



Journal of Religion & Society

Supplement Series

The Kripke Center

Supplement 13 (2016)

Religion and Identity

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins and Thomas M. Kelly

2. Gender and Identity in Biblical Israel

Ronald A. Simkins, Creighton University

Abstract

Gender, which is a fundamental aspect of identity, in biblical Israel is an expression of power in a hierarchical relationship. It signifies the power differential that results from the different roles that men and women have in procreation, as culturally understood through the metaphor of agriculture. The husband was the dominant, ruling member because he possessed the seed necessary for procreation, whereas the wife was dependent upon his seed to fulfill her primary social role. In other social relations, however, a man or woman might take on different gendered roles depending on the circumstances, giving rise to various gender ambiguities, where men and women behave or are treated contrary to the expectations of gender. In their relationship to YHWH, for example, the Israelite men always take on the female, subordinate role. In this gendered relationship, YHWH has all the power and Israel is wholly dependent on him, and thus YHWH, the consummate male, may take the men of Israel as his wife.

Keywords: gender, identity, patriarchy, hierarchy, procreation, biblical Israel

Sex, Gender, and Performance

Beginning in the social sciences, identity has become a prominent category of analysis for many disciplines, including the humanities, but it is also a category of practice that designates the processes by which one forms a self-understanding (on its utility, see Brubaker and Cooper). Whether the focus of identity is on the individual or the collective, or the analysis is of symbolic valuations, social behavior, or public discourse, a fundamental aspect of identity is gender (see Cerulo). As Judith Butler notes, “. . . ‘persons’ only become intelligible,” that is, express an identity or self-understanding, “through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (2006: 22). Moreover, gender and identity are performative rather than substantive, and their relationship is dialectical. Although one’s identity or connectedness to others may encompass much more than gender – and in the context of this volume the focus is on religious identity, of which gender is but a part – identity at its base is constituted performatively by the very expressions of gender that seem to result from it. All of this, of course, expresses a rather recent understanding.

Understanding the construction of gender has a notable history over the past few decades (see Scott 1986; Moore: 12-30). Previously, scholars defined gender as the culturally specific patterns that are imposed on the biological differences of sex. The biological distinction between male and female was assumed to be a natural, given trait of all persons, whereas gender was an identity that was culturally assigned, based on one’s sex, and into which one was socialized. Thus, according to Simone de Beauvoir, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (301; see Butler 1986). The same could be said of a man.

Although this distinction between a biologically-given sex and a culturally constructed gender proved useful – for example, in reconciling the culturally diverse expressions of gender and a universal gender asymmetry (see Ortner 1989-90) – the distinction could not be sustained, neither empirically nor theoretically. At the empirical level, the distinction between sex and gender assumes that, biologically, the world displays a clear sexual dimorphism, populated by distinct males and females. But biological sex turns out not to be as binary as the distinction assumes. Rather than occurring as a sexual dimorphism, male and female forms are simply the end points on a continuum of intersexual human forms, with the male pseudo-hermaphrodite, the true hermaphrodite, and the female pseudo-hermaphrodite being the most recognizable (see Fausto-Sterling). Moreover, at the level of sex chromosomes, which presumably determine biological sex, over 70 combinations have been detected (Gudorf: 4). Sex determination – whether someone is a male or female – turns out to be an effect of gender (see also Hood-Williams).

At the theoretical level, the distinction between biological sex and constructed gender suggests the possibility of a radical discontinuity that does not seem to play out in the real world. At most, biological sex only supplies “a suggestive and ambiguous backdrop to the cultural organization of gender” (Ortner and Whitehead: 1), yet biological males are usually associated with masculine concepts of gender and biological females with feminine concepts of gender. This is unexpected, given that the cultural construction of gender would seem to sever any necessary link between a given sex and a particular gender. “When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-

floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler 2006: 9). But such is not the case. Instead, given that sex turns out to be an effect of gender, the cultural construction of gender, in relation to sex, is dialectical: one becomes a gender within the constraints of the deeply-held, cultural norms of gender (Butler 1986).

