No Gendered Bodies without Queer Desires: Judith Butler and Biblical Gender Trouble¹

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ABSTRACT

This article offers two related arguments on gender as critical category for reading biblical texts (i.e. The Book of Judith, the Abraham and Sarah story in Genesis and the Book of Ruth): Firstly, drawing on Judith Butler’s theoretical work, the paper argues that if we want to consider gender, we must consider how sexuality and power constitute our bodies as gendered bodies. Secondly, if we bring gender as interpretative category to biblical texts, it will neither do to simply rebuke the scriptures as a lore of male, straight domination, nor to simply herald the scriptures as a well of gender emancipation. Since no interpretation happens outside of social practices and institutions, the critical potential lies in how questions of gender allow us to examine our discursive regimes and practices at the junctures of bodies and power. Butler’s work allows us to understand how not only gender, but also sex and sexuality are formed in relation to normative and normalizing frameworks. Our sexed and gendered bodies are haunted by the spectres of those queer bodies and desires which have to be excluded and disavowed.

A INTRODUCTION: GENDER AS CRITICAL CATEGORY

If we want to consider gender as a critical category in the context of the bible, then the question of gender will compel us to ask how norms and power delimit and animate bodies and desires as gendered. What kinds of normality and queerness determine what kinds of bodies and desires we get to inhabit? How is a particular reading of biblical texts mobilizing a conjunction of religious and political discourse? How do these readings themselves become sites of negotiating desires, sexualities, social norms, and relations of power? Which readings

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of gender become sites of desire as readings that have to remain unspeakable and unthinkable?

Starting with this perhaps rather ambiguous and ambitious title, I will admit upfront that I am not sure I will be able to make entirely good on either gender, queer desires, or the Bible here. All three of them are perhaps as enticing as difficult because all three of them continuously escape final settlement. While preparing this paper I kept coming back to a set of questions: What does it mean in general to think about gender and the Bible? Why does gender often become so exclusively about women or about identities for those who do not fall within the boundaries of the so-called normal? What are the unique critical perspectives that open up when feminist theory, queer theory, and biblical scholarship encounter each other at the site of gender? To briefly set the stage I would like to highlight two recent articles from the *Mail & Guardian*, which I hope will illustrate the problematics I would like to present here.

The first is an article entitled ‘Gender, a state of mind,’ (Groenewald 2006) which reported on the photographer Robert Hamblin. While Hamblin refers to himself as transgendered, the article insists on identifying him as a transsexual and focuses on his story as one of a sex change despite the title of the article. In addition to revealing how unstable the distinctions between sex and gender are, the article offers Hamblin as asserting that ‘Gender has nothing to do with sexuality,’ while the article still dutifully recounts that Hamblin had been lesbian for most of his life.

What does this have to do with my considerations on gender and the Bible? Simply this: The assumption that gender, sex, sexuality, and desire are phenomena that have no connection with each other is one assumption that I would like to problematise here. An inquiry into gender, as I will argue, requires a reflection on how our bodies are formed and lived in relations to others and to social norms. Sex and gender thus are neither reducible to social norms nor to identities. Our becoming sexed and gendered takes place at the intersections of relations of power and trajectories of desires. When bodies become sexed and gendered at an angle to the culturally normative, they in effect become ‘queered.’ Equally, social practices and expectations are queered when we inhabit them in ways that do not fully conform to social norms, and so mobilize bodies and practices as sites for renegotiating these norms.

