Kalmanofsky’s book operates from a feminist interpretation of gender as socially and performatively constructed. Her thesis is that there are specific “gender-playing” texts in the Hebrew Bible that intentionally violate conventional gender norms, though not for the purpose of undermining those norms, but instead to reinforce them. She claims that in these texts, “Israel’s women learn to submit to Israel’s men, and Israel’s men learn to submit to Israel’s male God” (p. 3). In this way, she sets herself apart from queer readings of text that seek to disrupt such gender binaries. Her methodology is primarily textual and intertextual, rather than theoretical, in that she attempts a close-reading of the texts, paying attention to literary details and the rhetorical argument of each text, followed by the identification of an overarching gender ideology of the texts.

To assess the effectiveness of her argument, Kalmanofsky’s book can be evaluated against four outcomes which need to be achieved in order for her argument to work. First, she needs to show that there are indeed conventional gender norms in the Hebrew Bible that could be played upon. Second, she needs to demonstrate that the texts intend to frame their characters by their genders, rather than gender being an incidental facet of the characters. Third, the texts must be shown to purposefully depict their characters transgressing gender norms. Fourth, she needs to demonstrate that common themes emerge across the different texts that can constitute a consistent gender ideology.

Kalmanofsky attempts to deliver on the first outcome in the introduction to her book, where she provides an overview of biblical gender norms that apply to humanity and God. While she is successful in showing that there are typical sets of behaviour associated with human masculinity and femininity in the Hebrew Bible, she is less successful in proving that God is the “ideal male from which essential characteristics of human maleness can be drawn” (p. 11). In particular, her analysis ignores texts in the Hebrew Bible which compare God to feminine figures and roles, leaving it open to the charge of selective reading.

The second and third outcomes are the goals of the main body of the book (chapters one to seven) where Kalmanofsky undertakes her analysis of the so-called gender-playing texts. Kalmanofsky’s depiction of gender-play is particularly convincing in chapters two and three when she discusses Judg. 4

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and 13—16 respectively. Her argument is especially robust in those chapters because it is predicated on the use of overt gender markers, such as the words איש (“man”) or אשה (“woman”), at significant points in the text which thus clearly signals intentionality in the texts to frame themselves by the category of gender. Moreover, she reinforces her argument by showing how the gender-play of these texts contribute to the book of Judges’ overall rhetorical purposes, namely that the book uses the violation of gender norms to demonstrate the “chaos of the world” (p. 47) in the absence of a king.

In contrast, she is less persuasive in her readings of some of the other texts. For example, in her reading of the deception episode in Gen. 27, she argues that “Isaac welcomes Rebecca’s deception since it enables him to remain submissive [to God] and prevents him from engaging in unpleasant acts, such as sacrificing a beloved son [Esau]” (p. 156). Isaac’s submissiveness, Kalmanofsky argues, is a positive expression of femininity in Isaac since it is submission to the purposes of a male God. However, this seems to go against the textual evidence which suggests that Isaac acted to avoid being deceived (Gen. 27:21) and that he had genuinely been deceived (Gen. 27:33).

Therefore, in this episode, the second and third outcomes do not appear to be achieved: neither does gender appear to be the intended organizing category nor does the violation of gender norms appear to be purposeful. This is an example of the key challenge that Kalmanofsky continually faces throughout the book and only partially manages to resolve, namely, that while gender is often an important interpretive category in the Hebrew Bible, it is not the only such category. Human identity consists of more than just gender. However, the hermeneutic that Kalmanofsky applies in the book appears to be monolithic, leaving no space for alternate organizing conceptual categories other than gender.

Finally, with regard to the fourth outcome: If one can accept her readings of the various texts, Kalmanofsky can be commended for effectively bringing together her findings in the conclusion of her book to argue for her thesis of an overarching gender ideology. Building on this, she then provides helpful avenues for further research, such as studying other possibly gender-playing texts, studying stories of women who manifest power yet do not compromise the gender hierarchy, and studying male figures who are most intimate with God to see if they exhibit a loss of masculinity.

In summary, Kalmanofsky’s book is often insightful, especially with regard to how she carefully analyses text to show characterization in biblical narrative. Her interpretations, while not always convincing, are nonetheless thought-provoking and encourage the reader to further investigation.