Rather than understanding gender as a cultural construction of biological sex, gender is better understood to be the discursive origin of sex and to be performatively produced – “that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be” (Butler 2006: 34). Gender is not an essence or substance, but a series of acts that produce the effect of an identity, or a self-understanding, which gives the appearance of a natural state of being. Gender is always a doing; it is generative in compelling certain kinds of behavior, and concealing through its naturalization in the context of the body (Morris: 573).¹

The performative constitution of gender is best discerned at the margins where gender behavior seems ambiguous or even contradictory. In the majority of cases, men and women conform to the culturally determined, normative gender expectations, which reinforce the naturalization of gender and mask the organizing schemes, or logically-structured worldview assumptions (see Kearney: 41-64), of gender behavior. Seemingly ambiguous or contradictory gender behavior, however, does not conform to what is expected naturally – that is, one’s gender behavior does not seem to fit one’s gender identification – and thus enables insight beneath the process of naturalization. In the biblical tradition, such marginal cases are evident when men are represented like women, or when women are represented like or are representative of men.² For example, Israelite men, in several prophetic texts, are collectively represented as the wife of YHWH, and biblical women such as Deborah, Jael, and Judith behave like men, whereas women like Hannah and the prostitutes who petition Solomon are representative of men. In all of these cases, the gender behavior of the characters is either unexpected or unexpectedly valued in relation to the gender norms of biblical Israel. This gender ambiguity provides a window into the organizational schemes of Israelite gender and a means by which to understand how gender in biblical Israel was performatively constituted.

¹ Although gender differences are the basis for defining sexual differences, especially in ambiguous biological cases, it is through the physical sexual differences that the gender differences themselves are naturalized. Maurice Godelier recognized this dialectical relationship between sex and gender long before the “post-constructionist” treatment of gender, as typified by Butler: “Sex-related differences between bodies are continually summoned as testimony to social relations and phenomena that have nothing to do with sexuality. Not only as testimony to, but also testimony for – in other words, as legitimation” (17).

² More broadly in the ancient Near East, this type of gender ambiguity may be evidence of third and perhaps even fourth gender individuals (see the discussion of McCaffrey). In the biblical tradition, however, examples of this type of gender ambiguity are contextually determined and do not form what may be interpreted as an essential understanding of gender (cf. Asher-Greve). In the biblical tradition, there is little evidence of a third gender, other than perhaps a few references to the eunuch. On the problem of the eunuch in the biblical tradition, see Lemos.

Neutral Gender?

The late Tikva Frymer-Kensky addressed these and other cases of gender ambiguity in two important volumes (1992, 2002) and reached a rather unconventional conclusion that needs to be considered in this context. Distinguishing the biblical portrayal of women from the lives of actual women in ancient Israel and Judah, she notes that there is nothing distinctly female about the way women are portrayed in the Bible, nor are the goals and strategies of women distinctly feminine – they are shared by men. She acknowledges that women in biblical Israel are socially subordinate to men, but without being essentially inferior. She concludes: “The Bible presents no characteristics of human behavior as ‘female’ or ‘male,’ no division of attributes between the poles of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine,’ no hint of distinctions of such polarities as male aggressivity–female receptivity, male out-thrusting–female containment, male subjecthood–female objecthood, . . . or any other polarities by which we are accustomed to think of gender distinctions” (1992: 141). According to Frymer-Kensky, Israel had a unique gender-neutral ideology, based on the ontological parity of all humans, and the examples of gender ambiguity are made possible because of the dissonance between this gender ideology and the Bible’s patriarchal social structure.

