Requiring an Explanation

Hegemonic Masculinities in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Traditions

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Time and time again, it has been pointed out that the writings included in the Bible are written by men, to be read by men, and that the values and ideas reflected on its pages are cycling around men's interests. Ideals, preoccupations, and anxieties found there are to a great extent shared with and peculiar to men in male-centred and male-privileged societies: anxieties relating to female care and services and to ‘legitimate’ offspring; preoccupations with physical strength, individual or collective through access to larger armies; preoccupations with the justification of violence and killing to defend one's interests (which are identified with God's interests) – these concerns and related ones fill a vast number of the Bible's pages. Vanity and competition for esteem, honour, power and reputation are known pursuits among men in patriarchal societies as such, and we also find frequent examples of this in the Bible.¹

Reading ancient texts that reinforce patriarchal values and androcentric perspectives may estrange modern readers raised in modern societies in which gender equality is one of the highest values.² Much gender-critical research on


² On gender equality as a mainstream value in Western democracies, see, for example, Nancy Fraser, ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’, New Left Review 56 (2009), pp. 97–120 (98).
the Bible in recent years has focused on what happens when the ancient ideals, values and preoccupations meet the twenty-first century. Subconsciously or consciously, readers make a choice: either to be estranged from this most global of cultural texts or to adjust their own expectations and perspectives so that the Bible meets them. It is a problem in modern Western, secularised societies (i.e. with an ambition of keeping church and state, religious and public spheres separate) that while the public at large has written off the Bible as deeply compromised and promoting a value system that is outdated and needs replacement, in many religious communities its association of divinity and masculinity is still taken as God-given. This divide can result in a form of ‘schizophrenic’ compartmentalization in the minds of those who have to inhabit in equal measure both the space of the religious community and that of a social, public, political sphere that promotes equal opportunities in theory at least, although far from always in practice.

Comprehensive, longstanding and robust feminist criticism of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament has largely dealt with how women within patriarchal value systems have been represented as objects rather than as subjects, or as causes of trouble although they are sometimes vessels for the solution – if they are visible at all. It has also pointed out how women have carved out a space for agency within the structural confines – which are flexible and less stable than they look at first sight. Gradually this scholarly approach, critical towards patterns of gender binarism, has been extended to put under critical scrutiny also biblical heteronormativity with its accompanying models and example stories of desirable and undesirable sexual and intimate practices. More recently, intersectional approaches have analyzed how patterns of gender and sexuality intersect with other social hierarchies such as ethnicity or economic class.

We have also for some time seen critical masculinity studies in the Bible, although mainly in Hebrew Bible, and the number of such works is growing. This year, there are at least two biblical journal issues devoted to the topic. One of them is the current issue of *Biblical Interpretation*. In this special issue, per-

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4 The other one is a special issue of *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 2:2 (2015), guest edited by Ovidiu Creangă, Adriaan van Klinken and Peter-Ben Smit. For a recent reader in masculinity in Hebrew Bible studies that also includes pioneers such as Stephen D. Moore and David