Abstract and Keywords

The idea that biblical scholars discern the "gender" of a text or tradition by examining a text's worldview, voice, and use of language gained currency in the 1990s with Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes's *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible*. Since then, a steady stream of books and papers has made the case for "masculine" or "feminine" voices in various biblical narratives. Although the boom in scholarship searching for "M" or "F" voices in biblical texts coincided with the growth of queer-theoretical and gender-critical approaches to the Bible, no queer-influenced critique of the practice of gendering texts has yet emerged. This essay argues that the M/F textual schema both implies and reinforces a fixed gender binary, a notion rejected by queer theory in general and queer biblical criticism in particular. In other words, the attempt to recover female voices in the Hebrew Bible is a noble goal, but the conviction that an exegete provides such a recovery by looking to a text's stereotyped "gendered" language or interests is unhelpful to feminist biblical studies.

Keywords: Hebrew Bible, feminist biblical criticism, gender, queer theory, gender performance, ancient Near East, third gender

CAN modern researchers recover female voices in the Hebrew Bible, hidden in plain sight among the male-authored bulk of the corpus? The possibility is tantalizing. If we can identify parts of the Bible that bear the marks of women's interests and concerns, feminist readers gain new ways to relate to and interpret scripture. Additionally, if these scholars find authentic female voices in the Bible, we get closer to finding out what women's lives in ancient Israel were really like. In the landmark work *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (1993), Athalya Brenner and the late Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes propose that this type of recovery is possible.[1] Their book was, and still is, hugely influential in feminist biblical scholarship and precedes a plethora of interpretations that seek to recover authentic female voices in biblical texts.

Much as scholars trying to gender texts might wish to avoid gender stereotypes, the method promoted by Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes virtually guarantees reifying them. Since those doing this work do not generally engage with gender performance theory, a branch of queer theory that questions the inherence of gender, they reproduce the normative understanding of gender difference as it applies to "masculinity" and "femininity." Ironically, the boom in scholarship that searches for "M" or "F" voices in biblical texts coincides with the growth of queer-theoretical and gender-critical approaches to the Bible. However, I know of no queer-influenced critique of the practice of gendering texts. Queer and gender-based approaches question ideas of "man" and "woman," "masculine" and "feminine," "homosexual" and "heterosexual." They aim to expose the (p. 480) complex ideologies that go into constructing and reinforcing these categories. Gender performance methods examine how perceived ideas of masculinity and femininity, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual are produced and shaped by many interlocking factors.

This paper will argue that the M/F textual schema both implies and reinforces a fixed gender binary, a notion that queer theory in general and queer biblical criticism in particular have challenged persuasively. Brenner's and Dijk-Hemmes's method also ignores the role of performance in the construction of gender. Thus, while their attempt to recover female voices in the Hebrew Bible is noble in motivations, the idea that the recovery of women's voices can be done by looking to a text's "gendered" language or interests is unhelpful to feminist biblical studies. It would be more productive for scholars seeking gender equality to look to queer and gender critical methods to analyze the manufactured and contested natures of masculinity and femininity in the biblical texts.

The following steps structure the analysis performed in this article. First, the chapter discusses the methodology proposed by Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes in *On Gendering Texts*. Second, it addresses other scholars' use of these methods, as well as Brenner's self-critique in a later essay. Third, the essay examines the insights into sex and gender that queer theory and queer biblical criticism bring to the table. It explores how the theories of queer-theoretical and gender-critical approaches contribute to the gendering of biblical narratives. Finally, the essay offers a queer theory-influenced deconstruction for the study of female and male voices in the Bible, including a queer critique of the work that used Brenner's and Dijk-Hemmes's methodology.

The Power and Promise of Brenner's and Dijk-Hemmes's Proposal

On Gendering Texts was the result of a collaboration between Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes when they realized that both of them were working on similar projects.[2] These two scholars independently built on the work of S. D. Goitein who, grounded in his research on poetry of Yemenite émigrés to Israel in 1949 and 1950, identifies textual features common in women's writings and literary compositions. He later transfers his discoveries to the Bible where he names various biblical literary genres as women's creations, such as victory songs, mockery songs, women's rebukes, love poems, whispered prayers, dirges and

other laments, as well as the speeches of the wise woman, the soothsayer, the prophetess, and the dancing women. Goitein explains:

(p. 481)

> It is natural for woman, whose emotional life is strong and delicate, to be sensitive to religious poetry and endowed with the gift of song. In a society which does not oppress woman, especially one which does not humiliate her spirit or steal her self-worth from her, these traits find their outlet in creativity. Biblical society was such, and we have therefore found that the Hebrew woman of ancient days lifted up her voice in song.[3]

Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes both cite Gotein, but then expand upon his premise. The authors, operating with a feminist sensibility, set out not to essentialize gender (as Goitein had). Their work, unlike Goitein's, makes no claims that ancient Israel represented a creative paradise for women. Instead, they dissect the patriarchal nature of the world produced by the Bible. Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes ask whether it is possible to establish if a narrative is the product of male or female culture, and, if so, whether such a determination matters. They answer in the affirmative on both counts.[4] Rather than look for the authorship of biblical material, both scholars aim to uncover the putative oral prehistory of the texts. They concentrate on the slippery notion of "voice." Brenner states, "When all or most of the affirmative answers to the questions, Who speaks? Who focalizes the action? Whose viewpoint is dominant?—converge on one and the same textual figure, then that figure embodies the dominant voice of a passage, be it prose narrative or poetic."[5] The project was of great importance, as Brenner explains in the following statement:

> In our view, gendering texts is an invaluable step toward a reconstruction of ancient Israel's culture. Israelite culture, as it is reflected in the Hebrew Bible, is distorted by gender bias and M literary supremacy . . . . By redefining biblical women's (and men's) voices we redefine not only individual texts, not only "women's culture." By so doing we redefine a human culture as a whole, for human societies are bi-gendered.[6]

Dijk-Hemmes also maintains that the project does not need to essentialize gender because the differences in men's and women's textual voices are not attributable to biology. Rather, they are the result of social construction. She affirms that social roles generate gendered interests. As a result, this construction produces a distinct women's culture and authentic women's voices.[7] In other words, Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes assume that biblical literature is not an accurate depiction of gendered life in ancient Israel, but heavily biased by its androcentric representation. They also presuppose a gender binary in their effort to trace "women's" culture in the Hebrew Bible.

In her chapters, Dijk-Hemmes combs the entire corpus for female voices, especially texts that the Bible itself attributes to women. She begins by asking whether a text depicts (p. 482) "reality from a female perspective." Markers of F voice, according to Dijk-Hemmes, include accounts of female experiences and subversions of stereotyped ideas

about women.[8] She cautions that biblical texts may contain a "double voice," a muted women's story detectable alongside or interwoven with a dominant androcentric one. This double voice occurs because biblical women live in a male-dominated culture and their voice is subsumed under androcentric authorship. Women, Dijk-Hemmes suggests, include both authentic experiences and the expectations forced upon them by patriarchal society in their texts.[9] For Dijk-Hemmes, examples of F voices in the Bible include the end of the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5:24–27, 28–30), the women exulting Saul and David's battle kills (1 Sam. 18:7), and the words of wise women (2 Sam. 14, 20). She also considers the Song of Songs to be replete with double voice, reflecting a woman's desires yet bound by a patriarchal world of abusive brothers and watchmen.[10] Dijk-Hemmes sees social criticism embedded in many of these texts. In her view, women would have been more likely to compose these kinds of texts because of their place on the margins of society.

On Gendering Texts, on the Scholar's Bookshelf

Many other scholars have taken up the methodology and goals developed by Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes. For example, Alice Ogden Bellis argues for an authentic female voice in Proverbs 7. She maintains that this woman, cautioning against the temptations of the strange woman, represents an F voice since womanizing men are against the interests of women and the larger community. Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes themselves suggest that this teacher of wisdom could be an F voice. But in their work, they propose that this hypothetical female author had internalized patriarchal strictures. Bellis rejects this argument because it presupposes a modern context in which sexual freedom of women is desirable. Instead, she claims that in an ancient context, this freedom would have been summarily rejected.[11]

Another example, from Richard Bauckham, argues that the book of Ruth represents a case where "a male author has adopted a female voice."[12] Interacting with Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes, Bauckham writes, "What recent feminist discussions of Ruth seem to me (p. 483) to have shown is that the voice with which the text speaks to its readers is female. Readers are offered and drawn into an ancient Israelite woman's perspective on ancient Israelite society."[13] Bauckham argues that the last few lines of Ruth, which give a genealogy for King David, show that the writer of Ruth is male. Still, he maintains that this narrative represents an authentic women's perspective.