Although insightful in recognizing the ontological parity between men and women in the Bible, Frymer-Kensky’s conception of the Bible’s anthropology as gender-neutral (or gender-blind) is problematic. Some characteristics of human behavior are presented as either male or female – namely, those involved with procreation. Men have “seed” and thus rule over the process of procreation, whereas women are dependent on such “seed” to fulfill their purpose of bearing children. Numerous biblical laws seem designed to protect or reinforce this very distinction between men and women.³ Frymer-Kensky acknowledges that men and women have different social roles in the biblical tradition, but this is not significant for her interpretation. She claims, for example, “gender is a matter of biology and social roles, it is not a question of basic nature or identity” (1992: 141), and then, “the differences between male and female are only a question of genitalia rather than of character” (1992: 142). Frymer-Kensky seems to view gender as social and biological traits that adhere to, and even distort, the essential human character. But such human character is only evident through the action and discourse of gendered human beings, and differently gendered human beings may express the same character or basic human nature without diminishing the significance of their gender. Frymer-Kensky’s understanding of gender and identity seems to be governed by polar and essentialist assumptions. Her distinction between a

³ See especially the laws in Leviticus 18 that define women in terms of the nakedness of a man and regulate the man’s sexual activity. The concern in these laws is not simply incest, but also the preservation or proper use of a man’s seed. Thus, when a man has sexual relations with a kinsman’s wife – “copulates for seed” (v. 20) – the preservation of his seed becomes confused with his kinsman’s seed (see Milgrom: 1567; Eilberg-Schwartz: 183). Similarly, when a man has sexual relations with a menstruating woman – “uncovers her nakedness” (v. 19) – his seed is wasted. In Leviticus 15, the impurity that results from ejaculation and menstruation are taken up in great detail. Although the priestly treatment of these two impurities are parallel, here as elsewhere the male-produced impurity is less severe than the female-produced impurity. Nicole Ruane argues that the prohibition against intercourse with a menstruating woman is to avoid the mixing of male and female impurities and so keeps the male and female genders distinct (181-83).

socially constructed gender and an essentially-given identity is simply mistaken. One cannot explain the biblical cases of gender ambiguity by removing gender from the problem.

Normative Israelite Gender

The normative gender roles of the Israelites are nowhere explicitly articulated in the biblical tradition, but expressions of these roles are found in abundance and are commonly characterized as patriarchal. Although a so-called patriarchal gender asymmetry is evident in every ancient historical society and can be found in some form in many, if not all, modern societies (cf. Ortner 1974), the concept of patriarchy is too universalizing to be useful for analysis. It leaves undisclosed the workings of gender and the articulation of gender asymmetry in specific cultural contexts (Butler 2006: 5-6; Meyers: 24-46). In order to understand the normative gender roles of biblical Israel, we must explore the assumptions and structures that underlie the expressions of gender in the biblical texts, and there is no better place to start this analysis than with the so-called Yahwist creation myth in Genesis 2-3, where a prominent purpose of the myth is to inaugurate and naturalize the gender roles of the first human couple (see more fully, Simkins 1998).

The Yahwist creation myth, like all myths, is a sacred and symbolic story that encodes, generally through metaphors, the fundamental assumptions and values of the culture. Through a series of word plays and a rite of passage, the Yahwist myth builds a metaphor between procreation and agriculture and compares the husband's role to the farmer who tills the arable land and "plants seed" within the woman, and the wife's role to the arable land that is "sown" and brings forth new life. In the biblical tradition, as in the ancient Near East generally (see Asher-Greve: 16), gender is defined by one's role in procreation.

The myth begins with YHWH forming the male human (*'adam*) out of the dirt of the female arable land (*'adama*) in order to work the land to produce pasturage and field crops, along with YHWH's contribution of rain.⁴ Although the focus seems largely agricultural, the biblical scribes draw upon metaphors associated with pregnancy and birth to suggest that the *'adam* is fashioned in the womb of the *'adama*, and is then delivered from the womb by God who acts as a midwife. The forming of humans out of dirt or clay, which is the predominant metaphor for human creation in the Near East, is a metaphor for the process of gestation, requiring the work of gods, and may be compared to the work of a potter: YHWH fashions the *'adam* in the womb of the *'adama* – as God fashions all fetuses within the wombs of women (see Psalm 139:13, 15) – just as a potter fashions an elegant vessel from a lump of clay. The first act (2:4b-17) ends with YHWH separating the *'adam* from the *'adama* and placing him in the garden to tend it.

