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God and Man in Judaism: Fathers and the Father-God

MASCULINITY IS A CENTRAL CONCERN of the Old Testament. God is masculine, and the response he calls for entails special responsibilities for men. The position of the male is a problem and receives attention in the Old Testament for the same reason that it is a primary concern of pagan literature: masculinity is a difficult achievement. Even when achieved, masculinity contains tensions that may destroy the very social peace that men are called to protect. Though masculinity is always threatened by femininity, men cannot simply abandon all contact with women; they must have a fruitful union with women. Yet that union itself is a chronic source of problems for men.

Creation and procreation were intimately linked in the Hebrew mind, and flaws in the locus of procreation, the relationship of man and woman, had dire consequences for the relationship of mankind and God. From the very beginning, trouble arose for Israel from the relationship of man and woman, and that trouble disrupted the harmony between the creator and the creature. The writers of the historical and sapiential books traced the course of this disharmony in the history of the Jewish people, warning men to avoid the pitfalls that had caused the nation to stumble in the past.

The Masculinity of God and Man

Judaism was not concerned with things in themselves, but with the knowledge of things in their actions. *By their fruits you shall know them* was the operative principle for a Jew; being was manifested in action, and existence apart from its action could not be known, or at least was of little interest. This applied to both God and man. What is man? What is God? To answer those questions, Jews looked at the characteristic actions of each.

Various translators of Scripture and revisers of liturgies have tried to excise references to God as masculine or balance them with feminine references. But these translators confuse maleness and masculinity, a crucial distinction of which the Scriptures are well aware. Maleness is a bodily given, but God does not have a body; maleness is sexual, but Yahweh is not a sexual being. As Gerhard van Rad says, "any thought of sex in him, or of his acting in creation by means of sex, was completely alien to Israel."[1]

There is indeed a distinctively male god prominent in the Hebrew Scriptures: his name is Ba'al. He was the principle of male fertility, and in his name the sacred male prostitutes were put into the pagan temples. The name Ba'al, "Lord," seems to have had connotations of sexual mastery, and sexuality is absolutely excluded from Yahweh and his worship. Sexuality is good, but it is a created reality, not a divine one: "The distinction between the sexes is a *creation* by God since there is no such distinction on the divine level; the polarity of the sexes belongs to the created order and not to God."[2] God did not create by means of sexuality, but by his Word.[3]

God is always masculine in the Scriptures[4] for two main reasons, or rather one that is known in the other. He transcends creation: it is not part of him, nor did it come out of him—he spoke, and it was. God is, therefore, utterly *separate* from creation; that is, he is holy. The holy is a masculine category. To be holy is to be separated, set apart from common or profane use. The English *holy* comes from a root meaning pure, sound, or uncontaminated, but this moral connotation is not the precise meaning of the original word. As Rudolph Otto points out, the holy is the wholly other, the numinous, the be-

ing which transcends all categories, the *mysterium tremendens et fascinans* that provokes awe, fear, and wonder.[5] The Hebrew *kaddosh* means separated, and the Pharisee was so called because he kept himself apart from all that was unclean and therefore took his name from the Aramaic *perisha*, "separated." Though God transcends his creation, he loves it and is involved with it. A transcendent God is a masculine God, a feminine or bisexual God is an immanent God, one who is part of creation or the creation is part of him-her. Such an immanent deity is not holy (separate), and does not demand holiness, that is, separation from the standards of the natural world. A god who was one with creation would not be Yahweh.

The Hebrews came to know the nature of God through his actions. And the God who acts, acts by separating: "It is the biblical God who inaugurates separation at the beginning of creation. He creates a division which is also a mark of his presence."[6] Separation, as we have seen, is a leitmotif of the masculine, its identifying characteristic. Both maleness and masculinity are created by separation. If God's actions establish unity, they do so first by creating a division, and therefore God is masculine in his actions and in his nature. Even scriptural references to God that seem to be feminine emphasize the final unity at which God aims, a unity that follows masculine actions of separation. A reunion with the feminine is the sign of a completed masculinity, although in the Old Testament the nature of this union is not as fully articulated as it becomes in the Trinitarian spirituality of the New Testament.