Secondly, I noted a commentary by the retired Grahamstown Anglican Bishop David Russell (cf. 2005), who wrote about the Christian churches’ attitude toward homosexuality, using changing stances toward slavery as an example of how interpretations of the Bible can shift over time. Even though, as Russell demonstrates, there are many passages in the Bible that unambivalently endorse slavery, the church eventually changed its position on slavery. If we accept and support this change in the stance on slavery, then we also acknow-
lledge that we cannot simply deduce unchanging normative stances from readings of the Bible for how to organize our relations with each other. Since interpretations mobilize as well as possibly disrupt social norms, contestations over interpretations take place in the realm of negotiating bodies and power and cannot be settled in a realm of religious truth outside of historically conditioned ethical and political debates. As abolitionists and anti-apartheid activists powerfully demonstrated, although social structures might be claimed as natural, unchangeable, and unquestionably legitimate, these structures rely on socioculturally constructed norms that sometimes direly need to be disrupted—and this disruption took place at the very site of the body, renegotiating and in fact queering the status and the claims of excluded bodies and exclusionary norms. Russell argues that just as the churches needed to re-examine slavery, similarly they have to rethink their heterosexism and realize that ‘God is not condemning of faithful, committed partnerships of whatever orientation.’ Leaving aside for the moment the claim that only monogamous long-term relationships qualify for God’s approval, I’m interested in how Russell makes his case by pointing to how biblical texts require a continuous critical practice of rereading them, an activity at the heart of queer theory.² Biblical texts are thus neither simply dismissed as irrelevant for ethical and political life nor simply transformed into a catalogue of ethical or political precepts, but they can be ‘queered’ and queried in a way that opens a critical examination of both, these texts as well as the issues that render the texts often so problematic. When we inquire into gender and sexuality in biblical texts, ethical and political reflections become possible precisely insofar as there is a gap between the texts, their interpretations, and actions to be taken.

With these preliminary considerations as a background, I would like to present two arguments on gender as a critical category today for reading biblical texts. Firstly, drawing on Judith Butler’s theoretical work, I will argue that if we want to consider gender, we must also consider how sexuality and power constitute our bodies as gendered bodies. Secondly, if we bring gender as an interpretative category to biblical texts, it will neither do to simply rebuke the Scriptures as the lore of male, heterosexist domination, nor to simply herald the Scriptures as a well of gender emancipation. Since no interpretation happens outside of social practices and institutions, the critical potential of gender inquiry lies in how questions of gender allow us to examine our social practices and institutions at the junctures of bodies and power.

B OUR BODIES AS GENDERED BODIES – JUDITH BUTLER

I would like to consider Butler’s work more in depth, because her works can provide us with some useful tools for rethinking gender, bodies, and politics. Some of the key insights that make her work as productive and challenging today as it has been for more than 15 years are these: what the category of ‘women’ is supposed to refer to is not as clear as we might have thought; biological sex is as socially constructed as gender is; gender cannot be separated neatly from desire and power; and the ways in which we perceive and live gender are bound up with how sexuality, race, class, age, and ableness form our bodies. Butler’s work allows us to rethink the exclusive focus on women that gender questions elicit without neglecting the importance of a feminist perspective. Gender then is one mode in which power and social norms make bodies possible or impossible, endow them with power or marginalize them, and make them vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

Butler’s work challenges us to question our assumptions about sex as a biological, uncontestable fact that differentiates bodies into males and females. Famously or infamously, Butler has argued that there is no biological body outside or prior to the social and cultural frameworks that regulate and produce our bodies and our desires as intelligible and material realities. Further, this gendering and sexing of bodies is tied to desire and sexuality and the rigid dimorphism of ‘opposite sexes’ is possible only insofar as heterosexuality is already in place as the norm through which gender and sex attain meaning. However, to consider how heteronormative frameworks condition how bodies become sexed and gendered is not the same as considering how sexuality and desire are constitutive of how bodies are lived as sexed and gendered. Desire—including its erotic and sexual dimensions—is not reducible to heteronormativity, but more generally addresses how, through our bodies and psyches, we are always physically and psychically exposed to and viscerally entangled in complex relations with others.

The argument that there is no biological reality beyond cultural construction and that gender and sex are results of the repetition of social norms seems to be a counterintuitive way of thinking about bodies. However, biology and the power of biology have long been at the heart of feminist struggles to break the socially deterministic force of biological truths about women. When Gayle Rubin in 1975 first introduced the distinction between sex and gender as mapping onto the distinction between nature and culture, her aim was to break the normative power of the idea that ‘biology is destiny.’ For all its achievements, this sex/gender distinction leaves in place the conviction that sexual difference as a biological difference in chromosomal, hormonal, and morphological makeup is a primary reality that sorts human bodies into males and females and that human traits and roles are equally categorisable into feminine and masculine ones. The problem with the sex/gender distinction is that it assumes the so-
cial construction of feminine and masculine to be independent from the biological distinction between the sexes without considering how feminine and masculine become meaningful as gendered characteristics through dissimulated assumptions about the biologies of sex. So it turns out that there is more biology in gender and more social construction in sex than one might have thought.

