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Gender Transgression: Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible is not readily associated with gender transgression. On the contrary its opening chapters, relating the creation of man and woman, appear to supply a foundational template for the binary pairing of man and woman. The gendered norms for these two sexes become quickly apparent: prescriptively in the law codes of the Pentateuch, and implicitly through the representations of masculinity and femininity that permeate biblical narrative. However, the creation stories do not so much reflect a divinely ordained sex/gender system as construct it, while law codes provide prescriptions for a society where transgressions are evidently anticipated. As speech acts, law codes perform and enact, constructing rather than reflect realities. As for biblical narratives saturated with representations of masculinity and femininity, these certainly reify gender norms but they also provide subversive cracks that, once opened, cannot readily be closed and forgotten. Thus Stone (2007) observes that the gender polemic used against Abimelech is a risky strategy, because by focussing on instabilities in the performance of 'doing man' the narrator simultaneously draws attention to the flimsiness of apparent norms. Some methodological approaches are particularly adept at investigating these fissures, such as feminist criticism, queer criticism and the critical study of masculinities.

Key texts and vocabulary. The key texts discussed below are organized broadly into three categories: those that attempt to restrict the potential for gender transgression, those that play with gender norms in a subversive, entertaining manner and the gender-bending at the heart of the relationship between Yhwh and Israel.

Texts containing gender transgression. Prominent among texts in this first category is the ban on cross-dressing in Deut 22:5. Grammatically, this verse reveals anxiety for the borders of the masculine: there will be no item pertaining to a male (*k^elî-geber*) upon a woman, and vice versa.

Accoutrements of gender are envisaged within the scope of this text since the reach of *k^elî* goes beyond clothing. Distaff and spindle are, for example, typically associated with women (Prov 31:19, 2

Sam 3:29) while weaponry, especially the bow, is reserved for men (2 Sam 22:35). In safeguarding the right to male-only dress and equipment Brenner (1997) rightly suspects that Deut 22:5 attempts to safeguard male autonomy and social supremacy.

Regardless of how insulting it is to women, biblical narrators know that associating a man with the trademark items of a woman or with womanly behaviour is an easy way to cause affront. In 2 Sam 3:29 David's curse on Joab's house includes reference to there being a male (the participle is masculine) grasping a *pelek*. Those convinced by the link with the Phoenician *plkm* suppose crutches but others accept the MT and translate 'holds a spindle'. The implication is that Joab's descendants will include one associated with the female gender. Nowack (1902) thus suggested that Joab's house will be afflicted by an 'effeminate stay-at-home'. Such translations are no doubt accurate, but critical distance from the text is necessary so that ideologies about gender are not unthinkingly endorsed and passed on. The negative value judgments about effeminacy are caught up within the ancient cultural milieu where codes of honour and shame are foundational. In this system maintenance of masculine norms sustains honour but association with femininity is a thing of shame. It is unlikely that 2 Sam 3:29 carries any broader reference to cultic rituals that provoked gender change, but see Hoffner (1966) on how holding symbols of masculinity and femininity featured in ancient Near Eastern loyalty oaths when warriors are threatened with being turned into women should they not uphold their promises.

Further key texts attempting to contain gender transgression include Lev 18:22 and 20:31 which stipulate that a man should not lie the 'lying down of a woman' (*miškēbē ʾiššā*) with another man.

Often assumed to be texts about sexuality, these are centrally texts about gender. As Olyan (1994) has persuasively argued, the act envisaged is anal penetration and the confusion that results when a male is penetrated – for a man who puts himself, or another man, in the receptive position of a woman betrays gender norms. The law declares (constructs) such an act *tô'ēbā*, a word often translated 'abomination' but which connotes more generally a sense of boundary-crossing or the reversal of convention. Olyan argues that it is the potential for mixing semen and excrement that prompts the prohibition and believes that the law originally addressed the penetrating man. Walsh

(2001) contrarily contends that grammatically to 'lie the lying down of a woman' is akin to standard Hebrew idioms such as 'to dream a dream'. These texts thus relate to a subject's action and to lie the lying down of a woman is thus better translated 'to lie with a male as a woman would' (2001, p. 205). The prohibition, Walsh argues, relates to the fact that gender roles and boundaries have been troubled: its rationale is to contain such transgression. The death penalty indicates how serious a matter this was considered to be.