Jan Willem van Henten applies Dijk-Hemmes and Brenner's methods to the Book of Judith. There, he argues for an F voice amid the dominant M voice in the text. Such a voice, he argues, presents the title character as an alternative leader to the male authorities. Henten cited as evidence the lengthy genealogy given to Judith, especially in contrast to her husband's ambiguous and lackluster pedigree; Judith's independent actions in the story; and the book's departure from the usual biblical model of men conquering the enemy and women singing about it.[14]

Another example, drawn from Mark Smith's essay on warfare songs in the Bible, engages with Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes's research that genders these compositions as female. Smith cites *On Gendering Texts* favorably: "The tradition of early heroic poetry is in no small way the domain of women, and it is arguable that a good deal of heroic poetry in early Israel is to be situated in the context of women's oral song."[15]

Similarly, Steve Cook refers to Dijk-Hemmes's theory in the analysis of biblical victory songs, specifically citing the argument that women's victory songs critique male militarism that harms women. Cook claims that this analysis should be extended to Habakkuk 3. He notes, for instance, that this biblical chapter shares many elements with other texts that Dijk-Hemmes identifies as women's victory songs: YHVH as divine warrior, warfare imagery, descriptions of water as destructive, and taunting language. Cook also points to female-gendered language in the chapter; the author refers to "my belly" (or womb) and compares his or her feet to a doe, which Cook suggests belies the existence of a feminine voice. He agrees with Dijk-Hemmes's conclusion, that victory songs often represent F voices, but he also articulates how those songs nevertheless reinscribe androcentric interests. Since the doe is a prize animal rather than a meat animal, it serves as a metaphor for the potential mistreatment of women in war. Other aspects of Habakkuk 3 persuade Cook that the chapter displays evidence of simultaneous female, male, and androgynous voices, representing both the perpetrators and victims of war.[16]

Finally, in one of the most recent treatments of Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes's work, Nancy C. Lee uses "Hebrew feminine grammatical indicators, song of lyrical genres associated with women, and distinctive poetic patterns in the Hebrew lyrics of women's attributed (and discerned) voices in comparison to men's poetic patterns" to uncover (p. 484) female voices among the prophetic books.[17] For instance, in parts of First Isaiah Lee sees male and female prophets in dialog. Each uses a different pattern of syllables as well as distinct themes; the man focuses on violence and the woman on peace and children.[18]

In short, scholars have further developed Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes's proposal for recovering M and F voices in the Hebrew Bible. Some, like Bellis, deal with the original texts mentioned in *On Gendering Texts*, arguing with some of Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes's conclusions. Others cite the book's methodology, applying it with varying degrees of critical engagement to other texts. Still others, like Nancy Lee, use Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes's methods as a jumping-off point for a much more detailed schema of discerning texts' gender.

Almost ten years after the publication of *On Gendering Texts*, Brenner herself wrote an essay reflecting upon the book. On the efficacy of finding M or F voices Brenner remarks: "[I]t seems so naïve if full of worthy intentions."[19] Finding authentic female voices in the biblical text is especially challenging because women internalize the dominant male voice, Brenner notes. She writes: "I was not and am not satisfied with the positively triumphant diagnosis of either female or male voices in the text."[20] As a way forward, Brenner proposes that biblical scholars investigate what texts say about gender. Taking a page from reader-response criticism, which recognizes the paramount role of the reader's in-

terpretive lens in making meaning, Brenner suggests reading a text *as if* it contains a female voice and seeing what possibilities that opens regarding its meaning.[21] This new approach represents a limiting of the goals and methods proposed in *On Gendering Texts*. Brenner's reflections, however, have not halted use of the book's methods by other scholars. In fact, her 2002 piece has been rarely cited, especially in comparison to *On Gendering Texts* itself.[22]

Two (and Only Two) Genders?

My methodology for this critique comes from queer-critical approaches to the Bible. Queer critics assume postmodern ideas about the fluidity of sex, gender, and sexuality (p. 485) when they examine biblical texts. Thus, queer biblical criticism builds on feminist criticism even as it works in parallel to it. Queer hermeneutics start from the premise that gender systems, including the categories of "female" and "male," ought to be questioned. In addition, queer analysis problematizes ideas about sexual desire as bivalent—either heterosexual or homosexual, desiring men or desiring women. Queer theory equips biblical scholars to study how sex, gender, and sexual desire are constructed in biblical texts, and how these narratives, their relationships with other texts, and the contexts of readers undermine these constructions.

In this section, I discuss what queer theory can say about efforts to gender texts. I start by arguing that humans do not fall neatly into two and only two gender categories, marshalling evidence from biology and considering what the gender landscape might have looked like in antiquity. Next, I examine textual and iconographic clues from Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbors to suggest that gender was not as rigid as one might imagine. Then I apply this methodology to the gender system of ancient Israel, showing that there are individuals whose biology, sexuality, or life circumstances may have restricted them from being marked as M or F. I discuss the problems of discussing gender without also discussing gender performance. Finally, I return to some of the works discussed above, using the vocabulary of queer theory to reexamine scholarship that engages with the M/F schema.

