
Whose Gendered Language of God? Contemporary Gender Theory and Divine Gender in the Prophets

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Feminist scholarship on biblical texts has had an invaluable effect on the field. The fact that there are gendered elements at play in every ancient text is taken for granted. No longer do those doing gender analyses have to defend the validity of their questions. At the same time, the theoretical lenses through which gender is analyzed have become more complex, with less dualistic constructions of gender yielding to gender as a socially constructed fluid category.¹ This construction allows for more nuanced investigations into how gender categories functioned in the ancient world. The question remains open, however, how this more recent research can or should affect a biblically based theology of gender in contemporary churches. Here I argue that the gender fluidity and inversion expressed in Jeremiah lends a resource to understand God's promise of grace at work in contemporary understandings of gender fluidity. The exegesis outlined here implies that language and images of God are not bound to an androcentric gender dichotomy.

Jeremiah

I use the book of Jeremiah in order to illustrate the fluidity of ancient constructions of gender, asking how texts such as these can function as authority for a Lutheran theological anthropology. This article is based on a recently published essay in which I examined the marriage-less state of both Ezekiel and Jeremiah through gender categories.² While I lay out my methodological assumptions more fully there, a brief summary can be helpful. First, I regard gender as something people perform in society and not as an essential or biological category. Second, I reject dualistic or dichotomous constructions of gender, first because evidence contradicts such a model and second because even as a functional model, it does more harm than good. For me, a theological anthropology that is constructed on a dichotomous view of gender is inherently flawed. One challenge to this stance on gender has been the question of

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the biblical witness. If the biblical record reflects a thoroughgoing dichotomous view of gender, then how can Scripture help in the construction of a better gendered anthropology?

To address that issue, I come to my third assumption; I assume that the rate and fluidity of gender diversities and sexual expressions has stayed relatively constant throughout human history. For me this last assumption leads me to ask how we would find evidence of these diversities in the ancient record. Or, to put it more bluntly, what would we count as evidence? This question, first of all, should lead scholars to re-examine whether the Bible does have a thoroughgoing dichotomous view of gender.

Given my three assumptions, queer analysis offers interpretive lenses for my analysis of ancient gender. The use of queer theory has become increasingly robust in biblical studies.³ By queer theory, I

1. This change is due in large part to the work of Judith Butler. See, especially Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

2. C. L. Carvalho, "Sex and the Single Prophet: Marital Status and Gender in Jeremiah and Ezekiel," in *Prophets Male and Female: Gender and Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Ancient Near East*, J. Stökl and C. L. Carvalho, eds. AIII 15 (Atlanta: SBL, 2013), 237–267.

3. See, for example, S. D. Moore, *God's Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); K. Stone, *Practicing Safer Texts: Food, Sex, and Bible in Queer Perspective* (London: T&T Clark, 2005); D. Guest, et al., eds., *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM, 2006); and T. J. Hornsby and K. Stone, eds, *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, SemeiaSt 67 (Atlanta: SBL, 2011). For a survey of references to homosexuality in the ancient world, see Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

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mean an approach to gender that is deconstructionist in its aims, which offers a critique of those very gender categories. Queer theory rejects sexual dichotomy as an objective category and instead sees it as a social construction that supports the claims of patriarchy.⁴

The book of Jeremiah is an interesting locus for the application of queer theory. Gender-bending takes place in the text on three planes: first, defeat of the nation is depicted through gender-bending metaphors; second, the prophet Jeremiah's gender is called into question through his interactions with God and the community; third, the picture of restoration also engages gender reversal, although the exact meaning of the text is ambiguous. Gender distortion and reversal in the book are part of a larger rhetorical strategy to depict the defeat of the city as a disruption to every social category. Judean society is undone in a tragedy read as God's punishment on a sinful city.

