

Article

Masculinity, Homoeroticism, Transness, and Yhwh: When Biblical Scholars Attempt to Rehabilitate a Violent God

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Abstract

Reception history explores how the Bible has been translated, interpreted, reinvented, and deployed by exegetes, artists, politicians, and others. Given the Bible's historical and global significance, reception history must also include evaluating how scholars themselves have "read" the biblical literature. This article examines the work of two influential scholars of Hebrew Bible, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Theodore Jennings. Eilberg-Schwartz's groundbreaking *God's Phallus: And Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (1994) and Jennings' *Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel* (2005) both treated an underexplored subject: divine masculinity. In their monographs, Eilberg-Schwartz and Jennings present biblical homoeroticism—divine as well as mortal—as a valuable path for establishing intimacy among men and for "transing" the men of the Hebrew Bible. Both works, however, partake in two long-standing exegetical traditions: mitigating, ameliorating, and even attempting to redeem the Bible's often violent deity, and reinscribing binary premises that biblical narratives typically feature. The article concludes that scholars must resist the tendency to rehabilitate a violent deity, as well as challenge the Hebrew Bible's (and scholars' own) binary premises.

Keywords: masculinity; homoeroticism; trans; binary; heteronormative; Hebrew Bible

1. Introduction

Given its well-known historical and global impact, the Bible cannot be treated as a mere relic of the past. Indeed, the Bible has spawned offspring of every kind. It has been translated, and thus interpreted, into hundreds of languages.¹ It has been explained by exegetes to a variety of religious audiences. It has been reinvented in a plethora of art forms. And finally, it has been foundational for a range of political and economic ideologies and practices. Those scholars who pursue the reception history of biblical literature have a rich field to choose from, including biblical scholarship itself. Each generation of academics brings a particular history, location, and culture to its readings, of course. It is therefore well worth asking how scholars themselves have "read" the Bible, and how those readings have influenced their colleagues, students of the Bible, and even, perhaps, the Bible's more general audience.

This question is particularly salient when it comes to academic discourse about the Hebrew Bible's depiction of Yhwh, the Israelite deity. Biblical scholars have inherited a deeply embedded tradition: Christian and Jewish exegetes have spent centuries justifying divine violence in both the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Bible. A well-established genealogy of ideas undergirds countless sermons describing Yhwh's "just" wars or explaining



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why the punishment Jesus metes out on Jezebel in Revelation was deserved.² Biblical scholarship, for its part, has colluded in such efforts to rationalize divine violence. As Clines (2019) points out, such (male) scholarship has valorized the conception of Yhwh as a warrior god: the deity's purpose, for such interpreters, is to uphold justice and to usher in an imagined final eschatological order.³ This argument has been put forward with such conviction, Clines states, that "only an enemy of peace could find an unkind word to say against it" (Clines 2019, pp. 71–72).⁴ Similarly, scholars of the Greek Bible have made efforts to detoxify Jesus' violent behavior.⁵

This genealogy of ideas, one that features strenuous attempts to soften the presence of a hypermasculine, violent deity in a hypermasculine and violent textual world, has not remained the sole province of the cis-gender, heterosexual-passing, and white European scholars who have dominated the field in decades past. Over the past forty years, feminist scholars have been among this project's strongest advocates, arguing that the Israelite deity, Yhwh, has "a feminine side." Phyllis Tribble sparked the endeavor with what she calls "an invaluable vocabulary of female imagery for God" (Tribble 1976, p. 368). This vocabulary, Tribble writes, "tempers any assertion that Yahweh is a male deity" (ibid.).⁶ Since then, multiple scholars have revisited the subject, many supporting Tribble's line of inquiry. There have been dissenters, too: notably, Clines concludes his close analysis of presumed feminine divine language in the Hebrew Bible by stating that Yhwh is a "thoroughly male god, and there is simply no benefit in failing to recognize that fact and accept its consequences" (Clines 2021, p. 249).⁷

While many feminist scholars posited a kinder, gentler Yhwh with feminine attributes, scholars of masculinity seemed more hesitant to confront Yhwh's gendered performance. Few scholars wrote about *divine* masculinity.⁸ Instead, for several decades, they focused their efforts instead on exploring how *mortal* male characters of the Hebrew Bible either demonstrate or fail at being "good at being a man."⁹

Two foundational monographs provide exceptions to this rule. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz's *God's Phallus: And Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994) and Theodore Jennings' *Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel* (Jennings 2005) directly address Yhwh's masculine performance. Both scholars write extensively about the homoerotic relationship between the Israelite deity, individual men of his choice, and 'am Yisrael, the men (not "people") of Israel.¹⁰ For both authors, biblical homoeroticism provides a pathway both for resisting and for transforming the Hebrew Bible's troubling portrayals of divine masculinity. Acknowledging and even celebrating homoeroticism leads to a transformed understanding—even relationship—with Yhwh. A violent god is thus, in some part, redeemed.

Rehabilitating Yhwh through a celebration of his homoerotic inclinations comes at a price, however. Despite their valorization of biblical homoeroticism, both authors reinscribe binary assumptions that dominate the Hebrew Bible from its opening verses in Genesis 1. Both ameliorate and (at least implicitly) condone biblical depictions of a sexually violent and hypermasculine deity. Both, then, participate in a long-standing reception history where biblical scholarship is concerned, one that depends on an effort to soften, rationalize, and even justify divine violence. Their place in this tradition—and its implications—has yet to be fully examined.

Section 2 of this article, then, explains why Eilberg-Schwartz's understanding of biblical homoeroticism leads to his depiction of a loving "Father God." Section 3 will lay out Jennings' argument that biblical authors deliberately "trans" Israel in order to depict the transformation of a violent and hypermasculine deity into a tender lover. Section 4 will then place the work of these two authors in conversation by analyzing the knotty implications of the valorization of homoeroticism in both works, arguing that these implications

include the reinscribing of the binary assumptions so prevalent in the Hebrew Bible and participating in biblical scholarship's enduring tendency to ameliorate divine violence.

2. God the Father and God the Lover: God's Phallus and a Tender Yhwh

In *God's Phallus*, Eilberg-Schwartz reaches the conclusion that biblical homoeroticism is to be valued precisely because it permits male readers to reimagine a violent male deity as a tender "Father God." His argument is based on assuming a heterosexual ideology on the part of biblical writers. This ideology is challenged by the existence of a monotheistic and male deity whose lover and partner is not to be found in a divine female presence, but rather in his male people, *'am Yisrael*.