In the second act of the myth (2:18-25), YHWH makes a suitable helper for the *'adam* so that he is not alone. Unable to create a new creature out of the arable land that is suitable for

⁴ Phyllis Trible has argued that the first human, *'adam*, was created sexually undifferentiated and remains so until God creates a new creature from the *'adam*, resulting in the sexually differentiated pair *'is* and *'isša* (75-105). And her argument is correct to a point. What her argument does not address is the prior differentiation between *'adam* and *'adama*, which is cast in gendered terms, and that this differentiation becomes the precedent for the differentiation between *'is* and *'isša*. Moreover, after the differentiation between *'is* and *'isša*, the male human continues to be designated at *'adam*.

the *'adam*, YHWH builds a woman from a piece of the man's body. When YHWH brings the new creature to the *'adam*, he immediately recognizes that she is suitable for him: she is bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh. Moreover, she is *'iššā* because she was taken from *'iš*, paralleling and reversing the relationship between *'adam* and *'adama*. The terms *'iš* and *'iššā* are gendered social terms that refer in this context to husband and wife, and thus the myth provides an explanation for marriage. But the gender roles of the *'iš* and *'iššā* are not stated. Instead, the human couple exists in a liminal state: the man and his wife are naked, but feel no shame. They are like the animals with no sexual awareness, but they are not simply animals. Although sharing a common origin in the *'adama*, the many animals created by God are not suitable for the *'adam*, nor are the man and his wife fully gendered humans.

In the final two acts of the myth (3:1-7, 8-24), the human couple is transformed through a rite of passage and then, as YHWH explains the consequences of their transformation, they are reintegrated into life in the *'adama* as gendered human beings. The catalyst for the human couple's transformation, of course, is the eating of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. Once they eat the fruit, the man and his wife's eyes are opened; they become sexually aware with their newly found knowledge and cover themselves. With knowledge, the man and his wife are now different from the animals, and their relationship will be characterized by enmity. The woman for her part will now bear children, and the man will work the arable land, for which he was created. The myth ends with God clothing the man and his wife as a symbol of their new gendered status. The woman takes over the procreative role of the *'adama*. No longer will creatures be born from the arable land; as her name indicates, Eve will be the mother of all living. And the man, along with his wife, is sent from the garden to work the *'adama*, in which he was formed and for which he was created.

The Yahwist creation myth presents the normative gender roles of Israelite men and women in terms of the complementary relationship of male farmers and female child bearers. By structuring the story through the parallel relationships of *'adam* and *'adama* and *'iš* and *'iššā*, the Yahwist scribes create a metaphor between agriculture and procreation to articulate the fundamental gendered roles of men and women: just as a man tills and sows the arable land to produce his crops, so the husband sows his seed in his wife to produce children; similarly, the wife, like the arable land, receives and nurtures the seed until it is delivered and born from her body, just as vegetation sprouts from the land.

Israelite men and women, of course, do much more in the biblical tradition than till and sow seed and bear children, but as presented through a creation myth, these gendered aspects of their social roles are only symbolic of the more complex social roles of men and women lived in daily life. The man's seed sowing and the woman's child bearing are representative and generative of male and female gender roles, but more importantly, they naturalize the gender roles in the context of the male and female body. Their gender roles are linked to cultural understandings of their bodies, which were created by God. But their gender roles are not simply rooted in biology; they are not, according to earlier conceptions of gender, a cultural construction built on the biological differences between men and women. Rather, as an effect of gender, the Israelites' conception of their biological differences is rooted in the worldview assumptions that organize and structure the asymmetrical gender behavior of men and women. And these worldview assumptions enable

and make intelligible the numerous cases of gender ambiguity (on worldview theory, see Kearney).