Gender-bending in defeat

At first glance, if sin and punishment are metaphorically depicted as gender reversal, this implies that gender conformity is God's plan for humanity. This assumption seems borne out by the way the book of Jeremiah depicts defeat as gender reversal. In various places, gender reversals reinforce hetero-normativity, as men are subjected to gender-shaming.⁵ The king becomes a sexually assaulted woman (13:20–27). Warriors are compared to women giving birth (30:6). Shaved men appear on stage in 41:4, representing those who are defeated on the battlefield. The Babylonians are turned into women (50:37; 51:30). Prophets are accused of adultery, a crime applicable to women (23:14). Kings, officials, priests, and prophets are not able to play the role of protector of women and children (2:26–28, for example).⁶ Even the diatribe against false idol worship confuses the gender of stone and tree (3:9).⁷ This rhetorical strategy mirrors the depiction of

gender reversal in Assyrian reliefs commemorating battles. There the king performs his masculinity both through his calm survey of the bloody defeat of other males, and also by the protection he proffers to captive women and children, supporting traditional views of masculine behavior.

While it would be easy to conclude at this point that both ancient Israelites and the Assyrians were gender essentialists, this conclusion is undercut by the clear ways in which various Mesopotamian cultures accepted gender fluidity in motifs not related to battle, in terms of both divine gender and religious personnel. For example, Ishtar was a gender-bending deity, a characteristic embodied by her transvestite priests. She often spoke through prophets who were also gender-non-conforming. In the Old Testament, while there is no evidence of religious personnel performing gender ambiguously, there is also no categorical prohibition on same-sex intimacy, as is demonstrated by the lack of reference to sex between women. Rather, the prohibition is against those intimacies (sex between men) that threatened patriarchal economic structures by threatening inheritance or by undercutting male divisions of landowners, freemen, and slaves.⁸ Israelite texts do play with gendered images of God, the most obvious case the "image" of God that humans emulate in Gen 1:26 that is explicitly both male and female. This suggests that, at least at the divine level, there is an active notion of gender-bending.

The fluidity of gender in Assyrian religious practice suggests that the more rigid view of gender in the reliefs is a characteristic of battle narratives. If the battlefield was primarily a location for human males to perform their gender, it is no wonder that military defeat would undercut that performance. What is most interesting to me, however, are the ways the warrior aspects of Ishtar also subvert the gendered rhetoric of the male victor.⁹ While the human warrior was all man, he worshiped a deity who combined the identities of woman and warrior. The inscriptions show that Ishtar allowed the victorious males to remain manly, while she feminized the warriors who were defeated (literally through castration, as well as figuratively). While many casual readers of the Bible assume that all the warrior images of Yahweh in the Old Testament code God as a male deity, the fact is that many of these images have closer parallels to the kind of violence perpetrated by Ishtar. Yahweh's gender in war, even in the book of Jeremiah, is not as stable as often assumed.

Jeremiah's gender ambiguity

The second example of gender-bending in Jeremiah also undercuts assumptions of neat gender categories; his own gender performance is hindered and subverted at various places within

4. By "patriarchy" I do not mean the belief that all men are superior to women, but rather a system of unearned privilege based on gender, as well as race, class, and able-bodiedness.

5. T. M. Lemos, "Shame and Mutilation of Enemies in the Hebrew Bible," in *JBL* 125 (2006): 235–236. Amy Kalmanofsky uses horror theory to explore how the gender reversal in this motif shames the male audience in *Terror All Around: Horror, Monsters, and Theology in the Book of Jeremiah*, LHBOTS 390 (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 20–29.

6. See C. R. Chapman, "Sculpted Warriors: Sexuality and the Sacred in the Depiction of Warfare in the Assyrian Palace Reliefs and in Ezekiel 23:14–17," in *The Aesthetics of Violence in the Prophets*, J. M. O'Brien and C. Franke, eds. LHBOTS 517 (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 1–17.

7. W. G. E. Watson, "Symmetry of Stanza in Jeremiah 2:2b–3," in *JOTF* 19 (1981):107–110; S. M. Olyan, "The Cultic Confessions of

Jer 2:27a," in *ZAW* 99 (1987): 254–259.

