

**He-Prophets:  
Masculinity as a Problem for the Hebrew Prophets  
and their Interpreters\***

David J. A. Clines  
University of Sheffield

Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible is essentially a masculine project.<sup>1</sup> There were female prophets in ancient Israel (five in the Hebrew Bible), but with the exception of Huldah, who gets six verses, and Miriam, who gets one, they hardly contribute to the profile of prophecy as a literary product.<sup>2</sup> My purpose in this paper is to isolate in the prophets elements that are characteristic of masculinity, asking withal, metacommentatingly, after strains of co-option by prophetic masculinities in texts of our own time.

### 1. The Messenger

Prophets are messengers; that is the most commonplace of commonplaces about the prophets.<sup>3</sup>

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here am I! Send me' (Isa. 6.8).

You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear, although the LORD persistently sent to you all his servants the prophets (Jer. 25.4).

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<sup>1</sup> And not just because, as Robert Coote put it in an unforgettable phrase, it 'came in spurts' (1981: 1). Masculinity can be defined in psychological terms (as corresponding to the different parental responses to the child's drives towards pleasure), in terms of role theory (as playing out a set of scripted behaviours), as a set of distinctive practices (which develop from men's position in specific social structures), or as a variety of discourses of masculinity present in and offered by the culture to men (who have a certain freedom to adopt one type of masculinity or another). See the helpful analysis by Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherell, 'Masculinity, Power and Identity' (Edley and Wetherell 1996).

<sup>2</sup> The female prophets are Miriam (Exod. 15.20-21), Deborah (Judg. 4.4), Huldah (2 Kgs 22.14-20; 2 Chr. 34.22-28), Noadiah (Neh. 6.14), and the unnamed *haybi*, presumably the wife of Isaiah, in Isa. 8.3.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the classic article of James F. Ross, 'The Prophet as Yahweh's Messenger' (Ross 1962); and Glazier-MacDonald 1987.

It is the implication of the prophetic formula 'Thus saith the Lord', as all the form critics point out. What they do not point out, however, is that messengers in the world of the Bible are males. Women do not travel; their place is in the home.<sup>4</sup>

I draw two conclusions already: (a) this central metaphor for the prophetic role is inescapably gendered, and (b) no one notices.

## 2. Strength

Strength is not in itself a marker of masculine discourse; women too want strong bones, strong glass in their car windows, strong friendships, and, at the end of a hard day at the office, a good strong drink. But when you find an intense concentration of the language of strength in a text, you may properly form the suspicion that you are in the realm of the masculine,<sup>5</sup> since strength is the primary quality for men and boys of whatever culture,<sup>6</sup> and they talk about strength in the Old Testament all the time. Here is a prophetic text that revolves about the language of strength:

Behold, the Lord (YHWA) Yahweh comes as a *mighty man* (QZj), and his arm (IWFZ, i.e. power) rules for him. When he brings out the army (abx) of heaven by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness (br) of his *might* (μYMA), and because he is *strong* (YMA) in power (j k) not one is missing. He gives *power* (j k) to the faint, and to those who have no *might* (μYMA) he increases *strength* (hmx). Those who wait for Yahweh shall renew their *strength* (j k) (Isa 40.10, 26, 29, 31).

This is a prophetic *encouragement* to its hearers, that is how it sets itself forward; it assumes that you will agree that weakness is bad and that strength is a most desirable quality, in humans as well as in God, that if you do not have enough strength, you can acquire it from God's surplus strength.

The power of this God of Israel is worshipped by the prophets; here are some examples:

There is none like thee, O Yahweh; thou art great, and thy name is great in might (Jer. 10.6).

I am a great King, says Yahweh, Lord of Fighting Men, and my name is feared among the nations (Mal. 1.14).

<sup>4</sup> While women may journey with their menfolk from Egypt to Canaan, or be carried into exile, or accompany their husband on a trip to Jerusalem, it is hard to find a single case of a lone travelling woman in the Bible.

