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The Masculinity of Jeremiah

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Abstract

Although the majority of the Hebrew Bible prophets are men, their masculinity has rarely been examined. This article analyzes the masculinity of Jeremiah vis-à-vis traditional hegemonic ideals of masculinity. These ideals include sexual, physical, and inner strength as well as authority and persuasive speech. The book of Jeremiah values these traditional ideals but Jeremiah himself is not a hegemonically masculine man. He does not exhibit sexual strength since he is not married and has no children. He lacks masculine authority when he does not succeed in persuading his opponents. Whereas God shows masculine physical strength, Jeremiah does not defend himself against his opponents. Jeremiah also lacks inner strength when he complains to God in his so-called confessions.

Keywords

Jeremiah; gender; masculinity

Introduction

The majority of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible are men. However, usually the prophets have not been studied as men, as characters affected by the gender ideals and norms of their culture. Men have a gender as well, but this has only recently been taken into account. Although the study of biblical masculinities has gained interest in recent years, the number of studies on the masculinities in the Hebrew Bible remains small.¹ The book of Jeremiah, for example, has gained relatively little interest from the point of view of masculinity.

C. J. Patrick Davis argues that the common notion of Jeremiah as the “Lamenting prophet” is based on the book of Lamentations, not on the book of Jeremiah. Davis comes to the conclusion that “Jeremiah was unabashedly masculine; the language and imagery attributed to him is typical of his era when men asserted their masculinity in terms of domination of

¹ See, e.g., O. Creangă (ed.), *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond* (The Bible in the Modern World, 33; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010); O. Creangă and P.-B. Smit (eds.), *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded* (Hebrew Bible Monographs, 62; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014); I. Zsolnay (ed.), *Being a Man: Negotiating Ancient Constructs of Masculinity* (SHANE; London: Routledge, 2017). For the masculinity of the Hebrew Bible prophets, see D.J.A. Clines, “He-Prophets: Masculinity as a Problem for the Hebrew Prophets and Their Interpreters,” in A.G. Hunter and P.R. Davies (eds.), *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll* (JSOTSup, 348; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 311–328; R. Graybill, *Are We Not Men? Unstable Masculinity in the Hebrew Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

women.”² However, there are features in the book of Jeremiah itself that make Jeremiah’s masculinity questionable. Jeremiah curses the day he was born, complains to God, and generally does not act with strength as would be expected of a traditionally manly man. What makes Jeremiah a fascinating object for the study of masculinities is that interpreters do not seem to find his behavior to be unequivocally masculine. As we will see, especially the so-called confessions³ of Jeremiah have been considered problematic by the scholars. Rhiannon Graybill notes that prophetic masculinity can be seen as “a series of failures of masculinity.”⁴ Although I agree with Graybill that Jeremiah fails to act in a traditionally masculine way, I would not say that Jeremiah’s reconfiguration of masculinity is “primarily limited to voice.”⁵ Rather, Jeremiah’s failure can also be seen in other features of masculinity.

The book of Jeremiah has more biographical material than other prophetic books in the Hebrew Bible. Because of this, it has traditionally been maintained that Jeremiah can be known better than any of the other prophets.⁶ However, the book of Jeremiah has had a very long and complex redaction history, which complicates the quest for historical Jeremiah. The continuous growth of material is evidenced by the fact that the Septuagint (LXX) version of Jeremiah is about one eighth shorter than the Masoretic Text (MT). It is not possible to take this long process into account in the scope of this article. To simplify the task, I concentrate on the masculinity of Jeremiah in the text we have.⁷ Thus, I am not examining whether editorial intentions changed how Jeremiah was portrayed as a man.⁸ Moreover, I am not focusing on the historical prophet Jeremiah. The historicity of the events described in the book of Jeremiah is irrelevant to the present study, since even a fictional narrative represents the conventions of the society that produced the text.⁹ Even if the book of Jeremiah might not portray historical

² C.J.P. Davis, “Jeremiah, Masculinity and His Portrayal as the ‘Lamenting Prophet’,” in O. Creangă (ed.), *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond* (The Bible in the Modern World, 33; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), pp. 189–210 (204).

³ The confessions (Jer. 11:18–12:6; 15:10–21; 17:14–18; 18:19–23; 20:7–18) are poetic passages where Jeremiah laments the adversity and opposition he has faced.

⁴ Graybill, *Are We Not Men?*, p. 14.

⁵ Graybill, *Are We Not Men?*, p. 145.

⁶ E.g., J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 94; B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jeremia* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1901), p. 168. See also M.C. Callaway, “The Lamenting Prophet and the Modern Self: On the Origins of Contemporary Readings of Jeremiah,” in J. Kaltner and L. Stulman (eds.), *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East. Essays in Honor of Herbert B. Huffmon* (JSOTSup, 378; London: T&T Clark, 2004), pp. 48–62 (49).

⁷ The passages I examine can be found in both MT and LXX. The text of MT and LXX is in these passages similar enough that it does not produce a different picture of Jeremiah’s masculinity.

⁸ William McKane argues that there are no “comprehensive editorial intentions and policies” in the text of Jeremiah. Instead, he calls the process of continuous accumulation of material “rolling corpus”. McKane also argues that “[t]he kinds of impetus which produce growth and enlarge a pre-existing nucleus of Jeremican material are not necessarily related to a grand, theological scheme and perhaps do not extend beyond narrow contextual limits.” W. McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah: Introduction and Commentary on Jeremiah I–XXV* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), vol. 1, pp. xlix, 1.

⁹ L.L. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1995), p. 9: “fiction may be true representative of its own age, and stereotypes too may have their uses; however much they may misrepresent the character of a historical individual, they still often show types of persons or institutions. Even when distorted and unbalanced, they may convey certain truths about society in general.”

reality, it still reflects the gender ideology of its writers and editors. This is not necessarily a result of a deliberate intention of the author(s), because gender ideals are usually taken for granted.

In this article, I examine how Jeremiah was depicted as a man. How masculine was he in light of the ancient ideals of masculinity? In addition, I note how scholars have seen Jeremiah's behavior as problematic and how they have interpreted and corrected the book of Jeremiah when they have encountered something that does not fit in with what they consider Jeremiah should have been like. Even though scholars are not analyzing Jeremiah's masculinity specifically, they often happen to reveal their view of what kind of a man a prophet should be.