God does not leave the universe an undifferentiated chaos; he as creator separates light from darkness, the waters above the earth from the waters below the earth. He creates the sun and moon and stars to separate time into discrete intervals. He creates mankind male and female, and creates Eve by separating her from Adam. For this reason, "a man leaves his mother and father, and the two become one flesh" the narrator explains. In marriage man imitates God by following the pattern first of separation and then union. The separation is for the sake of the union, but the action of separation dominates in the man. The man in this famous passage, not the woman, is the one who leaves his family. Whether Jewish families were indeed

matrilocal is not known; there is little evidence for it in the Scriptures. But Scripture does not describe a sociological reality (which partner leaves the family to join the family of the other partner), but a characteristic action of the man, separation, which reflects the divine pattern of action. Leo Strauss summarizes the theme of separation at the beginning of Genesis: "Creation is the making of separated things, of things or groups of things that are separated from each other, which are distinguished from each other, which are distinguishable, which are discernible."[7] The "sequence of creation in the first chapter of the Bible can be stated as follows: from the principle of separation, light; via something which separates, heaven; to something which is separated, earth and sea; to things which are productive of separated things, trees, for example; then things which can separate themselves from their places, heavenly bodies; then things which can separate themselves from their courses, brutes; and finally a being which can separate itself from its way, the right way."[8] The separation of the creature from God contains within it the potentiality for another type of separation, the rebellion against God: that which is not God can reject God.

To describe God as feminine or as an equal mixture of masculine and feminine undermines his identity in Israelite monotheism. It was the pagan world that fused the gods and nature. Israel, especially under the tutelage of the prophets, insisted they were separate. Every time Israel spoke of God as *he* (and Hebrew verbs express gender), Israel was reminded that God was the totally other, the Holy One. The feminine, on the other hand, is a principle of union or communion.

Only a masculine God can love his creature with the type of love that Yahweh shows. This God loves freely; he is under no necessity to love. He chooses Israel freely, he elects this one people from all the peoples of the world and separates them from the nations so that he can show his love for them. And his law obliges them to be a separate people: "I am the Lord your God, who separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean beast and the unclean. . . . You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, and you should be

mine" (Lev. 20:25-26). God's love is undeserved; it is sheer grace. An immanent God is not free, nor is it capable of love for the other, since finally there is no other: all is God. A masculine God is both fully transcendent and fully immanent *through love*. Such an immanence through love is possible only to a being who is transcendent and separate from creation, that is, masculine. The object of God's love is feminine, the Virgin Daughter Zion and the Church, although this femininity reflects, as we shall see, something in God himself.

Man, Woman, and Patriarchy

Israel developed its anthropology not as a speculative exercise but in its attempts to understand its history and its relationship to the world. This understanding of human nature was based on reflection on how man acts in history, and in particular on how Israelite man had acted. Israelite history is reflected in protology, the story of origins. The writers of Genesis had a great interest in the relationship of man and woman at the beginning because the relationship of man and woman has been important throughout the history of the Jewish people. They looked back from the time of the Exile at the history of Israel, and traced the roots of the punishment of the Exile to a flaw in the relationship of man and woman. This flaw was projected back to the very beginning of history. The disobedience of Eve and Adam in the garden was repeated by the women and men of Israel at key moments in their history: the Exile from the Garden was a result of the same failures that led to the Exile from the Promised Land.

In Genesis we see that man and woman are both important in the divine plan. Woman is not an afterthought: she is made from the man, and expresses something in him, although he remains different from her. What is the nature of unfallen man? He works, even in Eden. He is a co-creator with God, and the opinions of some platonizing Church Fathers notwithstanding, man and woman were obviously meant to procreate. But even the relationship of unfallen man and woman has the potential for problems. The distinction of man and woman is good, as everything created by God is, but pro-

vides an opportunity for the serpent to foment rebellion. In this respect, the distinction of the sexes is like the distinction between God and man: separation can become a source of rebellion and sin. Perhaps because she is the last element in creation to be separated, Eve is more susceptible to the serpent than Adam. In the moment they rebel, Adam and Eve know the distinction between good and evil and recognize their nakedness before God and the world. What experiences of Jewish history lead the author to articulate this prototype of the dynamic between man and woman?

The main books of the Old Testament took their canonical form in the midst of the Exile, either just before or just after Israel had experienced a forced separation from the Promised Land. Israel's confidence in God underwent a trial because of its near extinction as a nation. Was God faithful? God had promised to be with Israel; why had he deserted his people and let them be made captive? The Babylonian captivity must, the Israelites reasoned, be the result of some grievous failing on the part of the people, who had not kept their part of the covenant. What was the failure and what were the roots of that failure? Could Israel avoid such sin in the future, and never again go into exile?

In Nehemiah the repatriated exiles have been contaminated with paganism because they have married pagan women "of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab" (Neh. 13:23) who import the worship of idols into Israel. Idolatry, failure to worship Yahweh as God, replacing him with other gods, was the sin for which Israel was punished in the first place. Men failed to keep themselves free from such sin and were punished with exile. And they failed because they were led astray by their wives. Uxoriousness was a vice that could lead to calamity. Pagan wives led their Israelite husbands astray, and the husbands, besotted by love for their wives, were weak, refusing to discipline their families. Even Solomon was led astray: "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless foreign women made even him to sin" (Neh. 13:26).