In a critical inquiry into gender we need then not only examine how gender roles are transgressed and reworked, but we also must ask how these gender roles and our readings of them relate to, draw on, and efface assumptions about biological sex. If we turn to another Judith, the one of the Apocrypha, we might at first glance read this Judith as an example of women’s power by virtue of how she employs her femininity to vanquish Holofernes and, with him, Nebuchadnezzar’s threat to her hometown. We could call this reading feminist insofar as it explores the political intervention by a woman and valorises her creating an opportunity to wield power and seize it, even or perhaps precisely as she does so in a violent way.

Far from insisting that the proper sphere of the woman is the home and the family and that by virtue of entering into the business of politics and war, women are stripped of their femininity, the narrative instead seems to emphasize how Judith’s actions and her killing Holofernes are framed by her femininity. We learn that Judith purposefully adorns herself with garments and jewellery and that all the men she encounters on her way are enamoured and seduced by her appearance, including Holofernes. One might also find her femininity underlined when the text describes the circumstances that make it possible for her to kill Holofernes. He has drunk more than ever before in his life and she has to strike his neck twice with his sword, because she could not sever his head with one blow. However, if we try to mobilize these two instances as evidence of Judith’s femininity in the story, then our feminist reading has just become a bit more difficult: A reading of Judith as a woman who seizes opportunity and power has critical force, because it emphasizes Judith firstly as a woman who clearly transgresses traditional codes of femininity that ascribe women a nurturing, non-violent role and secondly it emphasizes her as a woman who in fact uses her femininity to transgress these codes. Nonetheless, if we stop here, we would overlook how this appraisal of Judith functions within a larger patriarchal structure.3 By relying on sex and its biological differences as a natural and settled truth, this appraisal cannot question how there is an underlying power differential that is naturalized through the assumption that men are naturally (physically) stronger and hence (physically and also politi-

3 In ‘Women in the Apocrypha’ in The Oxford Companion to the Bible (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) Sidnie Ann White argues that ‘Women’s power is expressed in Judith, but only within the confines of patriarchy’ (813).
cally) more powerful than women. Accepting this differential as a natural fact leads to inscribing political power as masculine.

An interpretation that seizes only on Judith’s subversion of gender expectations cannot question these underlying naturalized biological differences of sex, because such an interpretation is focused on gender as a role or behaviour of individuals. The missing critical questions are: How is this naturalness of sex itself constructed? How is sexual difference inscribed into our categories as an epistemological condition gendering our concepts through which we understand social and textual realities? My point is not that Judith’s gender queering is not radical enough and that it would have been more radical if Judith just had appropriated masculinity more aggressively, although it seems to me that women’s appropriations of masculinity are often perceived as more threatening than their reworking femininity within its own terms. Yet if we were to valorise how a woman becomes masculine within the realm of politics, we nonetheless would not question how certain traits like courage, aggressiveness, and a violent politics belong to a ‘masculine’ domain that is precisely not feminine. And we could not question how it is that this domain makes room for feminine power only insofar as this femininity seduces the subdued masculine power or as the woman becomes in effect masculine. With these two choices of access, we see how this understanding of the domain of politics is not only masculine, but also heterosexually structured.

