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Texts in Context

Preaching Texts of Multiple Masculinities to a World of Multiple Masculinities

CAMERON B. R. HOWARD

A recent article in the *New York Times* describes the work of Dr. Michael Kimmel, director of the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities at Stony Brook University. In a discussion at the beginning of one of Kimmel's workshops on masculinities, he poses two questions to the class: "What does it mean to be a *good man*?"—the kinds of characteristics a man might want recounted at his funeral—and "What does it mean to be a *real man*?" The participants come up with strikingly different answers to the questions. "Good men," says the class, are honest, selfless, and caring, while "real men" are authoritative, take risks, and avoid showing weakness.¹

In a class at Luther Seminary on "Sex, Gender, and the Old Testament," my students have described similar discrepancies in cultural expectations about what it means to be a man. Even going to church, they say, can be the purview of a "good man" but not necessarily a "real man." Both Kimmel's exercise and my seminary

¹Jessica Bennett, "A Master's Degree in... Masculinity?" *The New York Times*, August 8, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/fashion/masculinities-studies-stonybrook-michael-kimmel.html?_r=0 (accessed November 2, 2015).

Today's preachers proclaim the word into a world that is fraught with dissonances about the expectations of gender roles. The Bible itself demonstrates a similar complexity, though sometimes in different modes. Ultimately, an exploration of biblical masculinity can offer preachers and their congregations new ways of navigating those intersections between the ancient text and our world today.

class reveal that in the twenty-first-century United States, there is not simply one notion of masculinity, but rather there exist multiple *masculinities*. Today's preachers proclaim the word into a world that holds tightly to these discrepancies about the ways men ought to act. There is pressure to be "good," on the one hand, but those pressures often conflict with the demand to be a "real man," on the other. Moreover, those expectations can shift according to a man's race, class, and sexual orientation, among other variables. What can the Bible, and biblical preaching in particular, do to help today's churchgoers navigate these cultural forces?

MULTIPLE MASCULINITIES

The influence of feminist criticism on biblical studies over the last thirty to forty years has made "women in the Bible" a common subject of inquiry for scholars and preachers alike. A multitude of books and commentaries for preaching and teaching has emerged around that topic, from Phyllis Trible's groundbreaking 1984 monograph *Texts of Terror* to Westminster John Knox Press's *Women's Bible Commentary*, released in a revised, twentieth-anniversary edition in 2012. Lindsay Hardin Freeman's book *Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter* (Forward Movement, 2014) received much media attention in 2015 as a resource that counts all the words spoken by women in the Bible, showing a popular audience just how rare biblical speech by women is. Even resources that are not specifically organized around female biblical characters are usually careful to consider how the gender of those characters affects their presentation and their experiences in Scripture's stories. In churches, preachers may conduct sermon series on female characters in the Old and New Testaments, and many Bible studies are organized around the topic of biblical women.

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This recent, persistent interest in female biblical characters *qua* women pushes back against a history of neglect. Biblical scholarship into much of the twentieth century assumed "male" as the norm for the writer, reader, preacher, and critic of the Bible, and male characters like the patriarchs mattered most. The dearth of female voices *in* the Bible only compounded a disregard for the female reader *of* the Bible. Yet, being attentive to those female voices *in* and *of* the Bible—or their absence—has raised vital questions for the church: What does "biblical womanhood" look like, and how does that category translate into the everyday realities of today's female readers of the Bible?² What does it mean to be a woman today, and how

²Rachel Held Evans's book *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012) is one example of a text that tackles these questions.

does the Bible inform that gender identity? How do women experience biblical texts where women's voices are suppressed, oppressed, or altogether missing?