<sup>5</sup> This fact is not recognized even by the most up-to-date and Foucauldian studies of power in biblical literature; cf. Polaski 1999, which does not seem to invoke the concept of the masculine at all. See further, Brittan 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Edley and Wetherell 1996: 117: '[A]ny adequate theory of men and masculinity has to have the concept of *power* at its centre'.

The accoutrements of power surround this divine figure: he is kitted out with a hard and great and strong sword (Isa. 27.1), his arm is strong (Isa. 51.9; Jer. 21.5) and so is his hand (Isa. 8.11; Jer 32.21; Ezek. 3.14), arm and hand both outstretched in power (Jer. 21.5; 32.21; Ezek. 20.33, 34).

Naturally, the prophets of such a male God of power inevitably view their office as an exercise of power:

But as for me, I am filled with power (j k), with the spirit of the LORD, with authority (fpvm) and with might (hrwbq); To declare to Jacob his crimes and to Israel his sins (Mic. 3.8 NAB).

Or if the prophets imagine an ideal human figure, one upon whom the Spirit of Yahweh may rest, for example, strength cannot be missing from the picture. So upon the ideal ruler in Isaiah there rests the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and *might* (hrwbq), the spirit of knowledge and the fear of Yahweh (Isa 11.2). It is a ruler who is humane and religious, with intellectual virtues—but, oh yes, *strong*. That was not forgotten. Or if it is the Manservant of Yahweh in Isaiah 53 (as we should no doubt always translate hwhy db[, since db[ is gendered), he cannot be a success if he is not at the end found dividing spoil with the strong, himself one of them (Isa. 53.12).

Are there for the prophets no values in what might be perceived as ‘weakness’? Are there any alternatives to the traditional or hegemonic masculinity? What of patience and calm, of quietness and trust? They are indeed virtues, but they are not ends in themselves. If the prophet says, ‘in quietness and in trust shall be your strength’ (Isa. 30.15), he means that strength is his ideal, and that quietness and trust are ways of achieving the ideal. It esteems quietness but it honours strength more.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Violence

Masculine strength can be used for pacific and salvific purposes, but it is no secret that male strength is typically on display when it is being used aggressively, for fighting with other males and for killing them.

Prophets, no doubt, are on the whole pretty harmless individuals, physically speaking (I mean the ‘writing’ prophets, not the Elijahs). Their aggression is expressed verbally, and they do not mince words. In the prophets, there are more occurrences of words for *destroy* and *break* (318) than there are of *Jerusalem* (248), more for *die* and *death* (158) than for *spirit* (155), more for *fire* (154) than for *holy* and *holiness* and *sanctify* (146), more for *anger*, *angry* and *wrath* (193) than for *voice* (174) or *soul* (158) or *prophet* (156), 50% more for *evil* (66) than for *good* (40). There are 50 *woes* (ywh) in the prophets, more cursing (31) than blessing (29).

<sup>7</sup> I made a similar point about Paul’s phrase, ‘when I am weak, then am I strong’ (2 Cor. 12.10) in my paper ‘Paul, the Invisible Man’ (Clines: forthcoming). I am delighted to discover that Isa. 30.15 is the motto of the Israeli Military College in Haifa and Tel Aviv (my thanks to John F.A. Sawyer for the information); we may be sure that such an institution is not harbouring any namby-pamby construction of masculinity.

The speaking, 'writing', prophets themselves will not harm a fly, as far as we can tell, but open a prophetic book at random and you will find such sentences as these:

Woe to my worthless shepherd ...  
May the sword smite his arm  
and his right eye!  
Let his arm be wholly withered,  
his right eye utterly blinded! (Zech. 11.17)

Behold, I am against you, says Yahweh, Lord of Fighting Men, and I will burn your chariots in smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions (Nah. 2.13).

