Rooke, Deborah W., ed.

*A Question of Sex? Gender and Difference in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*

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This collection emerges from a conference held in King’s College London in the summer of 2006 and its structure reproduces the structure of the conference (Rooke, vii–viii). Thus, the contributions are organized under four headings.

Part 1, “Methodological Considerations” (2–17), offers one article on gender criticism as applicable or as it should be applied to biblical criticism, by Deborah Sawyer. I shall come back to this article later.

Part 2, “Gender in Law and Ritual” (20–81), has four contributions, three of which focus on “sexual” matters. Deborah Rooke, the volume editor, writes on gender and nakedness in Lev 18. She concludes that females forbidden to males in this corpus are characterized as “pseudo-males,” thus dangerous for gender categorization. Bernard Jackson discusses “tripartite breeding relationships,” that is, the arrangement whereby two household members reproduce for the benefit of a third member, in the cases of female and male Hebrew slaves, foreign female captives, foreign slaves used as surrogates, and a patriarch. Amy Kalmanofsky writes about gender and praying in Lamentations; she points out similarities and differences between the Daughter of Zion’s prayer and that of the textual “man” (עֵוַּי), to conclude that the two perspectives—the female’s, in order to save her
children’ the male’s, in order to save himself—are complementary. Nicole Ruane writes on laundring and bathing, status and gender in Priestly ritual. She illustrates how cleansing rituals may produce status and power, in support of gender ideologies. She points out that the Priestly code does not prescribe bathing for characteristic female “impurities” (menstruation, childbirth, illness), in contrast to later rabbinic law.

Part 3, “Ethnological and Anthropological Approaches to Gender” (84–123), has two contributions. Carol Meyers discusses the theorizing of patriarchy and gender in ancient Israel in the light of anthropology. She rejects the hierarchy or complementarity models as inadequate. Instead, she advocates the adoption of the “heterarchy” model, that is, a multiple-node social structure laterally connected. Such a model for describing “ancient Israel” would, in Meyers’s opinion, do more justice to the complex mesh of vertical and horizontal relationships obtainable in its social structures. Ovidiu Creanga queries the lack of (gendered) victory songs in Joshua, which, indeed, is astounding, given the space in that book allocated to stories of military conquest, on the one hand, and the strong biblical tradition of female victory singing, on the other. She concludes that this lack, or gap, constitutes a marginalization of women and their cultural production in favor of male military culture and, particularly, Joshua’s leadership. This, claims Creanga, is manipulated or constructed memories.

Part 4, “Gender in Post-biblical Literature” (126–73), has three contributions. Tal Ilan reviews women in the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and other literatures of early Judaism (Philo, Josephus, Qumran). She begins by defining her corpus in order to anchor it in the Second Temple period, pointing to the methodological difficulties of so doing. She concludes that these literatures provide “a bridge” for understanding Jewish women’s history “between the first Jewish scripture, namely, the Bible, and the second one, namely, the Mishnah and Talmud” (141). Andrew Angel writes on male heterosexuality in interpretations of Lady Wisdom and Folly in Philo, Ben Sira, and 4Q184. His starting point is the contemporary construction of masculinity as the “new man”: wily, energetic, sexual, aggressive. Since the “implied reader of Proverbs 1–9 is a young man” (147), the depiction of Wisdom and Folly/the Strange woman as sexual objects may yield profiles of male heterosexuality as constructed in the biblical source (Prov 1–9) and its retellings, each in its fashion. Finally, Rebecca Jefferson writes on biblical law and marriage contracts from the Cairo Genizah. Having examined the documents, she concludes that the contractual clauses in them are probably motivated by economic reasons, the wish to make divorce more difficult, local customs, and a sense of partnership imported from nonmarriage contracts. In this practice, according to her and following Epstein, the rabbinic precept that any agreement between husband and wife is allowed as long as it is legal and not contrary to biblical law or public interest is followed.
A list of contributors, index of references, and index of authors (each article has its own bibliography) are provided.

This reviewer finds all the articles collected worthy and interesting, although for different reasons, of course. My pleasure in reading Creanga’s article stems from recognizing its freshness, although I find it a little short on basic “memory” literature (e.g., Aleida Assmann, Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses [Munich: Beck, 1999], and her “Memory” entry in The Brill Dictionary of Religion 3:1212-18); Tal Ilan’s typical erudition, energy, and straight-forwardness is also on display. These are but two examples, not intended as a belittling of other articles.

The question remains, however, whether the collection stands as such, a cohesive collection rather than an anthology, beyond of its representation of a successful conference, and whether its message exceeds individual articles’ worth into the realm of a cumulative, value-added methodological tapestry.

Rooke defines the original conference’s raison d’être as the wish to “meet the perceived need for a UK-based arena in which to explore how an awareness of gender critical issues might impinge upon study of the Hebrew Bible and associated literatures”; publication was undertaken to meet this demand (vii). So far so good: this seems reasonable and timely. Further, it would not be fair to expect one conference to give a full or fuller picture of an ongoing project. (A follow-up conference is planned for August 2008.) What puzzles me is the demarcation line drawn between feminist bible criticism and “gender criticism” as practiced in this conference/book. My bewilderment is extended especially to Sawyer’s contribution, which is introduced under the heading “Methodological Considerations” (see above).

Two quotes from Sawyer’s article will perhaps explain. She writes, “The analysis of gender construction is vital to understanding the ways in which the themes of biblical texts often interact … within the canon, where the given gender behavioural patterns in one text are challenged in another” (8). Later, as a final paragraph, she adds, “This is why reading the Bible from the standpoint of gender critique broadens the lens that was first introduced by feminist interpreters, allows us to engage with ideas that are perhaps more in sympathy with the pre-modern writers who produced them, and perhaps might even allow us to gain clearer insights into the character of the god who inspired them to write” (15). Now, perhaps naively, I thought that feminist criticism has progressed beyond its preliminary interest in biblical women’s stories—mainly or exclusively—into gender interest and read femininities and masculinities as a binary pair on a continuum a while ago. Is such a new self-definition beneficial? If so, to whom and why? Is it justified? Does it offer new avenues for research and understanding as such, as “gender criticism” to
distinguish from—old fashioned?—“feminist criticism”? What more does it do to help, to organize, to structure—in general and particularly in the case of this collection? Does it really matter, this fine semantic distinction of feminist criticism, women’s studies, gender studies, and the assigning of the study of femininities and masculinities exclusively or especially to the latter? Or is the change of name a technique for achieving respectability and a wider audience/participation, beyond the stigma of being considered a feminist? Or does it simply represent a certain coming of age? These are not wholly rhetorical questions.

PS: I hope that the publisher will correct the mistake in the editor’s name on the back cover. In my copy, Rooke appears as “Deborah W.” only, with her surname missing.