Texts subverting gender norms. However, while the texts above strongly proscribe gender transgression, narrative texts use gender transgression to create humorous tales of the unexpected, or to satirise, or to shock. In fact, biblical narrators were particularly adept at manipulating gender norms to suit certain ideological purposes. Deliberate feminization of the foreign male, for example, shows how gender norms can be subverted for the purposes of satire. The figurative rapes of Eglon and Sisera in Judges 3—5 provide good illustration (see Guest, 2006, 2011). And when the prophets envisage the Day of the Lord, they picture enemy soldiers crying like women in labour, or experiencing womanly fear and trembling, with their 'hands' going limp (Isa 13:7-8, 19:16-25, 21:3-4, Jer 48:41, 49:22, Nah 3:13). Musing on such images, Jer 30:5-6 provocatively has the Lord wondering whether men can actually give birth! When it comes to womanizing the enemy, gender transgression is evidently a phenomenon that can be played with entertainingly in the Hebrew Bible.

Arguably, laws that relate to the inappropriate grasping of a man's genitals (Deut 25:11-12), or the status of the man with crushed testicles (Lev 21:20), or the eunuch (Deut 23:1 cf. Isa 56:3) concern gender. But since these texts deal primarily with bodily wholeness and sex norms they are not discussed further here. Of greater relevance are texts that refer to the deliberate castration or bodily abuse of enemy soldiers. In 1 Sam 18: 25 Saul demands one hundred Philistine foreskins from David in return for his daughter. This is not just an act of castration, it is an affront to gender, calling into question Philistine manly honour. The rape of enemy soldiers on the battlefield, a well documented ancient practice, is similarly a gendered act that womanizes the defeated. Rape may be envisaged in Dagan's full frontal submission to Yhwh in 1 Sam 5:3 and in the 'affliction' of the men of Ashdod by the 'hand' of the Lord ('hand' can be used euphemistically to refer to genitals). Jennings (2001) notes

how such an interpretation has coherence with other texts where the threat or actuality of phallic violence upon the foreigner is present (Gen 19, Judg 19).

Masculinizing women is also an option when the narrator wants to criticize members of the Israelite community who do not measure up. In these cases, gender norms are transgressed in order to vilify and mock. Jezebel's dominant agency exposes Ahab's weakness while stories of Israelite woman warriors shame their male counterparts. Thus in Judges 4, Deborah's proactive battle-ready stance mocks Barak's trepidation. Esther's and Judith's actions similarly play with the gendered expectations of the intended audience. When it suits the ideological purpose, female masculinity is a thing positively extolled.

Jael however is in a category of her own: in this case, a liminal figure has been created whose gender is thoroughly disrupted. Note, for instance that her name is grammatically in the form of a third person masculine singular, and that in 4.20 Sisera instructs Jael to stand at the entrance to the tent by using a second person masculine imperative. Commentators immediately begin to emend, assuming an error but these appear to be recuperative strategies, intending to contain the strange she/he liminal figure that is emerging from the page. Yet more is to come: this masculinized Jael subsequently engages in a figurative phallic rape of a passive Sisera whose death throes are unmistakably sexualised. All this before the narrator has her extolled as most blessed of women! Jael's quick recuperation is understandable: when a society is founded on a rigid binary system there is no room for such gender ambiguity. Therefore when women are no longer women, but cannot be said to be properly men either, such a society comes face to face with the spectre of chaos – a real threat to the system that has to be contained. A queer reading is adept at teasing out the unsettling phenomenon that the narrator has conjured: a character whose performativity offers the reader an unintelligible gender which gives the lie to ideas of sex as abiding substance (see Guest, 2011).

Sawyer (2002) convincingly demonstrates how a full range of characters slide across gender spectrums when it suits the narrator; most notably when the narrator wants to drive home his advocacy of theocratic power. And female characters do quite well out of this manoeuvre. They step outside the constraints of the home and ownership by father, brother or husband, and take up

activities, sometimes warlike, to demonstrate that sometimes God's best men are women. Male characters fare less well because in order to preserve alpha maleness for the deity, their own male prerogatives such as impregnation of women, or their values such as honour, are lost. For feminists with Christian or Jewish allegiances, these examples of female strength, initiative and agency are liberatory. For others, such as Sawyer, it is the deity (read male narrator) who wins. The gender 'transgressions' of Deborah or Judith are celebrated, but only because they serve a larger patriarchal agenda. The best that can be said is that their stories blunt the otherwise restrictive prescriptions and norms that limit their activities, and are a welcome respite from stories of women as victims of men (Jephthah's daughter, Levite's concubine in Judges 11 and 19). The reader is thus advised to keep their attention on the narrator who casts the characters in order to put forward his own politics under the guise of divine speech and action.