Gender in the Israelite Worldview

Worldview assumptions are tacit and rarely articulated; they generally operate beneath the surface of linguistic expressions and social behavior and thus must be inferred. We rarely articulate, for example, what it means to be “male” or “female”; we simply speak and act according to culturally shared assumptions that we have learned, reproduced, and sometimes reified. Fortunately, the mythic character of the Yahwist creation story and its focus on gender relations brings some of these assumptions to the surface of the narrative. For example, in the gendered relationship between the *'adam* and the *'adama*, the myth emphasizes that the female *'adama* is dependent upon the work of the male *'adam* to produce vegetation. Without the man working the arable land through tilling and sowing, the land would remain barren, lacking pasturage and field crops. The man supplies, in part, what the arable land lacks: tilling and sowing. It was for this work, the text suggests, that the *'adam* was created. The man, for his part, is bound to the arable land. He was created from the land, and when he dies he will return to the land. He is also dependent on the arable land to produce the crops for his subsistence, but the myth masks this dependency by YHWH planting the garden; only the land's dependency on the man is emphasized.⁵ The creation of the *'adam* from the *'adama* establishes a gendered relationship between them, but the dependency of the *'adama* on the *'adam* defines the relationship.

Similarly, the creation of the woman from the man, the *'išša* from the *'iṣ*, as a suitable helper establishes the gendered relationship between the man and woman, as husband and wife, but it does not define the relationship. Instead, after the human couple eats the fruit of knowledge, YHWH articulates how their newly-acquired knowledge defines the relationship between them. Speaking to the woman, YHWH states: “. . . your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16). Given this translation and the context of procreation in which it is stated, the text would mean something like the following: Although the woman's child bearing will be painful, she will nevertheless desire to have children with her husband, but he will have control over the process because he possesses the necessary seed. According to this interpretation, the wife is dependent on her husband in the same way that the arable land is dependent on the man: both require the seed and the work of the man.

Although the meaning of YHWH's statement to the woman seems clear from the context, this interpretation is nevertheless problematic. At a semantic level, the woman's desire (*tešūqa*) does not denote “dependency” but perhaps a sexual longing, which does not seem to be an appropriate counter-point to the man's rule (*mašal*). Moreover, the meaning of *tešūqa*, which is translated “desire,” is itself doubtful. It is a rare term – it only occurs in Genesis 3:16, 4:7, and in Song of Songs 7:10 – with an uncertain etymology. The term is usually compared to Arabic *šāqa*, which means, “to desire” or “to excite desire,” but

⁵ Outside of the Yahwist creation myth, the man's dependency on the land is transferred to YHWH, who owns the land (Leviticus 25:23), gives it to his people (Exodus 6:8), and rains upon it so that it is fertile and fruitful (Deuteronomy 11:11-14); Israel's relationship to YHWH in covenant determines Israel's relationship to the land.

philologically it should be connected to Arabic *saqa*, meaning, “to urge, drive, impel.” Thus, *tešūqa* may instead mean “impulse” or “urge,” and in relation to the husband’s *mašal*, it may have the sense of “dedication” or “dependency” – a meaning that also fits the other two uses of *tešūqa* (see Deurloo). Rather than address the woman’s desire for sexual relations with her husband, YHWH’s pronouncement to the woman articulates her dependency on the man (see further, Simkins 2009: 47-55).⁶ *Tešūqa* is an active rather than a passive dependency; it is the woman’s urge or impulse toward her husband. It is an action, rather than a state of being, which is expressed through deference or submission to her husband’s rule. The husband’s rule (*mašal*) similarly emphasizes the process of ruling, governing, or even managing, rather than being a ruler. It is a relative term, expressing one’s relationship to another, and is used of God, the king, or the chief servant of a house. In relation to his wife, the man rules by supplying what the woman needs for procreation – namely, his seed (on the role of “seed” in procreation, see Levine) – but his rule is not necessarily limited to procreation. Like his relationship to the *’adama*, the man, as *’iš*, is bound to his wife, the *’išša*: he becomes one flesh with his wife in marriage. He is also dependent on his wife in the same way that he is dependent on the *’adama*; he needs his wife in order to realize the future of his seed. But as with his former dependency, the myth conceals this dependency by emphasizing not his fathering of children but his working of the land.⁷ Together, *tešūqa* and *mašal* define the asymmetrical gendered relationship between the husband and the wife, which is parallel to and builds upon the relationship between the man and the arable land.