Instead, we need to examine the ways in which structures of power become naturalized with respect to how sex and gender structure them. We need to ask how our concepts of femininity and of gender norms structure how we think about bodies as well as about politics. We can then examine how the sphere of politics and political power are presumed as a domain of power that is indexed as heterosexual and masculine. In our initial reading the blindness to this problematic results precisely from our operating on the assumption of a settled distinction of sex as biological and gender as social, because this distinction assumes that biological categories and the realities we know through them are not conditioned by social norms themselves. It is therefore not enough to praise a femininity that can transgress traditional gender expectations, but we need to rethink the firm separation between sex and gender and the naturalness and stability of the gender binary in order to examine critically how the foundations of gender inequality and the norm of heterosexuality are continuously codified and naturalized as the foundations of politics.

Reading the story of Judith and wrestling with its interpretations has led us from valorising a woman who seized political opportunity and power to using our reading in order to ask how gender works in relation to politics. How is a gendered perspective mobilized when it depends on the gender of the actor whether the actions are read as political or are eroticized and consequently depoliticized? So the problem with reading for gender in terms of a valorisation
on the basis of gender traits does not overcome the problem of condemnation of acts on the basis of gender. If one stays within the paradigm of holding to a fixed biological identity (‘Judith as a woman’) and then simply valorises a transgression by incorporating traits of the other gender (‘violence’), then this ‘transgression’ is based on gender expectations that remain naturalized. We shift our perspective when we also question how our frameworks of interpretation are gendered and gendering and in what ways they are naturalizing gender. So the aspect that reading the narrative of Judith allowed us to focus very clearly is how gender cannot be reduced to a question of identities and biographies, but is a question of how our concepts are structured and animated by sexual difference.

With this understanding in mind, I would now like to return to Butler’s arguments questioning how sex becomes discursively naturalized, and I would like to consider in particular how Butler’s inquiry might offer us tools to examine how by virtue of such naturalizations the category of ‘sex’ is stripped of its history and how power works to produce and naturalize material facts. Taking up the feminist concern about biologies’ determining social destinies by naturalizing the differences and deducing normative implications from them, Butler argues that sex and gender only become effective realities through the social practices, norms, institutions, and discourses that invest these categories with meaning. As Butler (1993:2) explains in the introduction to Bodies That Matter:

[What constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power’s most productive effect. And there will be no way to understand ‘gender’ as a cultural construct which is imposed upon the surface of matter, understood either as ‘the body’ or its given sex. Rather, once ‘sex’ itself is understood in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory norm. ‘Sex’ is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.]

In this passage, Butler argues that sex as a material characteristic of bodies is a belated effect of understanding bodies as gendered and that the material effects of power are the results of how norms regulate bodies. This regulation is not simply an oppressive force that bears down on a pre-existing body, but this regulatory power of social norms is productive. So we cannot simply strive to take away regulatory structures and practices in the hopes of recovering bodies as such, unscathed and uncorrupted by social power, as if we could rid ourselves of power at all. Sex and gender are two particular discursive regimes of power through which our bodies become liveable at all. Butler shifts our view from thinking about sex as a description of an identity to seeing how sex is a
category through which bodies become understood—we could do this to every
category through which we apprehend and encounter bodies. So what seems to
be merely a description of ‘the body’ has evaluative and normalizing effects,
because in order for descriptive categories to work, they must produce a nor-
mality and generalized validity that allows them to represent what bodies are
like.

The normality of gender and of our bodies is formed and sustained
through vexed attachments and aspirations to these normal biologies that pro-
vide social recognition. The desire and need to be normal are fuelled by the
ways in which this normality is a site of possibilities and stability because it
grants us access to social power and protects us from violence. Yet when we
consider gender as a critical category, then the question itself compels us to ask
how norms and power delimit and animate bodies and desires as gendered.
What kinds of normality and what kinds of queerness determine who gets to be
a ‘man’ and who a ‘woman’? What kinds of ‘women’s’ bodies and desires and
what kinds of ‘men’s’ bodies and desires do we get to inhabit—and what are
the norms, institutions, and practices that delimit these bodies and desires?

When we inquire into gender, we need to be aware that this inquiry can-
not be severed from the multiplicity of circuits and modalities of desire and
power. Gender is not separable from the ways in which bodies are constituted,
lived, and encountered through other aspects that form our bodies, such as
sexuality, race, age, class, ableness. To inquire into the social, political, and
psychic ways of how gender forms subjects means that we have to attend to the
ways in which these different other aspects are intertwined. We need to exa-
mine how gender inquiry runs up against its limits because it is already consti-
tuted and traversed by these other aspects.

