

UnManning Moses

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It is nothing new to say that the texts of the Bible, and in particular the Old Testament, are hopelessly patriarchal. It is a man's book, written by men, for men, and featuring predominantly male characters. So much so, that representation and experience of women in the text is a common point of conjecture, given that female voices and experience are mediated to us through this now multi-layered patriarchal prism. We are indebted to the pioneering work of scholars who have deconstructed the layers of ideology and laid bare some of the assumptions regarding the construction of women in these texts. Likewise, we are indebted to them for the new approaches which have been introduced to our discipline through their efforts, enriching our work in innumerable ways.¹

One of the trajectories that feminist criticism set into train was the investigation of gender roles and performance. We know that gender roles are culturally formed and performed, and that within any specific culture, a variety of masculinities or femininities are to be expected. To talk of a biblical masculinity in any singular sense, then, is fraught with this cultural ambiguity, particularly given the diverse set of historical questions which bear upon any responsible reading of the scriptural text. Further, we must bear in mind the weight of our own culture's view of gender and the way in which that influences our reading, a point well borne out in Clines' essay on David.² Nonetheless, Clines lays out a typology of biblical masculinity under six categories: the fighting male, the persuasive male, the beautiful male, the bonding male, the womanless male, and the musical male. While these categories come from a reading of David and not the whole Old Testament

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canon, Clines asserts his view that the myth of masculinity enshrined in the David story was potent amongst Israelite men and must have been influential in the ongoing perception of masculinity within that culture. It is easy to see how these categories (perhaps with the exception of the beautiful male) might be used in a more comprehensive study of Moses' own masculinity. For the purposes of this more limited paper, my emphasis will be on the categories of the bonding male and the persuasive male. I will also draw on the work of Susan Haddox, who provides a less-clearly developed typology than Clines, but who nonetheless identifies key traits in the characterisation of masculinity. Haddox identifies three broadly conceived components: honour, potency, and wisdom.³ Together, these features make up what is best described as a hegemonic masculinity, a term developed by Robert Connell in his influential monograph, *Masculinities*.⁴ Hegemonic masculinity is that demonstration of masculinity which is culturally exalted as the ideal type. Such men are not necessarily the bearers of powerful office, and indeed, this myth of masculinity may well be propagated through fictional characters, such as James Bond, Jason Bourne, Frank Underwood, Harvey Spectre, Don Draper, and so on.⁵ However, as Connell notes, hegemony is unlikely to be achieved without a correspondence between cultural ideals and institutional power, so that in our world, top level corporate, business, and military demonstrations of masculinity must play into the construction of the idealised type.⁶

The text I will consider is the story of Numbers 20: the waters of Meribah. In it, Moses is confronted by a mob of angry people, suffering from a lack of food and water. It is not the first instance of such complaints. Typically, these events stir up the wrath of God, and a number of people are made to suffer on account of their murmuring whether by famine or fire.⁷ But no such report is present here. Indeed, it appears that the complaint is entirely justified. In the face of the reality, Moses and Aaron have little option but to retreat and seek the wisdom of the Lord on this matter. The result is intended to be a demonstration of God's holiness, with water issuing forth from a rock sufficient to sate the thirst of the thronging people and their livestock, and while that ultimately happens, Moses is chastened on account of his actions. Rather than follow the divine decree accurately, Moses departs from the script, seemingly taking responsibility and so credit for the miracle of the water. This story, then, allows us to engage these categories of masculinity, and examine the nature of the relationships within the text. It will also

allow for a discussion of agency as it relates to the divine and human, and, in particular, male subjects.

Honour

Honour is a fluid social category that helps determine one's relative standing in the midst of a community. Honour can be earned, and can also be lost. It is a category that belongs almost exclusively to men (see Proverbs 11), in as much as the provision for and protection of women was central to a man's maintenance of honour. This final point has a strong resonance with our story in Numbers 20. Confronted by a lack of water, the people come to quarrel with Moses and Aaron (Numbers 20:3). The lack of water is seen as being the fault of Moses, which is to say, there is an operating assumption that it is his responsibility to provide sustenance for the people of Israel, who, continuing the association, comprise Moses' house. In some sense, this is the ultimate *bēt 'āb* (father's house)—the basic family unit of biblical Israel—which takes in its human members, inheritable property, and so on. Leadership and social responsibility relating to the house belong to the father, in this instance imagined as Moses.⁸

