

# Thinking about Gender

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## "Walk before me"

It was the summer of 1983. I was slated to do two things: go to Syria for six weeks as part of an archaeological *équipe* under the leadership of John Lundquist and James Flanagan, and go to Adelfia on the coast of Sicily thereafter, to hang on the beach and lead Bible studies for youth in the middle of the storm that was brewing in Europe at the time. Missiles were going in left and right. West and East were in confrontation mode. The peace movement was about to peak.

My mother fretted about me going to Syria. "It's dangerous there." I knew it might be more dangerous in Sicily following. And it was. One fine summer morning, along with hundreds of other demonstrators, Paola and I blocked as we had for weeks the construction of the Cruise missile base in Comiso, Sicily. We passed *panini* and shared water with kids our age on the other side of the barricades, Italian soldiers. The order was suddenly given to break up the demonstration. All hell broke loose. We were charged and beaten. Many ended up in the hospital.

But that's another story.

In this set of posts, I want to reflect on gender construction. Everything I know about gender I learned in Syria from Syrian teenagers who became part of my life while excavating Tell Qarqur. Not everything, but you get the idea.

John Lundquist put me in charge of excavations on the acropolis, the high point of the tell. A great privilege. I loved the view. It's a breathtaking experience to survey a Levantine valley from atop an ancient tell: Some of my readers will know what I mean. Perhaps, as I do, they remember the view from the top of Megiddo, "Armageddon" of biblical fame. Or from atop Hazor.

A forewarning. I am going to describe everything from a specific, gendered point of view. It's my own, as I remember it, only lightly censored.

Before I headed off to Syria, I had had a conversation about gender with a high school friend I respected very much. The daughter of a famous math professor at the university, she was a gentle and caring person, soft-spoken and knowledgeable. There was an understated beauty about her that I found attractive. She was also a feminist. That intimidated me. "In the Muslim world," I said, "things are really bad for women." Or something to that effect: I was trying to gain her sympathy. "No, they're not," she said, looking me square in the eye. "They're just different."

Two teenage boys and three teenage girls worked with me on the acropolis. My Arabic is minimal, so I had to rely on an interpreter to engage in conversation. Whenever the interpreter paid us a visit, it was a party. So much to ask. So much to understand.

The older girls, all of sixteen, were polite and sociable, but they avoided eye contact with me or any other male.

There is something special about having a conversation with someone who is listening very carefully, but doesn't look you in the eye. You learn to read them by other means, by how they shift their hands and move their shoulders and how they look away from you. They enjoyed chatting, I could tell. But they wanted to set a good example for the youngest of the girls, all of 12 or 13.

Syria is not Saudi Arabia. The girls wore a kerchief on their heads, dressed modestly from head to toe, though not in a loose-fitting burka. They wore pajama-like clothing that adhered to their skin. It was a sight to watch the girls walk. As they carried gone-over dirt in baskets on their heads to the designated dump on the side of the tell, they walked with a strong and dignified gait, as if on air. Having flown to Syria from Italy, a relatively "loud" culture, I was struck by the understated grace of my new friends.

One way to listen to a culture is to watch people walk. The gait and dress of the Syrian village girls spoke to me of the moderate Islamic culture that serves as their natural habitat.

I'm going to switch horizons for a moment, and turn to the Bible. Isaiah was a people-watcher, too. A prophet, someone who speaks from God's side, needs to be a careful observer of the human side. Isaiah watched the girls of Jerusalem of his day walk. He did not like what he saw. This is the message from YHWH he is said to have received (Isa 3:16-17):

	וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה
	יַעַן כִּי־גָבְהוּ
בְּנוֹת צִיּוֹן	וַתִּלְכְּנָה גְטוּיוֹת גְּרוֹן
וּמִשְׁקָרוֹת עֵינָיִם	הַלֹּדֶד וְטָפַף תִּלְכְּנָה
וּבִרְגְלֵיהֶם תַּעֲבֹסְנָה	וְשִׁפַּח אֲדָנֵי קִדְקִד
וַיְהוֶה פְתָהֵן יַעֲרָה	בְּנוֹת צִיּוֹן

יהוה said:

Because the maidens of Zion, with neck thrown back mince along as they go, My Lord will expose the scalp יהוה, he will bare their butt.	high and mighty, and roving eyes, and jingle with their feet – of the maidens of Zion;
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As a note in NJPSV indicates, "To bare a woman's head in public was an intolerable humiliation. Cf. Mishnah Baba Kamma 8.6."

YHWH, when we walk, what does he see?

## Two wives are better than one

Mahmoud, the oldest of the boys who worked with me on the acropolis, was taciturn, but his younger cousin, all of 16, was light-hearted, and easily broke into a smile. That all changed one day. A cloud hung over the latter's head. Mahmoud explained. His cousin had been informed that for the second time, a marriage had been arranged for him.