Eilberg-Schwartz begins by making clear that, in his view, the authors of the Hebrew Bible were motivated by ideologies embedded in binary assumptions. "Ancient Judaism's concept of masculinity," he writes, "was deeply entangled in images of what is now called heterosexuality" (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 3). In this ancient world, mortal-male performance is associated with procreation, and female characters serve as the natural counterparts for male ones in assuring human fertility. Eilberg-Schwartz also declares that condemnation of sexual acts between men in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 provides proof of the heterosexual nature of biblical theology (ibid.).¹¹ This troubling assumption undergirds his own binary premises.

Although Eilberg-Schwartz believes that biblical authors use "feminine language" for the Israelite deity, he acknowledges that Yhwh is certainly described as male.¹² The deity's masculinity is unusual, he argues, because the Hebrew Bible provides neither a divine goddess-wife or consort for the Israelite deity, nor offspring.¹³ Yhwh, Eilberg-Schwartz suggests, is unlike other ancient deities whose sexual life and progeny often involve the use and abuse of mortal female bodies (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 4). Thus, biblical authors do not admit Israelite women as sexual objects for the Israelite deity.¹⁴ Instead, *'am Yisrael* become the recipients of the Israelite deity's desire; Israelite *men* are Yhwh's "wife" (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, pp. 3, 138). Eilberg-Schwartz's thesis, which became foundational for masculinity studies, suggests that Yhwh's marriages and sexual intercourse with Israel are clearly "metaphorical" (pp. 3–4) in order to aid and abet the project of biblical authors: retaining the intimacy that the men of Israel enjoy with their deity without being troubled by potential homoerotic indications. For Eilberg-Schwartz, it was obvious that the Hebrew Bible describes mortal male relationships with the deity as both loving and sensual; "[t]hese men love," as Eilberg-Schwartz frankly puts it, "in ways that are imagined erotically and sensually, a male deity" (ibid.).¹⁵

Heterosexual premises, then, do not prevent homoerotic outcomes. These produce a thorny dilemma for ancient authors, according to Eilberg-Schwartz. Such writers would inevitably find their heterosexual identities disturbed by the expression of sexually charged love for their god. Eilberg-Schwartz suggests, then, that ancient writers found two ways to manage this predicament. On the one hand, biblical authors minimize or veil Yhwh's male body. On the other hand, the need to suppress—even deny—the homoerotic relationship compels them to feminize *'am Yisrael* (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 3).

The Hebrew Bible's authors thus work to disembodify Yhwh and to render him sexless. Eilberg-Schwartz does not claim that the Hebrew Bible was bereft of any descriptions of the deity's body; rather, he suggests that its authors attempted to hide it (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 8). The need to conceal the divine body results in prohibitions against material images of Yhwh. These prohibitions, he argues, help to de-sex Yhwh. They also constitute "a specific way of protecting the honor of the father God" (p. 119).¹⁶ Men do not look at men, Eilberg-Schwartz adds (p. 97),¹⁷ and they most certainly should not be permitted to look at the deity: "[t]he prohibition on images is thus invoked precisely where the dilemma

of a homoerotic relationship threatens to emerge” (p. 121). Ancient writers, he maintains, also avoid homoerotic implications through the feminization of Israelite men: “When a man confronts a male God, he is put into the female position *so as* to be intimate with God” (p. 137; italics mine).

Casting men of Israel as female sexual objects for a male Israelite deity creates a devastating equation. Biblical writers make clear that Israelite men who go “after other gods” are not only committing idolatry, but are women committing adultery (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 3). Yhwh’s punishment for Israelite disloyalty frequently features violent and brutal consequences. The biblical deity subjects his female-personified men to public stripping and stoning, and to rape and gang rape (Hos. 2:8–15; Ezek. 16:27–41, 23:1–44). Here, Eilberg-Schwartz, like most biblical scholars, relies on what biblical scholars have termed the “marriage metaphor” (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 97), describing this presumed “marriage” as monogamous. He asserts that “the man is to his wife as God is to Israel” (p. 99). We should note, however, that describing the “bond” between Yhwh and Israel as “monogamous” or even as a marriage is deeply problematic. In the Hebrew Bible, only the female must be monogamous; biblical texts include depictions of Yhwh as married to two sisters at one time (Ezek. 23).¹⁸

Eilberg-Schwartz observes that the Hebrew Bible makes it clear that the feminization of mortal men has consequences for individual men, as well as for the male collective. “The metaphors of God married to Israel spill over into other symbolic registers where God is imagined in relationship to individual men,” Eilberg-Schwartz writes (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 99). Patriarchs are incapable of impregnating their wives unless Yhwh allows and enables a pregnancy—without the blessing of Yhwh, there is no pregnancy (p. 140). The deity’s men must, at Yhwh’s direction, on occasion take overtly feminine roles even vis-à-vis other men. Moses is a prime example: he complains of his role as “mother” of all Israel in Numbers 11:12, and he must veil in Exodus 34:33 (pp. 143–44).

Yhwh, Eilberg-Schwartz observes, also inflicts a bodily sign of subservience on his followers. In Genesis 32:26, Jacob is marked on his genitalia to signify his submission; this means “Israel” only comes into being after being emasculated (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 155). When Yhwh seeks to kill Moses, his life is saved only by Zipporah, his wife, who conducts a nighttime circumcision of their infant son (Exod. 4:24–26).¹⁹ Israelite women, Eilberg-Schwartz concludes, will lose their husbands to Yhwh “unless they condone the genital disfiguration of their sons, and acknowledge that Israelite masculinity has been sacrificed to God... circumcision was for the ancient Israelites a symbol of male submission” (p. 161).²⁰ In short, patriarchs, prophets, judges, kings, and *‘am Yisrael* are, throughout the Hebrew Bible, feminized in relation to God. Masculinity is thus rendered potentially “superfluous” by the biblical authors (p. 4).