Masculinities and the Hebrew Bible

In order to be able to examine the masculinity of Jeremiah, we must first define what the ancient ideals of masculinity were like. I define masculinity as gender ideology. In other words, masculinity means the ideal a man is supposed to fulfill, not what men were like in reality.¹⁰ In every culture, however, there are several ideals of masculinity. The most commonly used theory of masculinities is Raewyn Connell's differentiation between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity is the masculinity of the hegemonic or dominant group. Gender is always a relational concept and thus hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to femininities and other masculinities.¹¹ Recent studies on masculinity have acknowledged this multiplicity of masculinities. It has become common to speak of "masculinities" in the plural. These different masculinities are not equal, but form a network of power relations. It is important to notice that the ideals of masculinity are and have not been the same everywhere and at all times. In the ancient Near East, there may have existed several ideals of masculinity, but we may suppose that the most widespread ideal of masculinity exhibited in these texts was the hegemonic masculinity. Non-hegemonic groups had fewer opportunities to make their ideals widely known in written texts.

Hilary Lipka delineates physical, sexual, and inner strength as the features of ancient Israelite masculinity.¹² I would also add persuasive speech to the features of ancient Israelite masculinity. Physical strength was connected especially with ability and courage in warfare. A

¹⁰ This is similar to Craig Williams' definition of masculinity. Williams defines 'masculinity' as "a complex of values and ideals that can more profitably be understood as a cultural tradition than as a biological given: the concept refers to what it is to be fully gendered as 'a man' as opposed to merely having the physical features held to signify 'a male'." C.A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 4.

¹¹ R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp. 183–186; *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2nd edn, 2005), pp. 76–81.

¹² H. Lipka, "Shaved Beards and Bared Buttocks: Shame and the Undermining of Masculine Performance in Biblical Texts," in I. Zsolnay (ed.), *Being a Man: Negotiating Ancient Constructs of Masculinity* (SHANE; London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 176–197 (177). According to Harry A. Hoffner, two measures used to define masculinity in the ancient Near East were man's prowess in war and his ability to sire children. H.A. Hoffner, "Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity: Their Use in Ancient Near Eastern Sympathetic Magic Rituals," *JBL* 85 (1966), pp. 326–334 (327–331).

man should be brave and skilled in battle. Sexual strength was performed in the active and dominant role a man played in his relationships with women. A man should get married, have children, and control his partner and household. A real man should not be controlled by women, sexually or otherwise. A man should also not be too fond of women or spend too much time with them. Ancient Israel was a homosocial culture, which meant that men were expected to associate with other men rather than with members of different gender. In his relations with other men, a man should exhibit authority. Authority could be seen, among other things, in persuasive speech. A man should persuade others, not be persuaded himself.

In addition to these more aggressive ideals of masculinity that emphasized the importance of control over others, there existed also an ideal that emphasized wisdom and self-control. A man should have inner strength, which meant perseverance and self-control. R.B. Parkinson calls this “scribal ethos” in contrast to the “military ethos” which emphasized aggression. Thus, there seems to have been two different ways of defining ideal masculinity: military ethos emphasizing aggression and domination, and scribal ethos emphasizing wisdom and self-control. There is evidence that these two traditions co-existed in the ancient cultures around the Mediterranean. For example, in the Middle Kingdom and the New Kingdom of Egypt one can find both the aggressive ideal of masculinity as dominance and penetration as well as the scribal ethos of masculinity as “being wise advisor, a father figure and a provider.”¹³ The scribal ethos that emphasized the importance of self-control can be seen, among other things, in the wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Bible. This tradition also undermines the importance of strength. Those who trust in the strength of their flesh are cursed, those who put their trust in God are blessed (Jer. 17:5–8). Mighty men should not boast in their might, but those who boast should boast in that they understand and know God (Jer. 9:23–24). When saying that the man who puts his trust in God is blessed, Jeremiah joins the wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Bible, according to which the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.¹⁴

Masculinity was something that was achieved, which also meant that it was never permanent. Masculinity was something always under construction and in danger of being called into question by other men.¹⁵ A man was in constant danger of losing his masculinity. A third

¹³ R.B. Parkinson “‘Boasting about Hardness’: Constructions of Middle Kingdom Masculinity,” in C. Graves-Brown (ed.), *Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt: ‘Don Your Wig for a Joyful Hour’* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2008), pp. 115–142 (130–131); D. Sweeney, “Gender and Requests in New Kingdom Literature,” in C. Graves-Brown (ed.), *Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt: ‘Don Your Wig for a Joyful Hour’* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2008), pp. 191–214 (193–194). Also in the ancient Greco-Roman world, there seems to have been at least two hegemonic ideals of masculinity, one that emphasized control over others and one that advocated self-control; see S. Asikainen, *Jesus and Other Men: Ideal Masculinities in the Synoptic Gospels* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

¹⁴ E.g. Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10; 15:33. See also G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Transl. J.D. Martin; London: SCM Press, 1988), p. 298.

¹⁵ M.W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. xxii, 59, 159. Gleason refers specifically to the ancient Roman ideas of masculinity, but this is also true for ancient Near Eastern and Hebrew Bible masculinities; see M. Nissinen, “Relative Masculinities in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament,” in I. Zsolnay (ed.), *Being a Man: Negotiating Ancient Constructs of Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 221–247 (224).

party could undermine a man's masculinity by rendering a man passive or powerless.¹⁶ Young men were not yet masculine, while old age could result in a loss of masculinity if a man lost his physical or sexual strength.¹⁷ The way a man behaved and acted could call his masculinity into question. For example, a fearful behavior turned soldiers into women:

The warriors of Babylon have given up fighting,
they remain in their strongholds;
their strength has failed,
they have become women
(Jer. 51:30)¹⁸

Masculinity is not just one-dimensional hierarchical scale with hegemonic masculinity on top and non-hegemonic masculinity on the bottom. Several other factors, such as race, ethnicity, and class, intersect with gender in the configuration of gender relations.¹⁹ Different social roles and occupations also intersect with gender. Thus, the ideals of masculinity may be different for different groups of men. For example, Assyrian grants from the time of Ashurbanipal (reigned c. 668–627 BCE) define the ideal king as just and kind. The ideal king will reward his loyal subjects. The ideal subjects, on the other hand, are devoted, faithful, and show loyalty to the throne by guarding the kingship.²⁰ Since the text is repeated word for word in several different grants, these are not personal qualities of the recipient, but rather exhibit a general pattern. The grants thus show what an ideal king and subject were like. Since both the king and the subject were male, they also show the ideal masculinity in the Assyrian court.