Gendered Hierarchy and Gender Ambiguity

Based on inferences from the Yahwist creation myth, the worldview assumptions that underlie the Israelites’ understanding of gender form the image of a bounded, hierarchical relationship in which the subordinate member depends on a dominant member who governs the subordinate. The dependency of the subordinate is based on a deficiency that the dominant member can supply. Although both members are dependent on and benefit from the relationship, the assumptions seem to express only the asymmetrical dependency of the subordinate. This hierarchical image has its origin in the experience of agriculture and procreation, and it functions within the Israelite worldview to organize and structure gender behavior. However, it is not limited to gender. As part of the fundamental assumptions in the Israelite worldview, this hierarchical image should be expected to organize and structure the people’s perception of other similar hierarchical relationships (see Kearney: 52-64; cf. Gilmore), such as the relationship between kings and their people, patrons and their clients, empires and their vassal nations, and YHWH and his people Israel. In other words, gender in biblical Israel is not an expression of the biological differences between males and females, but is a constitutive element of multiple social relationships “within which or by means of which power is articulated” (see Scott 1986: 1066-70) and is legitimated, or naturalized, by

⁶ The use of *tešūqa* in Song of Songs 7:10 would then emphasize the mutual dependency between the beloved and his lover: “I belong to my beloved, and his dependency is on me.”

⁷ Outside of the Yahwist creation myth, the man’s dependency on the woman is also transferred to YHWH, who opens and closes wombs (Genesis 16:2; 25:21; 29:31; 30:2, 17, 22). In other words, rather than emphasizing the man’s mutual dependency on both the land and the woman, the biblical tradition indicates that the man’s ability to work the land and impregnate his wife is dependent on YHWH.

the culturally perceived differences between men and women. The gender ambiguities highlighted previously arise when the social relationships of power involve men and women in roles contrary to the social expectation of their roles in the husband-wife relationship.

For example, in several prophetic texts (Hosea 2, Jeremiah 2–3, Ezekiel 16, 23), the relationship between YHWH and his people is gendered so that YHWH is represented as a husband and the people of Israel or Judah (Samaria or Jerusalem) are represented as YHWH's wife. Generally, the metaphor is used to emphasize how the people have abandoned YHWH for other gods, as a wife commits adultery in her pursuit of other lovers. Although the metaphor is persuasive in emphasizing the severity of the people's sins – what Israelite husband would not be enraged at his wife's adultery? – the metaphor will not work unless the largely male audience of the texts can identify with being the female wife of YHWH. Without the Israelite men's recognition and acceptance that they are indeed like women in relation to YHWH, the metaphor rings hollow or is at least irrelevant. Because gender is not rooted in biological differences, but rather because the Israelites' understanding of their biological differences and their gender behavior are both expressions of their gendered hierarchical worldview, Israelite men can identify with being the wife of YHWH: Israelite men, through covenant, are bound to and dependent upon YHWH, who rules over them. Because of the shared hierarchical image that defines the gendered relationship between husbands and wives and between YHWH and his people, Israelite men will identify with husbands in one relationship and with a wife in the other.