Biblical authors’ efforts to suppress the homoerotic implications of an intimate relationship between *‘am Yisrael* and Yhwh were not entirely successful, as Eilberg-Schwartz admits. Thus, the “sexless” deity appears in scenes where his genitalia cannot be veiled or hidden completely (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, pp. 77–78).²¹ For example, in Exodus 33:13–23, Moses expresses a desire to “know” God (Exod. 33:13).²² Eilberg-Schwartz notes that just a few verses later, in Exodus 33:18, Moses appears to make a direct request for a deeply intimate, homoerotic experience when he asks the Israelite God to show him his divine “glory,” or phallus (כבוד).²³ Yhwh agrees, instead, to show the prophet his “hinder parts” (Exod. 33:23); “it is certainly plausible,” Eilberg-Schwartz suggests, “to understand the deity to be presenting the backside in order to hide the divine front side” (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 78).²⁴

Eilberg-Schwartz thus acknowledges graphic and fleshy depictions of homoeroticism in biblical texts. In his discussion of Jeremiah 13:10–11, a passage which suggests that

Israel's relationship to Yhwh is as a loincloth clinging to divine genitalia, he observes that "[t]he homoerotic resonances, however unintentional, lie just beneath the surface and threaten to break into consciousness" (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 101).²⁵ Interestingly, Eilberg-Schwartz's own analysis of this passage suggests that the homoerotic resonances he describes are not "lying beneath the surface" but are actually quite obvious:

The principal meaning of this passage is obviously to condemn Israel's lack of fidelity to God. But not far beneath is the exceedingly erotic conception of Israel's relationship to God as the cloth covering God's loins. When that image is juxtaposed to images of Israel following other gods, an act that Jeremiah himself compares to adultery, *it leaves little doubt* that Israel is expected to cling to God's loins. (p. 102; italics mine)

"God the father is also God the lover," he observes (p. 101).²⁶

Imagining God the father as God the lover is a critical point for Eilberg-Schwartz; this dual role permits *readers* to reimagine biblical homoeroticism. Doing so permits the recovery of intimacy and tenderness between men, Eilberg-Schwartz holds, and that connection is itself embedded in the biblical relationship that obtains between a "father God" and his male children. This sexless father God, who is also a lover, offers an affirmative—perhaps even freeing—form of homoeroticism. "Embracing the Father," he suggests, "involves a willingness to see male-male eroticism as an emotionally whole relationship... We recognize the part within ourselves that creates intimate bonds with fathers and other men, though those bonds do not take the form of sexual relationships" (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 241).

Biblical homoeroticism, then, can be valued for its power to reinvent (male) relations with the divine. There is room for homoeroticism among men, one that offers intimacy without feminizing men, without making them women as biblical authors do. In addition, like those selfsame authors, Eilberg-Schwartz's vision of homoeroticism avoids evoking homosexuality; readers should remember that he assumes that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are prohibitions against homosexuality and that biblical theology is assuredly heterosexual (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 3).

While biblical authors try to avoid the sexual implications of homoeroticism by feminizing Israelite men and desexing Yhwh, Eilberg-Schwartz declares that men may remain men and yet enjoy intimacy with God the Father and God the Lover. He valorizes a homoeroticism that avoids feminization while depending on assuming a sexless relationship among *heterosexual* males.²⁷

3. "Transing" Israel and Taming God in Jacob's Wound

In *Jacob's Wound*, Jennings (2005) insists that ancient authors quite deliberately (even enthusiastically) depicted their God in sexualized terms, contra Eilberg-Schwartz. He also exposes the sexualized violence that forms the foundation of Yhwh's homoerotic displays. Notwithstanding, he builds a complex (and troubling) argument in order to conclude that the deity's propensity for sexualized violence is redeemed, softened, and transformed by homoerotic mortal love.

In his introduction, Jennings claims that anyone who has read the Hebrew Bible knows quite well that it contains a good measure of "unabashed eroticism" (Jennings 2005, p. ix). He refers to a range of narratives that involve heterosexual sexual behavior, though it is disturbing that his examples also feature sexual assault and sex trafficking on the part of male characters (e.g., 2 Samuel 11 and the book of Esther). What he describes as "erotic" stories of the Hebrew Bible have been read as narratives that depict male characters' power to use and abuse female bodies.²⁸ Nevertheless, those examples of "eroticism" demonstrate what scholars have yet to attend to: "What has been virtually missing from this

recognition of the eroticism of the Hebrew narrative," he states, "...is an engagement with the homoerotic elements of these sagas" (ibid.). Jennings goes on to assert that the Hebrew Bible is certainly not homophobic, as has been so often assumed (p. x). He aims to bring different questions to the text; once those are asked, he writes, we discover the Hebrew Bible's deeply homoerotic nature. Like Eilberg-Schwartz, Jennings maintains that homoeroticism in the Hebrew narrative is heavily determined by the role Yhwh plays (p. xiv). In contrast to Eilberg-Schwartz, he argues that the Israelite deity is hypersexual. Jennings' Yhwh has not been made sexless by biblical authors. Far from it.

Jennings begins his study with the book of Samuel, a text that offers readers "a story for warriors and, especially, leaders of warriors... In these stories of men constantly on the march, in a raid or skirmish, or at camp, women seldom appear" (Jennings 2005, p. 3). Women are not needed, Jennings states, because the narratives thematize relationships in which dominant war leaders always appear with youthful boy companions (ibid.).²⁹ Such relationships are modeled by the Israelite deity himself, given that he invariably chooses young and beautiful males for his attention (p. 7). "The first thing we know about Saul and David is their beauty," Jennings remarks (p. 8). This is a world dominated by men and defined by men; male-male relations are its subject.

Jennings is at pains to note the powerful and pervasive hypermasculinity of the Israelite deity and its sexualized expression. Phallic hypermasculinity is also expressed through divine material objects. The ark and the ephod, for example, "make physically present the hyper-masculine presence of the Lord. They both disguise and disclose the phallic potency of Adonai... The ark before which David dances is the sheathed phallus of his lover" (Jennings 2005, p. 47). Such "phallic potency" is dangerously violent. Jennings describes, for example, what happens after the Philistines transport the Ark of the Covenant to the temple of Dagon (1 Samuel 5). The night after the ark arrives, the Philistine deity is found face down on the ground before it. Dagon's faithful raise his body and put it back in its place. Nevertheless, the following morning, the Philistine god is not only found prostrating once more before the Ark of the Covenant, but his head and hands have been cut off (1 Sam. 5:2–4).³⁰

Jennings argues that the story of the ark's travels among the Philistines depicts Yhwh's inclination to engage in sexual assault against his enemies, both divine and mortal.³¹ "It seems quite likely that the narrative represents Dagon as having been raped by the ark," he writes (Jennings 2005, p. 48). Jennings compares Dagon's humiliation with the torture endured by the Levite's secondary wife in Judges 19. After she is gang raped all night long, the Levite finds her face down, like the Philistine deity. And, like Dagon, her hands rest on the threshold. The theme of phallic assault, Jennings contends, continues when the Philistines are struck with tumors. Maintaining, along with several commentators, that these tumors are hemorrhoids, he infers that the Israelite deity has marked the Philistine men with a sign of anal rape (ibid.).³² Their degradation is a tale, he concludes, that "makes sense" in the narrative world in which phallic aggression as the manifestation of male dominance is well-known (p. 49).