The complaints of the Israelites might be imagined as the complaints of children, or perhaps more seriously, as an attack on Moses' honour, and a persistent one at that. The so-called 'murmuring motif' is a common theme of the wilderness narrative, with a series of complaints made against Moses for a variety of reasons, most notably a lack of food and water (a complaint which seems justified), but also against the nature of Moses' leadership, in the case of the Korahite rebellion just four chapters previously (Numbers 16). Whether we see Moses functioning as the father of Israel or not, the complaints made to and about him, both in regards to his provision of food and the nature of his leadership, all have a gendered aspect to them. Attacks on Moses' leadership—whether familial or civic—are an attack on his masculinity, or more precisely, on the performance of his masculine duties. That is, Moses isn't 'man enough' to discharge his responsibilities.⁹ Moses' response, with the miraculous provision of water, and the performance which accompanies it ('Listen, you rebels!') serves not only to repel the attack on his honour, but, actually, to grow it further. By winning this 'duel', the honour of Moses is increased while that of the rebels is diminished. Moses asserts himself as 'the man.'

Potency

Introducing the notion of potency as an aspect of masculinity, Haddox stresses that potency is demonstrated in a variety of arenas: warfare, leadership, and procreation; and it is related to physical wholeness and autonomy.¹⁰ Each of these are instructive in relation to Moses at various points throughout his story, even while some of them are less prominent in its telling. Amongst all the roles we readily attribute to Moses, that of military leader is not always prominent, and yet it is unlikely that Israel would have survived long at all without Moses' command of his forces, nor would Moses have survived as leader of the people without a certain skill in violence. Moses moves from murderer (Exodus 2:11–15) to protector of vulnerable women (Exodus 2:15) to the leader of a vast horde of people responsible for the complete annihilation of towns and cities. Not only that, in Exodus 32:27 Moses encourages a group of Levites to dispose of a great number of their own families and friends. Clines observes that if the capacity to kill is the quintessential male trait of the Hebrew Bible, then this sort of act must represent a triple masculinity.¹¹ The Levites act 'according to the word of Moses', reinforcing his position as their 'commander' and demonstrating his potency. We have here, in the demonstration of Moses' acts of violence, an approach to Clines' category of 'the fighting male'.

As noted above, Moses was the target of rebellion on account of his leadership of the wandering people. Korah asks directly: 'You have gone too far . . . why do you exalt yourself above the assembly of the LORD?' (Numbers 16:3).¹² The protest is to do with service in the tabernacle, and comes directly at Moses' leadership and notions of holiness. The divine legitimisation of Moses' leadership (and elevated holiness, for that matter) comes with the ensuing earthquake (which Moses appears to foresee) and the death of Korah and his fellow rebels, and their families. Again, a certain violence is involved (though not enacted by Moses) and Moses' leadership is strengthened. Moses again emerges as 'the man'.

Likewise, Moses' own family take aim at his leadership in Numbers 12 on account of his marriage to a Cushite woman. This is a serious matter: if Moses' leadership in his family unit is eroded, how can he possibly stand as the head of the entire assembly? The response is emphatic, with Miriam famously struck with leprosy, and Aaron repenting for their collective foolishness (Numbers 12:11). It is clear. Moses' leadership and manliness will withstand any challenge, and dramatically so.

Moses' sexual potency is perhaps the least well developed aspect of this particular category. We are aware of his two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. However, it is a feature of Moses' story that his wife and children are largely absent. We know of Zipporah, who may well be one and the same as the Cushite woman who so upsets Miriam and Aaron. But Zipporah is hardly a major character in the story, and neither are Gershom and Eliezer. Moses seems uninterested in them and uninterested in the drive to produce heirs so common amongst other males in the Bible. It is possible to suggest that Moses is nearly the model 'womanless male' imagined by Clines.