As reviewer Katharine J. Dell wrote shortly after the release of *On Gendering Texts*, "As one reads on in the book, one realizes that much weight is in fact given to cultural factors in discerning male (M) and female (F) texts—e.g. M and F 'types' in society—and to psychological evaluations of what defines male and female behaviour."[23] By trying to divine "male" and "female" voices in the Bible using the criteria suggested by Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes, readers impose modern notions of gender on the ancient world. I use the word "modern" here on purpose, in contrast to "postmodern," because queer hermeneutics, influenced by postmodernism, questions the "relentless two-sex paradigm."[24]

Brenner writes that gendering texts is important because "human societies are bi-gendered."[25] However, scholars working at the intersection of biology, sociology, history, and gender theory have shown in the last two decades that human societies are not now and probably never have been bi-gendered. The biologist and gender theorist Anne Fausto-

A Queer Critique of Looking for "Male" and "Female" Voices in the Hebrew Bible

Sterling, working on the history of classifications of sex and gender, argues that "labeling someone a man or a woman is a social decision."[26] She discusses not only the idea that gender and its existence as a duality are socially constructed, but that the two-sex system is as well. Though in modern times, surgery on children with non-normative, "either/or, neither/nor" genitalia means that we rarely encounter such individuals as adults, she argues that variant genital and chromosomal configurations are common, perhaps representing as much as 1.7 percent of the general population, and may warrant a revision to a system of at least five genders.[27] Similarly, several cultures recognize categories for people who do not fit into one of the two standard sexes/genders.[28]

As Jonathan Stökl notes, current estimates of the prevalence of intersex people include those whose genitalia may appear normative but whose chromosomal configuration does not match those genitals. Stökl correctly points out that we cannot very well count such individuals as intersex in the ancient world, where no one could conduct DNA tests.[29] The prevalence of those of variant gender in the biblical world, then, would have been limited to people with perceptible anatomical differences. Variant genitals alone may affect one in 2,500 people today, but we do not know what that number may have looked like in ancient Israel.[30] Nevertheless, it seems likely that some small but significant number of individuals in ancient Israel would have, at birth, possessed an anatomical configuration that defied easy categorization as either male or female. There are also those whose anatomy might have become less clearly "male" or "female" later in life, by choice or accident. One obvious example is the eunuch, a term which apparently signified a range of abnormal male anatomical configurations, many of them inflicted on purpose.[31]

I do not deny that the ancients, including biblical authors, had some concepts of what qualities pertained to men and what qualities to women. Certain modes of physical appearance, behaviors, and skills were expected of men and certain others of women.[32] I do, however, argue that we do not know how fixed and universal those concepts of gender were, or what they included. While we do not know much if anything about individuals in ancient Israelite societies who fell outside the traditional two-gender system, recent research has shown evidence of sex and gender ambiguity and fluidity in other parts of the ancient Mediterranean basin.[33] For instance, individuals in ancient Mesopotamia with non-normative genitals at birth were recognized as not fitting into the categories of male or female, and "castrates, eunuchs, transsexuals, and men with undescended testicles" may have formed what Julia Asher-Greve terms a "third gender."[34] Uri Gabbay's research on the *kalû* supports the idea of more than two genders in ancient Mesopotamia. Gabbay argues that the Akkadian word used to describe this gender-ambiguous cultic functionary, *kalû* or *gala*, has etymological roots signifying that it means "one who is both," or what Gabbay characterizes as "third gender."[35] The goddess Ishtar was credited with the power to turn men into women and women into men, suggesting more fluidity than we would expect if ancient Mesopotamia had a strict gender binary.[36] There are several examples from the Ancient Near East of figures whose physical appearance and clothing do not match in gender, such as a statue from Mari with breasts, narrow waist, wide hips, and no beard, wearing men's clothing and with a male name.[37]

A Queer Critique of Looking for "Male" and "Female" Voices in the Hebrew Bible

In Egypt, too, gender is sometimes surprisingly fluid. There are several examples of the female pharaoh Hatshepsut represented in men's clothing and with a beard.[38] The Nile deity Hapi appears with breasts that sometimes are shown leaking fluid to symbolize the fertility associated with the river; sometimes Hapi is shown with a penis and sometimes without one.[39] Kathlyn M. Cooney identifies several bronze figurines from Egypt of the Late Period to Ptolemaic Period (522–30 BCE) that combine female and male elements. For example, the front of one figure depicts a male deity with an erect penis who stands atop a crocodile, ready to spear it, while the reverse side fuses the back of the male deity with a goddess in the form of a lioness. She writes, "This bronze figure combines youth and fertility, male and female, as well as human and animal, providing its owner with many divine aspects in one small figurine, if not in one body." She also points out that a late hymn to Neith discovered at Esna, which discusses the goddess as a primeval creator who is two parts masculine and one part feminine, provides a possible context for such androgynous figures.[40]