My kids were from prominent families in the village. Marriage serves to cement alliances between families. From that point of view, two wives are better than one.

From a 16 year old's point of view, the thought of what lie ahead was like a death sentence (two mother-in-laws!). He bore a visible weight on his shoulders, though the consummation of both marriages, and attendant responsibilities, lay years in the future.

Marriage in many cultures is a way for a family to expand its power and influence. Whose family? I'm not sure there is a general rule. Observations I have made suggest that the bride's family is the one that makes the play. If that is true, it's no wonder my happy-go-lucky 16 year old friend was happy no more. He knew that, aside from his family of origin, the eyes of two additional extended families were on him from now on, eyes that sized him up, and owned him. Eyes of people who would always regard the women he would marry as theirs. Eyes of people who would regard his children as their children.

In Syria of old, according to a biblical writer, the same situation obtained. Long after Laban was to have relinquished his daughters to Jacob, he still talked like this (Gen 31:43):

וַיַּעַן לָבָן וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-יַעֲקֹב  
הַבָּנוֹת בְּנֹתַי וְהַבָּנִים בְּנֵי  
וְהַצֹּאן צֹאֲנִי  
וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-אֶתָּה רֹאֶה לִי הוּא

Laban replied and said to Jacob:

The daughters are my daughters,      the children, my children,      the flocks, my flocks:  
all that you see                              is mine.

Talk about being owned! In the dialogue following, Laban admits that what he sees as his is not his to oversee: "But now what have I to say about my daughters and the children they have borne?" He goes on to compel Jacob to agree not to jeopardize the position of his daughters and grand-children by marrying other women (Gen 31:50). In traditional cultures - and according to Freudian and Lacanian psychology, one's family of origin is always one's primary family. Laban defends the interests of his family in calculated disregard of the wishes of its members and of the interests of Jacob and his family. To this day, this is the true meaning of "family values" in culture after culture around the world.

## Coming of age

Gender construction is a phrase that sounds obtuse to many ears. Isn't gender something you're born with? That's true, but only in part. There is also something we call culture. Culture is a code which channels biology and hormones, sets up boundaries, and shapes expectations.

During excavations of the acropolis of Tell Qarqur in Syria, among my helpers from the nearby village, it was the youngest, 12 or 13 years of age that I cottoned to the most. She was an imp, and, being an imp myself, we enjoyed teasing each other. You don't even need to have a common language to tease if that is who you are. One day, that all changed.

Overnight, my 12 or 13 year old became a woman. She had her first period, put on a headscarf, and would no longer tease or be teased in turn. Talk about gender construction. She knew what was expected of her. There was mostly sadness in her eyes, but also a hint of pride and a sense of worth.

Traditional cultures embroider natural rhythms and imbue them with significance. Cultures like ours have a lost a vital connection with biology. We synch instead with the rhythms of the market and of the workplace. Western capitalism is gender-blind, another way of saying that it squeezes out and penalizes people who focus on the three Ks (Kinder, Küche, Kirche: children, kitchen, church). According to a reasonable hermeneutics of suspicion, it might be estimated that 90% of what passes for feminism is ideological cover for market forces.

No one notices. People argue about the degree to which the principles of Adam Smith and those of Karl Marx are compatible, but with few exceptions compromises are worked out. It is not hard to do, since Smith and Marx agreed on the essentials: economics rule.

Put another way, the followers of Smith and Marx are Sabbath-haters:<sup>[1]</sup> Throughout the Bible, the subordination of the things of God to Mammon is hotly context. Take Neh 13:15-18:

בַּיָּמִים הַהֵמָּה רָאִיתִי בִּיהוּדָה דְרָכִים־גְּתוֹת בַּשַּׁבָּת  
וּמְבִיאִים הָעֵרְמוֹת וְעִמְסִים עַל־הַחֲמֹרִים  
וְאֶף־זֵיץ עֲנָבִים וְתַאֲנִים וְכָל־מִשָּׂא  
וּמְבִיאִים יְרוּשָׁלַם בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת  
וְאָעִיד בְּיוֹם מִכְרָם צִיד  
וְהַצֹּרִים יָשְׁבוּ בָּהּ מְבִיאִים דָּאָג וְכָל־מִכְר  
וּמִכְרִים בַּשַּׁבָּת לְבָנֵי יְהוּדָה וּבִירוּשָׁלַם  
וְאָרִיבָה אֶת חֲרֵי יְהוּדָה וְאִמְרָה לָהֶם  
מִה־הַדְּבָר הַרְעָה זֶה אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם עֹשִׂים  
וּמַחֲלִלִים אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת  
הֲלוֹא כֹה עָשׂוּ אֲבֹתֵיכֶם

וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹהֵינוּ עָלֵינוּ אֶת כָּל־הָרָעָה הַזֹּאת וְעַל הָעִיר הַזֹּאת  
וְאַתֶּם מוֹסִיפִים חֲרוֹן עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְחַלֵּל אֶת־הַשַּׁבָּת

In those days I saw men in Judah treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on asses, as well as wine, grapes, figs, and every other kind of burden, bringing them to Jerusalem on the sabbath day. I warned them against the selling of food on that day.