You are my hammer and weapon of war;  
with you I break nations in pieces;  
with you I destroy kingdoms.  
with you I break in pieces the horse and his rider;  
with you I break in pieces the chariot and the charioteer;  
with you I break in pieces man and woman;  
with you I break in pieces the old man and the youth;  
with you I break in pieces the young man and the maiden;  
with you I break in pieces the shepherd and his flock;  
with you I break in pieces the farmer and his team;  
with you I break in pieces governors and commanders  
(Jer. 51.20-23)

Then there is the pornography of the prophets, sex without eros, the pornography of perverse pleasure, the sadism of verbal violence against women.<sup>8</sup>

And there is, supremely, the divine violence, for the divine male is above all the fighter and the killer. 'Yahweh God of Fighting Men' is his favourite title, according to the prophets: 2117 occurrences of Yahweh, 236 of Yahweh Sebaoth (only 23 occurrences outside the prophetic books). Fascinating how the 'divine warrior' has become so frequented a topos in (male) scholarly literature,<sup>9</sup> how severely objective is the scholarly language of the history of traditions, and how rarely the ethical problem of a killer God comes to the surface (that is of course the province of pacifists).

Here is a typical notation of the theme:

The understanding of God as a warrior is grounded in the origins of biblical religion. The image of the divine warrior dominates the oldest Israelite poetry, remains a frequent characterization of God throughout the biblical period, and gains a new prominence in the apocalyptic literature of both Jewish and Christian communities.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> On the subject, see, among others, Bauer 1998; Brenner 1993, 1996, 1997; Carroll 1995; Exum 1995, 1996: 101-28; Selvidge, 1996; Setel 1993; Törnkvist 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Cf., for example, Miller 1973; Yoder Neufeld 1997; Brettler 1993; Klingbeil 1999; Longman and Reid 1995; Wright 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Hiebert 1992: 876.

Israel's prophets shared the tribal and royal conception of God as a warrior whose involvement in military engagements determined their outcome and preserved or destroyed nations ... The fervent concern for justice among Israel's prophets, however, gave a unique emphasis to their apprehension of the kinds of warfare in which the divine warrior was engaged. For the prophets, the divine warrior entered military conflicts against any nation characterized by injustice and political hubris. Thus prophetic circles associated the warfare of God with the divine maintenance of justice in the world, a justice which would eventuate ultimately in the abolition of war and the reign of peace.<sup>11</sup>

Please note that (1) if the conception of God as warrior is 'grounded in the origins of biblical religion', biblical religion itself might be undermined if it were to be surgically extracted from it, (2) that if it 'dominates' the oldest Israelite poetry (and remember, in biblical scholarship, old = authentic), remains frequent throughout the Bible, and even so manages to gain a 'new prominence' in the (presumptively climactic and supersessive) religion of Christianity, it is to be applauded, (3) once the warfare of God can be connected with the maintenance of justice and the Great Lie of the 'war to end war' can be invoked, only an enemy of peace could find a unkind word to say against it, and (4) caught up into a utopian vision of the 'abolition of war and the reign of peace' the quintessential masculinity of the idealization of violence can be totally ignored.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. Honour

A fourth area where I would look for male assumptions in the prophets is the matter of honour. It is a key concept in Mediterranean culture, as many recent writers have been pointing out;<sup>13</sup> some would go as far as to call ancient Israel essentially an 'honour-shame' culture. But it is more correctly defined as a patriarchal culture, the concern with honour being an instantiation of male values. The cultural anthropologists concur: '[H]onor is a value embodied by adult males'; 'Honour is bound up with male ideology'.<sup>14</sup>

What is honour? It is a recognition by the group of the status of a male. It is a competitive matter, for a man's honour ranking is relative to those of all the other males in his group. It is constantly open to challenge, and a man with honour always has to be prepared to defend it.<sup>15</sup>

Honour is essential for male identity. There is hardly a place in the Hebrew Bible where a woman has honour (though a woman, who normally has zero honour in the male world, can be *shamed* or *dishonoured*, i.e. can

<sup>11</sup> Hiebert 1992: 878.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Römer speaks of the 'disarmament' or 'demilitarization' of the warrior god by Deuteronomistic editing that 'counterbalances' the tradition of Yahweh as a God of conquest (Römer 1996: 87) but, as the quotation above from Hiebert shows, a picture of a pacific future need not in the least countervail against the image of the warrior God, but may in fact be its ultimate justification.

