue in Africa, as is polygyny. These affect real lives today, but neither are uncontroversial 'biblical' eternal truths. Biblical texts on homosexuality are another example of over-simplistic acceptance of demands which are not seen in context. These issues are therefore far from academic – they affect real people today.

Making a difference means also taking a stance against biblical misinterpretation. The heart of this is interpreting biblical texts out of context. Part of that context is the recognition that the text served its own purpose, and not the idealised purpose of providing guidance for today. Since the intellectual argument about this point meets the brick wall of faith, these two opposite certainties cannot agree compromise.

The central agenda of Old Testament scholarship up to the 1970s was to attempt to reconstruct history by searching for and differentiating between historical sources such as J, E, D, P and H. Final editor additions might even be rejected as 'redactional'. There has been a shift to try to understand the point of view of the person who was responsible for the final text. Their contribution was recognised as more artistic than older views that they were simply editors bringing together a collection of traditions. Significant to this change was Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, highlighting the narrators' skills. The whole Bible was covered in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* edited by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (1987). This puts the authors' intentions centre stage – the messages that were intended to contribute to social and political debate in their own day. Another influential book was Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (1974), an eminent anthropologist who approached the text as an anthropological artefact: her view was that the final text must be assumed to have a coherent meaning

for the society which produced it. That study was about purity/impurity, focussing on Leviticus. She has more recently written about Genesis and Numbers, as well as returning to Leviticus.

Ancient Hebrew Law.
Relevant laws on marriage and family life are sparse. Ephraim Neufeld (1944) compared biblical law to cuneiform legal codes and material, and Louis Epstein compared Bible and Talmud. Adultery is prohibited: specifically having sex with another man's wife. This, according to narratives, did not apply to concubines. Certain close relationships (acc. to Leviticus 18) should not be turned into rival polygynous wives (e.g. two sisters, mother and daughter etc) and some are deemed incestuous; the assumption is that having polygynous wives was otherwise accepted. A slave-wife (amah) had special protection. Divorce was allowed, during which the woman had some protection (Deuteronomy). A childless widow should conceive an heir to her dead husband through his next of kin (levirate 'marriage', Deuteronomy). Each comes in its own context, in the main legal corpuses, and we need to be cautious about interpreting how the law reflected ancient society. In particular, we need to be cautious about assuming that we can reconstruct pre-exilic history and society.

Story
Most details about marriage come in stories, the date and purpose of which we cannot be sure. Clearly, as Mary Douglas asserts, the patriarchs are depicted as being unworthy of (ancestor) reverence, leading chaotic family lives. Much in Genesis is therefore rhetorical, not an accurate depiction of the history of marriage. Jack Sasson's study of the book of Ruth (and summary in Alter and Kermode) opens up a complex discussion of intermarriage, and inheritance in the family set within the supposed ancestors of King David himself. I will deal below with the Levite's concubine in Judges – a story which comments on the later concerns about Levites hostile to the Benjaminites, which lies beneath the Blessings of Jacob in Genesis (Benjamin is liken to a ravening wolf) and King Saul stories (Saul was a Benjaminite, depicted as violent and unstable).

Feminist issues.
Finally in this preface, feminist critique has developed over the past 30 years and asks some very awkward questions about how Bible writers treat women. Eve is blamed for the first sin. The prophets tolerate wife abuse – Hosea's marriage, Ezekiel's passages where Jerusalem and Samaria are abused wives of God (Patton, 2000).

Paper as delivered.

I Introductory.

My forebears were Macmillans, cleared off their ancestral lands so lairds could profit from sheep. The lairds wrote the laws, so land title may have been legal but were far from moral. Land acquisition worldwide is problematic, with those with power have historically taken over the land of the powerless. In Africa, America and Australia, land ownership and consequent reform is a significant issue. Land ownership claims in biblical

narratives affect attitudes and life opportunities in Israel/Palestine today-what Israeli geographer Oren Yiftachel calls 'Judaising the homeland'. This paper is a contribution to this debate. My PhD in 1975 was on Hebrew Marriage; Richard M Davidson's *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* from the conservative tradition, is one of the few substantial works on Hebrew marriage written since, has encouraged me to return to it. Albeit, my methods and assumptions now, 35 years later, are very different.