Since the ideals of masculinity could be different for different groups of men, we must ask whether the masculine behavior expected of a prophet was the same as what was expected of other men. Did they have a freer role when it came to gender expectations? In some cultures, those who worked in the service of a deity could perform their gender more freely. In ancient Mesopotamia, for example, the devotees of Ishtar, who belonged to the third gender, broke the gender boundaries of the Mesopotamian society.²¹ There is no indication that this kind of a

¹⁶ Cf. Samson in Judg. 16.

¹⁷ Cf. 1 Kgs 1:1–8, where David has become old and is unable to have sex with Abishag. His son Adonijah aspires to become the king, while Bathsheba and Nathan conspire for Solomon to become the king. David's sexual strength and authority are called into question in the narrative. The narrative claims that Abishag's purpose was merely to keep David warm, which betrays the author's anxiety to insist that David's sexual strength remained intact. The narrator doth protest too much?

¹⁸ Cf. Jer. 49:22; 50:37. Fear was characterized as feminine both in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Isa. 19:16) and in Assyrian texts (e.g., SAA I.32).

¹⁹ Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 81.

²⁰ SAA XII.25; SAA XII.26; fragmentarily in other texts as well.

²¹ S. Teppo, "Sacred Marriage and the Devotees of Ištar," in M. Nissinen and R. Uro (eds.), *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), pp. 75–92 (91–92).

concept of a third gender was known in the ancient Israel.²² Still, it is possible that Jeremiah and other prophets could have behaved in ways that were generally considered unmasculine and gotten away with it. Maybe Jeremiah's symbolic actions, such as carrying a yoke on his neck (Jer. 27–28), did not raise an eyebrow because he acted as a prophet. Different social roles and occupations could have different ideals of masculinity. Nevertheless, it is possible to examine Jeremiah's masculinity from the point of view of hegemonic masculinities. This comparison highlights how Jeremiah's behavior was similar to or differed from the hegemonic or traditional ideals of masculinity of his time. In this article, by hegemonic ideals I mean ideals of what men in general, not just rulers and kings, were expected to be like. In the next analysis, I examine the masculinity of Jeremiah from the point of view of sexual, physical, and inner strength as well as authority and persuasive speech. Does Jeremiah fulfill the traditional ideals of masculinity of his time?

Sex and the Single Jeremiah

In the ancient Israel, men were expected to marry and have children.²³ Marriage was expected of a man, which can be seen in the fact that the Hebrew Bible has no word for 'bachelor.' One of the most important criteria of masculinity in the ancient Near East was the man's ability to sire children.²⁴ Children were a proof of man's virility and sexual strength (Deut. 21:17; Ps. 127:3–5). The importance of begetting children can be seen in the book of Jeremiah as well. Jeremiah says of Jehoiachin that he will not succeed in his life because he does not have an offspring to inherit the throne (Jer. 22:30). Jeremiah also prays that the wives of his enemies would become widows and childless (Jer. 18:21). Lack of offspring was seen as a curse.²⁵

Having children was an important part of ancient Israelite masculinity, but Jeremiah was not married and had no children; on the contrary, God explicitly forbids him to marry: "The word of the Lord came to me: You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters

²² H.B. Huffmon, "Gender Subversion in the Book of Jeremiah," in S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting (eds.), *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2–6, 2001* (Compte rendu, *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, 47; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), vol. 1, pp. 245–253 (245). On the third gender in the ancient Near East, see K. McCaffrey, "Reconsidering Gender Ambiguity in Mesopotamia: Is a Beard Just a Beard?," in S. Parpola and R.M. Whiting (eds.), *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2–6, 2001* (Compte rendu, *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, 47; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), vol. 2, pp. 379–391; Teppo, "Sacred Marriages."

²³ Huffmon, "Gender Subversion," p. 248. See also T.S. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York, NY: Fawcett Columbine, 1992), p. 97. The ideal was widespread in the ancient Mediterranean: in the Middle Kingdom of Egypt there was also a strong pressure for marrying and begetting children; see Parkinson, "Boasting about Hardness," p. 118.

²⁴ Hoffner, "Symbols for Masculinity," p. 327.

²⁵ This curse can also be found in Assyrian treatises: SAA II.2; SAA II.6 §66, see also §62, §67. Jack Lundbom quotes an ancient Sumerian proverb (also known in Akkadian versions), which curses celibacy: "He that supports no wife, he that supports no son may his misfortunes be multiplied." J.R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 21A; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), p. 756. See also J.M. Asher-Greve, "The Essential Body: Mesopotamian Conceptions of the Gendered Body," in M. Wyke (ed.), *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 8–37 (28).

in this place” (Jer. 16:1–2). Jeremiah is the only person in the Hebrew Bible forbidden to marry.²⁶ The reason why Jeremiah should not marry is the coming destruction of Israel: the sons, daughters, mothers, and fathers will perish by sword and famine or die of deadly diseases (Jer. 16:3–4). In the next verses, Jeremiah is forbidden to enter the house of mourning (Jer. 16:5–7) and the house of feasting (Jer. 16:8–9). Jeremiah, in other words, is not allowed to engage in normal daily life.

Still, Jeremiah’s singleness appears peculiar. God does not command Jeremiah to tell other people not to marry and have children. On the contrary, in his letter to those in exile in Babylon, Jeremiah exhorts the recipients to take wives and have sons and daughters (Jer. 29:6). Later in the book, Jeremiah purchases a field so that it would stay in the family (Jer. 32). Buying the field is a sign of a better future ahead, but God still does not tell Jeremiah to marry and have children. Remaining unmarried and childless would have made Jeremiah’s masculinity questionable. Herbert Huffmon suggests that in this way the book of Jeremiah aims to subvert the traditional masculine role.²⁷ Jeremiah does not exhibit sexual strength expected of a man. He does not have children or a household he can control.

Unlike Jeremiah, who is unmarried, God has a wife, Israel. In the beginning, Israel is the loyal bride of God (Jer. 2:2), but later she becomes a treacherous wife (Jer. 3:1–3). The image of Israel as God’s wife shows both the intense bond and the unequal relationship between Yahweh and Israel.²⁸ In the ancient world, spouses were not equal. God has the masculine, leading role in the relationship. He should be in control of the submissive wife, but Israel does not act like a proper wife. Israel’s behavior casts doubt on God’s masculinity. The only way for God to protect his masculinity is to punish his wife.