<sup>13</sup> See Peristiany 1965; Finley 1962; Adkins 1960; Cairns 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Wikan 1984.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Moxnes 1993: 168.

have negative honour, honour less than zero, for example by being widowed, losing her sons, or not being married.<sup>16</sup> It is males who *need* and *seek* honour, the social esteem awarded to males both human and divine.<sup>17</sup>

Without honour, a male is 'shamed'. Defeat in battle is automatically shame for a land's soldiers (Zech. 10.5), its inhabitants (Jer. 9.19) and its deities (Jer. 50.2); not being able to produce what is expected of one (crops from a farmer [Jer. 14.4], prophecies from a seer [Mic. 3.7]) is a shame. A thief is shamed when he is caught (Jer. 2.26): not that he is subjectively 'ashamed' (he may be), but he is defeated, he has failed, and that is the shame.

*dhwbk*, which is 'honour', is sometimes translated 'glory', especially when it is Yahweh's honour, but I will always translate it 'honour', as it must be in Mal. 1.6:

A son honours his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honour? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says Yahweh, Lord of Fighting Men, to you, O priests, who despise my name.

Among humans, a king has maximum honour, of course:

Yahweh is bringing against them the king of Assyria and all his honour (Isa. 8.7).

But such honour is outranked by that of the divine king, who says:

For my own sake, for my own sake, I act. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my honour to another (Isa. 48.11).

Just to look at Isaiah alone, Yahweh's honour is foregrounded in these places among others:

Yahweh, sitting on his throne, is surrounded by courtiers who cry out, 'The whole earth is full of his honour' (Isa. 6.3).

The honour of Yahweh will be revealed when he brings the exiles back (Isa. 40.5).

He gives his honour to no one else (Isa. 42.8; 48.11).

<sup>16</sup> For widowhood as a shame, cf. Isa. 54.4 (the woman is of course Jerusalem, and not a real woman, but the language would presumably not be possible if a real widow did not suffer shame just for being a widow). A mother of seven sons is shamed (*vwb*) and disgraced (*rpj*) when all her sons are killed in battle (Jer. 15.9).

The only texts about women's honour are these: (1) Exod. 20.12 and Deut. 5.16 call upon sons to honour their father and mother. But it must be a different kind of honour for the mother than for the father; for the father's honour is a public one, attributed and assigned in a sphere in which mothers do not move. Or it may be that text means that one should honour one's father and not dishonour one's mother. (2) Isa. 66.11, where Jerusalem as a mother is said to have glory. Those who mourn for her will suck and be satisfied with her breasts of consolation; they should drain them out and delight themselves 'in the fullness of her glory' (*hdwbk zym*). If it turns out that women can have honour or glory, namely full breasts, this is nothing like the honour that men possess. Cf. also the idea that a woman's long hair is her honour (1 Cor 11.15).

<sup>17</sup> Certain objects also can be honoured or have honour, e.g. a forest and orchards (Isa. 10.18), Kedar (Isa. 21.16), Lebanon (Isa. 35.2), chariots (Isa. 22.18), the temple (Hag. 2.3, 7, 9), Ephraim (Hos. 9.11). Are they all within the male realm?, one wonders.

He created humans for his own honour (Isa. 43.7).

Wherever it appears, the honour of Yahweh is the honour of a male, for that is the only kind of honour there is. Every time we encounter his honour, we must remind ourselves that we are moving in a male sphere, and that the prophet must stress Yahweh's honour because, as one male to another, that is the only way he knows of expressing his own esteem for the deity.