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A previous generation of biblical scholars, such as Albright and Bright in America, assumed that the OT chronology was more or less authentic, and this influenced most exegetes up to the 1970s. It was the academic literature of my undergraduate training. My PhD on Ancient Hebrew Marrage and Family (supervised by Arnold Anderson and examined by John Gray at a time before feminist research was the force it is today) in 1975 combined historical analysis, archaeology and anthropology, more conventionally than I approve of today.   Greater skepticism on the existence of patriarchs and even kings followed (e.g. T L Thompson, Hayes and Miller, Miller and Hayes, Dever, Lemche, Philip Davies, Keith Whitlam) which uncoupled archaeological interpretation from biblical chronology to introduce a degree of caution and specticism. In my own introduction and contributions to *Creating the Old Testament* (1989) I emphasised that the biblical interpreter should not make unwarranted assumptions about biblical history but examine the text that we have: that is, the one thing we know for certain is that someone wrote it, for some purpose unknown, and at a date unknown. In searching for the intentions of the original writers, we have to be ready for surprises.

This treats the final text as an artefact to be explored for its potential of shedding light on the society that produced it (Mary Douglas rooted her work on this premise). The context was post-exilic, a time when new land claims needed to be made as incomers ('returners') were resettled in Israel/Palestine, but we still need to pin down in which century the text was produced. That the author's society was the historic owner of the territory was the basis of the claim of biblical historians; but this required some rewriting of history and perhaps local traditions to legitimize a claim. We of course still have the task of unpicking the diachronic under-text, but that is for another occasion.

Ancient texts, including the Bible, were productions of their times, and include assumptions that are unpalatable today (racism, prostitutes, slavery and polygyny for example). As interpreters, we seek only to understand. The stories do not present biographical fact but theology and, I argue, politics. To have a clear bloodline requires a lack of ambiguity to demonstrate that these tribes are legitimate and those are not. Declaring a wife (with inheritance rights) as a concubine (without inheritance rights) is an example of persuasive writing.

I have chosen to start by asking what use the author made of marriage (especially polygyny but also intermarriage) to underpin the argument presented about blood line and legitimacy.

II Polygyny

Polygyny, a man's legal marriage to two or more women irrespective of whether they are main wife, slave wife, or concubine, was legally possible within Jewish law until 1949 (though inhibited by the medieval 'ban of Gershom'), therefore having an impact on the lived experience of many women and families. There is no law prohibiting polygyny (notwithstanding Davidson's recent view that Leviticus 18.18 does – that is the law prohibiting simultaneous marriage to sisters). The Hebrew Bible assumes the possibility of multiple legal sexual relationships, both in story and in law. Laws (Lev. 18) prohibiting simultaneous mother and daughter marriage, and marriage with sisters presume that other plural marriages were allowed. Slave wives were offered some protection (Exodus 21.7-11) although polygyny is not explicit. No law mentions a concubine (pilegesh) who will play a substantial part in the argument which follows.

Adam, Noah, Abraham and Isaac each had one wife (Hagar is not called Abraham's wife but Sarah's slavewoman; Abraham married Keturah after Sarah's death). Jacob intends to marry one wife, Rachel: only she is declared 'wife' in the genealogy of Gen. 46. Tensions between rival wives are described (Sarah/Hagar; Rachel/Leah, Hannah/Peninnah). This is not to say, with Davidson, that monogamy has divine approval; it is to notice an interest of the Genesis author in late post-exilic times, a concern for unambiguous family lines rather than sexual propriety.

Royal harems

Polygyny is detailed in king profiles (where numbers of wives and concubines are given) and described more curiously in the patriarchal stories of the early Hebrews. Was this from a detailed chronicle? Or were they folk tradition or fiction? We are still asking these questions. It has been assumed that people in exile anxiously gathered together their writings, stories and traditions and that descendents of these people returned to Palestine in the Persian period. However, they may have been creating, moulding or making up history to further their political claims.

The high numbers for Solomon reflecting his high status in folk memory (700 wives and 300 concubines is clearly a generalization), many marriages being results of political alliances. King David had an uninhibited sex life, happy to kill to achieve his ends. His wife Michal objected to him flaunting himself by dancing; he seduced Bathsheba mother of Solomon. He had other wives and concubines also (2 Sam 5:13) – his son Absolom had sex with them as a

declaration of *coup d'etat*, just as Reuben had with Jacob's 'concubine' Bilhah (Genesis 35.22).