Tyrians living in the city were bringing in fish and all kinds of wares and were selling them on the sabbath to the people of Judah, and in Jerusalem.

I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What evil you do by profaning the sabbath day! Did not your fathers do likewise, and did not our God bring evil on us, and on this city, evil we continue to endure? You bring further wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath."

Nehemiah censured and contended with marketeers who did not respect the Sabbath. Modern-day capitalism *and* socialism balk at the notion of a weekly pause from economic activity. According to both, life is about buying and selling. If you really must have a place where people gather to pray on a regular basis, make it be, none the less, a market place.

Against this, *keseif* 'money' and the Sabbath are not to mix (cf. Zechariah 14:20-21). But the rule has been forgotten except by orthodox Jews and traditional Christians.

In today's world, we sell our time and buy the time of others, and we do it 24/7, 7 days a week. We even try to buy love and attention. And we buy stuff, gaudy stuff, lots of it. The Sabbath, a menstrual period: neither fits into an efficient, economic scheme.

In the old way of seeing things, a menstrual period, a Sabbath, are rhythms which are accorded significance. When the rhythm of the marketplace is the only one we observe, our loss is incalculable.

Traditional culture and traditional gender construction create *difference* by the establishment of symbolically charged dichotomies, and by creating Sabbath, that is, by establishing a retreat from the buying and selling of the daily grind. The age-old project is now snubbed based on the observation that difference is created by way of unequal role distributions. We fixed that, didn't we? Now everyone gets to win bread unceasingly - if gainful employment is available - and shop until you drop. No difference at all.

Traditional gender construction creates an inside space for, in the case of a mater familias, the three Ks; an outside space, in the case of a pater familias, for the practice of what the Romans called *pietas* (devotion to the gods, the tribe, and the state). Women also contribute to the outside sphere, most often in distinct ways. Gender complementation carves out a space in which homo economicus does not rule the roost. *Homo reciprocans*, realization through reciprocal gift-giving, is the chief positive result of traditional gender construction.

Reciprocal gift-giving, a Shabbat from the usual, is the essence of the system of ritual the Bible upholds. The giving and receiving of gifts, symbolic and real; a time and place for sharing those gifts with a transcendent being, one's extended family, a priest or Levite, and the resident alien: these things are at the heart of the system of sacrifice described in the Torah.

Creating difference insofar as difference carves out a space for reciprocal gift-giving might be seen as a positive. The root notion is like and unlike Luce Irigaray's feminist philosophy. Her aim is to acknowledge two sexes, not one, and to create two equally positive and autonomous terms. She constructs an ethics of *difference*. Her emphasis on autonomy is nonsense if taken too far, but it is doubtless important to construct a gendered society in which relationships create not only dependence but freedom. *Autonomy* and *solidarity* deserve to have a place, and reinforce each other.

What might a positively gendered culture look like? Perhaps it already exists. I know of a number of families in which the three Ks and *pietas* are central to a common life. Families characterized by strains and stresses, but also, by mutuality in the giving and receiving of honor and respect.

What many long for is within their reach. But the dominant culture makes it hard for them to name and claim it for themselves.

## Law and Gospel

Law and gospel are, in a generic sense, aspects of everyone's life. The story of a Syrian teenager that unfolded while excavating at Tell Qarqur may illustrate.

People react to the set of expectations ambient culture imposes on them in contrasting ways. Many embrace the expectations ambient culture imposes. Culture is received as a form of common grace. But it's complicated. The environment often contains cultures in conflict. A global culture may be at odds with the mores of a subculture. In a society with a plural number of cultures superordinated and subordinated to one another in complex ways, members of the culture are subject to rival cultural claims on their lives.

A common term in the Hebrew Bible for cultural expectations is *torah* 'instruction, teaching,' as in the *torah* of God or the *torah* of one's mother (Prov 1:8). The same word is used for the *demands* or *law* of God and the *demands* or *law* of a mother. But you wouldn't know it, because *torah* appears as 'law' in many translations if the *torah* is God's, and as 'instruction' or 'teaching' if the *torah* is that of a parent.

