



Rhiannon Graybill. *Are We Not Men?: Unstable Masculinity in the Hebrew Prophets.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 200 pp. \$78.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-022736-4.

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Rhiannon Graybill's monograph on unstable masculinity in the prophets is based on her recent University of California Berkeley PhD dissertation supervised by Robert Alter, Daniel Boyarin, Chana Kronfeld, and Celeste Langan. I normally do not mention full committees in reviews, but this committee includes no full Bible scholars, even if some of them, for example, Alter, have extensive experience with Bible. Alter is a comparative literature scholar; Boyarin is a Talmudist; Kronfeld is a scholar of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature; and Langan is a specialist in English literature. But Graybill's research is frequently limited by her selection of often out-of-date scholarly literature and her failure to contextualize many of the Bible passages that she studies. Although she raises appropriate questions, her discussions often do not provide full consideration of the biblical and scholarly literature that such a project demands.

Graybill's work is based on two fundamental premises, viz., that the human body is essential to prophecy and that prophecy destabilizes the human body, thereby instigating a combination of pain and shame on the part of the male prophet. Presumably, female prophets would also experience such pain and shame, but Graybill has relatively little to say about women prophets, most likely because women prophets are not so well

represented in the Hebrew Bible and because women would have a different experience from that of men concerning the loss of control of the body.

Graybill takes a particular interest in the male prophetic body, which is commandeered by YHWH as part of the divine interest in communicating prophetic messages. Insofar as YHWH's efforts have their effects upon the bodies of male prophets, she correctly sees queer reading strategies as an appropriate methodological stance for exploring the impact of prophetic identity and activity on the bodies of male prophets who find themselves, whether willingly or not, under the control of YHWH. She makes it clear that queer theory entails not simply gender-based understanding of the body and its activity; queer literary theory entails the disruption or destabilization of the body and its normative activities and conceptualizations. The male prophets are frequently demasculinized, but such demasculinization does not necessarily result in homosexual identities for the prophets. Her argument would be strengthened by recognition that the demasculinization of male prophets by YHWH is in large measure an act of power, particularly since recent scholarship has recognized that the portrayal of YHWH in the Bible is heavily dependent on the imagery and roles of the major Mesopotamian

monarchs who threatened, invaded, and conquered Israel and Judah. Rape and demasculinization is typically an aspect of the exercise of power in invasion and conquest in all periods of human history. One may also see such acts in the incidence of male-on-male rapes and sexual activities in prisons in which the men involved are not necessarily homosexual, but instead employ male-on-male rape and sex as a means to establish power relationships in an extraordinarily threatening environment.

It is not always clear that Graybill understands the full dimensions of power in the demasculinization of the prophets. Her discussion of Isaiah is a case in point. In her introductory chapter, she employs Isaiah as an example, with a particular focus on Isaiah 20 in which the prophet goes about Jerusalem naked for three years to illustrate his message that Assyria would defeat the Egyptians and Nubians, who would attempt to relieve the Assyrian siege of Ashdod and drive them naked and barefoot into captivity. Graybill's understanding of Isaiah is limited by her fixation on Isaiah's buttocks, apparently analogous to the fixation of the presumed Judean audience, which might be expected to be similarly fixated. To a certain extent, the imagery of naked buttocks might be considered erotic, but the power dimensions of such a vision must also be understood. Graybill understands the imagery of captivity here, but the larger context of sexual violence in Isaiah might provide greater nuance for her understanding of the erotic nature of the image. Elsewhere, in Isaiah 8, the Assyrian threat against Jerusalem is portrayed as an instance of rape in which the Assyrian monarch extends his wings—that is, the “wings” of his garment (cf. Ruth 3:9)—and fills the land with his waters. One of the realities of the Assyrian invasions of Judah (and elsewhere) is the high rate of rape—of both women and men—that occurred, and this influenced the imagery in biblical texts. Later, in Isaiah 54, YHWH announces his return to his bride, Bat Zion/Bat Jerusalem, whom he had abandoned for just “a little while” (Isa