Stuart Macwilliam argues that the purpose of the marriage metaphor is not that the male readers would identify with God and female readers with the unfaithful wife Israel. The male readers may want to identify with the husband, but since their behavior more closely resembles that of the unfaithful wife, the metaphor forces them to identify with the wife.²⁹ This may be seen as a subversion of the gender norms. According to Macwilliam, “[t]he marriage metaphor requires men to think of themselves and their relationship to Yahweh in a way that wholly undermines their cultural expectations.”³⁰ At the same time, the marriage metaphor fits in with the hierarchical society of the ancient Israel: the proper position of the people of Israel in

²⁶ Richard Davidson writes referring to Jeremiah: “When God calls to a life of celibacy [...] at the same time God gives sufficient grace and a sense of fulfillment and often even empowers for a special task of service.” R.M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), p. 301. This does not seem to be an apt portrayal of Jeremiah, however, since even though Jeremiah does not complain about his singleness, he does complain about his life constantly throughout the book.

²⁷ See also Huffmon, “Gender Subversion,” pp. 246–250.

²⁸ Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, p. 144.

²⁹ S. Macwilliam, “Queering Jeremiah,” *BibInt* 10 (2002), pp. 384–404 (398–399). On the prophetic marriage metaphor, see also S. Macwilliam, *Queer Theory and the Prophetic Marriage Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011).

³⁰ Macwilliam, “Queering Jeremiah,” p. 400.

relation to God was that of a subordinate. However, this does not make the text any less oppressive towards women. Although Jeremiah is talking about symbolic women and not real women, the depictions are still violent against women.³¹ The text does not criticize violence against women but sees it as justified. The negative images Jeremiah uses of women can be found in other prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible as well.³² In relation to women, Jeremiah thus accepts the traditional attitude: men should control women, especially their sexual behavior.

However, one has to note that women are not portrayed solely in negative light in the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah also demands social justice. Control over other people also includes the responsibility of taking care of women and children. Men should act as the protectors of women and should take care of the widows and orphans (Jer. 7:6).³³

In sum, Jeremiah uses traditional negative images of women which emphasize that men should control women. He also subscribes to the traditional ideal of men as the protectors of women and children and regards childlessness as a curse. On the other hand, Jeremiah's own masculinity is questionable, since he is not married and does not have children.

Authority and Persuasive Speech

Authority over other people and the ability to persuade other people by speech were important facets of masculinity in the ancient world. Proverbs from the ancient Near East emphasize the importance of the verbal skills of men.³⁴ Silence was stereotypically feminine,³⁵ but this does not mean that women never displayed verbal skills. In the Hebrew Bible, even though there are women who persuade men,³⁶ persuasive speech was a masculine feature. The examples of these women illustrate that they showed masculine skillfulness in speech.

Verbal skills were obviously an important part of the prophet's job description. In the account of Jeremiah's call, Jeremiah does not want to become a prophet, because he is too young: "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy (נער)" (Jer. 1:6). The word Jeremiah uses, נער, could mean a boy anywhere between infancy and about 20 years of age.³⁷ Regardless of what age specifically the word refers to in this occasion, it is clear that

³¹ E.g. Jer. 2:20; 13:22, 26–27.

³² E.g. Jer. 2:32–33; 6:2; 13:26–27; 30:14, 17; 49:9. Cf., e.g., Isa. 3:16–24; 13:16; 32:9–14; Hos. 2–3; Amos 7:17.

³³ This is an important ideal elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as well, cf. Exod. 22:21–24; Deut. 14:29; 24:17–22; 26:12–13; Isa. 1:17; Ezek. 22:6–7.

³⁴ J.M. Asher-Greve, "Decisive Sex, Essential Gender," in S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting (eds.), *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2–6, 2001* (Compte rendu, *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, 47; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), vol. 1, pp. 11–26 (15). For example, "it is from a man's mouth that strength comes out," and "a chattering girl is silenced by her mother, a chattering boy is not silenced by his mother."

³⁵ A letter from the Assyrian crown prince Sennacherib attests to the stereotype of silence as feminine: "they are very much afraid of the king, my lord. They tremble and keep silent like women." SAA I.32.

³⁶ Tikva Frymer-Kensky gives examples of several women who persuaded men by talking, e.g., Bathseba, Abigail, Sarai, Rebecca, Rachel, and Delilah. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, pp. 130–131.

³⁷ E.g. Gen. 34:19; 37:2 (Joseph is 17 years old); 41:12; 1 Kgs 3:7. The scholars disagree with how old Jeremiah was. Lundbom maintains that נער "should be translated 'boy' – –, not 'young man'" and that Jeremiah was 12–

Jeremiah did not consider himself mature enough for the public assignment. The speech of young men could be easily questioned because they did not have enough authority.³⁸ As a young man, Jeremiah was not masculine enough to speak publicly.

The verse may also serve a rhetorical purpose. First, it shows the magnitude of the prophet's task. Secondly, it emphasizes the proper humility of the prophet.³⁹ This pattern of trying to refuse the task is typical in the biblical literature.⁴⁰ Jeremiah's reaction was thus normal, even expected. Finally, Jeremiah's refusal serves as a guarantee for the authenticity of the prophecy. The words of Jeremiah come from the God; he is not inventing them. However, if the words come from God, persuasiveness is not really Jeremiah's own ability. Jeremiah would not demonstrate masculine authoritative speech if he was just a messenger. The verse thus reflects more the authoritative speech and masculinity of God than the masculinity of Jeremiah.⁴¹ Jeremiah is only a proxy for God's message. Taking up a prophetic office results in the loss of masculinity because becoming a prophet requires submission to the masculine power of God. This can be seen even more clearly in Chapter 20, which I examine later.

Other characters do not question Jeremiah's speech because of his age, but it is clear that he does not succeed in persuading everyone. Although Jeremiah is not without supporters, such as Baruch (Jer. 36), Ahikam (Jer. 26:24), and Gedaliah (Jer. 40:5), he also has very powerful enemies. King Jehoiakim burns the scroll containing Jeremiah's words (Jer. 36:20–26) and Jeremiah is later imprisoned (Jer. 37). Even women refuse to listen to him (Jer. 44:19), which calls Jeremiah's masculine authority even more into question. It is only after Jeremiah's prophecy turns out to be the truth when people start to take Jeremiah more seriously. King Zedekiah consults Jeremiah, but in the end he does not follow Jeremiah's instructions (Jer. 38–39). In general, Jeremiah fails to persuade other people.⁴²

As an example of Jeremiah's failures, we can look at the dispute between Jeremiah and prophet Hananiah (Jer. 28) in more detail. Hananiah challenges Jeremiah and prophesies that Yahweh will bring back the exiles from Babylon and break the yoke of the king of Babylon (Jer. 28:1–4). Jeremiah begins his answer to Hananiah by hoping that Hananiah's message was true (Jer. 28:5–9). Some interpreters find Jeremiah's response problematic and maintain that Jeremiah is simply wrong when not attacking Hananiah vigorously.⁴³ However, the beginning

13 years old, "at most fifteen or sixteen", whereas according to McKane "'young man' rather than 'child' is appropriate." Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, pp. 107, 233; McKane, *Jeremiah I*, p. 8.