If, for example, we consider the story of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah, it
does not suffice to read the story exclusively in terms of the gender relations at
play. Rather, as we examine the gender relations, we also note how a number of
desires condition how gender is negotiated. In this story, sexual desire and jea-
lousy are intertwined with kinship relations, the promise of nationhood. The
bodies both of the women and of the male infants become the sites through
which these gender relations are negotiated. The privilege of Abraham as patri-
arch is established not simply through the biological tie that he has to Ishmael
and Isaac, nor solely through the privileging of one ethnicity over another, nor
exclusively through his passionate attachments to and erotic relations with the
two women. In fact, when we look at the text, we notice that it is the desire for
nationhood that at first brings Hagar into the picture, when Sarah offers her to
Abraham saying ‘perhaps I shall have sons through her.’ But then it is Abra-
ham’s attachment to Sarah that ends up complicating his relationship to both
Hagar and Ishmael. According to the social conventions of that time, a concu-
bine had no rights, and all children borne to her were the wife’s, but right away
this arrangement does not follow the cultural rules. Driven by jealousy once Hagar is pregnant, Sarah complains to Abraham—blaming him for Hagar’s disdainful attitude—and Abraham backs Sarah completely, thus denying any attachment to either Hagar or the child she carries. Sarah does the same herself, in her abuse of her maid, even though Hagar is legally carrying Sarah’s child. Once the child is born, however, Ishmael is clearly identified as Abraham’s son (Gen. 16:15), not Sarah’s. This oddly seems to be fine with Sarah as long she herself remains childless. But then once again, passion comes into play. This time it is the weaning of the promised son Isaac that causes the conflict, when Sarah seems to fear Abraham’s attachment to Ishmael and demands that Hagar and Ishmael be driven into the desert. Unlike in the first story, in which Abraham seemed not to care what happened to Hagar or the child she was carrying, in this narrative his attachment to Sarah comes into conflict with his attachment to Ishmael. Suddenly gender comes to matter for Ishmael through the dimension of nationhood, because of male progeniture. Gender matters not in and of itself, but precisely insofar as it is the site for negotiating nationhood and fantasies of national or ethnic purity, as we see in Sarah’s demanding of Abraham that he should send away Hagar and Ishmael for Isaac’s sake. So inquiring into gender here points us to how gender does not work separately from desire and from how the conduits of desire are sexually, erotically, ethnically, and racially charged. And the erotic and sexual dimensions of these various investments are precisely what make them often so passionate, so complicated, and so hard to rework.

But what about the focus on reproduction that seems to have returned here—and even become the primary figure for thinking about nationhood as nationhood becomes a question of having male children? If reproduction becomes the primary figure through which nationhood is negotiated, does this then not imply that we have once again made being a woman into all about being a mother and being a man all about being a father? Not quite, if we keep in mind two things.

Firstly, and importantly, we have not rendered any of these mothers (Hagar and Sarah) or fathers and fathers-to-be (Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac) into the normative or normal model of what it means to be a man or a woman. Instead, our perspective has been to ask how in this text we cannot understand the role gender plays if we do not also take into account how gender is traversed by attachments and desires and thus understand that gender encompasses more than reproductive roles or being male or female. And also these roles and being male/female become sites for various desires and attachments. If it is Sarah who is passionately invested in her son’s privileged position and in ensuring the plenitude of his future offspring that was God’s promise to Abraham, then we already find a moment here when Sarah is much more identified with fathering a nation than is Abraham. The same can be said of Hagar, who has also been promised that her son will be the father of a great nation. Because in this
story fatherhood matters mostly in terms of the promise of nationhood, it is only mediated through that potential for nationhood that masculinity is a question of fatherhood. In their investment in nationhood, then, Sarah and Hagar are in effect masculine characters much more so than is Abraham.