The Assyriologist Kathleen McCaffrey proposes evaluating gender-non-conforming images using a multi-gender system in which the genders are normative male, normative female, variant male, and variant female.[41] It has even been proposed that the biblical authors did not have in mind a two-sex system but rather only one sex, "with human sex a continuum of more- and less-perfectly executed maleness."[42] Men were effectively the only sex because they were the one that mattered. Using this schema, individuals with typical male anatomy who married women and fathered children would have been the pinnacle of manliness, male-gendered individuals who failed to conform to biological or social expectations for maleness would have been lesser men, and women, rather than being a category of value in themselves, were essentially not-men. In any event, based on evidence from the ancient Near East, I would argue that we cannot assume that there were two and only two genders in ancient Israel, or that the genders that did exist corresponded precisely to perceived biological sex or to modern expectations of gender traits and roles.

Further, what are we to make of individuals whom ancient Israelite society would have considered female, but who lacked the traditional female concerns seen by Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes? Examples might include women without children, unmarried women, divorced women, those who did not menstruate, or women attracted to other women—whether or not they could have acted on such an attraction. Do such women still have F voices? Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes endeavored not to be essentialist in their proposal of M and F concerns and voices, but instead to consider the differing social roles men and women would have inhabited in the biblical world. But what if some women (and, for that matter, some men) diverged enough from any gender standard so as not to inhabit one of two gender-based social roles?

The idea of gendering texts falls short when those who use it fail to engage with gender performance theory. Performance theory, most closely associated with Judith Butler, argues that gender has no inherent substance—certainly no one-to-one mapping of a complete gender onto one of two straightforward biological realities. Rather gender is con-

structed through the "stylized repetition of acts."[43] The society in which one lives compels one to adopt gender and dictates the set of actions, preferences, and physical affectations that make up a specific gender. Gender is also heavily charged, highly consequential, and complicated to challenge, so one cannot don and doff genders at will.[44] Nevertheless, all gender is performance, even when there is an ostensible "match" between one's physical body and the set of traits and behaviors one puts on. Applied to the practice of gendering texts, this suggests that, even if there are distinctive M and F voices to be found in the Hebrew Bible, they would be reflections not of some deep underlying reality of gender in the ancient world, but of the "stylized repetition of acts" used to construct the genders of "male" and "female." Perhaps a more productive project would be to look at the performance itself rather than seeking the gender of the one doing the performing. When a biblical text strikes the scholar as feminine, the scholar should start by interrogating why that is, if possible teasing out whether the characteristics that read as feminine do so because of something inherent in the text, or whether modern presuppositions about gender influence their interpretation. If there is biblical or extrabiblical ancient Near Eastern evidence for the observed characteristics connoting femininity in the world of the text, the scholar should look at what such femininity does for the text. Why might an author—of whatever gender—have chosen this voice? What purpose does gendered language serve in a text? Ken Stone articulates this point in his methodological essay on gender criticism:

> Which characters embody cultural gender norms successfully, and which characters fall short of such norms or embody them in unexpected ways? Might a character's success or failure at embodying gender norms result from a strategy to cast that character in a particular light, whether positive or negative? Is the text itself always successful at manipulating gender assumptions? Do biblical texts, like persons, sometimes fail to "cite" gender conventions in expected ways or according to dominant norms?[45]

(p. 490) Asking these questions leads to deeper interrogations of gender and its ramifications than do attempts to unearth M or F traditions behind texts.

Queer theory also helps expose some of the problems with scholarly work that uses Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes's methodology to gender texts. Here, I use the queer-theoretical language and concepts outlined above to point out issues with scholarly work that built on Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes's methods. For example, the piece by Alice Ogden Bellis about Proverbs makes assumptions, just as Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes did, about what constitutes female concerns and voice. In Bellis's proposal, women in ancient Israel would have wanted to discourage men from having illicit sex, for the benefit both of the women themselves and of the larger society. After all, one could imagine women who might have an interest in *not* discouraging married men from sex outside marriage, especially in a world where polygyny was permitted. For example, an unmarried woman, widow, or divorcee could hope to use sexuality as a tool to become the second wife of an already-married man. Likewise, a woman working as a prostitute stakes her very livelihood

on married men who stray. There are plenty of possible F voices that would not make sense as being behind Proverbs 7.