To read the Bible in ways attentive to masculinity means asking many of the same questions, but considering maleness as interpretive category, not as a given: What does "biblical manhood" look like, and how does that translate into the everyday realities of male readers of the Bible? What does it mean to be a man today, and how does the Bible inform that gender identity? How do men experience biblical texts when men's voices dominate? This last question should not be a return to the idea that the male character or male reader of Scripture is normative, nor should it discard the questions of women's roles that feminist criticism has raised. Instead, the question should turn our attention to those male characters and readers *qua* men, asking ourselves how masculinity factors into our interpretations, rather than presuming that maleness is irrelevant and femaleness is the only gender identity that matters.³

Like the modern tensions between ideals of the "good" man and ideals of the "real" man, the Bible also lifts up multiple masculinities. Susan Haddox argues, for example, that the book of Genesis favors "subordinate" masculinities over "hegemonic ones."⁴ Ovidiu Creangă maps the multiple masculinities embodied by the character in Joshua in different redactional layers.⁵ Hilary Lipka shows that depictions of masculinity in Proverbs both endorse and challenge ideal masculinities lifted up elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.⁶ All of these and more studies, while aimed at an academic rather than theological audience, reinforce the idea that there are multiple masculinities at play in the Bible, and that Scripture does not advocate for one "right" version of what masculinity should look like. Competing biblical masculinities rise and fall, offer judgment on each other, and can even coexist in the same character. Thus, preachers proclaiming the word with an attentiveness to masculinity in the modern context should embrace this complexity in the ancient one. In the paragraphs that follow I will offer up a few reflections as starting points for thinking about preaching, masculinity, and the Bible.

MASCULINITY, THE WORD, AND THE WORLD: REFLECTIONS ON TEXTS

Jacob and Esau

Preachers should guard against carrying modern assumptions about masculinity into their reading of Scripture. At the same time, the biblical text itself gives

³In fact, conceptions of gender in the twenty-first century have also taught us that gender identity is not binary—that is, not simply "masculine" versus "feminine"—but rather exists on a spectrum.

⁴Susan E. Haddox, "Favoured Sons and Subordinate Masculinities," in *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, ed. Ovidiu Creangă (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010) 2–19. This distinction between one idealized, dominant masculinity—the hegemonic—and other existing but less dominant—subordinate—masculinities is employed throughout masculinity studies.

⁵Ovidiu Creangă, "Variations on the Theme of Masculinity: Joshua's Gender In/stability in the Conquest Narrative (Josh. 1–12)," in Creangă, *Men and Masculinity*, 83–109.

⁶Hilary Lipka, "Masculinities in Proverbs: An Alternative to the Hegemonic Ideal," in *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded*, ed. Ovidiu Creangă and Peter-Ben Smit (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014) 86–106.

us clues about the expectations of masculinity that are being met or thwarted in a given story. The story of Jacob and Esau at Gen 25:19–34, an Old Testament reading in the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost in Year A, is a helpful test case.

Although Jacob and Esau are twins, the text describes them as polar opposites, at odds with each other even from the womb. Their contrasting characteristics align them as the favorites of different parents: “When the young men grew up, Esau became an outdoorsman who knew how to hunt, and Jacob became a quiet man who stayed at home. Isaac loved Esau because he enjoyed eating game, but Rebekah loved Jacob” (Gen 25:27–28 CEB). Jacob hangs out in the tent, which is the sphere of life more commonly associated with women. We see that association vividly in Gen 18, when Abraham runs back and forth to offer hospitality to his three guests, while Sarah remains at the tent, a fact mentioned at least three times in that passage (Gen 18:1–15). Esau, by contrast, is a hunter, a warrior, a man of open spaces.

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I once heard a preacher describe Jacob as a “mama’s boy.” While, according to the text, it is certainly true that Jacob’s relationship with Rebekah is stronger than his relationship with his father, the epithet “mama’s boy” brings with it many modern expectations about gender and sexuality. A “mama’s boy” today might be considered a “wimp” or “sissy,” a man dependent on his mother and not meeting society’s expectations of a “real man.” To use that kind of language from the pulpit reinforces cultural assumptions of masculinity that can disparage men who do not fit those expectations. At the same time, the biblical text does play on the differences between Jacob and Esau, complicating Jacob’s character with his trickster schemes, while ultimately seeming to side with the younger son Jacob, who becomes the progenitor of Israel.

