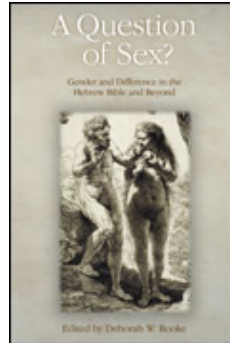


○ REVIEW OF DEBORAH W. ROOKE (ED), *A QUESTION OF SEX? GENDER AND DIFFERENCE IN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND BEYOND*

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This is a very English collection, and deliberately so, for it comes out of a conference held at King's College, London, in 2006 which had the explicit agenda of establishing an ongoing English forum for debate over gender and sexual difference in the Hebrew Bible. Seven of the contributors are from England, two from the USA and one from Germany. The collection is divided into four parts: methodological considerations, which has one essay by Deborah Sawyer; gender in law and ritual; ethnological and anthropological approaches to gender; and gender in post-biblical literature. The spread of essays in these three sections is four (Deborah W. Rooke, Bernard S. Jackson, Amy Kalmanofsky and Nicole J. Ruane), two (Carol Meyers and Ovidiu Creang) and three (Tal Ilan, Andrew Angel and Rebecca Jefferson). In typical Sheffield fashion it has a comprehensive biblical and extra-biblical index and an author index, but no subject index. The vagaries of conference papers and interests of authors have made it a rather mixed bag, all of which turns around the issue of gender.

Much hinges on what is meant by gender (the first part of the title, 'A Question of Sex?' is misleading). Although there is a token essay from masculinity studies (Angel), it soon becomes clear that the gender in question is female. In short, the topic concerns women. As with feminist biblical studies in general, these essays fall roughly into two groups: those that deal with women in the texts (both biblical and post-biblical) and those that deal with the arid stretches of text where women are few and far between. In the first group we find the essays by Deborah Sawyer, Amy Kalmanofsky, Carol Myers, Tal Ilan, Andrew Angel and Rebecca Jefferson. In the second group fall the essays by Deborah Rooke, Bernard S. Jackson, Nicole J. Ruane and Ovidiu Creanga.

I cannot engage with all the essays so I will focus on the more interesting ones. The ones I will not consider in detail are as follows. In 'Their Heart Cried Out to God: Gender and Prayer in the Book of Lamentations' Kalmanofsky deals with prayer by women who are literary constructs

in Lamentations. Ruane's piece, 'Bathing, Status and Gender in Priestly Ritual', deals with bathing and washing rituals as multi-valent processes concerned with relations and power dynamics (following Catherine Bell). In 'Women in the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha' Ilan offers a vast, comprehensive – it takes up almost a quarter of the whole collection – and indispensable survey of literary women in second temple Jewish literature. Jefferson's essay – 'Genizah Marriage Contracts: Contrasting Biblical Law and Halakhah with Mediaeval Practice' – provides a preliminary but necessary analysis of Palestinian, Kairite and Babylonian marriage contracts from the Cairo Geniza. Jackson's study, 'Gender Critical Observations on Tripartite Breeding Relationships in the Hebrew Bible' surveys the different uses of a third party to breed, whether slave or patriarch. As for Creang in 'The Silenced Songs of Victory: Power, Gender and Memory in the Conquest Narrative of Joshua (Joshua 1-12)' the concern is the non-recording of women's music and performance in Joshua.

Now for the ones that are more interesting. Deborah Sawyer's opening piece – 'Gender Criticism: A New Discipline in Biblical Studies or Feminism in Disguise?' – sets up gender criticism as the central concern of 'third wave' or what she also calls 'postmodern' feminism. After tracing the conventional seaside story of the three waves of feminism, with a brief consideration of womanist challenges to modernist or second-wave feminism, she engages in an interactive reading of Genesis 2-3, where gender comes to the fore. Despite the few comments on male characters, gender refers in Sawyer's essay to women. The main interlocutors are the three French feminists, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, the latter two of whom have actually written on this text. Judith Butler does her usual service as the one who shows that gender is a constructed category and by no means fixed, for which the word 'essentialist' is the moniker. (The only male theorist who makes a brief appearance here is Foucault.) What Sawyer wants is a usable Eve, one who 'presents a competing and subversive counter-discourse' (p. 14), who in the process provides a model of human becoming where the deity and the woman merge in an immanent becoming. As Sawyer concludes, 'On the theological level such a reading of Eve allows for a deity that dares to risk the liberation of his creation, rather than one who knowingly creates a defective, or potentially defective, humanity' (p. 15). Unfortunately, this is a very modernist, 'second-wave' agenda. Even though Sawyer wants to deconstruct the patriarchal Eve who is punished for her transgression, her moment of 'reconstruction' via the idea of human becoming really falls back on the old search for viable female models in the Bible. I can well understand the desire to do so for those within the church, who believe the Bible is in some way sacred scripture and must therefore provide something usable, but it also smoothes over the rough edges of the text and makes it all too palatable.