Bauckham's article arguing for a male author adopting a female voice in the Book of Ruth also shows some of the problems in Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes's methods. As Bauckham argues, a voice that sounds F to some ears does not necessitate female authorship or even underlying female literary traditions. Though Bauckham does not phrase his argument this way, his account describes a male author putting on literary drag, performing his idea of the feminine. Bauckham's piece shows how facile M and F designations can be, since such determinations ignore literary artifice.

Henten's argument about traces of F voices in the predominantly M text of Judith points out another problem of trying to gender texts: claiming to find "traces" of one gender's voice in a text predominantly composed of the other's leaves unanswered questions about how those traces got there. As Henten notes in his conclusion, "One can only speculate about the original context of the [F] passages of Judith discussed in this final section. There is a possibility that they were originally composed as a parody of male leadership for a female audience. But it is impossible to demonstrate this convincingly." One wonders why a parody of men ends up in a book Henten claims otherwise represents an M voice that has firm ideas about the proper social role for women.[46] When the gendering process finds a mix of M and F voices in a single text, they can make strange bedfellows indeed. Perhaps we can acknowledge the multiplicity and contradictions inherent in biblical texts without trying to ascribe them to the voice of one of two apparently monolithic genders.

Cook's use of Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes is also problematic when one examines it through a gender lens. While I appreciate his nuanced argument that a text may contain more than one type of voice, his division of Habakkuk 3 into gendered voices seems arbitrary and tautological. To assume that only a female speaker would compare her feet to a doe, or that the doe must represent the female voice's anxiety about war, is an (p. 491) overreading of the text. Cook also seems to begin with the premise that victory songs are intrinsically feminine. If one does not accept that premise, the rest of his argument is significantly less convincing. In addition, the idea of androgyny, that an individual can combine elements of the masculine and the feminine, assumes a rigid division between the two. Not only is this an inaccurate representation of gender as scientists and theorists today understand it, but it is most likely an inaccurate picture of gender as it was lived in the ancient Near East.

Lee's book, which argues for discernible M and F voices in the prophetic books, attempts to reinscribe women in what is traditionally perceived as an especially male set of texts. However, Lee ends up reifying gender stereotypes, which is virtually unavoidable when one uses this method. In Lee's telling, not only do F voices and M voices have a completely different set of concerns, they also sound totally different. For example, she argues that men used doublet sound patterns while women used triplets.[47] Thus, when doublets and triplets alternate, she sees female and male voices alternating. In the process of seeking

women's voices among the prophets, Lee ends up arguing that men and women in ancient Israel were so fundamentally different that they spoke what amounts to distinct dialects with different vocabularies.

"Un-gendering" Texts: Toward a Conclusion

One could critique *On Gendering Texts* on several grounds; indeed Athalya Brenner herself offers critical reflections on this type of scholarly analysis. In a review essay when the book first came out, Sara Mandell points out that looking for the gendered oral roots behind biblical texts is a faulty method because not all biblical texts have oral prehistory. She also criticizes the "double voice" concept as circular reasoning.[48] Others, such as J. Cheryl Exum, argue that the criteria used to determine M and F voice is always culturally dependent: "the problem remains how the critic, from a prior position within a gendered discourse with established notions of masculine and feminine, can decide what constitutes M and F without reinscribing those very generalizations in the text."[49] Timothy H. Lim suggests that many of the passages Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes highlight as F texts were probably written by men about traditionally female activities, such as marriage and childbearing. Lim also writes that what qualifies as F voice is overly (p. 492) broad: encompassing women's speeches, men's speeches about women, women's words filtered through male speech, women's perspectives, or women's rituals.[50]

This essay builds on these early critiques using a gender-critical lens. While the goals of Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes in *On Gendering Texts* are laudable, from a queer-theoretical standpoint the book's methodology is deeply flawed. While, at the time of its writing, queer theory was in its infancy and had yet to make its mark on biblical studies, scholars today ought to be aware of the problems with seeking the "true gender" of a voice in the biblical text. Here, I argue against using what we can today clearly recognize as an essentialist and inaccurate gender model to interpret the Bible. While scholars who still cite this methodology aim to welcome women back in to a set of texts that can feel exclusionary, they end up reifying gender binaries that never truly existed in the texts or in the societies that produced them. This methodological approach is ultimately not helpful for feminist interpretive goals.