8. S. M. Olyan, "And with a Male You Shall Not Lie the Lying Down of a Woman: On the Meaning and Significance of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13," in *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1994): 179–206.

9. I. Zsolnay, "The Misconstrued Role of the *Assinu* in Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy," in *Prophets Male and Female*, 81–99.

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the book. In fact, the closer the prophet gets to God, the more his masculinity is undercut. Three examples will suffice.

First, Jeremiah’s laments locate him within a liminal space, which compromises his performance of gender. Within the book of Jeremiah, the people credited with the professional skill of lamenting are women (9:17–22). In ancient near eastern poems describing the destruction of major cities, the weeping voice is that of the goddess. While Jeremiah’s own laments partly fall within the genre of male priestly psalm performance, his portrayal as the weeping prophet has him performing his gender in a gender-ambiguous way. His laments not only contribute to the marginalization of the prophet, but his activity as weeping lamenter, such as in 13:17, does so in a gendered way.

Second, Jeremiah’s divinely commanded bachelorhood also affects his performance of gender. Immediately after God’s promise to deliver only Jeremiah, Yahweh tells him neither to marry nor have children (16:1–2). In addition, he is forbidden to participate in anyone’s wedding or funeral (16:5). This is more than just a symbol of hopelessness; it cuts to the core of his gendered identity. An honorable man would have had an honorable family. He would have attempted to identify an heir to his property. He would have attended the weddings of his family and associates, mourned at the funerals of his colleagues and superiors, drunk wine at banquets, and shaved when family members died. Jeremiah’s inability to participate in these gender performances would have called his own gender identity into question. His compatriots would have wondered, is he, as a male, claiming a status he does not have by refusing to participate in certain social functions? Or, is he renouncing his own gender identity by behaving like a woman (assuming that women could only attend certain social functions, and only when attached to some male figure)? Jeremiah’s behavior is not just about the fact that marriages might be pointless. It also functions to undercut the expectations of the performance of masculinity. This subversion of his gender also raises questions, then, about his prophetic message. Does he advise surrender because he is insufficiently brave and fears like a woman?

Third, Jeremiah’s “confessions,” which are sprinkled throughout chapters 11–20, culminate with a focus on the weeping, solitary prophet. These chapters depict the ultimate endpoint of God’s systematic alienation of Jeremiah from Judean society and his new role as God’s unwilling mouthpiece. This image, which encapsulates Jeremiah’s singular relationship to God, engages both deception

and sexuality. The lament opens with Jeremiah’s accusation that God has seduced him. While Bauer asserts that God has raped him,¹⁰ this is a meaning found more prevalently in other forms of the verb. This particular form of the verb, which is also found in Job 31:9, contains a sense of deception, of being enticed by false promises. It implies that Jeremiah was tricked into thinking that God cared for him. The horrible result, for which Jeremiah curses those who did not kill him before his birth, is the fact that he is now merely God’s puppet, unable to do anything else but speak what God commands. The verb root chosen here has overtones of both deception and seduction, engaging both divine unreliability and gender instability found throughout this section of the book.

Whether seduced or raped, Jeremiah ends up “screwed.” This depiction of gender is not one that supports normative gender performance. Jeremiah, though male, takes on the passive, acted upon, stereotypical female role in ancient Israel.¹¹ God overpowers the prophet, turning him into an object of social mockery. Although God will shame Jeremiah’s enemies, who are also trying to seduce him in 20:10, Jeremiah ends his laments in the position he claimed he was in during his speech in chapter 1. He is nothing but God’s underling or “boy” (NRSV), forced to do God’s bidding. He is no man, no husband, no warrior, no elder. Cursing the day that his father heard he had a male child (20:15), he wishes he had been entombed in his mother’s womb (20:17), an ending that further subverts the prevailing function of the gendered values of male progeny and female fertility.

