

## THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND ISSUES OF GENDER

BUDIN (S. L.) *Gender in the Ancient Near East*. Pp. xiv + 309, ills, maps. London and New York: Routledge, 2023. Paper, £32.99, US\$42.95 (Cased, £120, US\$160). ISBN: 978-0-367-33154-2 (978-0-367-33153-5 hbk). doi:10.1017/S0009840X2400074X

This ambitious volume provides a comprehensive introduction to some of the key texts, issues and debates around gender in the ancient Near East. The introduction begins by defining sex and gender in modern society and scholarship before turning to the ancient Near Eastern understanding of these concepts. B. demonstrates that ‘the residents of the ancient Near East most assuredly recognized biological sex, and it was indeed binary – female and male’ (p. 14). Accordingly, they also had their own concepts of gender, as the ‘social manifestation of sex’ (p. 21). This book is about these concepts: it is not concerned with men or women in the ancient Near East, but rather about how their identities as men and as women were constructed and understood. This is developed over four chapters, focused on femininity, masculinity, ‘gender bending’ and sexuality.

The first two chapters establish what attributes were associated with femininity and masculinity. For example, B. demonstrates that beauty, nurturing and domesticity were coded feminine across the ancient Near Eastern cultures that she surveys. On the other hand, violence, professionalism and self-control were coded as masculine. Establishing these various qualities allows B. to consider examples of ‘gender bending’, by which B. refers to one sex adopting the attributes of another. This includes a discussion of the categories ‘transvestite’ (a person who wears the dress of a person of the opposite sex) and ‘transgender’ (a person who socially identifies as a person of the opposite sex). B. concludes that, in general, the evidence for transvestism in ancient Mesopotamia is ‘minimal and ambiguous’ (p. 176). On the other hand, she also points to Deuteronomy 22:5, which she interprets as a general condemnation against cross-dressing, and which therefore suggests that this was a ‘matter for concern’ at some point (p. 176). The NRSV translation of this verse would imply this to be the case: ‘A woman shall not wear a man’s apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment; for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the LORD your God’. But in fact, the restriction is not aimed merely at *ʾiš*, a ‘man’, but explicitly at *geber*, a ‘male warrior’. Similarly, the language of clothing refers not to one of the general terms for Israelite and Judahite dress (for example, *beḡed* or *lēbūš*, a ‘garment’), but to a male warrior’s *kēlī*, which properly refers to a utensil, vessel or implement (H. Torger Vedeler, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127 [2008]). In fact, the term can refer to an implement of war, i.e. to weapons or armour. Consequently, we might translate the first clause as: ‘a woman must not wear a warrior’s military equipment’. Rather than a general prohibition against cross-dressing, therefore, this verse is better made sense of in light of the common curse found in ancient Near Eastern treaties and other texts, which threatened gender inversion in military contexts (an example of which can be found on p. 120 of this volume). Both iconographic evidence as well as clothing terminology shows that, in general, there was little distinction between the clothing for men and women in ancient Israel and Judah: the *kētōnet passīm*, the famous garment worn by Joseph in Genesis 37, is in fact the same item worn by King David’s daughter in 2 Samuel 13. This biblical evidence therefore coheres with B.’s conclusions about transvestism in Mesopotamia: ‘minimal and ambiguous’.

In the case of transgender identities B. argues that it is important to distinguish between the divine and the human realms as well as between the royal court and wider society. While there are some interesting examples of warrior goddesses or female kings across the ancient record, in general there is little evidence that shows an individual fully adopting the gender of the opposite sex. Where we do see examples of gender bending, the adoption of masculine gendered behaviours by a woman is usually understood positively, whereas for a man to act in ways coded as 'feminine' is negative (as the curse of gender inversion makes clear). B. therefore concludes that, when we see 'gender bending' in the ancient literary record, this reflects and contributes to 'the patriarchal tendencies' of the ancient Near East (p. 240). The final chapter considers how the modern notions of hetero- and homosexuality apply to the ancient world, concluding that '[t]he inhabitants of the ancient Near East were heteronormative'. This relates to the structure of ancient Near Eastern society based on the family and so on reproduction (p. 247).

Throughout the volume B.'s analysis and arguments invoke modern terminology: transvestism, transgender, heterosexuality, homosexuality. But a lot of her conclusions show that the evidence for these categories is at best ambiguous. If this is the case, I wonder at the value of using this terminology in the first place. The designation 'homosexual' is increasingly deemed anachronistic when applied to describe ancient sexual desires (see e.g. p. 178), and this could also be said for 'heterosexual', which invokes modern cultural connotations including penetrative intercourse, reflected in much of the scholarly focus on male–male sex when treating same-sex relationships in antiquity. B.'s careful conclusions show that modern categories are not necessarily helpful when seeking to understand ancient values around sex or the body.

One of the many valuable contributions of the book is its use of material as well as textual remains: the volume is richly illustrated with helpful drawings and photographs that contextualise and provide visual evidence for B.'s points. By incorporating material remains as well as textual evidence, the book addresses some of the issues in using ancient texts, which were predominantly written by men for a male audience, and in an elite context. When women break through in the textual evidence, the focus tends to be on divine or royal women or on literary characters, who do not necessarily reflect the lived experience of ancient women. B. controls a massive range of data that surveys a vast geographical region and across millennia: including Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia, Cyprus and the Levant, and from the third to the first millennia BCE. In so doing, she has provided a comprehensive and accessible introduction to the study of gender in the ancient Near East, which will be of interest to both students of ancient history as well as the history of gender.

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