Gender-based methods, by contrast, offer promising insights for those who wish to read the biblical texts more positively for women. Queer-influenced biblical scholars produce surprising new ideas for welcoming people of all genders and sexualities back to the texts. More helpful than parceling texts into one of two absolute categories, queer scholarship explores the ways in which biblical narratives produce, reinforce, undermine, or even explode ideas of gender. In other words, queer criticism can "un-gender" the texts.

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Notes:

[1] Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden / New York, NY: Brill, 1993).

[2] Each scholar wrote her own chapters for the book. Thus, I refer to each scholar individually when I quote from *On Gendering Texts*. When I speak about the book or its common methodology more generally, I credit both authors.

[3] S. D. Goitein, "Women as Creators of Biblical Genres (trans. Michael Carasik)," *Prooftexts* 8 (1988): 29.

[4] Brenner and Dijk Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts*, 2.

[5] Ibid., 7.

(⁶) Ibid., 13.

(⁷) Ibid., 24–26.

(⁸) Ibid., 106.

(⁹) Ibid., 27. Dijk-Hemmes applies the double voice concept to the Song of Songs, see her "The 'Double Voice' of Her Desire," in *The Double Voice of Her Desire: Texts by Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes*, ed. Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Freda Droes (Tools for Biblical Study 6; trans. David E. Orton; Leiden: Deo, 2005), 179–84.

(¹⁰) Brenner and Dijk Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts*, 79.

(¹¹) Alice Ogden Bellis, "The Gender and Motives of the Wisdom Teacher in Proverbs 7," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 6 (1996): 15–22.

(¹²) Richard Bauckham, "The Book of Ruth and the Possibility of a Feminist Canonical Hermeneutic," *Biblical Interpretation* 5 (1997): 32–33.

(¹³) Ibid., 31.

(¹⁴) Jan Willem van Henten, "Judith as Alternative Leader: A Rereading of Judith 7–13," in *Esther, Judith, and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (A Feminist Companion to the Bible 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 224–52.

(¹⁵) Mark S. Smith, "Warfare Song as Warrior Ritual," in *Warfare, Ritual, and Symbol in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, ed. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritchel Ames, and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2014), 169–70.

(¹⁶) Steve Cook, "Habakkuk 3, Gender, and War," *lectio difficilior: European Electronic Journal for Feminist Exegesis* 1 (2009): 1–16.

(¹⁷) Nancy C. Lee, *Hannevi'ah and Hannah: Hearing Women Biblical Prophets in a Women's Lyrical Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 7.

(¹⁸) Ibid., 23. Lee cites one linguistic source in support of her argument that "[d]ifferences in the sound patterns of men's and women's speech and in composing, the same language in the same culture, are found in numerous traditional cultures." Ibid., 5. However, this appears to be the only linguistic source she refers to in her study. Arguing for major gender differences in phonology would seem to necessitate much greater engagement with linguistic research.

(¹⁹) Athalya Brenner, "Gendering In/By the Hebrew Bible: Ten Years Later," *Old Testament Essays* 15 (2002): 50.

(²⁰) Ibid., 44.

(²¹) Ibid., 45.

(22) With the caveat that indexing of citations in the humanities is very disorganized, I can find only the following citation: Gerald O. West, "Taming Texts of Terror: Reading (against) the Gender Grain of 1 Timothy," *Scriptura* 86 (2004): 160–73.

(23) Katharine J. Dell, "Review," *Vetus Testamentum* 44.3 (1994): 420–22.

(24) Deryn Guest, "From Gender Reversal to Genderfuck: Reading Jael through a Lesbian Lens," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Theresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2011), 19–20.

(25) Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden / New York, NY: Brill, 1993), 13.

(26) Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008), 3. Also see Leonard Sax, "How Common Is Intersex? A Response to Anne Fausto-Sterling," *Journal of Sex Research* 39 (2002): 174–78. Sax counts as intersex only people whose chromosomes do not match their anatomical expression or those whose anatomy is not classifiable as either male or female, leading him to estimate that intersex people make up only about .018 percent of the population. Fausto-Sterling, by contrast, also counts individuals with disorders such as Klinefelter syndrome, in which someone possesses an XXY chromosomal configuration. Such an individual looks male but may have reduced secondary sex characteristics and be infertile. While I understand that individuals with Klinefelter and other chromosomal or hormonal abnormalities may not be medically labeled as intersex today, because these conditions can produce physical characteristics that may historically have led to classification as something other than purely male or female, I would argue that scholars of the ancient world should consider them as intersex.

(27) Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 78–79.

(28) For example, third gender or two-spirit among some Native Americans, or *hijras* in India. Ibid., 108–109.