As Jeremiah moves away from his own gender-regulating society and becomes increasingly marginalized, he becomes more identified with a terrifying deity, whose secrets only he seems to know. In the Mesopotamian texts, gender subversion is often associated with Ishtar’s terrifying aspects. By this point in the book of Jeremiah, God represents the “terror” that surrounds the city,¹² a horror illustrated by the image of parents eating their children (19:8–9). This divine terror is often presented in gendered terms, that is, as attacks on and rapes of a feminized victim (chapters 2, 3, 6, and 13). As Jeremiah becomes more ambiguously gendered, a feminized victim of God’s supremacy, he also comes to be more clearly identified with a terrible God whose mysteries he (unfortunately) fathoms. The restriction that he remains unmarried highlights God’s exclusive claim on Jeremiah. The relationship between God and Jeremiah is not sexualized, but the legal claim is still the same. Jeremiah would have committed “adultery” against God by ignoring his command, and thus he becomes functionally impotent as a symbol of God’s exclusive claim on him.

The unique contours of Jeremiah’s relationship with God ask the reader to re-examine the theological function of Jeremiah’s

10. A. Bauer, *Gender in the Book of Jeremiah: A Feminist-Literary Reading*, StSBL 5 (1999); reprint (New York: Lang, 2003).

11. D. J. A. Clines, “He-Prophets: Masculinity as a Problem for the Hebrew Prophets and Their Interpreters,” in *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll*, A. G. Hunter and P. R. Davies, eds. JSOTSup 348 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 311–328.

12. Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around*, focuses on Jeremiah 6.

gender within the book. When the notice about Jeremiah's single status is coupled with the way that God's characterization becomes increasingly dangerous to the established human order, it reads as a deliberate rhetorical strategy to unsettle the categories of the monarchic world. Jeremiah is cut off from the public performance of his gender; he cannot marry, rule a wife, or produce heirs. He is confined, arrested, imprisoned so he cannot fight, rule, or harvest. When he is finally allowed to buy a piece of land that could serve as something his progeny could inherit (32:2–12), he is already terminally single, and the city itself is about to be demolished so that this land serves no function in restoring his manhood. At the same time, God becomes a deceptive deity, a terror to "his" own people, the agent of social upheaval.

Gender reversal as restoration

The question remains: Does the gender-bending of the character of Jeremiah actually reinforce gender dichotomies by utilizing deviance from that norm as a marker of disorder? While such a conclusion may be the safest one to reach, the book's vision of restoration in chapter 31 gives pause. That the gender-bending of prophet, people, and city is a conscious ideological aim of the book is, for me, confirmed in Jer 31:22 with the enigmatic gender symbol of the new utopia: a woman surrounding a man. Although there are a variety of explanations given for this phrase,¹³ it seems obvious that whatever the exact meaning of the text, it views gender "disorder" as a mark of an ideal society. In addition, it should be read within the context of the other gendered elements of the last section of the book. Jer 30:6 raises the question whether men can give birth. This rhetorical question, meant to elicit a negative response, sets the reader up first to identify the defeated warriors as becoming impossibly female (grabbing their bellies with labor pains), and second to wonder at the new creation of chapter 31, which also involves an incomprehensible gender inversion.

The text is intriguing in its polyvalence. The use of the word "encompass" or "surround" evokes images that are ascribed as "feminine," such as comforting and welcoming, as well as the literal surrounding that a woman's vagina does during intercourse; but it also includes meanings that are "masculine": protecting either as a male or as a city with walls. The text suggests that social disorder, or the blurring of the categories associated with social stability, is not only the marker of loss and destruction, but also characterizes the world for which the book is hoping. While the first two tropes of gender-bending in Jeremiah might be read as metaphors of disorder and social collapse, the final image is one of restoration, clearly promise. The presentation of gender inversion as a sign of

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God's "new thing" does not reinforce the patriarchal assumptions found in other parts of the book. It subverts them.

