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Is There a "Biblical Masculinity"? Masculinities in the Hebrew Bible

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In the culture wars the idea of "biblical masculinity" and "biblical femininity" comes up frequently. Some people take the biblical characters and situations as models for contemporary behavior. Others reject them as culturally bound and hopelessly patriarchal. In both cases, certain assumptions are often made about how the Bible portrays men and women. The issue is not always straightforward, however. While most of the biblical texts focus on male characters and male concerns, until recent years not a lot of attention has been given to the ways in which masculinity is constructed. Often the male viewpoint has been seen as the universal norm in contrast to the feminine "Other." Feminist scholarship has made great strides in exploring the presentation of women, laying bare some of the assumptions about women and femininity in the texts and exposing power differentials. Only in the past decade or two has similar attention been given to the portrayal of men and masculinity. The biblical texts exhibit a range of masculinities, which at times conform to larger cultural constructions and at other times present alternative models, particularly when the focus is on a proper relationship with God. Different genres of biblical texts portray different glimpses into masculinity, some of which I will survey below.

What does it mean to be a man in the Bible? If we think of Moses—perhaps

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colored by Charleton Heston's portrayal—or Joshua, it is to be a strong leader, resilient and persistent, overcoming weakness. If we think of Samson, it is muscular and strong, with a soft spot for women. If we think of David, perhaps the raw physical strength is less, but it is still a good-looking man who charms the ladies: forceful, independent, yet faithful. But does the image hold when we look closely at the types of men and masculinity portrayed in the text? Is there a "biblical masculinity"? Does it matter?

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Getting at the issue of biblical masculinity is tricky, because it is easy to superimpose our contemporary constructions on the text. Alternatively, by assuming a uniformly patriarchal culture in ancient Israel, we can read a monolithic hegemonic masculinity into the text that distorts individual portrayals. How do we determine what expectations and social forces shaped construction of gender? There are a number of ways to approach the issue. One is to look at the portrayal of masculinity in surrounding cultures. For some texts, this is easier than others. For the New Testament, there is a wealth of information about gender in Greek and Roman texts of a variety of genres. For the Hebrew Bible, the matter is more difficult, in part because of the long time period over which the texts were written, and in part because there are many fewer external texts available. Some of the best resources for the First Temple period are Assyrian, Babylonian, and Egyptian texts and iconography, but though we know those cultures definitely influenced Israelite culture, it is impossible to know how closely the construction of gender tracked. Largely we have to look at various portrayals of men, women, masculinity, and femininity within the biblical texts. It is necessary to remember that significant historical traumas and cultural upheaval occurred between the writing of different texts and that they were written by elites.

It is helpful to start by looking at specific cases. From these, some of the characteristics and tensions surrounding masculinity emerge and may persist through various genres. Previous studies have highlighted some key components of masculinity. One is honor. Honor involves several facets. The ability to protect and provide for one's family, especially the women, is central to honor. In addition, honor involves practicing hospitality, providing for those beyond the household. It involves honesty and forthright speech. A second characteristic of masculinity is potency in all its senses: skill in warfare, in leadership, and in the sexual realm. Related to this is physical wholeness and autonomy. Disability reduces a person's mascu-

line status, as does enslavement. A third element is wisdom, showing good judgment and acting appropriately in different circumstances. Starting with these characteristics, let us examine examples of masculinity in a variety of biblical genres.

Masculinity in Genesis

The narratives in Genesis set up the relationships among various peoples and God. From the story of the creation of Adam, biblical masculinity has been multifaceted. Dennis Olson recognized that pairing the stories of Adam and Eve with those of Cain and Abel reveals much about the nature of masculinity.[1] Adam's masculinity shows a variety of responses: sometimes dominant, sometimes submissive; sometimes active, sometimes passive; sometimes in the forefront, sometimes behind. Olson points out that the initial relationship between the man, the woman, and God goes wrong when there is not a partnership between the genders. Subsequently, Cain murders his brother Abel when he does not understand that sometimes he will be prominent and at other times he will be out of the spotlight. He does not understand that God's rebuff of his sacrifice is not a permanent rejection and resents his brother. Thus violence becomes linked to a type of masculinity that must have dominance. In the following genealogy the stereotype of a violent and status-bound masculinity becomes intensified by Lamech, who kills a man for wounding him and claims a seventy-fold vengeance for his own life (Gen 4:23–24). The increasing spiral of violence leads to the destruction of the world through the flood. While the flood does not succeed in its purpose of cleansing humanity of wickedness, it does show a rejection of a type of masculinity intertwined with unrestrained violence and unlimited vengeance.