³⁸ Cf. Elihu in Job 32:6–7.

³⁹ Robert Carroll argues that "Jeremiah's protest that he is a youth need not be taken literally because the same objection is used by king Solomon at his accession, where it reflects conventional humility rather than king's youth." R.P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1986), p. 98.

⁴⁰ Cf. Moses in Exod. 4:10 and Isaiah in Isa. 6.

⁴¹ See also Jer. 23:29, where God's words are compared to fire and hammer.

⁴² Amy Kalmanofsky argues that Jeremiah represents "uncompromised masculinity when he represents God to the people." A. Kalmanofsky, *Gender-Play in the Hebrew Bible: The Ways the Bible Challenges Its Gender Norms* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 167. However, Jeremiah's lack of persuasive skills and, as we will see, lack of physical and inner strength compromise his masculinity in relation to other men.

⁴³ McKane refers to Rashi, who "expresses the opinion that Jeremiah erred on the side of diplomacy or even teetered on the edge of flattery and that he should have responded to Hananiah's prediction that the yoke of

of the response can be seen as a *captatio benevolentiae*, a rhetorical technique meant to make the audience more receptive to his message. Only after securing the favor of the audience Jeremiah gives his own prophecy. Jeremiah's diplomatic response shows rhetorical skill, but it does not fit in with the aggressive ideal of masculinity. Jeremiah does not display authority when he does not oppose Hananiah vigorously. Moreover, as can be seen from the following verses, Jeremiah does not succeed in persuading Hananiah.

Hananiah answers Jeremiah's response by breaking the yoke Jeremiah is carrying and repeating the prophecy that the yoke of the king of Babylon will be broken (Jer. 28:10–11). After this, Jeremiah leaves the temple area (Jer. 28:11b).⁴⁴ This verse has also been seen as problematic by the scholars. Why does Jeremiah leave without offering another riposte? Jack Lundbom maintains that Jeremiah leaves because the audience of priests was hostile.⁴⁵ This, however, is not explicit in the narrative. According to Bernhard Duhm, Jeremiah's dignified retreat would show the audience that he was a genuine prophet.⁴⁶ This is also questionable. When Jeremiah does not have a response to Hananiah's last challenge, Jeremiah would rather be seen as losing the dispute. This is noted by Carl Cornill, who argues that Jeremiah's case would have been lost unless he responded right away. He then comes to the conclusion that verse 11b is a later addition based on a misunderstood verse 12!⁴⁷ It seems that the presupposition of what kind of a man Jeremiah should have been like affects Cornill's view of the redaction of the text. Attributing difficult verses to the editors does not solve the problem of Jeremiah's behavior. Why would the editors ascribe unmasculine behavior to Jeremiah? Jeremiah lacks masculine authority since he does not manage to persuade other people. Therefore, Jeremiah's behavior is problematic from the point of view of masculinity.

Physical Strength and Aggressive Masculinity

Another masculine ideal was physical strength, which was especially connected with warfare. A man's ability in war defined his masculinity.⁴⁸ Jeremiah subscribes to the idea that strength and violence are especially masculine features. Language of strength is pervasive in the book of Jeremiah: terms having to do with strength, power, and might are common throughout the

Babylon would soon be broken more abrasively." McKane himself finds the verse "puzzling – if it is assigned to the historical Jeremiah. If he was engaged in repulsing an attack on his prophetic authority at a crucial moment of political decision for Judah, we would expect him to affirm vigorously that he spoke for Yahweh and not to engage in a kind of hypothetical musing with his adversary." W. McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah: Commentary on Jeremiah XXVI–LII* (ICC; (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), vol. 2, pp. 717–718. However, would the verse be less puzzling if it was a later addition? Why would the editors add a problematic response like this?

⁴⁴ When Jeremiah finally does answer Hananiah, he is no match to the rhetorical and performative force of Hananiah's action, since carrying the more durable iron yoke (Jer. 28:13–14) does not form part of Jeremiah's public performance.

⁴⁵ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, p. 337.

⁴⁶ Duhm, *Das Buch Jeremia*, p. 226.

⁴⁷ C.H. Cornill, *Das Buch Jeremia* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1905), pp. 311–313. See also McKane, *Jeremiah II*, p. 721–722.

⁴⁸ Hoffner, "Symbols for Masculinity," p. 327.

book.⁴⁹ In most cases, these words relate to God's strength and his future punishment. God is the one who will "fight against you with outstretched hand and mighty arm, in anger, in fury, and in great wrath" (Jer. 21:5). God created the earth and led his people out of Egypt with his outstretched arm (Jer. 32:17–21). God will uproot and destroy any nation that will not listen to him (Jer. 12:17).

Strength and violence are God's features, not Jeremiah's. Jeremiah does not appear to be strong, even though God promises to make Jeremiah "a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall" (Jer. 1:18) and "a fortified wall of bronze" (Jer. 15:20). Jeremiah is supposed to "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer. 1:10). Jeremiah himself, however, complains about the resistance he meets and demands revenge from God for his adversaries instead of attacking them himself.

Jeremiah never uses physical violence against other people; rather, he is the one threatened with violence or the victim of it several times himself. He is cursed and laughed at, people plot against him and think that he deserves a death penalty.⁵⁰ In the end, Jeremiah is arrested and thrown into a cistern (Jer. 38:1–13). This is not the only time Jeremiah's bodily integrity is violated. Priest Pashhur hits Jeremiah and puts him in the stocks (Jer. 20:2). In ancient Israel, violating one's bodily integrity led to shame and rendered the victim unmasculine. According to the aggressive ideal of masculinity, a real man would not allow humiliation but would fight against it. For example, Samson destroys the building he is in and dies while doing it rather than suffer ridicule by other men (Judg. 16:28–30). Jeremiah, on the other hand, does not fight against his imprisonment. The public humiliation and threats against Jeremiah's life and Jeremiah's (lack of) response to these events make Jeremiah's masculinity questionable.