Texts that reconfigure gender norms in the Yhwh-Israel relationship. Perhaps less well-noted, but permeating much of the Hebrew Bible, are the gender shifts at the heart of the Israel-Yhwh relationship. Within the covenantal relationship which is founded upon a heterosexual framework, Israel is repeatedly feminized as the wife of Yhwh. This is seen most starkly in those texts where Israel is described as the adulterous wife; bold and brazen, she cuckolds the deity with her foreign paramours (Hos 1—3, Isa 47, Jer 2—5, Ezek 16, 23). A certain queerness arises from placing the *male* Israelite audience in the position of subservient wife (the homoerotic connotations have been addressed by Eilberg-Schwartz (1994). Less provocatively but with a similar feminizing effect, other prophetic texts put Israel in a wifely position. O'Brien (1996) notes the gender shifts in Mal. 2:11 where wayward Judah is 'she' who has acted treacherously. Resisting the tendency for commentators to emend, ignore or deflect the gender switches in Malachi 2, O'Brien commendably lets them stand, noting how Judah is thus rendered liminal: both male and female, wife and son. In a different vein, but commenting on how male members of the Israelite community are feminized, Rooke addresses Exod 28:42-43 and Lev 16:4 where priests are instructed to wear breeches. Musing on the rationale for such laws, Rooke concludes that it is necessary for priests to neutralize the material sign of their maleness in a submissive acknowledgment of the deity's masculine power and authority. Overall, such observations cohere with Sawyer's (2002) thesis that a theme of 'demasculinisation' runs through the Hebrew Bible which advocates a model of maleness that is subservient to the deity.

Passing. There are several narratives where characters disguise themselves in order to pass as someone else (Gen 38, 1 Sam 28, 1 Kgs 20, 22) but in these cases the characters remain in their assigned gender. Arguably there is a case of excessive gender performativity when Tamar ratchets up her performance in order to lay a false trail for Judah, her father-in-law, but the closest we come to gender passing is in the language Kamionkowski uses for her analysis of Ezekiel 16. In this chapter the community of Israelite males is imaged as Woman/Jerusalem who does not stay within the boundaries allotted to her sex. Rather, she acts in an aggressive and independent manner which Kamionkowski (2003, p. 7) describes as 'attempting to pass for a male'. In fact there is a double passing going on, for Ezekiel's metaphor has a Judean/exilic male community imaged in terms of personified city (Jerusalem) whose aggressive behaviour and agency marks her as male. Her transgression is thus also double: not only one of unfaithfulness to her divine husband, but one of subverting the defined roles for women. Ezekiel's response to this spectre is to re-impose gender norms in a brutal way by having Woman/Jerusalem publically humiliated, stoned and abused. This enables two simultaneous things to happen: the deity reclaims a position of power and superiority, and Ezekiel/his community is able to express and recover from the cultural trauma of an exile experience that had left them shamed and emasculated. (Kamionkowski persuasively argues that Ezekiel's metaphor has its roots in the way he and his male compatriots were traumatized by the events surrounding the Babylonian exile, not least recognizing and surviving the humiliation meted out to defeated men on the battleground). However, the reader is left with the image of a male audience addressed as female whore. While the male audience might have been able to align themselves with the deity and so reflect the shame onto the metaphorical woman, this is a sleight of hand/mind that does not entirely displace entirely the odd gender shifts that have been summoned.