Jennings also describes Yhwh's inclination to engage in sexual violence against his own men. His monograph is filled with examples of Yhwh's sexualized assaults on men he has himself singled out for his attention. Saul is "ravished" by the Israelite deity, but the erotic possession Yhwh inflicts upon him is actually a humiliating sexual assault (Jennings 2005, p. 86). Jeremiah 20:7 is not a description of divine sexual seduction, but of rape (p. 51). The nakedness of the prophets Isaiah and Micah is "the sign of... their being subservient to the divine potency" (p. 88); to be a prophet may well result in being raped by God (p. 89).³³

According to Jennings, Yhwh's capacity for expressing his sexual self in disturbing and violent ways also emerges in the narrative of the prophet Samuel—even before his

birth. When Hannah asks the deity to give her “male seed” (אִנְשִׁים זָרַע) before going on to promise him the child engendered by it (1 Sam. 1:11), Jennings declares that the phrase appears to be “a rather graphic indication of the mobilization of YHWH’s male potency in connection with the conception of Samuel” (Jennings 2005, p. 108). He repeats that the ephod in Judges 8:27 and 18:14 serves as a fetish representing the deity’s phallic prowess and potency, and notes that in 1 Samuel 2:18 the child Samuel is described as wearing an ephod. He concludes that “the lad [Samuel] wearing such an (under)garment suggests to the (re)reader a certain erotic availability to YHWH” (p. 108).³⁴

Jennings makes both Yhwh’s homoerotic bonds with Samuel (and their potentially abusive nature)³⁵ and a variety of biblical examples of divine sexual assaults subjects of concern. Yhwh’s homoerotic relationship with David, however, can be openly celebrated:

In the homoerotically suffused relationship between David and Yahweh, the maleness of both characters seems essential. Both have “ephods.” ... David’s maleness is coyly draped in linen. Adonai’s is impressively sheathed in the ark. One is lover, the other beloved. For if in this tale Adonai is the top and David (as usual) plays the role of the bottom, it is by no means the case that the top is always in control or that the bottom is simply dominated. This is not, after all, rape; it is love. (Jennings 2005, p. 50).³⁶

Although Jennings admits that the homoerotic relationship between David and the deity is a troubled one, he insists that the David narrative reveals a profound transformation of divine character. A ferocious deity, one who is often violent, arbitrary, and even bloodthirsty, is rehabilitated by David, and by David’s trust in him: “so deeply is YHWH transformed in the crucible of this great passion, that his faithfulness will be relied upon even when all seems lost” (p. 66). This redemptive vision relies on Jennings’ assumption that the biblical authors of the book of Samuel intentionally composed a linear narrative in order to effect a divine makeover. Such intentions would also make it possible to project into the far-off future another man in David’s line who will be loved for David’s sake, a man who will restore the portion of Israel. The origin of Israel’s messianic hope is thus grounded, so Jennings, in the homoerotic love affair between Yhwh and his beloved David (ibid.). The story of David and the deity is a tale of Yhwh’s transformation from a “phallic bully” to a loving, tender God whose steadfast love cannot be gainsaid (p. 254).³⁷

From Jennings’ perspective, readers can thank biblical authors for depicting a loving David capable of taming the deity through his generous offer of homoerotic love. In addition, Jennings asserts that biblical authors engage in a complementary strategy for offering readers a deity who loves his men: the “transgendering” of Israel. Jennings maintains that when *‘am Yisrael* is depicted as female, “the result is not so much the depiction of a conventional heterosexual relationship but one between a male and his transvestite beloved” (Jennings 2005, p. 165).³⁸ Yhwh’s sexual nature is expressed in a queer relationship; the deity is not “straight.” The portrayal of Israel, Jennings continues, as either a “promiscuous slut or as desiring wife is a way to give both form and impetus to homoerotic feelings, as well as the practices they suggest” (p. 173). It is a disturbing moment, echoing the troubling nature of Jennings’ claims in his introduction, when he describes biblical narratives of sexual assault and sex trafficking as proof of the profoundly “erotic” nature of the Hebrew Bible (p. ix). In both cases, Jennings seems to ignore the violent misogyny of many biblical texts. It seems we are permitted to excuse the way in which biblical authors objectify and vilify women if authorial intentions are positive ones, such as permitting men a venue for freely expressing homoerotic desire.³⁹

The biblical authors, Jennings declares, continue to depict the relationship between the Israelite deity and his faithful as erotic in character and as specifically sexual in its expression (Jennings 2005, p. 131). Readers are aware that prophetic texts, in Jennings

words, can transgender male subjects as female, but they fail to recognize that the so-called female is “a male in metaphorical drag” (p. 134). The “transgendering” of Israel is not a disguise of homoeroticism, but rather a way to *foster* a homoerotic relationship with the divine (ibid.). For this reason, Jennings holds that the prophets never shrink from the attribution of eroticism to the relationship between the divine male and mortal males. We are not seeing some sort of conventional heterosexual relationship when Israel is depicted as female, as Eilberg-Schwartz would have it, but rather a relationship between one (divine) man and his mortal “transvestite beloved” (p. 165). The biblical authors are offering their male readers a way to reimagine their deity as one who offers faithful love and “limitless compassion,” and, Jennings concludes, “the transgendering of Israel plays an important role in this history” (p. 175).

Jennings concludes that a metaphorical “transgendering” helps Israel come “to know a much different deity than the one it first imagined in such ferociously macho terms” (Jennings 2005, p. 175). Biblical authors are offering us a repeated motif, a pattern of divine ferocity that, over time, becomes another thing entirely: the story of God’s unwavering love for his men (p. 254). We are reading stories about a loving, tender and *sexual* relationship between Yhwh and his men. “In this sense,” he supposes, “‘homosexuality’ is not the contrary of biblical faith in a loving God but its very foundation” (Jennings 2005, p. 66).⁴⁰

4. Discussion: *God’s Phallus and Jacob’s Wound in Conversation*

Eilberg-Schwartz wrote *God’s Phallus* two decades before Jennings published *Jacob’s Wound*. Both works focalize the role of homoeroticism in the Hebrew Bible. When these two works are placed in conversation with each other, it becomes apparent that each is part of two long-standing exegetical traditions: first, the tendency to reinforce the very binary premises that biblical narratives typically feature; and second, the attempt to mitigate, ameliorate, and even redeem the Bible’s often violent deity.

Both Eilberg-Schwartz and Jennings present the Hebrew Bible’s homoeroticism as ethically positive. For Eilberg-Schwartz, biblical authors work, on the one hand, to suppress sexually expressed love between Yhwh and his men because of its challenge to their heteronormative ideology; on the other, they permit their sexless male God to safely become both father and lover to his men. The deity may not love his man carnally, but that restriction does not prevent him from having “intimate bonds” with Israel. The Hebrew Bible’s male readers are thus granted a loving and tender relationship (though asexual) with their God and with their own fathers and male companions. For his part, Jennings deduces that biblical homoeroticism is *not* suppressed at all but is foundational to the biblical authors’ aims: to offer a positive vision of male-male relationships that are clearly erotic and even sexual in nature. The unfolding of the divine-male/mortal-male relationship demonstrates how mortal male love tames a heretofore violent and abusive God, one who was known to sexually assault the men he chose for his own.