Moreover, in his letter to those in exile in Babylon, Jeremiah does not encourage explicit resistance against Babylon, but rather adjusting to the circumstances (Jer. 29:4–7). Jeremiah argues that other men should not be violent either. They should rather submit to the masculine power of the Babylonian king and army. This calls their masculinity into question. At the same time, the letter bolsters the masculinity of the men since Jeremiah instructs them to marry and beget children. According to Daniel Smith, the letter is about a difference of opinion between those who favored limited co-operation and those who wanted open and violent rebellion. Jeremiah advocates non-violent resistance, which functions as a mechanism for survival. The purpose of Jeremiah's letter is to ensure that the number of Judeans did not decrease in the

⁴⁹ E.g., חזק (strong, mighty) Jer. 21:5; 31:11; 32:21; 50:34; זרוע (arm; strength, power) Jer. 17:5; 21:5; 27:5; 32:17; 48:25; כח (strength, power, might) Jer. 10:12; 27:5; 32:17; 48:45; 51:15; גבורה (strength, might, power) Jer. 9:23; 10:6; 16:21; 23:10; 49:35; 51:30. See also אבר (perish, destroy) Jer. 6:21; 12:17; 15:7; 18:7; 27:10, 15; 31:28; 46:8; 49:38; 51:55.

⁵⁰ Jer. 11:19, 21; 12:6; 15:10, 15; 18:18–20; 20:7–10; 26:7–11.

exile.⁵¹ Nevertheless, since men are urged not to oppose the Babylonian power, the letter does not fulfill the criteria of aggressive masculinity.

In the book of Jeremiah, there is violent language, but Jeremiah is not a violent person. The masculine strength and violence belong to God, not to Jeremiah. Jeremiah prays for God to revenge him instead of actively seeking retribution. Vengeance comes from God, Jeremiah is not masculine enough to defend himself. Jeremiah does not appear very strong, and thus does not fulfill the requirements of aggressive ideal of masculinity.

Inner Strength: “Confessions” as a Problem for Jeremiah’s Masculinity

Another aspect of masculinity was inner strength, which was displayed especially in self-controlled behavior. There seems to have been two ways for a man to deal with adverse situations: defending oneself against adversaries, possibly with violence, or displaying self-control and inner strength. As shown above, Jeremiah does not defend himself and thus does not act according to the aggressive ideal of masculinity. On the other hand, Jeremiah does not demonstrate inner strength either. Rather, he prays for God to revenge the wrongs he has suffered in his so-called confessions. The fact that Jeremiah continues to prophecy despite the overwhelming opposition he faces could be seen as an indication of inner strength. His constant complains nevertheless make him seem unmasculine.⁵²

Some scholars claim that the confessions show Jeremiah’s inner strength. For example, Ronald Youngblood argues that Jeremiah’s strength of character can be seen in his confessions.⁵³ Robert Carroll’s description of this interpretation sounds almost like a voice-over in a movie trailer for a new Hollywood blockbuster:

In all the chaos of the period, when the state was disintegrating and the nation was in hot pursuit of other gods in the brothels under the green trees, one man stood faithful to Yahweh and, in spite of terrible suffering and severe doubts, maintained the proclamation of the sacred word to the community.

Carroll goes on to criticize this view: “Such a brief summary of extensive writings on these poems allows the mythic nature of the picture of a heroic Jeremiah to emerge as the end result of reading the laments as ‘confessions’. How very modern and existential image of Jeremiah it produces!”⁵⁴ The interpretation of confessions as a sign of Jeremiah’s strength does not pay attention to the fact that Jeremiah complains about the opposition he faces rather than enduring it calmly.

⁵¹ D.L. Smith, “Jeremiah as Prophet of Nonviolent Resistance,” in Philip R. Davies (ed.), *The Prophets* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 207–218 (207, 216–218).

⁵² See, e.g., Graybill (*Are We Not Men?*, 78–79), who notes that Jeremiah uses voice in ways typically coded as feminine.

⁵³ R. Youngblood, “The Character of Jeremiah,” *CTR* 5.2 (1991), pp. 171–182 (175).

⁵⁴ Carroll, *Jeremiah*, p. 277.

Accordingly, other scholars consider the confessions to be a sign of Jeremiah's personal weakness. For example, John Bright argues that the expressions of hate and despair in the confessions do not "reflect great credit on the prophet." Bright maintains that readers would presume a preacher of an unpopular message should be "a man [!] of iron courage and unshakeable faith." Jeremiah, however, is a "weak mortal." According to Bright, "[s]uch readers may be inclined to feel disappointed in Jeremiah and to find it a pity that so great a prophet should have exhibited such weakness. Now it certainly must be admitted that Jeremiah does not reveal himself to us in his 'confessions' as an exemplary person."⁵⁵

It seems that scholars' expectations of what Jeremiah should be like—and particularly what he should be like as a man—affect their interpretation of the confessions. What seems to be at stake here is the masculinity of Jeremiah. If Jeremiah is masculine, then the confessions must be a sign of his strength. If the confessions are not a sign of Jeremiah's strength, then Jeremiah must be a disappointment to the readers.

Often in the confessions and outside of them, Jeremiah prays that God would listen to and remember what Jeremiah's adversaries say. He prays for God to take revenge on his persecutors (e.g., Jer. 11:20; 15:15). He prays that bad things would happen to his enemies: that their children would die and their wives become childless widows (Jer. 18:19–21). Disputes with Pashhur and Hananiah end with Jeremiah prophesying the death of his adversaries (Jer. 20:6; 28:16).⁵⁶ Seeking revenge and the violent language Jeremiah employs do not fit in with a self-controlled ideal of masculinity.

The confessions not only show the opposition Jeremiah has to face. They also demonstrate his strained relationship with God. In a confession in Jeremiah 15:10–21, Jeremiah not only demands revenge for his adversaries, but attacks God as well. He compares God with a "deceitful brook" (Jer. 15:18). Bright points out that this is "all the more shocking" when considering that earlier in the book God was called "the fountain of living water" in comparison with false gods that are "cracked cisterns that can hold no water" (Jer. 2:13).⁵⁷ Now it is God who fails to give water. God responds to Jeremiah accusation. God does not promise that Jeremiah's enemies would cease the attacks, but instead orders Jeremiah to return to his work as a prophet (Jer. 15:19–21). The vocabulary used in these verses resembles Jeremiah's call (Jer. 1:8, 18–19): God will deliver Jeremiah, if Jeremiah turns back to God. Jeremiah's relationship with God seems ambivalent. A wise man would trust in God (Jer. 17:5–8), but Jeremiah's trust seems to waver.