Issues of performance. Gender norms are often thought to be pinned to the prior given of biological sex. The complex series of gendered rules about what one can wear, where one can go, how one performs the given sex satisfactorily, thus emerge from the two-sex binary. In this view, gendered performances become a way of distinguishing and enforcing the male/female boundaries so that sex itself remains stable as the prior biological 'given'. However, biblical texts such as Deut 22:5 demonstrate that it is the *gendered performances* that have priority. This text forbids women to adopt

the items associated with men and thereby to perform an identity commonly thought to be the prerogative of men. '*Doing man*' is thus vital to the biblical notion of 'being man'. Male self-esteem, sense of self, purpose, dignity, seem to stem from having behaviours and items of masculinity carefully ring-fenced. The man/woman binary depends not so much on biological appendages, or lack of, but on the gendered behaviours associated with each sex. Thus, it is gender performativity that is vital when it comes to maintaining the kind of society envisaged by Gen 1–3. However, as indicated above, while biblical legal prescriptions uphold a rigid two-gender system, the narratives contain characters who can assume the gendered behaviour and appearance of their gender counterpart and the prophetic corpus contains unexpected, radical gender shifts in the feminization of Israel and Judah.

It could be argued that the revelry in gender transgression only serves to uphold the gender binary. Wolters, for example, builds a strong case for demonstrating how the sex/gender binary remains intact despite the fluidity of gendered imagery applied to both women and men. To some extent he is right. The male-female binary has resilience which, despite the flirtations with unexpected gendered activities or names, proves seemingly resistant to any undoing of that binary. Even queer theory which arguably has the best tools to unhinge the sexed binary, has a difficult task. The glimpses readers are given of unexpected and odd genderings in the Hebrew Bible might do some subversive work insofar as those glimpses offer the reader a vision of an alternative way of understanding sex/gender, but this would be dependent on the resistant reader.

However, Wolters' claim that grammatical gender designators (pronouns, verbs, pronominal suffixes) consistently identify the residual natural gender of the person, even when they are otherwise imaged, has an exception in Jael. Wolters might look to the surrounding female grammatical designations, but as noted above, the two masculine designations, at minimum, bring gender trouble to the story. Here is a case where the narrator creates something that, once out of the bag, is not easy to recapture.

If our understanding of both sex and gender is always shaped by language and the discourses of our cultural context (Butler, 1990), then the part played by scriptural texts in that cultural knowledge has to be noted. In Wolters' paper, the grammatical designations that he carefully identifies are assumed to

point to a given reality. However, although the grammar *appears* to be endorsing sex distinctions this is only due to a prior ideological commitment to their supposed realities. The grammar, rather, is constructing sexed differences, creating the distinction with boundary-words such as 'male' and 'female'. It takes effort to make visible how this happens because language is so easily taken as a given. Wolters is right that the language of the Hebrew Bible affirms the 'given' sex of characters while the metaphor or simile portrays them in cross-gender ways. But what Wolters does not address is that language thus iterates a perception of male/female categories, reifying the cultural consensus that certain reproductive parts of the body render one 'male' or 'female'. If this is seen instead as an ideological manoeuvre then the significance of the Hebrew Bible as an ancient but hugely influential cultural discourse becomes evident. Moreover, the task of interpretation can then be recognized as the ideologically driven work it actually is.

Gender Transgression and Ethical Exegetical Responsibility. Biblical interpretation can no longer be an act of investigating the meaning of a text for its author and ancient audience, then repeating that meaning to a modern audience. Biblical texts continue to be cited in political debate, wielded authoritatively to lobby for various ideological positions, they are 'live' texts that remain influential for our understanding of gender. This means that biblical interpretation does not happen in a neutral, objective bubble; rather, it takes place in the heat of controversy and debate. This is particularly so when it comes to gender transgression and current political and religious discourses pertaining to homosexuality, transsexuality and transgender. Accordingly, for queer and gender critics, the commodification of information into an encyclopaedia entry does not go far enough if the social and political effects of these texts are not addressed. Readers are thus encouraged to consider how ideologically led hermeneutical strategies are always at work in citations of texts such as Deut 22:5 or Lev 18:22 in contemporary discourses.

The emphasis, in conservative discourses, is on the prescriptive key texts that attempt to contain gender transgression. However, far from being a bastion of gender normativity, the Hebrew Bible provides repeated flashes of subversive gender-play that, to some extent, expose the ultimate artifice of gender performativity and fragility of the idea that there is any ontological grounding for gender stability. Acknowledgment of these texts makes room for a broader view and a deeper, more nuanced

understanding of how gender is constructed, manipulated and subverted in ways that might surprise the general public.

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