Eve listened to the tempter and was deceived; Adam let himself

by ruled by Eve instead of rebuking her for her disobedience. He should have listened to God, but instead obeyed his wife. This pattern, according to the various Old Testament authors, was repeated several times in Israel's history. Solomon's sexual prowess and interest in women led to the introduction of paganism and idolatry, and finally to the punishment of the Exile. The historical books clearly connect David's sin with Bathsheba and Absalom's rebellion, Solomon's marriage to foreign wives, his draining of the wealth of the kingdom in an erotic display of luxury, the consequent dissatisfaction and division of the Kingdom, and the extinction of the northern and southern kingdoms. Susanne Heine summarizes: "The queens of Israel brought with them the religious cults with which they were familiar, so that Yahweh, the God of Israel, became one among many gods and indeed goddesses. The prophetic history writing sees this apostasy to the alien idols as the occasion for punitive judgment by Yahweh, which finally leads to the destruction of the kingdom and the dispersion of the people."[9] Both men and women sinned and apostatized, but their roles in the apostasy differed.

The authors of the Old Testament recognize the dynamics of masculinity, but they do not see the primary danger as the tendency of men to nihilism once they have broken free of the maternal world. Rather, the chief danger is the failure of men to maintain their relationship to God because of a disordered love for women, a love that leads men to follow the directions of women rather than the laws of God. A man needs a woman to make him a patriarch, as Adam needed Eve, but the closeness of communion with the wife, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, exposes him to the danger of feminization, to the loss of the separation that makes him a man, a separation necessary for the free obedience that man owes God as his creator. Patriarchy, therefore, is a danger to masculinity. Though a great achievement of the Israelites, patriarchy, like all male achievements, contained tensions that threatened to destroy it.

Patriarchy is not simply an affirmation of masculinity; it is not "a synonym for male dominance or for a system in which male traits are valued over female ones."[10] Still less is it simply a synonym for ex-

ploitation and domination, though that is the current feminist usage. Patriarchy is a system in which fathers care for their families and find their emotional centers in their offspring. In ancient Israel, "the image of father was not primarily one of authority and power, but one of adoptive love, covenant bonding, tenderness, and compassion."[11] Patriarchy, we can easily forget, was and is a great achievement in the face of the male tendency to promiscuity and alienation from children and the women who bear them. As John W. Miller shows in *Biblical Faith and Fathering: Why We Call God "Father,"* patriarchy was not a universal ideal in the cultures surrounding Israel. Miller asserts that biblical patriarchy, far from a curse, is one of the greatest achievements of any religion.

Miller bases his conclusions on his analysis of human nature, on the emphasis on fatherhood in the Bible, and most of all on the processes of psychological development and maturation in the child. First of all, there is the indisputable fact that "fathers, biologically speaking, are marginal to the reproductive process."[12] If fathers are to play a role in the family, "culture must intervene on behalf of fathers if they are to be equally (and as significantly) involved."[13] The culture that has done this with the greatest consistency and success is that of the Jewish. The Jews of antiquity did not exist in a world dominated by patriarchal myths. Certainly the religions of the pagans were not patriarchal. Miller notes that in Near Eastern myths the father-god's "marginality, cruelty, incompetence, or powerlessness, more often than not, poses dilemmas to which mother, son or daughter deities must respond by defending themselves or by taking action to uphold the universe in their stead."[14] Only in the Hebrew Scriptures do we find an all-powerful and all-good Father-God.

The patriarchs reflected the fatherhood of God, although very imperfectly. The God of the Hebrews was not like the irresponsible masculine gods of the surrounding pagan cultures,[15] because he did not abandon the children he begot, but cared for them. The patriarchs followed the example of God, or the idea of God was influenced by the experience of patriarchy. Their culture taught Jewish men that they should not be simply male animals, aggressive, assertive, and violent, but fathers, whose aggressiveness would be

transformed by responsibility and who would manifest a gentleness and a concern for children, an expression of a completed masculinity that has reunited with the feminine world of the family, while still maintaining the separation necessary to exercise authority. Because the family is at the very heart of the Jewish way of life, sexual ethics is a central concern of the Hebrew Scriptures. The principal rituals of the Jews, circumcision, the redemption of the firstborn son, and the Passover meal, all express the importance of fathers in the culture. The wisdom literature repeatedly admonishes fathers to be the teachers of their children. Indeed, this paternal teaching role gave rise to the corpus of Scripture itself. Feminists are correct in their characterization of the Old Testament as inescapably patriarchal. The Hebrew Scriptures were written by fathers to teach men to imitate the Father in heaven.