The non-concordant translation tradition obscures the meaning. The *torah* of God and the *torah* of one's parents are, semantically speaking, members of a single class. They are sets of expectations which complement one another:

	מְשִׁיבַת נֶפֶשׁ	תּוֹרַת יְהוָה תְּמִימָה
	מַחְכִּימַת פְּתִי	עֲדוֹת יְהוָה נְאֻמָּה
The <i>torah</i> of the Lord is perfect, The decrees of the Lord are enduring,	renewing life. making the simple wise. (Ps 19:8)	
	וְאַל-תִּטֹּשׁ תּוֹרַת אָבִיךָ	שְׁמַע בְּנֵי מוֹסֵר אָבִיךָ
Attend, my son, to your father's warnings,	do not reject your mother's <i>torah</i> . (Prov 1:8)[2]	

The *torah* of God and the *torah* of one's parents are both, in biblical terms, means of salvation. In many ways, Greek *nomos* 'convention, custom' captures the sense of *torah* better than English 'law' or 'teaching.'

None the less, conventions are at times a vehicle of oppression. The expectations a culture imposes on its members in the name of God or in the name of family sometimes threaten the lives of the ones who are supposed to benefit from the conventions.

This relates to an antithesis developed with insight and unilateralism by Paul and Luther. The terms of the antithesis: Law and Gospel. In this polarity, a set of expectations, referred to as Law, has become a cause of oppression. Release from the consequences of not living up to the Law becomes imperative. The gift of release is referred to as "good news," or Gospel.

Law and Gospel define each other. Without one, the other is impossible.

Now for the story.

The director of the Syrian Department of Antiquities who oversaw the excavations at Tell Qarqur arranged to have members of a family from his home village do the cooking for the archaeological équipe. The cooking crew consisted of a mother of 16 children who brought along a daughter aged 13 and an infant whose care she supervised but delegated to her 13 year old daughter, and a brother, unmarried, who was, I think, a homosexual. In Syrian society, there are not many options available to a homosexual. As far as I noticed, homosexuality is looked upon with pity more than disdain.

Most of my colleagues in the équipe were students from Brigham Young University. Mormons one and all, some of the women befriended the 13 year old with the graciousness women of all cultures show each other if given the chance. This, too, is an aspect of gender construction.

A crisis ensued.

Years before, the 13 year old had been promised to a much older man, a trader in camels with other wives to his name. He prepaid for the privilege. For a large family, the importance of the transaction from an economic standpoint is difficult to overestimate.

The 13 year old's future husband got wind that she was cooking for a bunch of Americans. The man's knowledge of American culture was limited to what he had seen in bootleg Dean Martin movie cassettes. He was incensed at the turn of events. He made his way to the village where we were ensconced, stomped into camp headquarters, pistol drawn, and demanded the 13 year old at gunpoint.

The 13 year old caught sight of the mangy 40 year old demanding her, and saw, in the reflection of the man's fury, the end of life as she knew it. She held her ground. She refused to go. The law put the man in his rights. Was there another law by which that law might be set aside? The situation was not easy to resolve.

We Americans of course sided with the defiant 13 year old. But we were also on edge. The director of antiquities was called in. The girl's father was brought down from the village. The father met with his daughter one-on-one.

What do you think happened next?

He beat her black and blue. But she stood her ground.

Arrangements were made, with the *équipe*'s help, such that the bride-price was returned to her erstwhile rightful husband. I cannot forget the tearful joy of the defiant 13 year old.

Law and gospel. The former, sometimes, needs the latter.

Gender construction is a phrase that refers to the way in which something we call culture/religion channels biology and hormones, sets up boundaries, and shapes expectations. But gender construction is also the result of defiant personal choices that challenge the expectations of others as the need arises.

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[1] Adam Smith himself, unlike his latter-day disciples falsely so-called, defended the strict style of Sabbath observance of the Scotland of his day over the objections of innovators. The contempt in which Karl Marx held "Sabbath Judaism," on the other hand, is well-known.

[2] Compare Prov 3:1; 4:2; 6:20, 23; 7:2; 31:26. 'Son' and not 'child' (NRSV) is the more precise translation. The conventions of the ancient genre of instruction followed in Prov 1:8-19 required that the speaker bear the persona of 'father' and the addressee the persona of 'son.' The contents of the passage are aimed at a teenage son in danger of joining a violent gang. To be sure, 1:8 from the start would have been received by a larger set of potential addressees as if addressed to them. Daughters would have received Proverbs 1:8 as applicable to themselves, and adjusted the rest of the passage to their own situation. The translation of 'son' by 'child' in NRSV is a concession to the felt need for inclusive language in the faith and practice of the member denominations of the organization which commissioned the translation, the National Council of Churches USA.