Eilberg-Schwartz and Jennings reimpose heterosexual and binary thinking on their subject, even while attempting to explore and valorize homoeroticism and “transness” in the texts. For Eilberg-Schwartz, an idyllic depiction of divine-male/mortal-male homoeroticism in the Hebrew Bible depends on presuming not only that the Israelite deity is indeed made “sexless,” but that this is beneficial precisely *because* divine sexlessness is what makes possible “intimate bonds” with fathers and other men. God the lover, in the minds of biblical authors and for Eilberg-Schwartz, must be a desexed god in order for mortal men to enjoy intimacy with him. Men can only love one another if that love is devoid of any form of sexual consummation; biblical homoeroticism, like the homoeroticism Eilberg-Schwartz imagines for modern men with their God, is one that rejects sexual expression of love be-

tween men.⁴¹ The painful implications for members of the LGBTQ+ community are obvious: heterosexuality is biblical, and it is normative.

There are challenges for female readers, too, who barely receive attention in *God's Phallus*. While Eilberg-Schwartz posits that women who imagine themselves in the image of a female God through “goddess imagery” are engaged in a complementary exercise to the one he describes for male readers of the Hebrew Bible (pp. 241–42), this assumption would appear to exclude access to Yhwh, who is, according to his own reading, male. It is also worth asking: would divine-female/mortal-female eroticism necessarily mirror his depiction of a sexless divine-male/mortal-male relationship; must that relationship, too, rely on heterosexuality as prescriptive?

Similarly, Jennings celebrates the homoeroticism he regards as foundational for biblical authors at the expense of female readers. As in Eilberg-Schwartz, women are not relevant for Jennings—either in the biblical narratives or as readers of the Hebrew Bible. Both men are writing for men about texts that were, from their own perspective, written for men. They are not wrong about the male biblical authors, whose narratives are written from male perspectives for a male audience. The authors and their ancient audience share a male gaze. Nevertheless, both monographs essentially reinscribe the Hebrew Bible's binaries, binaries that subordinate female characters who largely serve as tools in male contests over power. Modern female readers are subordinated, too, made all but irrelevant to the arguments both scholars produce. Ironically, then, both authors perpetuate, rather than resist, biblical perspectives about women's worth.

Thus, where Eilberg-Schwartz devotes just a few sentences to female readers' potential relationship to goddess imagery in his exploration of the positive value of homoeroticism, Jennings authorizes a homoeroticism that depends on blatantly misogynistic views of women. In *Jacob's Wound*, the female body is irrelevant except insofar as its debasing depiction helps male authors invent a gentler God. The biblical portrayal of a promiscuous, slutty Israel is, in his view, a way to provide both “form and impetus to homoerotic feelings” (Jennings 2005, p. 173). Again, such views rely on binary assumptions: women are inescapably sexual, and male authors must make men into women in order to find a forum for the depiction of male-male desires. If “transing” Israel relies on toxic binaries that have been applied to men and women for millennia, it serves no liberatory function.

Both Eilberg-Schwartz's and Jennings' valorization of biblical homoeroticism relies on suspect interpretive moves. The former argues for a “desexed God” in the Hebrew Bible. But there is little evidence that such a deity exists. “Desexing” Yhwh is not a biblical project for most of the Hebrew Bible's authors. Rather, as scholars have long-since noted, the Israelite deity's sexuality is often depicted in extremely violent scenes that include sexual abuse and sexual assault of his men, who serve as individual and collective victims for his sexual aggression.⁴² Similarly, Jennings' claims that biblical authors thematize how a sexually violent Yhwh is tamed by the love that his mortal men offer is belied by the texts of the Hebrew Bible, which demonstrate that Yhwh retains, at all times, the capacity to brutally punish his men, and not infrequently through sexual violence and assault. A tamed biblical deity is, here, more imagined than textual.

A primary goal for both authors is to detoxify the biblical masculinity they explore. Such a project must work to redeem a violent and sexually aggressive deity—in Eilberg-Schwartz's vision, by placing a sexless but tender Father God in the role of lover for his men. In Jennings' readings, we become free to celebrate biblical authors for (supposedly) deliberately crafting narratives that demonstrate how a transgendered Israel and Yhwh's passionate and devoted men turn a bullying, violent deity into a loving and steadfast God. These two important efforts to ameliorate biblical homoeroticism, even to “trans” the rela-

tionship between Yhwh and his men, partake of a long-standing exegetical tradition: rehabilitating a violent God.

Yhwh has, however, “unrivaled military and royal status” among gods, men, and creation (Chapman 2004, p. 85). He carries a sword “sated” with blood (Isa. 34:6). He spreads dung on enemy cities (Nah. 3:6). He sexually assaults his chosen men (e.g., Ezek. 16:23–25; 23:1–44, Lam. 1:9–10).⁴³ Yhwh is a warrior who wades in the blood of his enemies (Isa. 63:1–6); wields his own member in order to kill and assault other men (1 Sam. 12:15)⁴⁴; castrates and beheads and mutilates those who dare oppose him (e.g., 1 Sam. 5). Yhwh’s capacity for violence at every possible register is not only acknowledged, it is valorized by the biblical authors who describe it in horrifying detail. Rehabilitating Yhwh’s abusive and sexually violent homoeroticism by claiming that he embodies (or can embody) either a loving homoerotic paternalism or a gentle and tender lover to a transvestite Israelite beloved are problematic projects. Biblical homoeroticism (whether asexual or sexual) hardly leads to either the desexed and paternal or tender divine lover these two authors describe. Quite the opposite. From a textual perspective, Yhwh’s homoerotic behavior is most often coercive, controlling, and violent.

Exegetes—particularly male ones—have, for centuries, “managed” the biblical God. They have often valorized his violent displays of masculinity and justified them. Eilberg-Schwartz and Jennings were not of that ilk. Quite the contrary. Both sought to discover a deity who loved (at least his men) safely and who could be loved in return. Both worked to detoxify the Bible’s depiction of Yhwh’s hypermasculine and violent nature. Their efforts, however well-intentioned, nonetheless reinscribe binary and heteronormative premises. These reveal an implicit rejection of homosexuality in *God’s Phallus*, and outright misogyny in *Jacob’s Wound*.