The Persian/Achaemid royal family were famed for large royal ménages, wives married for alliances, and concubines. Greek writers such as Herodotus and Thucydides delighted in these tales of their old enemy, of protected enclosures for women run by eunuchs, although they got this wrong, since wives and concubines travelled openly with their menfolk, even into battle, as a public display of status. The Persian kings were insecure and used marriage alliances to cement their positions. Maria Brosius, in *Women in Ancient Persia* describes wives as being the result of alliances, and concubines as enjoying a good status and having servants. The Greek word *pallake/pallakas/pallakis* is used for 'concubine' by these Greek writers. Such a ménage is described in Esther 2.14. So, writing after the Persian period, this was a familiar model of kingship and it would be natural to depict Hebrew kings in the same light. The huge Persian royal menages are read back into Israelite monarchy. For our study of polygyny as social practice <u>before the exile</u>, we cannot with confidence use the royal household as evidence of polygyny as being the norm.

Concubines.
The Hebrew word for concubine is *pilagesh* and is central in this discussion. <u>As a quadriliteral stem, pilagesh is unusual, and generally considered to be a Greek loan word, pallakis, 'young woman, concubine', the feminine of pallax, 'young man'</u> (so BDB, Kohler-Baumgartner)<u>.</u> That pilagesh is a loanword from Greek, and therefore an anachronism, is the least problematic interpretation. Greek communities in Levant ports might be traced back to the 7th or 8th century, but these were not close enough or significant enough to cross over to in 2nd millenium Israelite society or for that matter pre-exilic. An early Jewish Encyclopedia entry claimed (without usage evidence) an Aramaic origin, *palga isha* meaning 'half-wife' which they claimed became a loan word into Greek. Needless to say, it is not the word that Biblical Aramaic uses for royal concubines in Daniel 5.2 (lechenah). Chaim Rabin (1974) wrote a detailed philological study, concluding that pilagesh was Indo-European, meaning 'lie with', much as concubine does. He rejected Greek as the source, as biblical references were too early, and suggested tentatively that the Philistines were Indo-European and since references are to Judah and Benjamin, they lived nearby. He admits that we know nothing of Indo-European Philistine language, let alone whether they had the word pilagesh. His problem disappears if we redate the references to post-exilic times, when Judea/Benjamin are still the focus, against the Samaritans. The objection to the source being Greek then disappears.

We need therefore to understand what this Greek word is doing in our texts and what its presence implies[1]. The Greek empire did not began until the 4th century BCE (330 or so).

Let us examine the texts. Genesis describes concubines mainly in the genealogies, which are first and foremost statements of political relationships. Abraham sent away his concubines and their offspring to the east with presents (Gen 25.5) instead of inheritance. They are named in Gen 25:5 indicating far off tribes. After Sarah's death, Abraham took Keturah as his 'wife' (but she is named as 'concubine' in I Ch 1:25: Midian was one of her sons). This clearly is to establish the legitimacy if Isaac's line over other who claim Abraham as Ancestor, their 'great father', a point which concerned the Genesis author less (his/her interest was in the sons of Jacob).

Bilhah, Rachel's slave who bore children to Jacob, is termed a concubine only after Rachel's death it a story of Reuben having sex with her (Genesis 35.22) – but not in the genealogy of Gen. 46. In that list, only Rachel is deemed 'wife' (v.19) emphasizing the primacy of the descendents of Joseph and Benjamin (whereas Leah and the slave women "bore children").

Nahor, Abraham's father in law had a concubine, Reumah (Genesis 22.24) and four sons are mentioned, thus giving no genealogical concern. Caleb has two concubines, Ephah and Manoah, named in his genealogy (I Chronicles 2:46-48) which may imply lower clan status for their children. The Chronicler, a later writer, uses the word pilagesh significantly.