In another confession (Jer. 20:7–18), Jeremiah accuses God of seducing him to the office of the prophet (Jer. 20:7): פתיתני יהוה ואפת חזקתני ותוכל. NRSV translates the verse as "O Lord,

⁵⁵ J. Bright, "A Prophet's Lament and its Answer," in L.G. Perdue and B.W. Kovacs (eds.), *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1984), pp. 325–338 (332–333). For other interpretations of the confessions, see K.M. O'Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role of Chapters 1–25* (SBLDS 94; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), p. 1.

⁵⁶ Cf. Jer. 17:18; 29:21.

⁵⁷ Bright, "A Prophet's Lament," p. 330.

you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.” The verb פתה means “entice”, but can also be used in a sexual sense of seducing a girl.⁵⁸ This usage of פתה can be found in Exodus 22:16: “When a man seduces (פתה) a virgin who is not engaged to be married, and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife.”⁵⁹

David Clines and David Gunn maintain that the verb פתה does not in verse Jeremiah 20:7 mean sexual seduction but rather a more neutral attempt of persuasion.⁶⁰ However, as Jack Lundbom points out, the verb cannot mean “tried to persuade,” since the persuasion was successful. Nevertheless, Lundbom also comes to the conclusion that the verbs do not have anything to do with seduction or rape, rather, what God did was “to act in a heavy-handed manner with the young Jeremiah.”⁶¹ This interpretation, however, diminishes the impact of the metaphor.

The context makes a sexual reading of פתה more likely. Another verb used in the verse, חזק (translated in NRSV as “overpower”), can also have a sexual connotation. According to Gerhard von Rad, the verb חזק refers to “a wrestling match in which Jeremiah is inferior.”⁶² However, the verb also means forcing a woman to sexual intercourse.⁶³ It is used in this sense in Deuteronomy 22:25: “But if the man meets the engaged woman in the open country, and the man seizes (חזק) her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die.” Also in 2 Samuel 13:11 the word refers to rape, when Amnon seizes (חזק) his sister Tamar and forces her to have sex with him.⁶⁴

Since both פתה and חזק have a sexual connotation, it seems logical to conclude that the verbs have a sexual meaning here as well.⁶⁵ The sexual reading is not less likely because Jeremiah is a man—after all, men are victims of sexual violence as well, also in the Hebrew Bible (see, e.g., 1 Sam. 31:4; Jer. 38:19). More recent studies usually accept that the verbs refer to sexual violence and rape.⁶⁶ The verse could thus be translated: “You have seduced me, and I was seduced; you raped me, and you have prevailed.” This interpretation puts Jeremiah into a position of a woman in relation to God. Earlier, Jeremiah had been only a boy and had not

⁵⁸ Exod. 22:16; see also Judg. 14:15; 16:5; Job 31:9; Hos. 2:14.

⁵⁹ The word can also be used of a woman who seduces a man; cf. Job 31:9: “If my heart has been enticed (פתה) by a woman, and I have lain in wait at my neighbour’s door.”

⁶⁰ D.C.A. Clines and D.M. Gunn, “‘You tried to persuade me’ and ‘Violence! Outrage!’ in Jeremiah 20.7–8,” *VT* 28 (1978), pp. 20–27 (20–23).

⁶¹ Lundbom, *Jeremiah* 1–20, p. 855.

⁶² G. von Rad, “The Confessions of Jeremiah,” in L.G. Perdue and B.W. Kovacs (eds.), *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1984), pp. 339–347 (343).

⁶³ McKane, *Jeremiah* I, p. 469.

⁶⁴ The word is also used of women seizing men, cf. Prov. 7:13: “She seizes (חזק) him and kisses him, and with impudent face she says to him”; Isa. 4:1: “Seven women shall take hold (חזק) of one man on that day, saying, ‘We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes; just let us be called by your name; take away our disgrace.’”

⁶⁵ See also McKane, *Jeremiah* I, pp. 469–470; Bright, “A Prophet’s Lament,” p. 331; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, p. 459. Even if the verbs did not have a sexual meaning in this context, being persuaded would still call Jeremiah’s masculinity into question.

⁶⁶ See, e.g., Kalmanofsky, *Gender-Play in the Hebrew Bible*, 176.

considered himself masculine enough to have the authority to proclaim God's message. Staying unmarried and childless made his masculinity questionable. Now, Jeremiah's subordination to God is finalized when he is placed in the position of a woman.

The confession does not end with Jeremiah complaining about God's treatment of him. Bright points out that the confession in Chapter 20 continues like several psalms with thanksgiving and praise (Jer. 20:11–13).⁶⁷ Jeremiah is sure that God is with him "like a dread warrior" so that his enemies will not prevail or succeed (Jer. 20:11). He again prays to be able to see God's retribution (Jer. 20:12). Bright remarks that the confessions were not "the words of a quitter."⁶⁸ However, the text continues with a one of the several curses, where Jeremiah curses the day he was born (Jer. 20:14–18). Again, Jeremiah's relationship with God seems ambivalent: first he accuses God, then praises him, and finally curses his birthday. Although Jeremiah continues to proclaim the word of God, he does not do it because he holds fast to the word of God but because he claims that he is forced to do it: "If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name', then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (Jer. 20:9).

The portrait of Jeremiah is ambiguous: on the one hand, he obeys God's will and does not give in to the persuasion of others. On the other hand, Jeremiah does not stop complaining. He does not "act in strength,"⁶⁹ but rather is forced to proclaim God's message. Jeremiah suffers, but he neither defends himself nor bears his sufferings with fortitude. All of these features call Jeremiah's masculinity into question. Jeremiah does not display inner strength in his confessions.

Jeremiah and Prophetic Masculinity

Jeremiah is subordinate and feminized in relation to a more masculine God. This is a typical feature of the Hebrew Bible. Susan Haddox, for example, maintains that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all occasionally appear feminine. Haddox argues that this critique of hegemonic masculinity is intended to show a proper relationship with God: "While the biblical text in many ways reflects and supports the categories of hegemonic masculinity, in the realm of the relation with God, these norms are frequently subverted because no human can assume the position of ultimate power. That position is left to God."⁷⁰ This is what happens in the book of Jeremiah as well. Jeremiah is feminized in relation to the truly masculine God.

This feminization can be seen especially in the confession in Chapter 20, which describes Jeremiah's prophetic task using sexualized language. Being a prophet requires submission to

⁶⁷ Bright, "A Prophet's Lament," p. 332.

⁶⁸ Bright, "A Prophet's Lament," p. 334.

⁶⁹ This is what Bright argues: "Jeremiah may have spoken in weakness, but he acted in strength." Bright, "A Prophet's Lament," p. 335.