To be the older son in the biblical world is to have clear economic, familial, and even spiritual advantages: Esau would have received both birthright and blessing, had his younger twin not wrested them both away from him (Gen 25; 27). At the same time, so many Old Testament stories, particularly in the book of Genesis, show an upending of those expected advantages; the Bible often seems to advocate for the younger son, as when God prefers Abel’s sacrifice to Cain’s. As Haddox argues, “The masculinities portrayed in the book of Genesis, like the men themselves, have multiple significations. While men may strive toward performing the norms of hegemonic masculinity, these are constantly in tension with various sub-

ordinate masculinities.”⁷ Instead of falling back on modern cultural assumptions about what makes a “real man,” preachers should take care to tease out the details of the contrasts between the brothers and the ways that the text advocates for the younger son, who demonstrates subordinate masculinity, in surprising ways.

David and Jonathan

The fourth and fifth Sundays after Pentecost in Year B of the RCL provide lengthy passages from the story of David as choices for the Old Testament readings (1 Sam 17:1a, 4–11, 19–23, 32–49; 1 Sam 17:57–18:5, 10–16; 2 Sam 1:1, 17–27). In young David’s ability to defeat the physically superior Goliath, we see David’s “subordinate” masculinity winning out. At the same time, however, the stories of the ancient Israelite monarchy in Samuel-Kings show a clear association of virility with leadership. In David’s old age, his fitness to be king is tested by his advisors’ sending a young virgin, Abishag the Shunnamite, to lie with him. When David is unable to consummate the relationship, he is understood to be no longer fit to rule (1 Kings 1:1–4). After Solomon dies and Rehoboam becomes king, his younger advisors encourage him, in a vulgar turn of phrase, to prove to his subjects that “my little finger is thicker than my father’s loins” (1 Kings 12:10b). Fitness for kingship is associated with male sexuality.

In the lectionary passages from 1 Sam 18 and 2 Sam 1, the heteronormative masculinity at work in much of the Hebrew Bible is challenged by the descriptions of David’s relationship with Jonathan. At 1 Sam 18:1 we read that “the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.” At 2 Sam 1:26, in David’s lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, we learn that the feelings were mutual: “I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.” Many scholars have speculated about whether David and Jonathan were, in fact, lovers.⁸ Regardless of how one evaluates that possibility, the fact remains that the tenderness of David and Jonathan’s relationship contrasts starkly with their positions as warriors. David is caught between expectations of virility in battle and an affection for a man who is supposed to be his enemy. The Hebrew Bible does not clearly prefer one aspect of David’s character over another, but instead presents both as facets of a very complex personality.⁹ To preach on these texts, then, is again to embrace the Bible’s depiction of a multiplicity of masculinities, not an advocacy of one way of being male over another.

⁷Haddox, “Favoured Sons and Subordinate Masculinities,” 16.

⁸For one set of contrasting views on this question, see Yaron Peleg, “Love at First Sight? David, Jonathan, and the Biblical Politics of Gender,” *JOT* 30.2 (2005) 171–189, and Jonathan Rowe, “Is Jonathan Really David’s ‘Wife?’” *JOT* 34.2 (2009) 183–193.

⁹David’s complicated masculinity is not, of course, limited to this binary set of choices; his relationship with Bathsheba, his dancing before the ark, and his complacency in Amnon’s rape of Tamar, among other elements, all complicate his portrait. For more on David and masculinity, see “David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995) 212–243.

Prostitution and Sexual Violence

The last few decades of attention to the female characters in the Bible has revealed that much of biblical women's gender identity revolves around questions of childbearing, sexuality, and sexual violence. Matriarchs in Genesis, like Sarah and Rachel, face barrenness and receive relief from it as a blessing. The stories of many female characters in the Old Testament revolve around their experience of sexual violence, like Dinah (Gen 34), the Levite's concubine (Judg 19), Tamar (2 Sam 13), and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11). Some biblical women receive their claims to fame as prostitutes, like Tamar (Gen 38) and Rahab (Josh 2). Even Israel is imagined as a whore throughout the prophetic books, metaphorically selling herself to the gods of other nations. Although most of these Old Testament texts are never featured in the lectionary, New Testament lectionary passages like John 4:5–42, the woman with five husbands, still foreground women's sexuality as part of their social role. Less prominent in many analyses, however, is the role of male characters in the stories as perpetrators of violence or as solicitors of prostitution.