Eilberg-Schwartz and Jennings are not alone in hoping to find a more benevolent deity in the Hebrew Bible. But whether Yhwh has been read as more-female or more-male, whether he has been read as hypermasculine and heterosexual or hypermasculine and homoerotically motivated, the academic and scholarly perception of him and of the world he acts within largely remains governed by binary assumptions. That binary conception needs to be interrogated and resisted. It can be—and not only because the text itself offers opportunities to challenge it, but because non-binary queer and trans people are at high risk of harm from those who weaponize the Bible against them precisely through the use of binary premises and assumptions.⁴⁵

Redeeming, taming, and reinventing the Israelite deity is an understandable project. Readers, exegetes, and scholars have justified, even celebrated, divine violence and the masculine performance it serves. This project cannot succeed, however, if it sets aside the Hebrew Bible’s depiction of a deity who regularly deploys sexualized violence to control, subordinate, and even torment *‘am Yisrael*. Nor can such an effort, however well-intentioned, rely on reinscribing heteronormative and binary assumptions favored by biblical authors and, at times, shared by biblical scholars. If readers are to be freed to resist such ideologies, biblical scholars will have to think their way out of such boxes. It is not an impossible task, though certainly a difficult one.

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Notes

- 1 According to Wycliffe Bible translators, there are 7397 languages in the world, and as of June 2025, one in five individuals are still “waiting” to read the Bible in their language. See <https://wycliffe.org.uk/statistics> (accessed on 9 January 2026).
- 2 In his article “How to do the History of Male Homosexuality” (Halperin 2000), David M. Halperin describes his methodological approach as an attempt to trace a genealogy of ideas. I adopt that approach in this article, and though, like Halperin, I do not claim to provide a full historical treatment of the ideological thread I am exploring (in this case, how scholarly work has ameliorated or justified divine violence), I do, like Halperin, assume that ideas can be described sequentially, with earlier work influencing and framing later work. This is clearly the case with the two primary works in this study, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz’s *God’s Phallus: And Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994) and Theodore Jennings *Jacob’s Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel* (Jennings 2005). Jennings acknowledges his indebtedness to Eilberg-Schwartz in his introduction and explains where his approach diverges (Jennings 2005, p. xiv). His work refers to *God’s Phallus* multiple times in both the text and accompanying footnotes (e.g., pp. 53, 73, 134, 145, 210–11, 246).
- 3 Clines writes that “[i]t is fascinating how the theme of the ‘divine warrior’ has become so frequented a topos in the (always male) scholarly literature” (Clines 2019, p. 70).
- 4 Once the male scholars dominating the discussion had subscribed to some utopian vision of the abolition of war and reign of peace, Clines adds, they could ignore the “quintessential masculinity of the idealization of violence” (Clines 2019, p. 72). The depiction of the deity as a warrior was, he insists, an ethical problem that scholars were failing to confront (p. 71).
- 5 An obvious case is the work of René Girard, historian, literary critic, and philosopher of social science, which has had a significant effect on the work of many scholars of the Greek Bible. Girard insists that Jesus rejects violence in any form (Girard 1972, 1987), and his students extend his argument to other biblical figures. Hamerton-Kelly (1992), for example, suggests that Paul’s life is another victim-centered story, one that moves Western civilization toward an ethic of love and nonviolence. In the 1960s and 1970s, leading scholars insisted that Jesus was a teacher of nonviolence, and even nonresistance (e.g., Hengel 1971, 1973), and later scholars, like Crossan (1991), emphasized Jesus’ presumed inclusiveness and tolerance.
- 6 An even earlier exposition of Yhwh’s presumed “feminized” aspect can be found in Tribble (1973).
- 7 Clines concludes that wishful thinking on the part of feminist scholars is problematic, writing that he regrets “the damage done to the feminist cause by the repeated claim that the Bible is less masculine and less sexist than it actually is” (Clines 2021, p. 249). Two feminist scholars have responded to his article. Langton (2022) does not, ultimately, contest Clines’ examples in her response. She maintains that Deuteronomy 32:18, Psalm 90:2, and Numbers 11:12 feature language that can inform readers about biblical understanding of the female body, even though they do not contain female language about the deity. Hanne Løland Levinson, however, concludes that the Hebrew Bible *does* contain examples of metaphorical female or feminine god-language (Levinson 2022).
- 8 Barbara Thiede’s contribution to this conversation is to be found in *Divine Masculinity in the Book of Samuel: How Yhwh Models the Man* (Thiede forthcoming-a). Other texts attend to the characterization of the deity, but do not foreground his masculinity or sexuality. Deryn Guest’s *YHWH and Israel in the Book of Judges: An Object-Relations Analysis* (Guest 2019) uses psychological theory to frame the scribal depiction of Yhwh’s relationships through the lens of problematic parent–child relations. Rachelle Gilmour’s *Divine Violence in the Book of Samuel* (Gilmour 2021) argues that Yhwh’s violent behavior can be analyzed through ethical reasoning. Francesca Stavrakopoulou’s *God: An Anatomy* (Stavrakopoulou 2022) provides a full description of the corporeal (and violent) nature of the deity. Other monographs describe the Israelite deity as akin to other ancient deities (e.g., Smith 2002; Sommer 2009).
- 9 Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld coined this phrase (Herzfeld 1985, p. 16). Summarizing the considerable body of research in the field of biblical masculinity studies is not possible here, but three edited collections published in just one decade of the past four make the point. In the first, *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond* (Creangă 2010), Clines notes the lack of scholarship on divine masculinity in his “Final Reflections on Men and Masculinity,” calling it “the elephant in the room” (Clines 2010, p. 239). Despite his call for more attention to the subject, the second volume, *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded* (Creangă and Smit 2014), includes just one full chapter on Yhwh’s masculinity (Hooker [2014] 2017). The third volume, *Hebrew Masculinities Anew* (Creangă 2019), includes Clines’ own contribution, “The Most High Male: Divine Masculinity in the Bible” (Clines 2019).
- 10 Despite the work of translators and of hopeful readers of the Hebrew Bible, *‘am Yisrael* is not a gender-inclusive collective. When the word *‘am* is joined with the proper name *Yisrael*, biblical authors are not referring to a mixed, if binary, constituency of men and women, but to male Israelites alone (Clines 2019, pp. 80–81).
- 11 Since *God’s Phallus* was published, scholars have argued that homosexuality, which refers to a sexual orientation (rather than to same-sex sexual acts that may or may not result from such an orientation), is not at issue in the Hebrew Bible; it is a modern construct. See, for example, Olyan (1994, 2006); Boyarin (1995); Stiebert and Walsh (2001); and Lings (2009).