Secondly, gender in our interpretation of this story does not simply boil down to a model of heterosexual reproductivity, precisely because of the triangulation of desire between the three characters—Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham—as well as between the different aspects of sex, kinship, and nationhood. And of course we cannot forget religion: God is the fourth one here, so now the triangle has been squared. The ambiguities that emerge in these constellations would be effaced, if one were to settle on a reductive reading that renders one character into the exclusive figure of motherhood. Instead of trying to find gender as the truth inherent in one figure’s story, actions, and body, a critical reading for gender takes gender as one particular dimension through which these, indeed bodily and passionate, relations between these individuals and social aspirations are formed and negotiated.

What then does reading the story of Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham allow us to theorize about gender in conversation with the Bible more generally? It seems to me that this inquiry has aided us in seeing how desire and power are key to thinking about gender. Not only did biological sex turn out once again to be looming as the bottom line of gender, but there is also the question of normative heterosexuality. To what extent have we not been relying on an unavowed understanding that heterosexual desire provides a key to what sets the two women and the man in the story apart? I would like to take this question as an occasion to think more about how sexuality is not merely an additional aspect to gender, but is inseparably bound up with gender and with how gender and sexuality are normalizing and normative frameworks that structure social relations.

In particular Gender Trouble and Bodies That Matter offer a way of thinking critically about this connection between gender and sexuality. Butler elaborates how the assumption that gender is independent of sexuality actually presumes heterosexuality as the normal framework through which to conceive of gender. In turn, this normality of heterosexuality becomes an unspoken normative framework against which gender deviance becomes perceivable. This intertwining of sexuality and gender becomes particularly visible when we think of, for example, a masculine woman who reads as a lesbian or an effeminate man who reads as a gay man. In this way, the ‘proper’ relation to gender, to masculinity and femininity, is sexually indexed as heterosexual, even if this index is invisible until a body is at odds with it.

Insofar as heterosexuality is inscribed as normality, it can appear as unmarked and be taken as irrelevant for how one becomes gendered and lives one’s body
as gendered. In the Mail & Guardian article ‘Gender, a state of mind’ that I mentioned earlier (cf. Groenewald 2006), Robert Hamblin not only insists that ‘Gender has nothing to do with sexuality,’ but also that as a transgendered man in a sexual relationship with a woman, ‘Technically, I am straight. It’s all about how you see yourself.’ So gender seems to have to do quite a bit with sexuality after all. Insofar as Hamblin’s statement can be read as cautioning against thinking of one’s gender as determining one’s sexuality, that cautionary note is indeed a very important one. However, there is a difference between arguing that gender does neither determine nor exhaust sexuality and arguing that they have nothing to do with each other.

To take gender and sexuality as strictly separable from each other means to consider gender as a stable characteristic of the body that does not depend on how desire relates us to others and that in some way precedes sexuality. Gender and sexuality in this view are both exclusively taken as attributes or identities that an individual has or is and that can both be ascertained independent of each other. However, this assumption that bodies are gendered independently of sexuality and desire and that our notions of gender are equally independent is precisely achieved through a disavowed normative heterosexuality. Butler (1999:30) argues about this normative heterosexuality in Gender Trouble that ‘[t]he institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire’. The normality of the gender binary that makes each gender seemingly understandable both in itself and as distinct from the other is achieved by taking heterosexuality as the normal and natural presupposition. This natural relation between the genders and their difference can then be ascribed to a domain other than the bodily markers of gender, and this other domain becomes sexuality, which can then be taken to be independent of the conceptions of the gender binary. By virtue of its naturalization, heterosexuality as the presumed orientation of bodies and desires can appear as a secondary development that postdates the gender identity of a particular body. The gender binary becomes less stable and distinct as soon as we begin to consider how bodies are inhabited through desires, how desires relate us to each other, and how notions of gender are socially constituted by understandings of sexuality.