In regards to wholeness, we might see something which inhibits Moses' masculinity in Exodus 3:10, when he makes his confession of lacking eloquence, given his slow tongue and speech.¹³ Is it possible to see a speech impediment here, a hindrance to the masculine role of potent speech and persuasion? Perhaps. But much of the narrative of the Pentateuch is punctuated by the report that 'Moses said'. After the initial meetings with the Pharaoh in Egypt, it appears that Moses overcomes his stage fright and develops into a formidable public speaker (and singer, which picks up Clines' category of the 'musical male'). This particular trait appears quite strongly in Numbers 20. Confronted with the complaints of the congregation, Moses says nothing until he dramatically taunts the accusers with his rhetorical question, 'Shall we bring water for you out of this rock?' (Numbers 20:10). Moses' previous silence serves to increase the effect of his pronouncement, and as the water gushes forth, the words become more and more potent.

Wisdom

Haddox defines wisdom as the demonstration of good judgement and appropriate behaviour in different circumstances.¹⁴ This is hardly exhaustive of the range of meanings possible when we consider the theological idea of wisdom in the Old Testament, but it provides a sufficient lens for my purpose in this instance. Moses is confronted with a situation that requires an exercise of wisdom. In the face of the rebels, Moses could easily engage them at their level, point to his history of provision in the past, enter into a slanging match, or get defensive. Given the situation, which is to say, a real lack of water presenting a major issue to the people, Moses didn't have a lot to gain from that and chooses not to be baited by it. Rather, he walks away and consults with YHWH as to how to deal with the situation. I guess we would concur that this is a demonstration of good judgement and appropriate behaviour.

However, where Moses comes unstuck in this scene is the point in which he deviates away from the divine command. That is, the point where he takes credit for the miracle which ensues. It is possible to defend Moses here. After all, this is the same process he undertook previously in Exodus 17 with no such ramification. The difference here, though, is Moses' speech: 'Shall we bring water for you out of this rock?' (Numbers 20:10). Moses is told simply to command the rock to give water, not to taunt the people in a way which seems to suggest this result is Moses' own doing. Further, there is no command to strike the rock as he does here (despite the instruction to take the staff, and the use of the staff in the Exodus account). It seems, then, that in the eyes of YHWH, Moses has not demonstrated good judgement, nor appropriate behaviour in this instance, and the consequence is severe: exclusion from the land of Canaan.

We might say here, then, that the episode is a mixed one in regards to wisdom for Moses. While he succeeds admirably in the first scene, he suffers a monumental failure in the second. His failure and the consequence meted out to him as a result constitute a severe curtailing of his manliness. That is, it is a thoroughly unmanly experience.

The persuasive male

As has already been noted, Moses is introduced as one with some form of speech problem. This impediment is obviously a hindrance to masculinity, if persuasion is held to be a primary metric. And yet one could hardly argue against the notion that Moses overcomes his impediment, or lack of confidence, and presents as the quintessential persuasive male. Moses, from the early moments of his story, is speaking boldly to the Pharaoh, convincing the Israelite captives of their impending release against all odds, speaking with no small candour to God. That continues to develop. In many instances, just as we have seen, Moses demonstrates a capacity to talk in situations which move to resolution. Oftentimes, this trait is used in relation to God. On numerous occasions, Moses manages to avert disaster for Israel by arguing with God. Consider, for example, the story of Exodus 32. The people of Israel dance, drink, and revel around a newly minted golden calf. YHWH is incensed, and determines to wipe out the entirety of this decrepit people and to start again with Moses and his family. But Moses, with incredible rhetorical skill, turns God away from this act of wrath by appealing to Divine reputation. 'What would the Egyptians think, if you did that? Why

give them a chance to think poorly of what you have done?’ And, remarkably, God changes direction,¹⁵ persuaded by Moses’ words.

Moses displays an intelligence of speech. He demonstrates a power with words which creates alternate realities for him. As Clines notes, the master of persuasion wields a form of power which is not alternative to physical strength but, rather, is part of the repertory of the powerful male.¹⁶ Moses’ words matter. And yet, in Numbers 20 it is Moses’ words which are part of the problem he creates for himself. While his taunting of the people presents Moses as a victor in their battle, it also represents a particular failure.

