
The volume is a collection of essays gathered primarily from the “Whence and Whither: Methodology and the Future of Biblical Studies” program unit of the International SBL meetings in 2003 and 2004. The editors’ preface suggests that the essays examine the intersection between constructions of gender and religious discourses in antiquity (ix). The “mapping” in the title refers to the aim of the text to provide a cartography of the role of gender in ancient religious discourse and, conversely, the religious dimensions of ancient gender conceptualizations. The book includes seventeen essays covering a wide range of topics, some of which fit the aim of the text, others have either little to do with gender or nothing at all to do with religious discourse. This is not to undercut the value of the essays in and of themselves, but only to point to the difficulty of finding a common thread to weave through such a diverse assortment of material.

The introductory essay by Virginia Burrus is helpful in listing points of contact between the various essays—masculinity, sexuality, the body, and empire—even while noting that the essays do not “explicitly or expansively” take up the topic of gender and religious discourse. Nevertheless, Burrus observes that collectively the essays highlight ambivalence as a key aspect of the intersection between religious discourse and gender construction. This ambivalence is manifest in the way that religious discourse is deployed in the “competition among cultural claimants of masculine perfection” and also reveals the “subversive or counterhegemonic gender constructions to which empire paradoxically gives rise” (9-10). Another way of expressing this ambiguity is in the tension between a desire to conform to a normative masculinity as defined by the cultural elite and the urge to resist this norm by adopting deviant gender constructions. Burrus is correct that for the most part, this ambivalence is only evident in the volume collectively. While a few essays do explicitly address the ambiguous nature of ancient gender constructions, more often the gender analysis leans in one direction or the other.

For example, several essays present strong arguments for the drive to conformity and competition for masculine perfection in ancient religious discourse. Swancutt’s well-argued essay (which, however, is also an example of a contribution with no attention to religious discourse) focuses on rhetorical strategies employed by elite Roman men to reassert cultural gender norms in the face of threatened masculinity. Specifically, Swancutt offers a detailed analysis of the use of tribas as an imperial gender stereotype that was created as a propaganda tool to use against the politically active Roman matron. As she argues, the tribas is not a figure taken over from the Greeks but a “gender-monstrous Greek penetrator,” invented whole cloth by the Romans as a reflection of and response to the growing power of Roman women. Along a different line, D’Angelo’s analysis of Philo also focuses on cultural (and gender) conformity. In this case, she shows how Philo’s use of gender and religious discourse is influenced by Roman imperial moral propaganda. Philo argues, according to D’Angelo, that the same qualities that are distinctive to Judaism—obedience to the law and devotion to one
god—enable the Jews to be the most morally responsible and family oriented people of the Roman Empire. At the same time, the good order of the household produced by adherence to the Jewish law (especially control over women and slaves) distinguishes the Jews from the effeminate Egyptians in Alexandria. The Jewish community thus emerges as superior in masculine perfection to the Egyptians and on par with, or even surpassing, the Romans. An example of the rhetorical use of gendered discourse to best an opponent is found in Ivarsson’s essay on the vice lists in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Illustrating how new insights can emerge from a focus on gender, Ivarsson shows how Paul engages a convention in Greco-Roman moral philosophy in which young men are chastised for their unruly effeminate behavior. Paul’s use of vice lists is a way of doing the same—treating the Corinthians as arrogant young men in need of chastisement from him, their spiritual father. Indeed, yielding to Paul’s authority is the only way these Corinthians will mature into real men, and thus inherit the kingdom of their heavenly father.

Other essays focus not on conformity or reinscription, but on subversion through deviant gender constructions. Lopez’s study of the Paul of Galatians in light of imperial iconography leads her to interpret his work among the Gentiles as a mission to the “nations” which have been emasculated by Roman imperial domination. Paul presents himself as a new man, embracing a non-dominant masculinity that resists and rejects the violence of Roman masculine conquest. Moreover, his mission is one that brings together the defeated—Jews, the nations, women, barbarians, and others rendered powerless by Rome (161). In a similar vein, Perkins argues that the story of the martyred Perpetua and Felicitas challenges the typical aversion to the body in Roman literature by embracing the maternal body in all its physicality. This distinctly Christian emphasis on the suffering and vulnerable body undercuts the dominant group’s disavowal and disparagement of the body (and the projection of its own disparaged bodies onto lower class bodies).

While both of these essays add new insight to the texts in question, they also show the limits of an interpretation that elides the ideological ambivalence so characteristic of ancient gender constructions. In the case of Perpetua, while the maternal imagery is present throughout much of the narrative, it does give way at times to a non-maternal, differently gendered body. When Perpetua’s father refuses to bring her baby to nurse, God removes the pain from Perpetua’s breasts and the infant’s need to nurse. More tellingly, in Perpetua’s fourth vision, she becomes a man and battles her opponent to victory. These are significant instances of bodily transformation away from the maternal that are not convincingly addressed in the essay. Similarly, Paul is a figure who is ripe for analysis of gender ambivalence. In the very letter that Lopez sees Paul’s non-dominant masculinity expressed, he is also reasserting his authority and dominance over the Galatians and wishing his opponents would castrate themselves.

There are essays in the volume that explicitly treat the ambivalent nature of gender construction. Not surprisingly, they are also the essays most influenced by postcolonial theory, for which ambivalence is a key feature. Thurman’s essay, for example, reads the Gospel of Mark in tandem with Xenophon’s An Ephesian’s Tale, arguing that both works