Sexuality is at the heart of negotiating notions of gender. Sexual norms delimit the masculinities and femininities that we are allowed by society to inhabit and normalize and fix gender categories, categories of attraction and desire that become markers of orientations and identities. These norms and relations of power not only delimit the possibilities for our bodies and desires, but these norms themselves become invested with desire. Normality and gender norms become invested with desire and even sites for pleasure, which is why it is so threatening when the norms of normality that we live by are about to be
fundamentally reworked, so that our own desires and bodies might turn out not as normal as we desire them to be.

Gender thus becomes a conduit for the erotic investments of the body and for negotiating desire. Just as gender is not reducible to women, neither gender nor heterosexual relations are reducible to heteronormativity. In this regard, I am intrigued by how the narrative of Ruth is cited and deployed so often at weddings in the context of two individuals vowing faithfulness and loyalty to each other. Even within the framework of a heterosexual marriage ceremony, most people familiar with the passage recognize that the ones vowing loyalty and support to each other in the narrative are two women, Naomi and Ruth. One not uncommon current rereading of this story is to elaborate on the passionate and erotic relationship between Naomi and Ruth. However, interpretations that are invested in reading Ruth to be decisively and exclusively a lesbian end up having to insist that she married Boaz only and exclusively for pragmatic reasons, namely to attain financial security. Within these readings, Ruth’s relationship to a man can no longer be one of erotic and sexual desire, but the relationship anything has to be one dictated by practical necessities. The relationship with a man thus is animated by a desire that is divested of its particular gendered aspect as erotic and sexual regarding this other body. Gender and sexuality as identity categories for Ruth’s body become the determining principle for the interpretation that Ruth’s desire is for Naomi alone. In this investment in Ruth’s being a lesbian, the possibility is entirely excluded that there might in fact be a passionate relationship among the three of them or at the very least that the kinship relationship that they are negotiating fits neither neatly into the model of exclusive heterosexuality nor into the model of exclusive homosexuality.

Asking how gender works in this text requires that we interrogate both how the recurrent triangulation of desire and sexuality works to gender bodies and how this gendering happens within and through a set of social norms, practices, and institutions, but also within and through erotic and sexual investments. Unlike the triangular relationship among Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham, which was rife with erotic conflict that tears the family apart, here the passionate attachment among the three focuses on kinship that binds them together.

That said, while it seems that harmony rather than rivalry is key to the story of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz, the relationships and desires in this latter text are not any less complicated. Who is pursuing whom and for what purpose? How do these desires intersect, which do not exclude each other, but perhaps even fuel each other, give rise to fantasies and passionate investments? While this is also a narrative of the nation—Naomi is the great-great-grandmother and Ruth and Boaz the great-grandparents of King David—the focus of the narrative until the last few verses is not on Obed, son of this union, and on the kingly
line. Instead the narrative focuses on how these three characters negotiate bonds of kinship, which is by no means separable from the economically fragile status of the two women, or the social obligations of Boaz as relative, or from Ruth’s being a foreigner. Reading this narrative then with respect to gender, allows us see how the normative limits of the understandings of gender that we bring to the text delimit what kinds of desires and relations we can hear in the text—the limits in our categories determine whether we can see it as a nonsexual kinship account, as a friendship story, as an example of heterosexual marriage, as a lesbian narrative, as a bisexual narrative, as a queer family, or all or none of the above.

My point here is not that a bisexual or polyamoury reading of Ruth is ‘more true’ than any of the other readings. Rather, my argument is that the field of possible interpretations is delimited by norms of interpretation which we bring through our categories and which are historically conditioned. And this conditioning works precisely also through contemporary frameworks of gender and sexuality. In the face of the possibilities of interpreting this narrative, what happens is that we have to reflect on what role sexuality plays in delimiting our categories of gender with which we approach the narrative.