Beginning with Abraham, new presentations of masculinity emerge. Abraham is a complex figure who embodies some of the give and take of masculine characteristics as outlined by Olson above. Abraham appears as an active leader, who is willing to pick up his household and follow God. He seems to have clear authority, as no one in the text seriously questions his actions. Unlike Cain, he does not resort to violence when trouble starts to emerge with his nephew Lot. Instead he negotiates a separation, content to take the seemingly less desirable hill country when Lot chooses to settle in the fertile valleys. Abraham does not completely eschew violence, however, showing skill in warfare by defeating the kings who kidnap Lot and his family (Gen 14). He fights defensively to protect his family, but does not use violence to aggrandize himself. He is a successful herder and becomes rich.

In several ways, however, Abraham does not meet the characteristics often associated with masculinity. He is not successful in reproducing, creating the major

[1]Dennis T. Olson, "Untying the Knot? Masculinity, Violence, and the Creation-Fall Story of Genesis 2–4," in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World*, ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 73–86.

crisis in the first part of the story. Even though the text places the blame on Sarah's barrenness, the lack of offspring also reflects on Abraham. He endangers his wife on two occasions by pretending she is his sister, which in the first instance results in her being taken into Pharaoh's harem (Gen 12) and in the second results in a near miss (Gen 20). Despite his dishonesty and lack of protection of his wife's sexual property, Abraham gains wealth from these encounters. When the story does turn to reproduction, Abraham recedes into the background of the action. After Sarah takes the initiative to give him Hagar as a wife, Abraham tries to make her responsible for the ensuing troubles, but she does not let him off the hook. He casts Hagar and Ishmael out of the camp with few provisions, even though he feels bad about his son. Despite his arguments with God about the fate of potential innocents in Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18), when God asks him to sacrifice Isaac, he does not raise a word of protest. Though he had worried about having no heir early in the story, he seems to have few qualms about dispensing with the ones he does obtain. Yet the text looks favorably upon these decisions, because he is following God's orders. Thus we see one of the primary characteristics of "biblical" masculinity: submission to God outweighs the "normal" expectations of masculine behavior.

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This theme carries through the competition between sons in the remainder of Genesis. When two or more sons are vying for dominance, it is the younger and less typically masculine son who is favored.[2] Isaac, who is a rather shadowy figure in the text, a submissive near-victim of sacrifice and later a hapless and muddled old man, becomes the heir over the warrior Ishmael. Isaac's twin sons Esau and Jacob present a similar case. Jacob, the smooth-faced homebody who prefers his mother, gets the birthright over his brother Esau, a hairy hunter. Jacob acts as a trickster figure, a position usually embodied by women in the biblical text. A trickster is a person who subverts the system to get what she needs, because she does not have access to the normal channels of power. Jacob does have a number of more typically masculine characteristics, which emerge especially after he starts his own family. He is strong, handsome, clever, and very virile, evidenced by his thirteen children. He does submit to God, however, even if it requires injury to his "hip." ("Hip" in Gen 32 is likely a euphemism for genitalia, symbolizing the submission of his masculinity to God.) His favored son Joseph was a young dreamer, who was dressed up by his father and seemed to be excused from the rougher work of tend-

[2]I discuss these cases in more detail in Susan E. Haddox, "Favoured Sons and Subordinate Masculinities," in *Men and Masculinities in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, ed. Ovidiu Creangă (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010) 2–19.

ing the sheep. After rising to power in Egypt, his most influential decision for Israel is forgiving his brothers and moving them to Egypt. Though tempted, he does not seek violent vengeance for his brothers' mistreatment of him, but sees it as part of a larger plan of submitting to God.