The bonding male

The ‘bonding male’ as a category recognises something about the relational aspect of human existence, and the type of relationships that exist between men. Clines cites a series of literary ‘partners’ who demonstrate a myth of devotion between male friends, forged in some form of crisis and struggle.¹⁷ He goes on to argue that the ideology of this form of friendship contains elements of loyalty, exclusivity, commitment to a common cause, and a valuing of this particular relationship above all others.¹⁸ In these relationships, men become ‘close’ to one another and develop a type of intimacy which is different from the intimacy shared by female friends, or in male-female friendships. As in the examples shown above, the relationship develops in the midst of activity, rather than in the sharing of one’s inner being, or what might normally be called ‘intimacy’. This ‘covert intimacy’¹⁹ is very powerful in men, even while it appears to be instrumental in nature. This is Clines’ characterisation of the relationship between David and Jonathan: that it is instrumental rather than affective, lacking a strong emotional bond.²⁰

An argument can be made that this type of relationship is what we find between YHWH and Moses, and it is this bond which is broken in this story. Certainly we can see loyalty at play in the Moses and YHWH story, as Moses is continually the object of YHWH’s protection and legitimisation. Their friendship is formed in the experience of the exodus, an agonising time. They share a common commitment, and this is an exclusive relationship: only Moses speaks with YHWH face-to-face. And yet in this scene Moses breaches loyalty. Taking credit for his friend’s work, Moses devalues the relationship, and it is irreparably broken. Having broken trust, having opted out of the common cause, Moses will no longer share in the instrumentality of the relationship.

Agency

Having examined these five categories, we now turn to the notion of agency, though this notion was hinted at in the previous section on potency where a passing reference was made to autonomy. Agency refers to the capacity to act in a way which brings about a particular result or effect. Enfield suggests it contains elements of flexibility and accountability.²¹ Flexibility refers to the degree to which one can freely determine the elements of a course of behaviour and its results in multiple senses: the physical carrying out of the behaviour, the planning and design of the behaviour, the placing of the behaviour in an appropriate context, and the anticipation of likely effects of the behaviour. Accountability is the extent to which one can expect or demand that other people will react to certain behaviour in certain ways, for instance, asking for reasons, sanctioning, praising, blaming, and so on. These aspects of agency provide insight into the events of Numbers 20 and the role of Moses and response of YHWH.

Hegemonic masculinity is perhaps the greatest demonstration of agency, at least in the biblical world. In a world in which the primary social unit is the *bêt 'āb*, it is near impossible to argue against this claim. This is not to deny the reality of agency for men who do not hold the social rank, or of women. But, at best, theirs is a limited agency, which is demonstrated time and time again throughout the narrative.²² The idealised man operates beyond the social and even legal parameters which constrict others. They control their destiny, their own behaviours, and the behaviours of others. They anticipate freedom of movement and overcome resistance to their will, reinforcing the social fabric which exalts the particular form of masculinity demonstrated in this individual. As far as the narrative of Moses' life goes, he stands as the seminal hegemonic male, the one who speaks face-to-face with God, the one chosen to ascend the mountain, the one who dies at 120, with eyes undiminished and vigour unabated (Deuteronomy 34:7).

Except that is only part of the story. In Numbers 20, Moses oversteps his agency. Is Moses responsible for the result of the action? Is it even his idea? Does he plan it? Does he act appropriately through its execution? The answer to these questions is a resounding No! Further, in his actions Moses demonstrates an awareness of how the response of the people will ensue—one of great joy and adulation, no doubt—and yet despite his limited agency in the event, Moses seeks full praise. Enfield talks of the accountability of speakerhood,²³ and it appears that in this scene, Moses presents

himself as the agent of the message and the deliverer of the miracle. And so, in response, YHWH teaches Moses something about agency, and shows him who the real man is. What this reveals is that agency is (almost) always shared,²⁴ but there is a principal agent. In this instance, YHWH plans the action, but Moses carries it out. This is the way it has always been! YHWH has always been the agent of Israel's deliverance, but that agency has been shared with Moses. It has been YHWH who has planned and designed the actions, but those plans have often involved active participation by Moses. That has, at times, led to confusion about who was responsible for those actions. In Exodus 32:1, the people of Israel talk of Moses as the one who had led them out of Egypt, an assertion that is also found in the mouth of YHWH (Exodus 32:7). It seems, then, that there is, at some level, recognition of shared divine-human agency. At other times, YHWH shares no credit with Moses at all, speaking emphatically in the first person of his acts of deliverance ('You have seen what *I* did to the Egyptians, and how *I* bore you on eagle's wings,' Exodus 19:4).