C CONCLUSION: QUESTIONS AT THE JUNCTURE OF BODIES AND POWER

In the final section, I would like to briefly sum up and integrate the aspects of gender inquiry that I have laid out with respect to the politics of interpretation. Gender is not just about what it is like to experience life as a woman or a question of what it means to be a lesbian, gay, transgendered, or intersex individual; rather, it is crucial to understand that the queering of gender means that the ‘normal’ itself is called into question and is no longer so easily retrievable as a clear-cut understanding of terms. Gender inquiry is as much about calling the meanings of the categories ‘men,’ ‘maleness,’ and ‘masculinity’ into question as it is about ‘women,’ ‘femaleness,’ and ‘femininity,’ and it’s about the ways in which all of these are intertwined. Equally, heterosexuality itself, as the story of Sarah and Abraham and of Ruth and Boaz shows, is not outside reconsid-erations of what qualifies as queer. Gender is not separable from inquiring into how sex, sexuality, desire, and power form our bodies, our relations, and our social practices and institutions. Practices and institutions become gendered and sexed because of the daily experience of bodies and social life.

If we then want to consider gender as a critical category in the context of the Bible, the question of gender will compel us to ask how norms and power delimit and animate bodies and desires as gendered. What kinds of normality, norms, and necessities determine what kinds of bodies and desires we get to inhabit? How does a particular reading of biblical texts mobilize a conjunction of religious and political discourses? How do these readings themselves be-
come sites for negotiating desires, sexualities, social norms, and relations of power? Which readings of gender become sites of desire as readings that have to remain unspeakable, unthinkable, and unliveable?

Inquiring into gender means raising and pursuing readings at the juncture of bodies and power. The fact that politics traverses, animates, and conditions our practices of reading, our bodies, and our desires does not discredit this enterprise. By eschewing power we forgo the conceptual tools to critically reflect on the different ways in which social norms and relations of power intersect with desire and sexuality to shape both us as readers and our readings themselves. Moreover, to render power—as such, as if it ever existed ‘as such’—suspect deprives critical readings of the political potential that they can mobilize, because the refusal of power binds us to an ethical purity that refuses to get its hands dirty in political contestation. Such an approach to interpretation either relegates critical readings to academic finger exercises or renders critical readings simply moralistic and—in fact—uncritical, if they despise power and politics and then seek to assert their exclusive superiority in terms of truth or morality.

Reading biblical texts critically with respect to gender is thus not solely a question of reclaiming the Scriptures by finding the marginalized in the text valorised instead of condemned. Rather, a critical reading of the Bible means to turn also to these texts as they pose stumbling blocks and do not inevitably lend themselves to emancipatory readings. In making these texts accessible as stumbling blocks, making graspable the outrage and difficulties they pose, reading these texts becomes an occasion for critical ethical and political reflection. A caution against a too-optimistic project of rereading the Scriptures does not invalidate the importance of critical liberation theologies that have long been drawing on the Bible as a source for criticizing structures of oppression and marginalization. A question that remains with respect to such readings—with a different angle—is what happens as one might find oneself entangled with the history of the oppressor and unable to easily align oneself with the history of the oppressed. Although it is not possible to easily join the marginalized, even if one wants to do so, we can and should address the possibilities for a solidarity in our differences based on an understanding that neither culture nor biology fully determine who we are and who we can be. Thus the aim for solidarity does not spare us the difficulties of undertaking the labour of critique, of risking encounters with others, and of daring political contestation that might transform settled boundaries of identities.

As I have been arguing in this essay, critical gender inquiry can open a new horizon for solidarity by its insistence on not reducing gender or desire to questions of ascertaining or asserting identities. Different perspectives can open up when we begin to think beyond binarisms of sex, gender, and sexuality and when queer is understood not only about ‘others’ but also about how our own
normalities come into question. Rather than grounding solidarity in a shared identity, new possibilities for solidarity might emerge precisely where identities and our categories for them come into question and are experienced as queered. The method of critical questioning and the uncertainty of its outcome form its power in making possible solidarity against neo-imperialisms, neo-nationalisms, neo-racisms, and neo-sexisms where an ideology of purity and truth gets yoked to structures and aspirations of power that are no longer accountable. But social change is slow and laborious and so often it seems to move backwards rather than forward. And often social change is sustained by not much more than a persistent desire for justice beyond identity—a very visceral kind of justice, for our bodies, in more just institutions, in more just social practices to make life possible with others. And perhaps it is that efforts for social justice can wax precisely when fixed identities wane.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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