- 12 Eilberg-Schwartz claims, for example, that “there appears to be less reluctance in employing explicit metaphors of female anatomy from God than metaphors of male anatomy. This makes sense. Since the gaze is typically assumed to be male, and since it is male figures who are imagined to have seen God, the deity can be comfortably figured in metaphors that are anatomically female” (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 115).
- 13 It should be noted, however, that in Proverbs 8:22–30, Lady Wisdom claims to have been created by the deity as his first work and also describes herself as his “delight” (שׂשׂוֹן) in verse 30; this term has potentially erotic implications (Koehler and Baumgartner 2001, p. 1619). Interestingly, the biblical author uses the same root to describe how Lady Wisdom herself takes delight in men (Prov. 8:31).
- 14 Several scholars do address possible sexual relations between Yhwh and mortal women, mostly focusing on Eve. Eve figures as a possible consort in Rashkow (2000), and the possible sexual relationship with Yhwh is explored in some detail in Bokovoy (2013), who provides a thorough discussion. Stiebert, too, discusses Yhwh’s role in the sexual act of conception regarding Cain and notes that Eve also attributes the birth of Abel to the deity’s doing (Stiebert 2010, pp. 215–16). In a similar vein, Sara Milstein suggests that it is not Jacob who makes Leah pregnant, but Yhwh, who functions as her “implicit sperm donor” (Milstein 2024, p. 321).
- 15 The Hebrew root for “love” (אהב) is associated with sexual activity. See Mirguet (2019, p. 562), Milstein (2024, pp. 317–21), and Wallis (1974, pp. 107–9). The root shows up repeatedly to describe erotic experience and relationship in the Song of Songs. The term may refer to sexual love itself, or to a loved one, beloved, lover, betrothed. See Song 1:13, 1:14, 1:16, 2:3, 2:8, 2:9, 2:10, 2:16, 2:17, 4:16, 5:2, 5:4, 5:5, 5:6, 5:8, 5:9, 5:10, 5:16, 6:1, 6:2, 6:3, 7:10, 7:11, 7:12, 7:14, 8:5, 8:14.
- 16 Eilberg-Schwartz suggests that a nexus between three different kinds of prohibitions is at work in the Hebrew Bible. These include prohibitions against making material images of God, dishonoring one’s parents, and violating specific sexual norms (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 120).
- 17 This claim may be overstated: David quite literally puts himself and his genitalia on display before all Israel in 2 Samuel 6:14.
- 18 “Marriage” in biblical texts is frequently polygynous. It frequently goes unnoticed that prophetic texts that scholars claim depict the “marriage metaphor” do not describe “marital” relationships at all. As L. S. Stone (forthcoming) points out, the deity’s relationship with Israel in Ezekiel 16 is defined in exclusively sexual terms and does not feature the typical marriage formula “and she was his *as a wife*,” even though such a phrase and variations of it appear throughout the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Gen. 24:67; Deut. 22:19, 29, 25:5; 1 Sam. 25:42; 2 Sam. 11:27; 1 Kgs. 4:11; 2 Kgs. 8:18; and Ruth 4:13). The Hebrew text, L. S. Stone notes, “does not require or even invite a reading that imagines any other bond between deity and woman than his sexual ownership of her.” For an overview of “marriage” in the Hebrew Bible, see K. Stone (2014). Eilberg-Schwartz does note that the so-called “marriage metaphor” supports the violent dominance of men in marriage (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 99).
- 19 Eilberg-Schwartz presents Moses’s and Zipporah’s second son as the subject of the nighttime circumcision. The Hebrew text is quite difficult, however, and does not clearly identify who is being circumcised, whose feet are being touched with the bloody foreskin after the circumcision, or whom Zipporah addresses as the “bridegroom of blood.” For a discussion of these difficulties, see Hays (2007).
- 20 In addition, as Eilberg-Schwartz points out, when the deity approaches, men must avoid women, literally leaving their role as husbands behind them before any encounter with Yhwh can possibly take place (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 48).
- 21 Eilberg-Schwartz does not include discussion of the rabbinic texts which address the possibility that Genesis 1:26 hints at the existence of the androgyne (Genesis Rabbah 8:1, Leviticus Rabbah 14:1). In his view, “it is clear that in general Israelite culture viewed male–female complementarity and heterosexual desire not simply as a norm, but as part of the fabric of creation. This is evident in the way that both stories of creation (Genesis 1–2) posit a complementarity between men and women that belongs to the natural order” (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 95).
- 22 Females may be described as being “known” by men (e.g., Gen. 24:16, Judg. 11:39), but they themselves cannot “know” a man.
- 23 Hooker (2014) suggests that Yhwh’s “glory” is phallic and a site of desire.
- 24 The term used here for “hinder parts” (אחור) is also found in 1 Kings 7:25 and Ezekiel 8:16 and can be applied to non-human and human animals alike.
- 25 K. Stone (2007) considers reading this passage as a description of a sado-masochistic relationship.
- 26 Similarly, Eilberg-Schwartz observes that the author of Psalm 63:2–9 provides one of the most passionate and erotic expressions of desire for Yhwh in the Hebrew Bible (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 103). Multiple narratives show the deity and his favored men enjoying homoerotic experiences engendered by the shared use of a biological female body (Thiede 2022a, pp. 86–109).
- 27 One of the relationships Halperin explores, friendship—or male love—is based on a relationship of equals in which the true friend is indistinguishable from oneself (Halperin 2000, p. 100). He writes: “[s]exual love, at least as it is viewed within the cultural horizons of the male world, is all about penetration and therefore all about position, superiority and inferiority, rank and status, gender and difference. Friendship, by contrast, is all about sameness: sameness of rank and status, sameness of sentiment, sameness of identity. It is this very emphasis on identity, similarity, and mutuality that distances the friendship tradition, in its original social and discursive context, from the world of sexual love. So why include it here, in a genealogy of male homosexuality? Because the friendship tradition provided socially empowered men with an established discursive venue

in which to express, without social reproach, sentiments of passionate and mutual love for one another, and such passionate, mutual love between persons of the same sex is an important component of what we now call homosexuality” (p. 101). Eilberg-Schwartz appears to be describing something similar with his vision of a sexless homoeroticism, though in this homoeroticism, hierarchy between Yhwh (the “Father” God) and men clearly obtains and the rejection of any connection to homosexuality is featured.

28 There is a rich literature on both these examples, far too extensive to list here.

29 Thiede (2022b) argues, against this claim, that female characters not only appear with certain regularity in the books of Samuel, but that their presence is essential to the narratives’ political concerns: the taking and raping of female characters, as well as the intentional sexual humiliation of male characters by other men, I suggest, is critical to the narratives precisely because sexualized violence is the instrument for establishing power, authority, and rule.