## 5. Holiness

It is a strange but symbolically meaningful fact that *qdy* never occurs in the feminine in the Hebrew Bible. Women cannot be holy, sanctified or consecrated. Not only are there no 'holy women', the adjective is not even used with any feminine noun.<sup>18</sup>

The sphere of holiness is exclusively male, which is what we should have expected anyway, since it is the essence of the male deity. So we should always translate, for example, the Isaianic term *qdy* 'holy one of Israel' as 'holy male of Israel', of perhaps 'the Holy Israelite Male' (25 of its 31 occurrences in Isaiah).

What is holy in the prophets? God himself (Isa. 1.4; and c. 40 other occurrences), his name (Amos 2.7 and 7 other occurrences), his Spirit (Isa. 63.10 and 1 other occurrence), his words (Jer. 23.9), his arm (Isa. 52.10), his angels (Zech. 14.5), his temple and its objects (Jer. 51.51 and 37 other occurrences), his people and their seed (Isa. 62.12 and 3 other occurrences), his city (Isa. 52.1 and 2 other occurrences), his mountain (Isa. 11.9 and 15 other occurrences), his land (Zech. 2.12), his feasts (Isa. 30.29), his Sabbaths (Isa. 58.13), his highway (Isa. 35.8), his remnant in Jerusalem (Isa. 4.3). In short, nothing female, nothing domestic, nothing from the realm of the moral, nothing outside the sphere of the male God himself and the objects and practices of his cult is holy here.

## 6. Women

Yet another indication of a male text is the attitude taken toward women. If in any text women are despised, or feared, or threatened, or blamed, or abused, or trivialized, or stereotyped, or marginalized, or humiliated, or ignored, it is *prima facie* evidence that it is a male text.

Women are *despised* in

And seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying, 'We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes, only let us be called by your name; take away our reproach' (Isa. 4.1).

Not to have a husband is automatically a reproach; here women are represented as making pathetic and ludicrous attempts to avoid shame.

Women are *threatened* in

The LORD said: Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet; the Lord will

<sup>18</sup> If you want to say 'holy city' in Hebrew, you must say 'city of holiness' (*qdy* *ry*), as in Neh. 11.1, 18; Isa. 48.2; Dan. 9.24 (the only occurrences).

smite with a scab the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the LORD will lay bare their secret parts (Isa. 3.16-17).

Usually in the prophets threats against women are threats of punishment against their men, as for example in the famous cases of Amaziah's wife who is to become a harlot in Bethel because her husband has tangled with Amos (Amos 7.17),<sup>19</sup> but here, though it hardly an advance, the women are wholly responsible for their own punishment.

Women are *blamed* in

In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarfs; the headdresses, the armllets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets; the signet rings and nose rings; the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags; the garments of gauze, the linen garments, the turbans, and the veils. Instead of perfume there will be rottenness; and instead of a girdle, a rope; and instead of well-set hair, baldness; and instead of a rich robe, a girding of sackcloth; instead of beauty, shame (Isa. 3.18-24).

Women's clothing is clearly very wicked (probably because men are uncontrollably attracted by nose rings and handbags),<sup>20</sup> and Yahweh will need to personally remove it, item by item, since shaming a woman by stripping her naked is a recognized divine method of punishing her for overdressing (cf. Hos. 2.5, 11-12) The perversity of the prophet is embarrassingly transparent.

Women are *feared* in

And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, every one who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning (Isa. 4.3-4).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Job's wife whom he curses to suffer a similar fate should *he* allow himself to be seduced by another woman (Job 31.10).