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In today's context, many churches have begun to tackle the global problem of human trafficking, and particularly the sex trafficking of women and girls, in their justice ministries. Most of this work rightly focuses on the women and children who are trafficked; however, the industries of prostitution and trafficking could not survive without a market for those services, and American men provide that market. It is difficult to find reliable numerical statistics on how many men in the United States have solicited prostitutes or otherwise engaged in the sex trafficking industry. However, in a synthesis of multiple reports on prostitution and trafficking, Janice G. Raymond writes, "These reports indicate that the main users of women in prostitution are regular men who are in regular marriages, study in regular educational programs, and have regular jobs, some of whom are entrusted with upholding the very laws that they violate. In other words, studies indicate that prostitute-users in general are not marginalized men, unlike the women they use and abuse."¹⁰ Though disconcerting to think about, it is reasonable to assume that some of these "users" are churchgoing men, and that many congregations contain men who have, at some point in their lives, paid for sex. Thus, preaching through the lens of masculinity in these biblical texts requires confronting the role of men in both ancient and modern contexts as possible users and abusers of women.¹¹

¹⁰Janice G. Raymond, "Prostitution on Demand: Legalizing the Buyers as Sexual Consumers," *Violence against Women* 10/10 (2004) 1156–1186.

¹¹The focus on the victimization of women in this essay should not be seen as a dismissal of the very real experiences of men and boys as victims of sexual abuse, a crime that also bears many consequences for the constructions of masculinity in today's culture.

Masculinities and the Divine

Despite the consistent use of male pronouns for God throughout Scripture, metaphors for the divine draw from both traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine imagery. Inasmuch as God is divine warrior-king, such as in Exod 15:3, God is also like a nursing mother, as in Isa 49:15. These metaphorical representations of God speak less to the potential masculinities of God, and more to God's genderlessness, or perhaps *genderfulness*—containing the whole gender spectrum in God's image. That is, the Creator God is portrayed not so much as a *male* but as a being from whom all genders have been made, and who cannot be understood through just one type of gendered description.

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Jesus of Nazareth is another story. As God incarnate, Jesus takes on human form, specifically the form of a *male* human. Along with theologian Joe Jones, I affirm that Jesus' maleness matters only in his particularity as a human being and does not obscure his accessibility to women and men alike. As Jones writes, "Jesus is an inclusive and salvific cosmic event that touches all creatures, whether they know Jesus or not. The inclination to diminish Jesus' historical concreteness is akin to the perverse need to diminish Jesus' Jewishness. We must steadfastly confess the irrevocable *particularity* of the human, male, Jewish Jesus as the one in whom God is at work for the reconciliation of the world."¹² Preachers must ask, then: In Jesus' particularity as a human male, how does he perform masculinity?

Although that question is too big to be answered here, I offer up just a few points to consider when reflecting on this issue for preaching. First, we must remember that the stories about Jesus are mediated through the four male Gospel writers, so fully separating their own senses of masculinity from Jesus' own is practically impossible to do. The essays in *New Testament Masculinities* provide a helpful starting point for differentiating the Gospels' take on masculinity from book to book.¹³

Second, Jesus' identity as a Jewish subject of the Roman Empire already makes him unable to access the hegemonic ideal of the imperial Roman male. In the same way that, as Haddox argues, many subordinate masculinities depicted in the Old Testament "offer the nation of Israel strategies for survival," so too does Jesus' own subordinate masculinity push against the political controls of colonization.¹⁴ As

¹²Joe R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*, 2 vols. (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2002) 1:424.

¹³*New Testament Masculinities*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

¹⁴Haddox, "Favoured Sons and Subordinate Masculinities," 16.

second-wave feminism pointed out in the late twentieth century, so too is it true of first-century Palestine: “the personal is political.”

Finally, the central Christian message of power in weakness—that the Savior of the world did not conquer the world but rather died on a cross at the hands of the world—is itself contrary to today’s hegemonic masculine ideals of being a “real man,” one who should not dare show weakness, as the students in Michael Kimmel’s class observed. Today’s preachers proclaim the word into a world that is fraught with dissonances about the expectations of gender roles. The Bible itself demonstrates a similar complexity, though sometimes in different modes. Ultimately, an exploration of biblical masculinity can offer preachers and their congregations new ways of navigating those intersections between the ancient text and our world today. ⊕

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