Deborah Rooke's piece, 'The Bare Facts: Gender and Nakedness in Leviticus 18' is important for what it does not say. Focusing on the incest passages in Deuteronomy 23 and 27, Rooke assumes that incest refers to blood and marriage relations. In a tight and cautious piece, she ends up arguing that women are really pseudo-males in these texts. But there is a glaring omission, signalled by the following: 'incest is constructed not just as an offence or insult against another male but as an actual physical violation of his person. As such incest is a worse crime than (mere) adultery (which is effectively wrongful sex) because it threatens the basic family structures and disrupts the social hierarchy in a more fundamental way than adultery does' (p. 33). Here I want to ask about the other prohibited relations in these lists. For example, in Leviticus 18 beyond blood and marriage we have a woman and her daughter, her son's daughter and daughter's

daughter, two sisters as wives, menstruating women, sacrificed children, men on men, or with animals. Why are these shunted off as not incestuous? In fact, why is incest used as a term at all when the text deals with animals, men, two sisters and so on? It looks all too much like a category mistake.

Carol Myers's essay, 'Contesting the Notion of Patriarchy: Anthropology and the Theorizing of Gender in Ancient Israel', is a blast from another dimension. Resolutely anthropological and archaeological, so much so that she eschews any feminist theory that is not anthropological, her essay is a mix of old and new. Myers reaches back to her earlier arguments from *Discovering Eve* concerning the large role that women played in ancient Israel, so much so that they often dominated men. She also deploys a term – heterarchy – that has been a centrepiece of her work for at least a decade and a half. Both older elements come together to challenge the description of Israelite society as hierarchical; it simply wasn't, she argues with confidence, since there were multiple, horizontally connected power structures. It should come as no surprise that patriarchy too comes under critique. Not content to suggest, as many have, that there were many, complex and overlaid patriarchies, Myers digs the foundations out from beneath patriarchy to argue that it is entirely inadequate. Not a bad argument, really. Yet there are a few snags on the way. To begin with, Myers points out that the Bible is unreliable for any reconstruction (a minimalist moment), but then lets her guard down at odd moments, citing a biblical text or two to support a position. Further, the charge that some approaches to the Bible are anachronistic, developed in 19th and 20th century debates, is special pleading. Are not anthropology and archaeology also modern disciplines applied anachronistically to the Bible? Indeed, does not any approach we use suffer from the same problem? Unfortunately, we still try to kid ourselves that we can get back to what genuinely happened and what people really thought back then. But I do like this essay, mainly because it sides with the theoretical assumption of historical difference rather than similarity: ancient Israel, whatever it was, is simply so different from what we know that we struggle to understand it.

Andrew Angel's piece on Proverbs, 'From Wild Men to Wise and Wicked Women: An Investigation into Male Heterosexuality in Second Temple Interpretations of the Ladies Wisdom and Folly', looks like it is the token acknowledgement of masculinity studies, but then it falls back on a discussion of literary female figures – woman folly and woman stranger from Proverbs whom he promptly rolls into one. To be fair, there is precious little of masculinity studies in biblical criticism, so one essay is better than none. The essay tantalizingly offers the possibility that gender in biblical studies may move out of its feminist confines, but the essay fails to live up to its promise. All Angel does is survey the way three subsequent texts elaborate on Proverbs: Philo's *De sacrificiis Abelis et Caini* 21–28, 4Q184 (or Wiles of the Wicked Woman) and *Sirach* 51.13–21. What I really missed was some troubling of the terms masculine and heterosexual.

Now I may be missing something, but I am not sure that this collection is all that new. There are some bright moments, especially in the contributions by Myers, Rooke and Angel, yet the collection as a whole is not really earth-shattering. The promising lanes all too quickly become cul-de-sacs and half-seen possibilities for something really innovative are just that, half-seen. I would suggest that context is crucial. If this conference had appeared in, for instance, Germany or Denmark, it would have been regarded as jaw-droppingly original. Not so in Norway, the USA, or indeed Canada or Australia, where these issues are by no means new.