

Milena Kirova, *Performing Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible*

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Milena Kirova's *Performing Masculinity* adds an interdisciplinary project – “one might call it eclectic,” she acknowledges in the preface – to the rapidly expanding discussion of biblical masculinities. Masculinity studies emerged within the field of Hebrew Bible¹ roughly 25 years ago, with a brief wave of studies published in the mid-1990s. The most influential of these was David Clines's “David the Man,” which, through literary analysis of the David story, produced a list of key characteristics of biblical masculinity. Subsequent studies in the early 2000s followed in Clines's example, analyzing other important biblical men and debating and refining his list of masculine traits. More recent approaches have adopted theoretical frameworks from the fields of masculinity and gender. The most important of these is sociologist Raewyn Connell's hegemonic masculinity, which has shifted the discussion away from enumerating traits of “the” biblical masculinity and toward analyzing multiple masculinities within the context of gendered power.

In *Performing Masculinity*, Kirova introduces the concept of hegemonic masculinity only to express skepticism about its applicability to ancient cultural contexts. Nor does *Performing Masculinity*, despite its title, engage Judith Butler's concept of gender as performative. Instead, the book draws on Kirova's strengths as a literary critic to analyze masculine traits and roles in the Hebrew Bible, particularly those that contemporary Western readers might fail to recognize as masculine. This literary, trait-based approach follows in the tradition of Clines's “David the Man,” as does Kirova's focus on David as a paragon of biblical masculinity. Yet for Kirova, the trait-based approach leads to a list of conflicting features, rather than a straightforward description of normative masculinity.

Performing Masculinity grew out of two Bulgarian-language volumes, *David the Great: History and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible Book 1* (2011) and *The Heroic Body: History and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible Book 2* (2017). The first chapter opens with a concept to which Kirova returns throughout the book: that humans, particularly men, are created in the image and likeness of God. Kirova connects this to the Bible's many regulations concerning the human body, in particular those for priests and Levites, and concludes that the perfection of the human body reflects the perfect image and likeness of God. The second chapter demonstrates that one aspect of that perfection was male beauty, with attributes both particular to men (e.g. beards, large statures) and not (e.g., long hair, jewelry). Male beauty has been part of the discussion of biblical masculinity since “David the Man;” here Kirova connects it to the divine, concluding, “men could frankly be beautiful; after all, the first and greatest example of beauty was not a woman, it was God.” (42)

Chapter three moves from the theme of perfection to the motif of the youngest brother. It starts with true youngest brothers (David, Isaac, Moses) and moves on to other unlikely leaders, such as the reluctant prophet or king. A pattern of self-

¹ New Testament scholarship on masculinity had a different trajectory, since it benefitted from the large body of existing work on Greek and Roman masculinities.

effacing male leaders emerges, and Kirova concludes that for the Deuteronomist, at least, the chosen male is one who skillfully demonstrates his own insignificance. Returning to the theme of perfecting the male body, chapter four takes up the symbolism of circumcision. It includes a wide-ranging literary analysis and an anthropological discussion of its significance in the postexilic period. The concluding claim that circumcision “domesticates the fathers, repressing their aggressiveness” (92) is somewhat surprising, as the chapter provides no context for why readers might think that fathers are categorically aggressive or require domestication. This is one of several places where the book uncritically relies on essentialist notions of gender; see also the unexplained characterization of tender parental care (by men) as “maternal” behavior indicative of “female” qualities (113).

Chapters five through nine each focus on a different aspect of David’s portrayal: his roles as a shepherd and a bandit, his public weeping, his lack of a reputation as a builder, and his old age. Part of Kirova’s interest in exploring these topics is that they add complexity to the list of masculine traits that Clines developed in “David the Man.” Shepherding “was associated with peace and serenity rather than with a warlike and aggressive attitude.” (112) Banditry involves cruelty and treachery, while weeping evokes empathy and mercy. Old age, though respected as a sign of God’s blessing, is also associated with declining strength and ability. This increasingly complex compilation of masculine traits underscores what appear to be the volume’s two central theses. The first of these is that in the Hebrew Bible all men, “heroic or not, powerful or weak, have come into being after the ‘image and likeness’ of God.” (163) The second is that divine (and therefore human) masculinity includes many conflicting features, making “normative” masculinity much more complex than a simple list of traits. God thus contains a multitude of contradictory traits, while David, as the “closest prototype” (162) to the divine image, possesses the greatest combination found in a biblical man.

At this point one might expect *Performing Masculinity* to employ hegemonic masculinity as a resource for contextualizing these dynamics; after all, Connell says that hegemonic masculinity is often maintained through contradictory strategies and modeled through larger-than-life figures (such as, say, a deity or mythic king). Here, however, Kirova rejects hegemonic masculinity as a framework for analyzing biblical masculinities. Operating under the idea that “the main figures of biblical narratives – patriarchs, kings and prophets – should be assumed to belong in hegemonic masculinity” (150), Kirova argues that the great variety of masculine traits this assembles is too large and varied to fit into the “ideology and terminology” of hegemonic masculinity. (162-163)

Kirova raises an important note of caution about the risks in applying concepts developed “to define the new gender situation in the postmodern world” (150) to ancient texts. It is fair to question whether the framework works as well for analyzing masculinities in the Hebrew Bible as it did when Connell was reporting on field studies of Australian teenagers in the 1980s, and a healthy topic for debate with those who, like myself, find hegemonic masculinity to be a fruitful concept for our work. That being said, hegemonic masculinity is not “the” amalgamation of traits observed across “all” dominant, powerful, or influential men. It offers, instead, a framework that analyzes masculinities, plural, within the context of gendered power. In order to employ the concept, one must name and explain the mechanisms that *legitimate* and *perpetuate* unequal gender relations between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities. The way hegemonic

masculinity is misconstrued in *Performing Masculinity* is unfortunately common; see James Messerschmidt's discussion of how scholars across disciplines have misunderstood the concept in similar ways.

Biblical scholars will continue to debate which critical frameworks from masculinity studies best aid us in the project of understanding gender in the Hebrew Bible. In the meantime, *Performing Masculinity* contributes to the ongoing project of challenging our assumptions about what Biblical authors considered "masculine."

Reference List

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