⁷⁰ S.E. Haddox, "Favoured Sons and Subordinate Masculinities," in O. Creangă (ed.), *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond* (The Bible in the Modern World, 33; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), pp. 2–19 (15).

God. When a man is forced to a submissive position (sexually or otherwise), he is emasculated. Jeremiah should submit to God like a woman. Jeremiah concurs that submission is not masculine when he complains against it and values masculine power and strength instead. Thus, Jeremiah does not question the traditional gender binary which privileges masculinity.⁷¹ This submission to God seems to be more imperative part of the prophetic masculinity than the masculinity of other men in the Hebrew Bible. The only way to function as a prophet is to submit to God's overwhelming masculine power. Like other prophets, Jeremiah fails to act in traditionally masculine ways.⁷²

In comparison to other prophets, however, Jeremiah seems to have more difficulties adjusting to his lot. He complains excessively. Nevertheless, Jeremiah is not the only man in the Hebrew Bible who complains to God. Job curses the day he was born (Job 3:1–26).⁷³ The psalms and Isaiah 52:13–53:12 talk about suffering men. There seems to have been a pattern of suffering and complaining men in the Hebrew Bible. In addition, it may have been more acceptable to a prophet to display behavior that was considered unmasculine in the wider culture.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, from the point of view of hegemonic or traditional ideals of masculinity, Jeremiah does not fulfill the requirements of traditional masculinity.

A lower position in the masculinity hierarchy in relation to God is commonplace in the Hebrew Bible. This, however, does not explain why Jeremiah fails to be masculine in relation to other men. Lower status in relation to God does not necessarily require Jeremiah to be unmasculine in relation to other men by traditional standards.

Why does the book of Jeremiah present Jeremiah as unmasculine? It is possible that the book aims to subvert traditional gender ideals. Jeremiah's singleness and lack of rhetorical skills and physical and inner strength are examples of this. Another example is Jeremiah 31:22, where the future world is described: "the Lord has created a new thing on the earth: a woman encompasses a man." This would make Jeremiah's lack of masculinity a foretaste of the world to come where the traditional gender roles will be subverted. However, the book of Jeremiah does not subvert all gender ideals. The traditional notions of masculinity and femininity are

⁷¹ See also Kalmanofsky, *Gender-Play in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 179.

⁷² See Graybill, *Are We Not Men?*

⁷³ Like Jeremiah, Job challenges God, but there are also differences between the narratives. God tells Job to be masculine: "Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me" (Job 38:3). Job, however, is unable to answer God's questions and ends up silent, humiliated, and emasculated. Jeremiah's challenges, on the other hand, are either not answered or are only answered with an order to obey God. At the same time, God does not tell Jeremiah to be masculine. Nevertheless, this does not save Jeremiah from humiliation when he is (sexually) violated by God.

⁷⁴ In the Sumerian culture, there were male priests called *gala* who took part in ritual lamentations. M.R. Bachvarova, "Sumerian Gala Priests and Eastern Mediterranean Returning Gods: Tragic Lamentation in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in A. Suter (ed.), *Lament: Studies in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 18–52 (33). According to Will Roscoe, the *gala* role might have included gender transgression. Lamenting was originally a female profession later taken over by men, with men maintaining the feminine role of lamenting. Although Jeremiah's behavior is not a ritual lament, *gala* priests show that for certain religious officials occupying roles that required gender transgressive behavior was acceptable. W. Roscoe, "Priests of the Goddess: Gender Transgression in Ancient Religion," *HR* 35 (1996), pp. 195–230 (214).

retained, and divine masculinity conforms to the traditional ideals of hegemonic masculinity. What are subverted are the traditional ideals of masculinity for men in relation to God: the men need to be completely subordinated to God. Amy Kalmanofsky notes that gender-playing narratives in the Hebrew Bible in general support conventional gender norms.⁷⁵ This is what the book of Jeremiah does as well. At the same time, the failures in Jeremiah's gender performance invite readers to imagine alternative ways of being a man.

Conclusions

How does Jeremiah fare in achieving masculinity? The book of Jeremiah contains traditional ideals of masculinity. Physical, sexual, and inner strength as well as authority appear as values in the book of Jeremiah, but Jeremiah himself does not fulfill these traditional ideals of masculinity.

First of all, Jeremiah lacks sexual strength. He does not have a wife or offspring, because God forbids this. Interestingly, modern interpreters have not found this problematic. From the point of view of the ancient Israelite ideals of masculinity, however, staying unmarried and not having children would call Jeremiah's masculinity into question.

Language of strength and violence is pervasive throughout the book of Jeremiah. The message of the coming judgment Jeremiah preaches is also on par with ideal of aggressive masculinity. However, the strength is not Jeremiah's strength, but God's. Aggressiveness and physical strength are not Jeremiah's qualities. God is the one who is aggressive and strong in the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is unable to defend himself against opposition, threats against his life, and actual physical violence. He is also incapable of self-restraint and does not seem to display inner strength expected of a man. Jeremiah complains about the opposition he faces and does not bear it with fortitude. The confessions do not present him as calmly accepting the adversities he faces. In addition, Jeremiah lacks persuasive strength and authority since he does not succeed in persuading other people. These features make Jeremiah's behavior problematic from the point of view of the ancient Israelite ideals of masculinity. They have also been problematic for modern interpreters. Jeremiah's lack of strength and authority and the fact that he does not defend himself puzzle scholars. Some scholars have tried to solve these problems by assigning the problematic verses to a later editor. Jeremiah clearly does not fulfill the ideals of traditional masculinity of ancient Israel.

Partially Jeremiah's failures in masculinity are due to his lower status in relation to God. There is a difference between what is said of God versus what Jeremiah says about himself and how he acts. Jeremiah's speech shows what the proper position of a man in relation to God is: Jeremiah is not strong and violent; instead he seeks revenge from God. God is the violent and aggressively masculine soldier that wages war against Jeremiah's enemies. The lower status of

⁷⁵ Kalmanofsky, *Gender-Play in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 2. See also Graybill (*Are We Not Men?*, p. 94), who notes that masculinity as a larger category remains stable in the book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah and other men in relation to God can also be seen in the wisdom material of the book and in the metaphor of Israel as the wife of God. Both the wisdom tradition and the metaphor of Israel as the wife of God show the right position of the people in relation to God. In the hierarchical society of the ancient Israelite world, God is supremely masculine, men (and women) are below God. Masculinity is shown to be a relational concept. Jeremiah submits to the truly masculine power of God. The book of Jeremiah conforms to the traditional ideals of masculinity. At the same time, Jeremiah's failures open up a possibility to imagine alternative masculinities.

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