In a similar way, the relationship between a king and his people is like the relationship between a husband and his wife. Thus, in the story of Solomon and the two prostitutes who fight over a child (1 Kings 3:16-28), which functions in the larger narrative to illustrate the wisdom of Solomon in ruling his people, Solomon takes on the role of a husband in restoring order to the lives of the prostitutes, who are representative of an unruly people, primarily Israelite men, without a king. A political relationship that is frequently represented in the biblical tradition, however, is between the people of Israel and a foreign king who oppresses them. This exploitive relationship is a distortion of Israel's gendered hierarchical image. Nevertheless, in such exploitive situations, women who prevail, usually with the help of YHWH, are held up as models for the Israelite men in their own struggles. For example, the barren Hannah was provoked severely by her rival, fertile wife Peninnah for years because she was barren, but when YHWH finally gives Hannah a child, her victory over Peninnah is presented as a victory for Israelite men who have suffered similarly under oppression:

The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn . . .

[The LORD] raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts up the needy from the ash heap,

to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor (1 Samuel 2: 5, 8).

Because gender is an expression of a social hierarchy, a relationship of power, rather than biology, Israelite men can identify with women who are powerless and with whom they share the same position within the hierarchy.

It is less problematic in the biblical narrative when a woman acts like a man, for such behavior shares rather than challenges the hierarchically dominant gender behavior of men. Thus, Deborah can serve as a judge for the Israelites and lead them into battle, and Judith, through the cunning and deceit of the powerless, can behead the general Holofernes, causing panic and flight among his troops, so that the Israelites are victorious in battle.

Similarly, though seemingly in a rather mundane way, Jael, in the absence of her husband, can offer hospitality and protection to a fleeing Sisera, an ally of her husband's clan. In this case, however, the relationship between Jael and Sisera goes awry when he begins making demands on her. In offering hospitality to Sisera, Jael takes the dominant, generally male, position in the relationship and she would expect Sisera to assume the subordinate, generally female, position, as was appropriate and customary for guests. But Sisera acts otherwise. Perhaps because he is a man in relation to a woman, or a general who does not want to be reminded of his own shameful defeat, he nevertheless asserts himself into the dominant role of the relationship. He refuses to relinquish his position of power. As the general of the oppressive King Jabin, Sisera was used to dominating over others and, as his mother attests, to raping women (Judges 5:30). By giving orders to Jael, Sisera ceased acting like a guest and retained his identity of a general and perhaps a rapist. Although the narrative in Judges 4 is silent on this matter, the parallel poetic account in Judges 5 implies with double entendre that Sisera was positioned over against Jael when she struck him dead (5:25-27). At the very least, when Sisera insisted on his position as a man in relation to Jael, he posed a threat to her and she killed him for it. The male commander of the Israelite militia, Barak, defeated and slaughtered the Canaanite army with the help of YHWH, yet it is the female Jael who is praised by the biblical scribes. She is a model for all Israelite men: "Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed" (Judges 5:24). Like the Israelites who were oppressed by King Jabin, Jael was forced into the subordinate position by Sisera, but she refused to let him oppress her. With tent peg and mallet in hand, she struck a blow for a subjugated and oppressed Israel.

Gender in biblical Israel is an expression of power in a hierarchical relationship. It signifies the power differential that results from the different roles that men and women have in procreation, as culturally understood through the metaphor of agriculture. The most prominent and fundamental relationship was between husbands and wives, where the husband was the dominant, ruling member because he possessed the seed necessary for procreation, whereas the wife was dependent upon his seed to fulfill her primary social role. Gender is also contextual and varies according to the social relationship that it signifies. Thus, in other social relations, a man or woman might take on different gendered roles depending on the circumstances – whether it be a patron or a client, a host or a guest, the king or his people, a foreign conqueror or an oppressed people – giving rise to various gender ambiguities. In their relationship to YHWH, however, the Israelite men always take on the female, subordinate role. In this relationship, YHWH has all the power and Israel is wholly dependent on him, and thus YHWH, the consummate male, may take the men of Israel as his wife.

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