<sup>20</sup> Not so, says Wildberger (1991: 147), quoting Budde: 'It is definitely not correct to say that Isaiah is indignant about clothing customs as such ... since one presumes that Isaiah would certainly have been able to find all these effects in his wife's wardrobe' (and we must presume that the prophet could hardly have waxed indignant about his own wife's trinkets, even though the image of the prophet poking about in his wife's wardrobe might raise an eyebrow). No, this is not an authentic Isaian passage, since 'it is ... most unlikely that he would have put in the time and effort to assemble such a list' (for why would a real man, a prophet with high affairs of state on his mind [cf. p. 148], waste his time with trivia like women's clothing?). 'In and of itself', of course, 'beautiful clothes, with the accompanying decorative touches, could give expression to the naïve, natural joy of an Oriental wife who wanted to adorn herself' (such adornment being, any man will tell you, childlike and naïve). But that is not the issue here; what is under judgment is not the clothing but the *lifestyle* of the Jerusalem women which is 'a symptom of the drive to be important'—and readers will know how unbecoming such a drive is in a woman. That lifestyle 'reveals a haughtiness in which one is so wrapped up in human affairs that there is no time left to bow down before God' (p. 156)—for obviously these women who are 'jingling with their foot bracelets' are not on their way to a prayer-meeting. The prophet and his commentator are of a common mind that women cannot be both pious and glamorous; they really disapprove of female adornment—which is to say, they fear it.



If male holiness is only possible when female 'filth' has been washed away (no mention of male 'filth'),<sup>21</sup> female filth is plainly dangerous and fearful.

Women are *stereotyped* in the standardized depictions of them as mothers, for example:

Pangs and agony will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in travail (Isa. 13.8)

Therefore my loins are filled with anguish; pangs have seized me, like the pangs of a woman in travail; I am bowed down so that I cannot hear, I am dismayed so that I cannot see (Isa. 21.3; cf. also 7.14; 26.17; 42.14; 45.10; 66.12-13).

Women are *abused* in

I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity... Whoever is found will be thrust through, and whoever is caught will fall by the sword. Their infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered and their wives ravished (Isa. 13.11, 16-17).<sup>22</sup>

That is, while the punishment for a wicked man is to be killed with a sword, the punishment for a wicked woman is to be raped. If, on the other hand, the wicked women were to be slaughtered and the wicked men were to be raped one would suspect that it was not a male text.

Women are *trivialized* in

Like fluttering birds, like scattered nestlings, so are the daughters of Moab at the fords of the Arnon (Isa. 16.2).

In that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand which the LORD of hosts shakes over them (Isa. 19.16).

Rise up, you women who are at ease, hear my voice; you complacent daughters, give ear to my speech. In little more than a year you will shudder, you complacent women; for the vintage will fail, the fruit harvest will not come. Tremble, you women who are at ease, shudder, you complacent ones; strip, and make yourselves bare, and gird sackcloth upon your loins (Isa. 32.9-11).

They are slight things, easily alarmed, not like Egyptians, who are of course all male. They have no conception of affairs of state, of how serious the political situation is: they are 'at ease' (אָו) and they are 'trusting' (תַּוְּיָב), just the sort of thing we should imagine Isaiah is deeply opposed to (if we overlooked 12.2; 14.30; 26.3; 32.17). This must be something that is good if men do it but bad if women do it.<sup>23</sup>

Women are *marginalized* in

<sup>21</sup> *hax* is sometimes 'excrement', but the fact that it is specifically the *hax* of the women suggests strongly that it is female impurity.

<sup>22</sup> There is also abuse of the woman who personifies Babylon in 47.1-15, but I am not dealing with metaphorical women here.

<sup>23</sup> Babylon, pictured as a woman, is also in trouble for 'trust' in 47.8'.

My people—children are their oppressors, and women rule over them (Isa 3.12).<sup>24</sup>

That is to say, women are regarded as so incompetent and defective that to have women ruling a society is a sure sign of social disorder and anarchy.

Women are *humiliated* in

Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you (Isa. 49.15).

Since women have little purpose in existing except to have children, it is rather humiliating to women to suggest that even in their primary function of childcare they have to take second place to the Almighty.

Oh, women are *ignored* everywhere else. Above I have listed *all* the references to women in Isaiah (real women, not cities or countries personified as women, or ballast variants<sup>25</sup> to men),<sup>26</sup> constituting much less than 1% of the book of Isaiah. It isn't much of a recognition of women, but taken together the meaning of these references is clear enough: women, though fundamentally unclean, are a source of dangerous temptation for men; they are weak, and scream a lot in childbirth. If they are wicked, they will be raped.

