Teaching Gender in the Hebrew Bible
By Karla Bohmbach

"Take it like a man."
"That's not how a lady acts."
"Sissy."
"Tomboy."

Each of these statements points to the significance of gender in shaping identity. That is, they all concern themselves with what it means to be a man or a woman. But although recognizing gender as a pervasive identity marker may be relatively easy, understanding where it comes from and how it works brings with it a number of complications. Some people, for instance, equate gender with a person's sex. But having a body that is sexed male does not automatically mean one will act "masculine." Nor does having a female sexed body guarantee "feminine" behavior. And what of bodies that are intersexed (when persons are born with ambiguous genitalia and/or a mix of hormones, which happens, according to conservative estimates, approximately one out of every 1500 to 2000 births[1])? Because of these biologically-based challenges, others argue for seeing gender as primarily a social phenomenon. As such, particular notions of what it means to be a man (masculinity) and a woman (femininity) receive shape and form from a society. But here, too, further complications arise, for gender constructions can and do vary from society to society, as well as within particular social groups.

Notwithstanding these complexities, most societies do produce dominant or normative constructs of gender against which all affiliated groups and individuals measure themselves. In present-day America, for instance, normative understandings of masculinity tend to coalesce around the following traits and qualities: strong, hard, tough, aggressive, rational, competent, in control, and independent. Femininity, meanwhile, often calls up the following associations: soft, passive, gentle, weak, domestic, nurturing, emotional, dependent, and demure. These gender constructs can exert powerful influences on the shaping of our identities. At the same time, they can provoke a lot of anxiety and confusion. Can boys and men really manage to be "in control" (of both themselves and others) all of the time? If they are not, does that mean they are not "real men"? What if girls and women, rather than being demure, present themselves as loud and aggressive? What are both the costs and benefits—individually and socially—of living up to gender norms? Equally, what are the consequences of not playing by the gender scripts prescribed by one's society? For teachers working with high school students, these issues are particularly acute, since adolescence is often the stage in life where issues regarding gender and identity are explored.

One way to puzzle through these questions is by means of stories, for stories can function for us as both mirrors and windows. As mirrors they reflect back to us some of the truths about our lives and our worlds. As windows they open us up toward other lives, other worlds, and so other possible ways of being and doing. When stories do so in rich, complicated, albeit satisfying ways, we judge them as good—Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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[1] See: http://www.isna.org/faq/frequency.

come to mind. So too with the Bible's stories—one of the reasons it has long taken its place among the great works of world literature. Reading biblical stories for gender has two additional advantages: 1) they are compact, so they are easily accessed by readers; and 2) because of their terseness they also leave lots of room for diverse interpretations.

Biblical writers no doubt composed their stories under the influence of their culture's notions of gender. Hence, looking specifically at how a biblical character operates in light of the Bible's gender norms can shed light on how those norms either helped or hindered those characters. Readers may then be moved to ponder how their own culture's gender norms either further or place limits on their lives.

Although some differences likely exist between the Bible's constructions of gender and our own, both Gravett et al. and Clines suggest some significant overlaps. Thus, at a minimum, masculine norms in the Hebrew Bible seem to include the following: 1) physical strength, including sexual prowess; 2) aggression; and 3) control over both others and the natural world. Biblical norms of femininity comprise: 1) nubility, a combination of physical beauty, sexual allure, fertility, and youth; 2) deceptiveness, which is not necessarily a bad thing, just an effective strategy for those who are relatively powerless to achieve their ends; and 3) acquiescence, which may variously include dependence, passivity, and submission.

How, then, do some specific biblical characters measure up to these gender norms? Consider Samson, a biblical "man's man" if there ever was one. He exhibits prodigious displays of physical strength: he rips apart a lion with his bare hands (Judges 15:6) and kills a thousand Philistines with just the jawbone of an ass (Judges 15:15). This strength often serves his aggression, manifested especially in his pursuit of women. (Besides Delilah, he also marries an unnamed Philistine woman and consorts with a prostitute.) Although at first sight he seems less than controlled, his riddle-making does effect a control of others as they try to puzzle out what Samson knows and they do not (Judges 14:10-18). And yet does not Samson's hyper-masculinity ultimately fail—even betray—him? Delilah fools him, resulting in his capture by the Philistines, who blind and enslave him. Although allowed a last moment of glory as he pulls down a temple onto three thousand Philistines, their deaths result in his death too (Judges 16).

Contrast Samson with David. The latter arguably tempers his masculinity with certain feminine traits—and does he not fare better? Certainly his warrior acts, including killing Goliath, demonstrate his strength. And his aggression and control shine through as he works to consolidate his kingdom. But David also often benefits from the actions of others–both women and men—thereby manifesting at least a kind of (feminine?) dependence on them. For instance, at different times both Jonathan and Michal save David from their father Saul's murderous intentions toward him (1 Samuel 19-20). Abigail intercedes so that David does not take on her husband in battle (1 Samuel 25). Joab, David's military commander, slays Abner, thereby ridding David of a potential military threat (2 Samuel 3). And the sons of Rimmon assassinate Ishbaal, Saul's son, clearing away the last impediment to David claiming the throne of all Israel (2 Samuel 4).

How do biblical women fare when measured against the strictures of biblical femininity? For an example of a hyper-feminine character, one could hardly do better than Esther. Her introduction in chapter two puts a premium on both her nubility and her acquiescence. After all, she wins an empire-wide beauty contest, even as she also remains obedient to her guardian Mordecai (Esth 2:20). And yet Esther does not simply remain locked into a role marked totally by the feminine. The needs of her people as they face potential extermination prompt her, beginning in chapter four, to "take charge." She disobeys the king by entering his throne room

uninvited. She plans a series of banquets to which she invites the king and Haman, the king's chief courtier. She then unmasks Haman as the enemy of her and her people. She even orders around her guardian Mordecai (Esth 4:16; 8:2).

For another biblical woman with a rather mixed bundle of masculine and feminine traits, consider Jael (Judges 4-5). Initially she, too, embodies femininity—inviting the tired warrior Sisera into her tent for care and rest. Further, this invitation holds a deceptive edge to it (recall that deceptiveness marks biblical femininity), for Jael has other ends in mind besides nurturing Sisera. After she gives him milk to drink and covers him with a blanket, leading him to fall asleep, she turns on him to kill him. And her manner of doing so strikes many as decidedly unfeminine: she thrusts a tent peg through his head (Judges 4:21). Some have even seen in this act a symbolic rape, with the tent peg serving as a phallus. Nevertheless, her violent deed earns her the praise of the Israelites, led by Deborah—another decidedly unfeminine biblical woman.

These four—Samson, David, Esther, Jael—present a mere sampling of biblical figures for whom the dynamics of gender reveal interesting facets of their characters. What messages or lessons might their stories hold for us? The ways in which many of them take on an interesting mix of both the feminine and the masculine may surprise us. And when they transgress their society's gender expectations, it often brings with it not condemnation but rather praise and recognition. But identifying the precise circumstances under which living or not living according to gender norms brings success or failure remains a challenge. And are those not challenges that we too face—figuring out how gender works in our lives, assessing the pros and cons of various gender traits, and then deciding if and how to act as a result? It all shows how the question, "Who am I?" is impossible to answer without taking gender into account.

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For Further Reading

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    JSOTSup 348. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002.

Gravett, Sandra L., et al. "Gender." Chapter 5 in *An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: A Thematic Approach.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Pgs. 131-64.

Tolbert, Mary Ann. "Gender." Pgs. 99-105 in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation,*
    ed. by A. K. M. Adam. St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000.