What we learn from the narrative texts in Genesis is that masculinity is complex and changing. Submission to God is a primary characteristic of the men who are chosen as prominent figures in Israelite history. As for the other characteristics, at times the men show power in warfare, virility, honor, and protection of family, whereas at other times they appear weak and subject to manipulation. The model set by Adam continues throughout Genesis.

Masculinity in Legal Texts

Legal texts express masculinity in a different manner. Rather than being embodied by complex characters, certain masculine characteristics and behaviors are assumed and regulated through laws. The laws are addressed to men, and specifically to Israelite men. Maleness and insider status are assumed as the norm, contrasted with the feminine and foreign Other. Relatively little work has been done on masculinity in the legal texts, but Mark George has made an initial study of Deuteronomy.[3] George delineates several categories of Deuteronomic masculinity: "a man's body; a man's place in society; how time is categorized; the spaces and places a man inhabits and passes through; and the relationship a man has with the deity."[4] Men's bodies are regulated in several areas. First, they must exercise self-control in eating, because food consumption is restricted to certain categories. They are also expected to work to obtain food, bearing in mind that they came from a situation of slavery. Male bodies may not dress in female clothing. While no rationale is given for the prohibition, it may relate in part to men trying to avoid battle. War is strongly associated with masculinity. Defeat in warfare is associated with feminization and feminine imagery in the ancient Near East. In the category of warfare, Deuteronomy regulates conduct in battle, taking into account the life situation of the Israelite warriors (newly married, fearful) and the identity of the enemies. The greater the threat of the enemy to "corrupt" the Israelite community, the more harshly they are treated.

Men are also expected to have sex, and although the Deuteronomistic codes specify penalties for certain kinds of relations, sexual relations are not necessarily confined to marriage for men. Descriptions of sexual relationships are all from the male point of view. Those prohibited relate to incest and infringement of another man's sexual rights. It is expected that a man should marry and have children, especially sons who will continue his name. Having a name in Israel is an important component of masculinity, which is partially maintained through honor, which

[3]Mark K. George, "Masculinity and Its Regimentation in Deuteronomy," in Creangă, *Men and Masculinities*, 64–82.

[4]Ibid., 67.

involves duty and mercy. Analogously, the motivation behind the Deuteronomic regulations is the continuation of the Israelite community, so that God's name is preserved through the obedience of Israel to the covenant.

Membership in the assembly of Israel is part of biblical masculinity. Not all men are eligible; men deemed to be imperfect, such as those with crushed testicles or born of illicit unions, are excluded. As members of the community, men are regulated to appear at certain times before God and to observe holidays, tithes, and sabbatical years. Deuteronomy sets up appropriate spaces for men and the activities they must perform. Men in the community are expected to uphold honor through the practice of generosity, and to fulfill appropriate social roles. Deuteronomy as a whole establishes a suzerainty relationship between Israel and God, which regulates worship, marriage choices, and requires absolute loyalty.

Masculinity in the Deuteronomistic History

The Deuteronomistic History is rich in examples of masculinity of a variety of types. Strong, yet flawed, male characters range from Joshua, who is a strong leader and military victor, yet who has no mentioned offspring, through the complex characters in Judges, to the monarchs. Many of these texts focus on warfare and sexual relations, which are strong symbols of masculine domination. While a thorough treatment is impossible in this article, I will examine a few examples below.

The story of Gideon reveals a number of important facets of masculinity in Judges.[5] When he is first approached, the angel says to him, "The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior." From this greeting it sounds like Gideon should be a noble specimen of manhood, but he is, in fact, a scared wimp. He claims that he is the least member of the least tribe, and he is caught in the process of beating out grain in a winepress to hide from the Midianite enemies. When the angel commissions him to lead a battle against the Midianites, he requires multiple proofs that God really is with him, requesting and receiving several signs. After defeating the enemy through a trick, which does not require him to demonstrate masculine prowess in battle, but does require his demonstration of faith, things start to change. He begins to lead his own battles and exact vengeance against those who offend his honor. In these later episodes he shows dominance, but does not seem to be listening to God. At the end of his story, Gideon creates an ephod that ends up leading Israel astray. From Gideon's story we can see that obedience to God is a prime feature of Israelite masculinity. If that is intact, other facets, such as victory, follow. If it is not in place, while a man may seem stereotypically masculine, he will not find favor with God.