Abraham and Moses

In the work of forming Israel, God acts in a masculine way. He first separates Abraham from his ancestral homeland. God's first words to him are "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house" (Gen. 12:1). God makes a covenant with Abraham that involves cutting animals in two and separating the halves of the carcass (Gen. 15:13); symbols of the divine presence pass between these pieces (Gen. 15:17). The sign of the covenant will be circumcision (Gen. 17:11), the separation of a piece of flesh from the body.

Abraham is a war leader, and protects those close to him, rescuing Lot from the kings who raided Sodom (Gen. 14:16). But his relationships with women cause him trouble. He fears for his safety in Egypt—the beauty of his wife might tempt the Egyptians to kill him and take her—and he pretends they are brother and sister. As a consequence, "the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house" (Gen. 12:15). Pharaoh's standards are higher than Abraham's, and when he realizes that the evils he suffers have come upon him because he has taken another man's wife, he sends Abraham and Sarah away. Abraham later tries to deceive Abimelech in the same way (Gen. 20:2).

God promises Abraham that his descendents shall be as numberless as the stars (Gen. 15:5), but Abraham heeds Sarah rather than the Lord. She complains that "the Lord has prevented me from bearing children," and she instructs him to "go into my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children from her." (Gen. 16:2). When Abraham obeys Sarah and begets a child by the slave Hagar, trouble starts immediately. When Hagar conceived, "she looked with contempt on her mistress" (Gen. 16:4). Ironically, Sarah blames Abraham: "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my maid to your embrace, and when she saw she had conceived she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" (Gen. 16:5). Abraham again gives in to Sarah: "Your maid is in your power; do to her as you please." It pleases Sarah to maltreat Hagar, who flees, and has to be rescued by an angel of the Lord.

The sacrifice of Isaac, the heir and carrier of God's promise, is at the heart of Abraham's mysterious relationship to God.[16] Abraham, because he was a patriarch, fell prey to uxoriousness. He had to redeem himself and demonstrate his obedience by his willingness to sacrifice the child whom he loved with a mother's tenderness. Abraham's sacrifice makes explicit in an extreme form what all fathers must be willing to do: encourage (if not force) their sons to separate from the safe world of the mother and assume the sacrificial male role. Without the achievement of sacrificial masculinity, the son remains stuck in the profane world. In his sacrifice, he is removed from the profane world and enters the sacred world, like the sacrificial animals that were slain and burned to remove them from this world into the divine world. The ultimate significance of this sacrifice becomes clear only in the Crucifixion. The Father is willing to separate the Son from himself, so that the Son may taste death for all.

In Exodus, God continues to act in a masculine way, making a distinction between Israel and Egypt in the plagues. What harms the Egyptians does no harm to his own people. The hail does not kill the Israelite's cattle, the darkness does not envelop the land of Goshen, and most of all, only the first born of the Egyptians die. When the angel of death sees the blood of the sacrificed lamb on the

doorpost, he also makes a distinction between Egyptian and Jew. The Red Sea parts for Israel, but clogs the wheels of Pharaoh's army and drowns his host. Moses sees that God treats Israel in a unique way, and tells God that "we are distinct, I and thy people, from all other people that are upon the face of the earth" (Exod. 33:16). This distinction must be preserved at all costs, and God instructs Moses to command the Israelites to drive out the pagan nations from the Promised Land, "lest . . . you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters play the harlot after their gods and make your sons play the harlot after their gods" (Exod. 34:16).

In Moses we see the role of protector exercised though mediation and substitution. When Israel sins, Moses repeatedly pleads with God to spare them and establishes the institutions of the sacrifices and the scapegoat. The sacrificers, the priests, are male, but the sacrifices too, if they are for the sins of the high priest or leaders of the community, must also be male, as must be the lamb of the Passover. The scapegoat bears the sins of the people and is driven into the wilderness.

David

David is the ideal of Israelite manhood, a man after God's own heart. He is a man of spirit, of *thymos*, and fits Plato's portrait of the spirited man. His nature is passionate, impetuous, and affectionate, in his dealings with both God and man, not to mention woman. David loves Jonathan, for instance, with a love surpassing that of woman. The Hebrew Scriptures recognize a male eros, a real desire for union that is distinct from homosexual desire (which the Scriptures condemn). This is the eros of comradeship in suffering, especially in war. This love is physical because the Hebrews know of no purely spiritual action of the human being, who is both body and soul. Jonathan and David embrace, and even exchange clothes. Their friendship is so close as to cause talk, and allegations of homosexuality may be implied in Saul's insults ("You have chosen the son of Jesse to your shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness" [1Sam. 20:30]). Saul does not say this because he believes it has oc-

curred, but because it is the worse possible thing he can say about David.