Moses' claim to sole agency is an attack on YHWH's hegemonic masculinity. For reasons which are not abundantly clear, YHWH takes umbrage at Moses' presumption here and uses it to assert the pre-eminence of divine agency and potent masculinity. As the bearer of hegemonic masculinity, YHWH expects Moses to subvert his own agency in order to support the system. But Moses fails to do so, and in the face of a rival, YHWH acts.

Conclusion

These categories of masculinity have provided a lens by which to revisit Numbers 20, and to assess the behaviour and sanctioning of Moses present within them. We see him assert his masculinity over those who confront him. In this, he displays a range of the behaviours consistent with hegemonic masculinity, and the response of the people to him (which is repeated in several similar incidents) reinforces the point: there is a culturally negotiated subordination to the figure of idealised masculinity. This text further demonstrates that YHWH is also imagined within this framework. At times, YHWH has shared agency with Moses, an arrangement which allowed Moses to ascend the culturally exalted heights of community leadership. In the broad house of Israel, Moses seemingly dared to believe that he was the father. But, in an assertion of potency and agency, YHWH demonstrates that

for the hegemonic male, no relationship is too sacred, no friend too close when a threat to dominance appears.

Endnotes

1. Amongst others, see Danna Nolan Fewell, 'Feminist reading of the Hebrew Bible: Affirmation, resistance and transformation,' *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39 (1987): 77–87; Tikva Simone Frymer–Kensky, *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism*, JPS Scholar of Distinction Series (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006); Carolyn Osiek, 'The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives,' in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985): 93–106; Susanne Scholz, *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible*, Introductions in Feminist Theology (London: T & T Clark, 2007); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 10th anniversary edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001); Phyllis Trible, 'Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies: Emerging Trends in Biblical Thought,' *Christian Century*, 99.4, (1982): 116–18; *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).
2. David J. A. Clines, 'David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible,' in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995): 212–43. Clines goes on to talk of the 'Triumph of modern masculinity,' and the way in which the more problematic aspects of David's life are pressed into the service of a contemporary worldview (243).
3. Susan E. Haddox, 'Is There a "Biblical Masculinity"? Masculinities in the Hebrew Bible,' *Word & World* 36 (2016): 5–14.
4. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 77–78. See also, R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,' *Gender & Society* 19 (2005): 829–59.
5. These three final figures are characters on House of Cards, Suits, and Mad Men (dealing with Government, Law, and Business, respectively). In each

of these fictional cases, the hegemonic ideal is contrasted against a range of other men who demonstrate a less-than-ideal masculinity. In each instance, the failings of the idealized figure pale in comparison to their positively-received traits.

6. Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.
7. See, for example, the story in Numbers 11.
8. For a consideration of the parental role Moses plays to Israel, see Anthony Rees, 'Moses: Mother of Israel?' in *Making Sense of Motherhood: Biblical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Beth Stovell (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 16–26.
9. See the section in J. Richard Middleton's paper in this issue, 15–16, where God challenges Job to gird up his loins 'like a man'.
10. Haddox, 'Is there a "biblical masculinity"?', 6.
11. David J. A. Clines, 'Dancing and Shining at Sinai: Playing the Man in Exodus 32–34'; in *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, The Bible in the Modern World, ed. Ovidiu Creanga (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 55.
12. This rebellion is also a challenge to Aaron's role, and he, like Moses, is strongly vindicated.
13. We see here a connection to Clines' category of the 'persuasive male'.
14. Haddox, 'Is There a "Biblical Masculinity"?', 7.
15. Not entirely, however, as a plague comes and wipes out an unmentioned number of people (Exodus 32:35).
16. Clines, 'David the Man', 220.
17. Clines, 'David the Man', 224.
18. Clines, 'David the Man', 225. These elements all seem present in the great Australian Anzac myth.
19. Michael A. Messner, 'Friendship, Intimacy, and Sexuality', in *The Masculinities Reader*, eds. Stephen Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 255.
20. Clines, 'David the man', 225.
21. N. J. Enfield, *Relationship Thinking: Agency, Enchrony, and Human Sociality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 104.
22. For example, vows made by women need to be ratified by men (Numbers 30). On this, see Jione Havea, *Elusions of Control: Biblical Law on the Words of Women* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003). The capacity of

women to inherit land gained by Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers 27 is revised in accordance with male interests in Numbers 36.

23. Enfield, *Relationship Thinking*, 105.

24. Enfield, *Relationship Thinking*, 104.