This theme develops further through the characters of Saul and David. Saul's

[5]For a more detailed study of Gideon's masculinity, see Susan E. Haddox, "'The Lord Is with You, You Mighty Warrior': The Question of Gideon's Masculinity," *Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies* 30 (2010) 70–87.

selection as king is related in more than one passage, but at his public anointing he is described as tall, head and shoulders above everyone else. His first act as king is to lead a successful battle against the Ammonites, defending the people of Jabesh-Gilead. He is a capable military leader and demonstrates his virility with multiple offspring. Despite his many masculine characteristics, the text presents Saul as disobedient to God and especially to the prophet Samuel. His two major offenses are performing a sacrifice himself, rather than waiting for Samuel (1 Sam 13), and his failure to completely destroy the Amalekites, sparing their king and some livestock (1 Sam 15). Both of those decisions made good sense as a military leader trying to maintain the support of his troops, but they did not conform to the instructions of the prophet. Because of this, he lost the support of God and Samuel and subsequently lost many masculine attributes, including self-control (his repeated attempts to kill David, 1 Sam 18–20), military judgment (the rash vow of the fast and its subsequent overrule by his soldiers, 1 Sam 14), and respect of the people (who preferred David, 1 Sam 18).

He is a flawed character, committing adultery and commissioning murder to cover up his deed. Yet because the text states that his heart remains focused on God, he remains a favored character.

David, meanwhile, is introduced as a young man, not yet in his full masculinity. Like the favored younger sons in Genesis, David is the last son of Jesse, picked by God but not initially by Samuel, who thought his more rugged older brothers looked better. David's youth and slight stature also feature in his other introduction story in 1 Sam 17 where he fights Goliath, but is unable to wear Saul's battle armor. Even in that story, however, he possesses one of the primary markers of masculinity: the ability to win in battle. Though his technique is not classical, his cleverness and skill help him defeat the enemy who had terrified everyone else. Later, he demonstrates continued success both in fighting and in leadership, winning many battles. He is a virile man, having several wives and concubines and numerous sons. He is a flawed character, committing adultery and commissioning murder to cover up his deed. Yet because the text states that his heart remains focused on God, he remains a favored character. He is willing to admit his mistakes, at least before God. David Clines, one of the early scholars of masculinity in the Hebrew Bible, presents David as a model for biblical masculinity.[6] The theme seen in Genesis and Deuteronomy that biblical masculinity submits to God continues through the Deuteronomistic History, while characteristics of masculine assertion over other humans are more fully developed.

[6]David Clines, "David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible," in "Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible," in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplemental Series*, 205; *Gender, Culture, Theory* 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995) 212–241.

Masculinity in the Prophets

The classical prophets offer a different perspective on masculinity. Rather than presenting characters whose attributes can be studied, the prophetic texts employ rhetoric that plays on expectations of masculinity and femininity. The book of Hosea demonstrates this use of language well. Hosea begins with one of the most famous gendered images in the prophetic literature: the marriage metaphor. God orders Hosea to marry a promiscuous woman, which becomes a symbol of God's relationship with Israel. While a lot of attention has been given to the portrayal of women in the metaphor, it is important to remember that the initial audience of Hosea was largely male and primarily elite males such as the king, his ministers, and the priests. In the metaphor, the wife strays to a lover and the husband brings her back with threats of violence and violation, which relies on particular attitudes about wives and women to be rhetorically effective. The violence of the rhetoric makes the text problematic to contemporary readers, but the major shocking element in the ancient context was likely the fact that the male elite audience is put into the position of wife. They are used to being the ones in charge, the ones who dictate terms to their spouses and underlings and reserve the right of punishment and humiliation for disobedience, but Hosea places them in the subordinate position. Their masculinity is undermined. Hosea takes several characteristics of masculinity, including self-determination, action outside the sphere of the home, leadership of religious festivals, ability to choose one's partners, and he twists them around, saying that the men have acted not like men, but like unfaithful wives. The ways in which they thought they were exercising masculine prerogative were, in fact, disordered and inappropriate, like a wayward wife.