## 7. Standard-Bearing

Ian Harris has drawn attention to an important social role men play, which he calls 'standard bearing':

Men produce the world by promoting certain social standards that reflect the way they want the world to be ... Male standard bearers strive to realize ethical standards, produce lasting creations, improve the world, and devote themselves to excellence. Standard bearers reflect concern for higher order needs, not just survival. They derive a sense of worth by fulfilling meaningful social roles and have an unselfish concern for others' well-being. Standard bearers take pride in living up to their moral precepts, so that when they finish their lives they can feel they have been of use (Harris 1995: 55-56).

Reading these lines, I imagine I am reading about the prophets. I draw attention to these elements:

(a) *The oracles against the foreign nations*. The prophets see themselves as global standard-bearers, responsible for assessing the moral standing of nations generally and for denouncing those that do not meet acceptable standards. They are applying the standards of 'international customary law' (Barton 1980), norms that would have 'embodied conventions hammered out in response to the pragmatics of routine life' (Hayes 1988: 58). In more poetic vein, the prophets see their people, in Isaiah's words, as a 'light of the

<sup>24</sup> BHS and some commentators read  $\mu\text{ycj}\text{r}\text{!}\text{O}$  'oppressors' (so too NJB) instead of  $\mu\text{yvi}$ : 'women'.

<sup>25</sup> See Watson 1984: 344. I have commented on the phenomenon in my 'The Parallelism of Greater Precision: Notes from Isaiah 40 for a Theory of Hebrew Poetry' (Clines 1987).

<sup>26</sup> I have omitted Isa. 24.2, perhaps the only text where women are mentioned by Isaiah without pejorative overtones.

nations' (Isa. 42.6; 49.6), perhaps as setting an ethical standard for other nations.

(b) *Prophecy and satire*. Like satire, prophecy's objective may be said to be to praise and to blame (more of the latter than the former, I should guess). Thomas Jemielity has drawn attention in this regard to the 'heavily censorious content of the canonical Hebrew prophets' (Jemielity 1992: 15).

(c) *Prophecy and tradition*. The prophets do not regard themselves as lone individuals who have just received a startlingly new word from Yahweh which they must pass on willy-nilly. If that is what Amos alleges (3.8), it certainly is not representative of the Hebrew prophets. As Clements puts it, even though the prophets were 'undoubtedly testifying to a particularly immediate consciousness of God', they 'appear to have been well aware that they stood in a prophetic tradition and fulfilled a particular role in the divine ministry to Israel' (Clements 1975: 39). They have a vision of themselves as standard-bearers, passing down an ethical and religious tradition from a former generation, one that they trust will survive their own lifetime.

(d) *The ethicization of politics*. It is of the essence of prophecy that it insists on reading the history of the prophets' own time, of their past and future as well, as a story of right and wrong. They have no space for historical causation, for everything is a moral matter, every historical event is a divine disclosure. A classic case is Amos's:

I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,  
and lack of bread in all your places ...  
And I also withheld the rain from you  
when there were still three months to the harvest;  
I would send rain on one city,  
and send no rain on another city...  
I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt;  
I killed your young men with the sword;  
I overthrew some of you,  
as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah,  
and you were like a brand snatched from the fire;  
yet you did not return to me, says the LORD (Amos 4.6-7, 10-11).

Famine, plague, defeat—all are acts of God, and all are summonses to moral behaviour. This single-minded concentration on the ethical, on ethical excellence to boot, is the mark of the standard-bearer, and proof again of the masculine formation of the prophets.