(29) Jonathan Stökl, "Gender 'Ambiguity' in Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy? A Reassessment of the Data behind a Popular Theory," in *Prophets Male and Female: Gender and Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jonathan Stökl and Corinne L. Carvalho (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2013), 64.

(30) Susannah Cornwall, "Introduction," chap. in *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible: Troubling Bodies in Church, Text, and Society* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1.

(31) Per Kathryn Ringrose, "Greek sources of Late Antiquity, at least in polite prose, used the term *eunuch* to encompass a diverse class of individuals without reference to the extent or nature of their castration, the age at which they were castrated, or their social or civil status. By the second century A.D. . . . the word was also a blanket term covering a variety of genital mutilations, ranging from the cutting of the *vas deferens* (as in a modern vasectomy) to the removal of one or both testicles to the total removal of all sexual or-

gans." See Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 13–14.

(³²) Julia Asher-Greve, "Decisive Sex, Essential Gender," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2–6, 2001*, Vol. 1, ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting (Helsinki, Finland: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 15. See also Julia M. Asher-Greve, "The Essential Body: Mesopotamian Conceptions of the Gendered Body," *Gender & History* 9.3 (1997). Asher-Greve notes that visual and written depictions of people from ancient Mesopotamia are highly sexed and gendered, indicating attributes such as anatomy, clothing, and occupation. She also cites several examples that contain asexual or ambiguously sexed or gendered depictions. Contra Asher-Greve, see Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001). Bahrani sees a strict gender binary in ancient Mesopotamia. See also Deut. 22:5.

(³³) See Lauren E. Talalay and Tracey Cullen, "Sexual Ambiguity in Plank Figures from Bronze Age Cyprus," in *Engendering Aphrodite: Women and Society in Ancient Cyprus*, ed. Diane L. Bolger and Nancy J. Serwint (Ann Arbor, MI: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2002), 181–93; Deborah Sweeney, "Sex and Gender," in *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, ed. Willeke Wendrich (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA, 2011), 1–14.

(³⁴) Asher-Greve, "Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East," 21.

(³⁵) Uri Gabbay, "The Akkadian Word for 'Third Gender': The Kalû (Gala) Once Again," in *Proceedings of the 51st Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, ed. Robert D. Biggs, Jennie Myers, and Martha T. Roth (Ancient Oriental Civilization 62; Chicago, IL: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2008), 49–56.

(³⁶) Kathleen McCaffrey, "Reconsidering Gender Ambiguity in Mesopotamia: Is a Beard Just a Beard?," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2–6, 2001*, ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting (Vol. 2; Helsinki, Finland: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 379–80.

(³⁷) Ibid., 380–81.

(³⁸) Ibid., 390–91.

(³⁹) Malayna Evans Williams, "Signs of Creation: Sex, Gender, Categories, Religion and the Body in Ancient Egypt" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 2011), 223.

(⁴⁰) Kathlyn M. Cooney, "Androgynous Bronze Figurines in Storage at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art," in *Servant of Mut: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Fazzini*, ed. Sue H. D'Auria (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 66.

(⁴¹) McCaffrey, "Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East," 388.

(^{42}) Cornwall, "Introduction," 14. Cornwall cites Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (rev. ed.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 8.

(^{43}) Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (second ed.; New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 179.

(^{44}) Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993).

(^{45}) Ken Stone, "Gender Criticism: The Un-Manning of Abimelech," in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee (second ed.; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 192.

(^{46}) Henten, "Judith as Alternative Leader," 252–53.

(^{47}) Lee, *Hannevi'ah and Hannah*, 15.

(^{48}) Sara Mandell, "Searching for a Woman's Voice: Review Essay," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 13.2 (Winter 1995): 87. Mandell also criticized the work as derivative and not objective.

(^{49}) J. Cheryl Exum, "Feminist Study of the Old Testament," in *Text in Context: Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study*, ed. A. D. H. Mayes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 101.

(^{50}) Timothy H. Lim, "The Book of Ruth and Its Literary Voice," in *Reflection and Refraction: Studies in Biblical Historiography in Honour of A. Graeme Auld*, ed. W. Brian Aucker and Robert Rezetko (Boston, MA: Brill, 2007), 269. Lim writes further on p. 270: "To say that depiction of war and violence is specifically male and not female is facile and simply untrue whether in modern or ancient literature."

Caryn Tamber-Rosenau

Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, Ph.D., is Instructional Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies and Religious Studies at the University of Houston, Texas, U.S.A. Her research interests include feminist and queer interpretations of the Bible, literature of the Second Temple period, and Jewish reception of the Bible. She is the author of Women in Drag: Gender and Performance in the Hebrew Bible and Early Jewish Literature (Gorgias Press, 2018).