In Judges, quasi-king Gideon/Jerubbaal, with many wives and seventy sons, has a concubine living in Shechem (Judges 8.31) whose son Abimelech, thus declared illegitimate in inheritance terms, fomented his city to rebel. The term is therefore rhetorical. A Levite had a 'concubine' from Bethlehem, who became estranged and returned to her father (Judges 19.1-20.6). Whilst guests in Gibeah (a Benjaminite town) a mob attacked, she was put out and gang-raped, during which she died. The fact that this happened caused offence which was remedied by war, during which the tribe of Benjamin was almost wiped out. The offence was a property and hospitality infringement rather than one involving women's rights. Intermarriage with Benjaminites was forsworn (clearly endogamy between tribes was considered normal), so, in order to prevent the tribe being eradicated, the hapless inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead (who had not so sworn) were massacred so that 400 virgins could be donated to Benjamin; later a group of eligible Shiloh girls were kidnapped by arrangement. It was described as the time when there was no law, when everyone did what was right in their own eyes. This message comes from a writer who is promoting law and authority using chaos as a spectre. <u>By calling the woman a concubine, the gang-rape is not deemed adulterous (see Reuban with Bilhah, Absolom with his father David's concubines).</u> The use of terms such as 'husband' and 'father-in-law' hint that she was a wife rebranded as concubine by the author. Benjamin, the perpetrator, was King Saul's tribe, whose story follows, inherently lawless and which according to this story owed its very existence to .the charity of the other tribes.

The line of enquiry is taken by S David Sperling (1998), that Torah story cycles were invented to legitimate later kings of Israel and then brought into a Judaean post-exilic history. The Jacob/Israel story for example was known to Hosea and this version of the story promotes Joseph as heir, supporting the claim of Ephraimite Jeroboam. Judah does obeisance to Joseph in Genesis 44, offering a political reference. The genealogy of Genesis 46 declares only Joseph and Benjamin to be sons of Jacob's 'wife' and The Blessing of Jacob (Genesis 49) gives priority to Joseph [i.e. Ephraim and Manasseh] (Benjamin being a 'ravenous wolf'). Judah shall hold the ruler's staff "until Shiloh comes".

We should also consider it possible that the writer was more concerned with establishing the legitimacy of the Samaritans in his own day than with distant history, a reaction against Ezra's attempt to brand them as foreigners. After Ezra's banning of intermarriage (between 458 [early date] and 398BCE [late date], Ezra 9-10), forcing the divorce of 'foreign' (i.e. local) women, the Genesis author emphasises intermarriages as legitimate. In Genesis 46.10, Simeon's son Shaul had a Canaanite mother and Joseph's Egyptian wife (Asenath, a priest's daughter no less, Genesis 46.19) was mother of Manasseh and Ephraim, the ancestors of the Samaritans. The killing of the Hivites in Shechem (Gen 34) is condemned, echoed again in the Blessings of Jacob – which in the case of the perpetrators Simeon and Levi, were 'lack of blessing'. That gives a somewhat grudging rationale to the ruling status of the 4th son, Judah, who nevertheless bows down to Joseph. Even king David was born of an intermarriage according to the book of Ruth).

III Reassessing Polygyny

The Genesis stories depict sexual chaos. Sarah marries both the Pharaoh and Abimelech and has to be baled out by God who caused illness and barrenness. Lot's daughters seduce their drunken father, Tamar tempts Judah by dressing as a prostitute. The legitimate bloodline is depicted as divine election, not primogeniture or even good behaviour, thus a political statement that brooks no tabloid challenge.

An earlier generation of Christian theologians took one of two general approaches to polygyny: conservatives who theologically declare that the Bible is a guide to life and therefore that monogamy is the ideal and polygyny the human weakness or aberration[2]; or, following Victorian evolutionist social scientists that human society had evolved from primitive promiscuity, through polygyny to monogamy[3]. The two view are not mutually exclusive if the theological demand for monogamy is viewed as an evolutionary step. The latter evolutionary view persisted uncritically for decades after it was rejected by functionalist anthropologists.

I argue that stories of polygyny are rhetorical and arise out of issues of legitimate bloodline and are not straightforward accounts of social practice. This had the effect of emphasising a single main wife for each patriarch, a point made much of by Davidson for theological reasons, by demoting 'rival' wives to concubines and thus declaring their offspring illegitimate. Intermarriage is a related issue, much running counter to Ezra's draconian demand for mass divorce.

The OT story thus presented in the final text is one of sexual complexity. Although polygyny was not forbidden, neither was it promoted but was viewed as far from ideal. Laws provide some protection to women, in terms of divorce regulations, partner restrictions and protection for slave women, but these also have complex motivations. The stories underline the messiness of human relationships, showing how human strife and unhappiness can be blamed on polygyny.

