

## **Gil Rosenberg, *Ancestral Queerness: The Normal and the Deviant in the Abraham and Sarah Narratives.***

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Gil Rosenberg's *Ancestral Queerness* begins with what he terms a "startling" hypothesis: that "in the face of Genesis's unrelenting straightness... Abraham and Sarah are Queer" (1). While perhaps surprising, this premise places Rosenberg's work within a larger discussion on the boundaries and definition of queerness and queer theory. In his introductory chapter, Rosenberg distinguishes between a conceptualization of queerness as a distinct sexual identity and an analysis of queerness as non-normativity. He then proposes that Abraham and Sarah fit into this second category. They "resist or transgress sexual or gender norms without it being a part of a specific identity" (12). Essentially, Rosenberg's thesis builds on a definition of queer theory offered by Ken Stone: exploring how biblical characters and texts "will sometimes exhibit characteristics that do not align completely with heteronormative presuppositions" (Stone 2013, 157). In his work, Rosenberg challenges the normalization of straightness in Genesis by showing how Abraham and Sarah effectively unsettle traditional heteronormative and ultimately reproductive roles.

One initial problem Rosenberg recognizes is that this expansive definition of queerness may cause the term to "lose some of its potency for political and social transformation" (Rosenberg 2019, 12). To combat this outcome, Rosenberg incorporates Jonathan Z. Smith's comparative method. The comparisons Rosenberg draws between Abraham, Sarah, and the LGBTQ community operate on two distinct levels. On the first level, Rosenberg identifies where Abraham and Sarah diverge from biblical norms. This helps Rosenberg differentiate between a queer sexual identity and a "queerness that does not... have gender transgressions, crossings, or ambiguities as a primary theme" (23). On the second level, Rosenberg juxtaposes Abraham and Sarah with examples taken from the LGBTQ community. Here, Rosenberg emphasizes the similarities and differences between the biblical character's experiences and their potential queer analogues. Ultimately, this twofold approach underscores what Rosenberg terms "queer sociality": how "deviations from... non-sexual norms oppose heteronormativity in a way that complements and parallels sexual deviations" (27-8). He offers this comparison to draw connections between Abraham, Sarah, and the LGBTQ community on the topics of marriage, reproduction, and the formation of familial units.

Chapter two offers one example of this type of queer analysis. Here, Rosenberg compares the wife-sister narratives in Genesis 12 and 20 with LGBTQ families who pass as normative. Accordingly, most of the chapter focuses on the correlation between marriage practices and social norms in both ancient Near Eastern and contemporary contexts. For the biblical accounts, Rosenberg offers a

detailed explanation for Abraham's efforts to conceal his relationship with Sarah. Rather than attributing this decision to Sarah's beauty or the practice of wife-stealing, Rosenberg posits that the marriage between these characters is itself non-normative. Although Rosenberg offers multiple reasons for their so-called deviance, including Abraham's and Sarah's childlessness or their prior familial relationship, the crux of his argument centers on societal stigmatization. Whatever the reason for their deception, Rosenberg maintains that Abraham fears a reprisal for his relationship with Sarah and thus conceals this part of his identity. The social aspect of Abraham's efforts to pass then serves as the basis for a comparison between the biblical couple and contemporary queer families. Rosenberg argues that while "the consequences and... the relationships differ in each case, the basic dynamic of hiding a relationship (or certain aspects of it) to avoid something negative is similar" (47). This assessment helps demonstrate how the concept of queer sociality can expand the conversation around queerness and sexual identity in the field of biblical studies. Still, Rosenberg recognizes some important distinctions between Abraham and Sarah and their queer contemporaries. For instance, he acknowledges that the possible stigmatization of the biblical couple's relationship "is very different from the shame associated with queerness" even if "both are reflections of and help to sustain patriarchy and normative sexualities" (51). These differences help distinguish between Abraham's efforts to pass and the queer groups Rosenberg references.

Chapters three, four, five, and six in *Ancestral Queerness* follow the same basic format as chapter two. Rosenberg analyzes how aspects of Abraham's and Sarah's relationship operate as queer in an ancient Near Eastern context and then offer comparisons with examples taken from the LGBTQ community. Each of these chapters cover different, albeit related, topics that revolve around marriage, reproduction, and childhood inheritance. In these chapters, Rosenberg highlights the various ways Abraham, Sarah, and their modern counterparts respond to normative expectations. For example, in chapter four Rosenberg compares Sarah with queer families who do not have children. His analysis helpfully critiques the terminology around childlessness, demonstrating that "most terms for people who do not have children are inherently negative, portraying a lack rather than representing a positivity or wholeness that many people without children experience" (113). Rosenberg then uses this comparison to redescribe Sarah's character as child-free. His reading critiques the implied pronatalism biblical scholars often reinforce in their interpretations of this passage.

Of course, due to Rosenberg's expansive definition of queerness, some of the chapters also raise questions about the limits of a queer reading of these narratives. In chapter five, Rosenberg uses Edelman's theory of reproductive futurism to suggest that the birth of Sarah's child in Genesis 21 underscores the complete inversion of her queer identity: "If Sarah finds joy through the birth of Isaac, then Isaac's birth can be read in terms of Sarah's assimilation to heteronormativity" (137). This evaluation raises several important issues. Namely, is Sarah still queer after her conception? What does Abraham's and Sarah's normative status after Genesis 21 say about queer sociality? Chapter three further complicates a queer analysis of the texts. Here, Rosenberg compares Abraham's reproductive or heirship strategy in Genesis 16 with contemporary marriage and couplehood practices

among queer families in the United States. By framing these practices as “legitimate... in their respective cultures” (84), Rosenberg argues that they represent efforts to achieve a semblance of normalcy. While helpful, this comparison also raises some questions. Can Abraham’s heirship strategy be considered queer if it is accepted as normal? In what ways do Abraham’s reproductive efforts contest gender norms in the ancient Near East? All these matters complicate Rosenberg’s queer reading of the Abraham and Sarah stories. But they also establish areas for future research on the definition of queerness and the role of queer sociality in the analysis of biblical texts.

In short, Rosenberg’s *Ancestral Queerness* offers a provocative queer reading of the Abraham and Sarah narratives that evaluates their relationship, childless status, and reproductive strategies as non-normative acts. Rosenberg’s work also helps redefines what makes something “queer.” His suggestion that Abraham and Sarah undermine gender normativity by deviating from non-sexual acts broadens the scope of queer biblical scholarship. While I certainly have questions about the full implications of Rosenberg’s analysis, the project certainly speaks to the need for additional work on queer sociality. Ultimately, *Ancestral Queerness* is a thought-provoking work that, at the very least, challenges the assumptions about what makes someone queer in both ancient Near Eastern and contemporary contexts.

## Reference List

Stone, Ken. 2013. “Queer Criticism.” In *New Meanings for Ancient Texts: Recent Approaches to Biblical Criticism and Their Applications*. Edited by Steven L. McKenzie and John Kaltner. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.



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