54:2), thereby allowing the uncircumcised and unclean to enter her (Isa 52:1). Perhaps there was an erotic dimension to Isaiah's naked buttocks, but the imagery is more suggestive of men who were demasculinized as they were led off naked into captivity while Assyrian soldiers raped (and murdered) the now undefended women (cf. Isa 7:20). Wider reading in Isaiah and commentaries beyond those of Wildberger and Blenkinsopp would have made these dimensions clear. Likewise, her analysis of Hosea as the cuckolded husband would benefit from commentaries other than that of Wolff which observe that neither Gomer or Israel speak in the book of Hosea. Such an observation entails that the portrayal of Gomer and Israel in the book is the product of Hosea's and YHWH's projections concerning the two “women.” Were Hosea and YHWH attempting to cover up some lapse in their own responsibility as husbands to their brides?

Graybill's discussion of Moses provides an appropriate combination of power and gender issues. Moses is disabled by his heavy mouth and tongue, perhaps an allusion to a speech impediment, which requires the appointment of Aaron to serve as Moses' spokesman to communicate effectively the divine word that YHWH communicates to Israel. Moses' speeches in Deuteronomy show no indication of any communicative problem, but they do demonstrate an interest in revising and updating the laws of Exodus 20-24 and elsewhere, a task that would have been undertaken by the priests and Levites, who would have understood themselves as the successors of Moses and Aaron. The incomprehensible nature of Moses' speech, or perhaps better, YHWH's speech through Moses, is ameliorated by the interpretative efforts of the priests and Levites. Further, one must ask whether Moses is feminized by the need to wear the veil after YHWH spoke with him in the tent of meeting (Exod 34:29-34). Graybill thinks so, and she is correct to a degree, but the veil points to the reality of divine power in that it

also protects Israel from the effects upon Moses caused by YHWH's holy power and presence.

Graybill's analysis of Jeremiah's last lament in Jer 20:7-18 notes the common reading that Jeremiah is seduced and raped by YHWH, but she sets aside such an interpretation by citing the work of Kenneth Stone, who argues that the text portrays an instance of sadomasochism in which Jeremiah functions as an "aggressive bottom," who would acquiesce to YHWH's advances.[1] Indeed, Jeremiah's use of gender-bending language and other traits indicate that he is the most likely of the prophets to be homosexual, but the reading of Jeremiah's rape is supported by Jeremiah's continued resistance to YHWH's overtures that he serve as a prophet and YHWH's insistence that he do so (see, e.g., Jer 1:4-19). Her argument that Ezekiel gazed upon YHWH's penis while speaking about his loins (Ezek 1:26-28) overlooks the fact that this part of YHWH's body is the focal point for the throne chariot on which YHWH sits. It also overlooks Ezekiel's fondness for questionable language throughout the book, including his graphic description of the penises of the Egyptians that are like those of donkeys and horses (Ezek 23:20). Does Ezekiel's swallowing of YHWH's Torah scroll signify fellatio (Ezek 3:1-3) or does it signify the internalization of divine Torah? Indeed, a fuller understanding of the character of metaphor, which employs the imagery of one thing to characterize another, would be helpful. Does YHWH have a penis, or does the imagery of YHWH's loins simply represent the metaphor of a human being applied to the description of YHWH's presence in Ezekiel 1? The language of simile appears throughout the chapter as a means to contextualize the use of finite imagery to describe the presence of YHWH.

I do not wish to be harsh in my critique because I think that Graybill raises an appropriate set of questions about the prophets and their literature, and such questions demand scholarly attention. Her discussion is stimulating and useful,

but it is also limited. She is quite correct on issues of destabilization, but at times she underestimates the role of power issues and metaphorical characterization in her analysis of the role of the male body in the prophetic literature.

Note

[1]. See Ken Stone, "You Seduced Me, You Overpowered Me, and You Prevailed": Religious Experience and Homoerotic Sadomasochism in Jeremiah," in *Patriarchs, Prophets and Other Villains*, Gender, Theology, and Spirituality series, ed. Lisa Isherwood (London: Equinox, 2007), 101-9.

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