The queering of gender performance corresponds to a number of ways that the book as a whole queers other social dichotomies. Jeremiah's society is depicted as one where the world's social dichotomies have become at best ambiguous, or perhaps destructively chaotic. Even so, what is often missed is that this dissolution of social categories marks restoration as well as devastation. The chaos belies a divine reality that both unsettles human delusions of power and re-aligns the human world where inversion is associated with comfort. In Jeremiah the gender ambiguity marks God as a dangerous divinity, capable of turning men into women, but through that transgression of boundaries, God produces a new social order.

Jeremiah is only one text in the Hebrew Bible that engages gender-bending categories, but it is one that most explicitly relates this gender strategy to theology. The gender rhetoric in Jeremiah is really about who God is and, for this book, Yahweh is a deity whose transcendence and utter "otherness" is revealed in the ways that all human categories become flexible, for evil and for good, when that God is truly encountered. It is a brilliant rhetorical strategy for a community where gender performance creates the foundation of social hierarchy and stability. While other biblical texts reveal that gender and sexual diversity were accepted as long as the patriarchal economic system was not threatened, Jeremiah's reflection of gender is more than rhetoric. It is theology. For me, the question the book raises is this: Is gender stability a good thing? Or is it simply pride, the replacement of God with human conventions? Although there are a variety of ways that the engagement with gender in the book of Jeremiah has been interpreted, I choose to read God's subversion of male patriarchal privilege in Jeremiah as revealing how God subverts all structures of human pride, which we use to make us comfortable in our stability, a reading in line with the various ways the book depicts complete social collapse as something divinely ordained.

The question arises when we move to the theological plain. Since the deity who bends gender is also associated with terror, is Jeremiah's own compromised gender identity a punishment? Is being Yahweh's boy-toy a metaphor of disorder? I will admit that it is exactly here that I have the most vigorous debates with my biblical colleagues, because I do not think it is. I think it is a metaphor for the utter other-ness of God. It is an experience of God that leaves humans unsettled to their core identities. If that is the way this metaphor functions, then I think we have rich ground

13. Among others, see the review of literature in Bauer, *Gender in the Book of Jeremiah*, esp. 145; B. Becking, *Between Fear and Freedom: Essays on the Interpretation of Jeremiah 30–31*, OTS 51 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2004), 221–224; A. Ogden Bellis, "Jeremiah 31:22b: An Intentionally Ambiguous, Multivalent Riddle-Text," in *Uprooting and Planting: Essays on Jeremiah for Leslie Allen*, J. Goldingay and L. C. Allen, eds. LHBOTS 459 (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 5–13; and P. A. Kruger, "A Woman Will 'Encompass' a Man: On Gender Reversal in Jer 31,22b," *Bib* 89 (2008): 380–388.

to think about gender as a vehicle of grace. Here is how I would outline this biblically based (or at least Jeremiah-based) theology:

1. Encountering God like Jeremiah does makes us realize the instability of human existence and identity.
2. This encounter undercuts any notion that we control anything, even our own identity as gendered individuals (and to me that works no matter how that gender is defined).
3. The book of Jeremiah reflects the vanity of resistance to God. Jeremiah has faith, even when he does not want it.
4. The use of gender categories in the book suggests that gender categories, when used as a basis for privilege, are shown as false—and deceptive when seen from the perspective of God who gives and controls all aspects of human existence.

The restoration of a gender-bent world shows that the world infused with God's grace is as varied and unbridled as God in God's self. Jeremiah is not restored as a traditional man but rather as one whose prophetic dreams were finally "pleasant" to him (31:26). Is this eisegesis, or an appropriate reading from contemporary experience of how queering gender corrects theological anthropologies? That is left to us to decide.

Discussion Questions

1. If a reader of the Bible begins with the assumption that there were a variety of gender expressions in ancient Israel, what would count as evidence that the text is reflecting that variety? Are there other biblical texts that come to mind?
2. In what ways, if any, does a gender ambiguous God affect how we understand God and humans?
3. How might the phrase "a woman will encompass a man" (Jer 31:22) be interpreted as a "new thing"?
4. How do Jeremiah's laments in chapters 11–20 add to his characterization in the book?

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