30 Hands function as a euphemism for the male member (Schorch 2000, p. 225). Cutting off the head also connects shame and emasculation (Lemos 2006, pp. 234–36).

31 Though the ark is ostensibly “captured” by the Philistines, some scholars have noted that Yhwh seems to have permitted, even arranged, this event in the first place (e.g., McCarter 1980, p. 109; Römer 2021, p. 241).

32 Gershon Hepner declares that this entire episode is scatological in nature, and that the use of the term *kavod* in connection with the affliction of *ophalim*, suggests that the deity is forcing the Philistines to “be feculent” (Hepner 2004, pp. 280–81). Maeir (2007) argues that Yhwh is striking the Philistines directly on their genitalia.

33 Thiede (2024, p. 227) points out that Yhwh penetrates his men with his own spirit in acts of sexualized possession (1 Sam. 10:10, 11:6, 16:13). Translations shy away from conveying the sexualized language evident in those texts. Instead, they typically describe the deity’s spirit as one which will “come upon” Saul mightily (NASB), “possess him” (NRSV), or “grip him” (JPSV). Baruch Levine has noted, however, that the term the biblical authors deploy, *tsalakh* (צִלַּח), suggests the use of considerable force (Levine 2009, p. 35–36). That force is patently penetrative; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner read *tsalakh* as denoting forcible entry when the word is used together with either *al* (עַל) or *el* (עַל), both of which occur in Saul’s and David’s story (1 Sam. 10:6, 10; 11:6; 16:13). In their entries on *tsalakh*, Koehler and Baumgartner follow Gesenius B in suggesting that *tsalakh* is a single verb that evidences a semantic range that includes “to split,” “to force entry,” and “to penetrate.” According to their analysis, the verb evolved to include additional meanings, such as “succeeding” and “prospering” (Koehler and Baumgartner 2001, p. 1026).

34 Jennings also notes that the biblical author of 1 Samuel 3:7 makes clear that the boy Samuel did not yet “know” (יָדַע) Yhwh because the deity had not yet “revealed himself” (גִּלָּה) to him. The verbiage reveals sexual overtones: the Hebrew word for “know” is frequently used to describe a male-initiated sex act (e.g., Gen. 4:1, 24:16; Judg. 11:39, 21:12; 1 Kgs. 1:4). The Hebrew root for “to reveal, uncover” is, as Jennings observes, used to describe the uncovering of Noah’s nakedness in Genesis 9:21–23 and regularly appears in Leviticus 18 and 20 as part of multiple prohibitions against uncovering nudity. An audience familiar with Biblical Hebrew will recognize these associations. As Jennings suggests, the “nakedness of YHWH is, at least allusively, sexual nakedness or nudity” (Jennings 2005, p. 111).

35 Divine grooming and abuse of Samuel is addressed in chapter 3 of Thiede (forthcoming-a).

36 David is named “beloved” (דָּוִד) for good reason.

37 I am not claiming that there is no evidence of positive depictions of male-male affection to be found in the Hebrew Bible. Ecclesiastes 4:11 reads: “When two lie together they are warm; but how can he who is alone get warm?”

38 Jennings is using nomenclature here that has been applied to individuals who dress in clothes normatively attributed to the opposite sex (keeping in mind that “opposite” is itself a problematic term that rests on binary assumptions). Today, the term “transgender” is generally applied as a more inclusive moniker for covering not only this practice but a range of other related gender expressions. Jennings uses the term “transgendering” to indicate that male characters are actively depicted as women, thus suggesting that their gender has been altered by the biblical author. Deuteronomy 22:5 states that a woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor a man wear women’s clothing.

39 At the same time, Jennings also argues, as does Eilberg-Schwartz, that there is some form of feminization of the divine in the Hebrew Bible; this can be found in the figure of Lady Wisdom (Jennings 2005, p. 176).

40 Reading divine expressions of homoeroticism as a redeeming feature for Yhwh may possibly signify the same kind of wishful thinking some feminist scholars engage in when they seek to find evidence of a “feminine” deity (on the latter, see Clines 2021). The impact of such arguments cannot be gainsaid, however; scholars have relied on Eilberg-Schwartz’s *God’s Phallus*, for example, to support claims that masculinity—particularly toxic masculinity—is subverted from within (e.g., Graybill 2016, p. 40) and on Jennings’ *Jacob’s Wound* for arguing for a fluid presentation of masculinity where male Israelites are concerned (Macwilliam 2012, pp. 47–48). As Roland Boer writes, “subversion lurks in every murky doorway and under every bed. Hegemony is continually undermined from within and without” (Boer 2012, p. 72). Such premises have guided numerous scholarly efforts to uncover gender blurring or gender ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible.

41 Eilberg-Schwartz’s reliance on God the *father* functioning as God the *lover* also defuses (and perhaps confuses) the sexual implications of biblical homoeroticism.

- ⁴² Scholarly exploration of Yhwh's sexualized assaults on his own people, personified as female, is extensive and long-standing. For an annotated bibliography on the subject, which lists many decades of scholarly work on sexual violence in biblical literature, see <https://www.shilohproject.blog/resources> (accessed on 9 January 2026) (Shiloh Project n.d.). For recent treatments of the sexualized violence Yhwh engages in regarding individual men of his choice, see Thiede (2024, forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b).
- ⁴³ For just one such example, see Stavrakopoulou's treatment of the horrifying depiction of Yhwh's rape of Israel in Ezekiel 16 (Stavrakopoulou 2022, p. 137). For a thorough description of the many sexualized assaults Yhwh inflicts on his chosen men in the book of Samuel, see Thiede, *Divine Masculinity in the Book of Samuel: How Yhwh Models the Man* (Thiede forthcoming-a).
- ⁴⁴ The Hebrew word for "hand" found in this particular verse is a euphemism for the male member (Schorch 2000, p. 225). For a discussion of Yhwh's use of his penis to crush enemies, see also Stavrakopoulou (2022, pp. 111–12).
- ⁴⁵ In her article, "Troubling the Waters: תהום, Transgender, and Reading Genesis Backwards," Deryn Guest makes an interesting case for the existence of a divine presence in the Hebrew Bible whose gender cannot be confined by binary assumptions: T'hom, who is introduced in Genesis 1:2, and reappears elsewhere in biblical texts. Guest invites a heteronormative audience to resist heteronormative and binary biblical authorial ideology in her discussion of T'hom. This is a moral imperative: the Hebrew Bible's binary depictions have been used to endanger and harm members of the queer community in countless ways and countless venues. "We have an ethical responsibility to challenge collusion with texts that diminish the lives of people," Guest writes (Guest 2016, p. 43)—and I agree.

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