It is not only the prophets themselves who are standard-bearers; those who study and research, teach and preach the prophets often see themselves as carrying on the standard-bearing role of the prophets. Just one citation, from James Crenshaw, will make the point:

Careful study of the Book of Jeremiah helps us to remain faithful to the prophet's legacy by learning from him to weigh the

traditions of the past and to use them in the struggle to forge a better world.<sup>27</sup>

Remaining faithful to the prophet is clearly an important ideal for this man, since the modern scholar sees himself as a legatee of the prophet, who will find his own fulfilment in recapitulating the ideals and experiences of the prophet.<sup>28</sup>

## 8. Masculinity as a Problem

How is the masculinity of the prophetic texts a problem, and for whom is it a problem?<sup>29</sup>

It is a problem for the prophets themselves, for they do not know they speak only in Gavrit, as I term the language of masculinity (translated as Masclish). Like M. Jourdain, who had been speaking prose for forty years without knowing it,<sup>30</sup> the prophets use Gavrit pervasively and exclusively, but know nothing of it. Unlike women, who can only ever define themselves over against males, men have long been accustomed to equating maleness with humanity. A woman prophet, a *haybn*, can only ever know herself as a female counterpart of a *aybn*, but a male *aybn* will never think of himself as a masculine *haybn*. As the linguists say, *aybn* is an unmarked form, and in the real world it is the unmarked who call the shots.

Whether the masculinity of the prophets is a problem for interpreters of the Bible depends on how they value the Bible. If they regard the Bible as an ancient text like the Gilgamesh epic or the *Iliad* or the *Epistles* of Seneca, they will not find the masculinity of the prophets a problem, assuming they even notice it. But if they think of the Bible as the Word of God, or as a theological resource, or even merely as a cultural classic, they are bound to

<sup>27</sup> Crenshaw 1987: 100 (cf. 112). Of course, from a male point of view we cannot remain faithful to the prophet unless we know exactly which are and which are not authentic words of his, i.e. where *legitimacy* lies. Thus it is not surprising (though it is deeply saddening) that Crenshaw identifies the 'fundamental issue' in current Jeremiah research as the question, 'How can we recognize authentic materials of Jeremiah when the book contains distinctive literary styles?' (pp. 100-101).

<sup>28</sup> As a second example I offer the closing words from the preface to Hans Wildberger's Isaiah commentary (Wildberger 1991: viii): '[H]ope remains that the message of the prophet and the words of the many interpreters and interpolators within the book itself will begin to speak once again in a new way to our own age. The central theme of Isaiah's proclamation is as timely today as it was in the time of the prophet: ... If you do not believe, then you will not remain.' The idea that the commentator is transmitting the words of the prophet to another age casts him as a standard-bearer. Interesting also, incidentally, is Wildberger's choice of this text (Isa. 7.9) as the 'timely' message of Isaiah when 'faith' or 'belief' is so scarce in Isaiah (28.16 seems to be the only other use of *ʾmā* in such a sense). It couldn't be anything to do with Lutheran theology, could it?

<sup>29</sup> Howard Eilberg-Schwartz is also worried about masculinity (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994), but his concern is different from mine. He finds 'the sexual body of a father God ... troubling for the conception of masculinity', 'render[ing] the meaning of masculinity unstable' (pp. 1-2). I am more concerned with the effect of the masculinity of the prophets upon their writings and their readers.

<sup>30</sup> M. Jourdain appears in Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*. He is astonished to find that he has been speaking prose for forty years without realizing it (*il y a plus de quarante ans que je dis de la prose sans que j'en susse rien*).

have a problem translating Masclish into Human. How can a 'message' that comes in male attire, standing tall and girded with a sword, lifting high its standard yet fearful for its precarious honour, hope to speak to a world that is 53% female (to say nothing of the men in the other 47% who are troubled about traditional masculinity)?

Interpreters of the Bible (until now) have, of course chosen the best way of handling any problem: ignore it.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> There are, for example, no references to 'male' or 'masc\*' in 700 references to books and articles on prophecy in the Aktinos database (<http://iktinos.swim.org/da-ba/index.html>).

A fuller version of the present paper may be found at [www.sheffield.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Articles](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Articles).

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