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The marriage metaphor is the most obvious way in which Hosea undermines the masculinity of the leaders, but it is far from the only example. In chapters 4–14, the marriage metaphor does not occur at all; instead Hosea addresses the leaders as men. Through the course of those chapters, he accuses them of being poor fathers, letting their children wander away from the correct paths, and even being active corrupting influences. He accuses them of being inconsistent and useless in their foreign policy decisions, making and breaking treaties to ill effects. He accuses them of political intrigue, carrying out coups against kings and acting in bad faith. While they think they are exercising power and control, Hosea predicts that their affairs will end in disaster, and they will be helpless. Of the leaders' many shortcomings, one that recurs frequently is religious disloyalty. The nature of the disloyalty is most often understood as the worship of other gods, such as the Canaanite

baals. The language about the *baalim*, however, like that of the marriage metaphor, may be symbolic, underscoring the fact that regardless of their ritual worship practices, the leaders are not obeying and submitting to God economically, socially, or politically. They are acting out of their own interests and motivations and not listening to God, including breaking treaties to which God was a witness.[7]

In addition to religious imagery, Hosea uses male potency imagery, including bows, which symbolize power in warfare, but also sexual virility, much as guns do in today's society. Hosea prophesies that their bows will be broken (Hos 1:5) and that they will be like slack bows (Hos 7:16) if they continue in their present path. The source of their masculine pride will be removed. Hosea also employs a wide range of other images.[8] In the fields of hunting and agriculture, the leaders are portrayed as prey and domestic animals, mostly female, whereas God is shown as a predator or the farmer. In the parent-child imagery, the leaders are the disobedient or ungrateful child to the parental God.[9] Hosea's rhetoric works to show the leaders that, while they think they are the ultimate masculine figures, they are, in fact, impotent. Only God fulfills the role as the top male. Yet the imagery of Hosea does not offer a sharp binary between masculinity and femininity. Though the leaders are to surrender the top position in the social hierarchy to God, they are not necessarily rendered as feminine. While some feminine imagery is used for maximum rhetorical effect, Hosea offers men alternative masculinities, similar to those seen in the narratives discussed above. Men do not have to become women to have a proper relationship with God, but they have to embody a masculinity that submits to God. Thus certain forms of masculinity are excluded, but a wide range remains.

What can be seen from this brief survey of the biblical texts is that if a man fulfills all of the categories of masculinity expected by society, such as honor, potency, and wisdom, but does not submit to God, he will not be favored by God. On the other hand, a man obedient to God may fall short in one or more categories, but be chosen for leadership in God's community. Thus biblical masculinity can be seen as countercultural, resisting the drive to complete power. A man must be willing to submit to God or he will be kicked out like Adam, Cain, and Saul. The faithful man who is on occasion a wimp (Gideon, Isaac) or a cheat (Jacob) or exhibits a disability (Moses) can rise to social and religious prominence with God's help. Perhaps the most useful lesson that we can take for our own context is that biblical masculinity is not about demonstrating constant supremacy and never showing weakness, as masculinity is often understood today. At times biblical men take the

[7]For more on the political implications of Hosea's gendered rhetoric, see Susan E. Haddox, "(E)masculinity in Hosea's Political Rhetoric," in *Israel's Prophets and Israel's Past*, ed. Brad E. Kelle and Megan Bishop Moore (New York: T&T Clark) 174–200.

[8]For more on how the various image fields in Hosea relate to masculinity, see Susan E. Haddox, *Metaphor and Masculinity in Hosea* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011).

[9]For a study of how masculinity in the Bible is contrasted to boyhood as well as to femininity, see Stephen M. Wilson, *Making Men: The Male Coming-of-Age Theme in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2015).

dominant role, but sometimes they defer to others, including their wives, and always to God, if they are successful. While it is dangerous to apply biblical masculinity unthinkingly to our own context, because it developed in a culture with different gender assumptions, the favored masculinities in the biblical text offer a wide variety of acceptable gender performances, more than is often allowed for "real men" today. Recapturing and expanding this variety is important for the affirmation of the diversity of men and masculinities and their gifts in the contemporary church.

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