War may have produced a surplus of women (but many may have been captured) so their protection and their child-rearing potential may have encouraged some polygyny, to the benefit probably of the rich and the powerful. Childbearing and barrenness are recurrent themes in stories and laws relating to polygyny. That this produced rivalry and jealousy is claimed in the texts and the term 'rival wife' (tsarah) used. Hebrew law made some effort to provide protections for the women involved. Ecclesiasticus (26.6 and 37.11) describes the heartache and grief of polygynous marriages. I Samuel 1 is a good example, describing childless Hannah as loved by her husband, with 'rival' wife Peninnah taunting her for her childlessness. After prayer in the Shiloh shrine/temple (and a night with husband Elkanah) she fell pregnant with Samuel. Interesting in the text that God had 'closed her womb' and later 'remembered her'. Babies, to this writer, were not caused by sex but by divine intervention, 'sex-plus' as it were. The special baby born to a barren woman is a dominant theme, producing Isaac, Samuel and later John the Baptist. Robert Alter (1978) calls this 'an annunciation type-scene'.

Richard M Davidson in *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament.* writes a conservative Biblical Theology of sexuality. He declares that Genesis 1-3 (Eden) declares monogamy to be the ideal and the whole OT supports this throughout, with examples of polygyny being implicitly condemnatory. This is over-simple, and, of course, the stories we have in no way illustrate what actually happened historically or socially before the exile.

It has been interesting to begin to decipher why the Genesis writer depicted the chosen family as so sexually and relationally dysfunctional.

Marriage was mostly not romantic, but a show of status for men, and of economic survival for women. The stories themselves show that for women, sex and marriage could be challenging, and like the experience of the Levite's concubine in Gibeah (Judges 19) her life could be in danger. Some things don't much change.

The Social Construction of Sexuality

In Eden, before the fall, God created humanity in male and female forms as intimate helpers. What went wrong, and hence what to avoid, that is, fallen humanity, is the rest of Genesis. Told in the post-exilic period, Genesis is a sampler of sex and marriage problems in which God plots his way skilfully through human deviousness to produce a chosen race. This applauds intermarriage and demands tribal integrity. It emphasised the importance of childbearing, even if that meant multiple child-bearing partners, to increase the Hebrew population. "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Genesis 1:26). The emphasis on the all-Israel family line, and on beneficial intermarriage, puts our author in opposition to Ezra, and we have to consider whether this opposition was a motive for writing. That *pilegesh* was a loan word from Greek supports a dating for the final Priestly version in the 4th century BCE when Greek influence can be more easily presumed.

IV Modern Consequences

This issue has consequences for constructing early biblical history. The Greek loanword pilagesh, I have suggested, is a rhetorical device which may unlock a context in which Genesis was written as an answer to Ezra, in the 4th century BCE by a priestly group closer to the Samaritans than to Ezra's Jerusalem. Mary Douglas has championed the need for this style of final text analysis.

There are also unintended modern consequences. I have written elsewhere about the effects of missionary activity in Africa (Bigger, 2009): native gods were identified with the devil (and therefore acknowledged to have real power) and the Christian God identified with The Ancestor. The family tree of The Ancestor begetting Adam and subsequent generations meant that Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon etc can be deemed ancestors of the African people and their polygyny validated as acceptable practice. Since polygyny was practiced in Africa before Christianisation, education is less likely to change a custom which now has divine sanction through biblical examples. The fictional stories of patriarchs and kings affect the real life of women in polygynous relationships. Bible authors treat polygyny as a problem to be controlled, not as a model to be adopted.

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Biography.

The author studied ancient Hebrew Marriage and Family for his PhD in Manchester University, 1974, supervised by Arnold Anderson. It is hard to find (currently in Columbia University with a microfiche in Chicago) so I am gradually updating it. The chapter on incest was developed into a JBL article in 1979 but my work in Education focused my academic writing in other directions. I designed and edited (and wrote several chapters for) *Creating The Old Testament: The Emergence of the Hebrew Bible* (Basil Blackwell, 1989), a Society for Old Testament Study project and still in print.

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[1] The use of pilagesh (concubine) relationships is still applied by some conservative Jews to theologically validate extra-marital sexual relationships.

[2] Mace, Parrinder, Lockyer, Gillett, Vos, Grelot, Heinisch, Piper, Davidson

[3] The view that monogamy was a development towards civilization was argued by De Vaux, Neufeld, Epstein, Plautz.