David is passionate and physical even in his relationship to God. The Psalms are full of cries that his soul and body yearn for the Lord. David displays his exuberant masculinity in his dance before the ark, when it is brought into Jerusalem. Micael implies in her remarks that, in his "leaping and dancing" (2 Sam. 6:16), David inadvertently exposed himself: "How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as one of the vulgar fellows shamelessly uncovers himself!" (1 Sam. 6:20). David rebukes her, and the narrator shows that God concurs with David's rebuke by remarking that Micael was childless after her despising of David's virility: "And Micael the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death" (1 Sam. 6:23).

David's life follows the pattern of masculinity, and indeed that is why David is a type of the Messiah and why so many of the Psalms can be understood as spoken by the Messiah.[17] David must leave his ordinary life because of Saul's anger and becomes a scapegoat wandering in the wilderness, an outlaw who confronts death at every turn: "How many are my foes!" (Ps. 3:1). Even God forgets him: "How long wilt thou hide thy face from me? (Ps. 13:1), "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1) Pursued by Saul, David constantly faces death: "The cords of Sheol entangled me, the snares of death confronted me" (Ps. 18:5). But David is delivered from death as if by a resurrection: "O Lord, thou hast brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit" (Ps. 30:3). David attains the wisdom of compassion, and is able to become the king, the father of his people.

David's personality is attractive because he is erotic and affectionate, although these good qualities lead him astray. David was the model king and model of Israelite manhood; but who is the true man, who plays the masculine role more fully in the matter of Bathsheba, David or Uriah, the Hittite, the non-Jew?: "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go forth to battle" (2 Sam. 11:1),

David sent his army off to war, but he stayed at home lounging on a rooftop, from which he saw Bathsheba performing her Mikvah, the ceremonial bath at the end of menstruation just before ovulation, when a woman is at the peak of her fertility and most likely to conceive. The Law enjoined continence during menstruation, and then had the wife cleanse herself so that she would be most attractive to her husband just at the time she was most likely to conceive. David desires her, and as masterful kings will, has her. When she becomes pregnant, he tries to get Uriah to sleep with her so the child will be mistaken for Uriah's. Uriah is off fighting, and comes back to his king as commanded. But after the feast he does not return home. When David asks why, Uriah replies that he will not take his ease at home while his men are suffering in the field: "Shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife?" (2 Sam. 11:11). Uriah, a pagan, is nobler than David and feels the demands of comradeship, while David stays in ease and safety. Although celibacy did not receive its full due until Christian times, it is not true that celibacy, at least temporary celibacy, was condemned by Judaism. Abstention from sexual relations was required in certain ritual contexts and was also a demand of warfare. In practical terms, an army in the field had to be celibate; but in Uriah's remarks we can also see an appreciation of the value of comradeship, which has demands that override those of marriage. David's sexual desires, on the other hand, lead him astray and bring civil war upon Israel.

David passes on his strong sexual desires to his children, and endless trouble results. David's children are all too like their father. Amnon desires his half-sister Tamar and rapes her. He then refuses to marry her and drives her away. Yet David does not punish Amnon because of his affection for him. Absalom bides his time, as David bided his time with Joab and Zeruiah, and at last kills his half-brother to avenge his sister. Again, David lets himself be ruled by his affections, permits Absalom to return from exile, and then allows him to plot against the kingdom. Even before the decisive battle, David's heart is still with Absalom, and he gives orders to spare the boy. After the victory and Absalom's death, David can only mourn until Joab warns him that his grief is costing him his kingdom.

The writers of the Old Testament were aware of the paradoxes of masculinity. The male had to undergo a lonely journey away from home, into the desert and into death, so that he could find God. The detachment from ordinary family life was dangerous. A man had to be firmly attached to a family and had to expend all his energies in protecting and providing for his wife and children. Yet this emotional closeness created a danger that he would listen to his wife and children and neglect duties to God. Not tyranny, but uxoriousness, is the chief danger of patriarchy. As a father he had to love his children, but he had to be willing to sacrifice them. A father's role is to separate his children from the safe maternal world and send them off to face the dangers of life. As an Israelite, a father had the additional burden that he may have had to sacrifice his love for his children to his greater duty to God. Then, as now, it was not easy to be a man.