Gender Agenda Matters

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Papers of the "Feminist Section" of the International Meetings of The Society of Biblical Literature

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Edited by

Irmtraud Fischer

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of Daniela Feichtinger

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PREFACE

IRMTRAUD FISCHER

The "International Meetings" of the "Society of Biblical Literature" are divided into "sections". The board of this international society gives the organizing-responsibility for these to one of its members for a period of three years for at most two times. Organizing a section is a pretty beautiful opportunity to meet colleagues from all over the world in person but also and all the more to become aware of the vivid scene of young researchers of all continents.

This publication, initiated by request of the publishing house Cambridge Scholars Publishing, presents a "best of" of nearly a hundred papers from the Feminist Section of these congresses, held in Amsterdam (2012), St. Andrews (2013) and Vienna (2014). Besides classical feminist studies which analyze the representation of female figures in various texts, their speeches and actions, as well as the living-conditions of women as socio-historical background of law, narratives and metaphors, the book also presents masculinity studies and questions former feminist research or well established achievements. Some of the articles are of special interest because of their sociopolitical or contextual focus, some for the glance at Christian texts from outside − not a very common phenomenon for Europeans until a few years ago. In confrontation with classical biblical studies, these essays present, in any case, a "textual liberation" (Nik Ansell), if not under the aspect of hermeneutics then certainly in the sense of provoking fresh questions and new approaches. Although the discussion is going on if feminist studies have not become old-fashioned in the meanwhile and gender-studies are turning more and more into queer-studies, these articles show that the gender agenda with feminist option still matters.

To prepare the present volume, Daniela Feichtinger has done a lot of work: She prepared the camera-ready manuscript, looked through all bibliographical references and brought them into uniform style. Without her help this book would not be ready at all – thank you so much, Daniela! I would also like to thank Sam Baker from Cambridge Scholars Publishing for being in charge of this volume, always helpful with information and advice.

Graz, January 2015, Irmtraud Fischer

WHEN IRONY BITES BACK: A DECONSTRUCTIVE READING OF THE MIDWIVES' EXCUSE IN EXODUS 1:19

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> These women are not leaders of the community, persons in a position of influence… Yet such persons are not powerless. In the process of carrying out their rather mundane responsibilities they are shown to have had a profound effect on the future of their people. God is able to use persons of faith from even lowly stations in life to carry out the divine purpose. (Fretheim 1991: 33–34)

In this quote Terence Fretheim has aptly summarised the view that several feminist and non-feminist biblical scholars hold as regards the position of women in Moses' birth story as presented in Exod 1–2. The presence of active, compassionate, resourceful and even scheming women in service of God and country might indeed be at first appealing. Not only is the focus of the story solely on the women's activities, in itself not a particularly common occurrence in the Hebrew Bible, but their attempts are described through irony and ridicule directed at the male antagonist in the text, Pharaoh. Several biblical scholars have noted how Pharaoh's edict to destroy male Hebrew babies and save the daughters as stated in Exod 1:16 and later in v.22 is immediately "undermined by those who are saved" (Fretheim 1991: 33. See also Exum 2001b: 73): the death edict on both occasions is instantly followed by two *women*, first by the midwives (Exod 1:15–22) and later by Moses' mother and sister (Exod 2:1–10), who by their actions undo Pharaoh's command by saving the male heir(s). The king of Egypt might have his nation at his beg and call but he cannot bend the will of the women in the story, whether these are two lowly midwives, slaves or later even his own daughter (Exod 2:5–10).

Irony appears to be rife in the passage, yet one needs to ask whether the women's actions help, as Fretheim further suggests, to highlight "*the*

importance of the activity of women in the divine economy" (Fretheim 1991: 33 [his italics]. See also Dennis 1994: 103) or to support the notion of male pre-eminence. Is God using the "weak and lowly" women to overcome the "strong and powerful" men and thus giving us a glimpse of egalitarian agendas or is something more sinister at play? (See Exum 2001a: 79–80)

As Renita Weems has argued, it appears that the implied author does not challenge the premise that "women are different from men" but rather shows how the women in the narrative have been able to exploit these assumptions "to their own ends." (Weems 1992: 33) After all, though the women are the ones who guarantee the survival of the Hebrews, all of their deception and trickery is done to effect the salvation of the boys (not the girls), and even *the* boy who will eventually liberate the Hebrews (see Exum 2001a: 80). Indeed, it is Moses (and Aaron) rather than the women who confront Pharaoh (Exod 5:1, 3), proving the premise of men posing more of a threat to the empire to be true (Weems 1992: 33). The purpose of the irony in the passage, therefore, could be argued to support the notion of male superiority as well as to ridicule the "wisdom" of the foreign ruler and does not readily provide a premise for egalitarian agendas. Rather, the women remain in their domestic spheres of midwifery, motherhood, even sisterhood and are thus rewarded: the midwives receive families of their own (Exod 1:20–21) whereas Moses' mother, sister and Pharaoh's daughter gain that which their hearts (supposedly) desire: the survival of the male heir, Moses (Exod 2:10). Furthermore, they all receive a mention of their great service to preserve the patrilinear line in Scripture for all to see for all eternity. As Cheryl Exum comments:

> Its [the story's] message to women is: stay in your place in the domestic sphere; you can achieve important things there. The public arena belongs to men; you do not need to look beyond motherhood for fulfilment. (Exum 2001a: 81)

The "heroic" deeds of the women keep their lowly position intact and in service of male pre-eminence rather than aid women to overcome oppression. It is true that by saving the Hebrew baby boys the women do also eventually succeed in securing their own freedom from the bonds of slavery; however, a more pessimistic view of this would be to understand the women's newly found freedom only as another form of slavery, that of a service to a husband or a father at the mercy of rather an oddly tempered

deity at the best of times, drudging through the desert. That which the women gain is a moment of glory as the heroines in a trickster tale, where they use the all too common methods of wit and vivacity to overcome their oppressors in a circumstance where one's wits are the only means of usurpation available. Yet this is done not to effect true freedom, at least not for the women, but to create the superiority of the Hebrew male and his deity (see Weems 1992: 32–33).

With such a grim view of the position of women in the story, is there perhaps another way that the narrative could be read?[1] Granted, we cannot ignore the texts' patriarchal bias; however, if we believe the principle inherent in deconstructive readings that all texts carry within themselves features which will contradict and/or undercut the text's and/or the author's intentions,[2] then perhaps an alternative reading could be gleaned from the story. This paper will suggest that by offering a deconstructive understanding of the irony inherent in the midwives' battle of wits with Pharaoh as presented in Exod 1:19, the very same biting wit that was employed to make a fool out of Pharaoh inadvertently works against itself. That is, while the story is directing ridicule at the foolish foreign ruler in the hands of two midwives, the form that this ridicule takes mocks not only Pharaoh but also the male sex at large and even the ultimate epitome of masculinity, the Hebrew male God that is Yahweh.

The midwives' excuse occurs as Pharaoh's murderous ways to control the Hebrew population are starting to fall into failure. Having failed to control the growth rate of his slaves by hard labour (Exod 1:8–14), as his second choice Pharaoh employs the services of two midwives of uncertain origin,[3] presumably to quietly kill off the Hebrew baby boys at birth or possibly at a prenatal examination (Exod 1:15–16) (Cassuto 1967: 12; Morschauser 2003: 731–733). However, the two women fear the God of the Hebrews as opposed to the King of Egypt and let the boys live (Exod 1:17). Several biblical commentators have noted the inherent irony in the women's actions. If the women are deemed as Hebrew, their deeds could be seen in direct contrast to Pharaoh's ability to command and control the behaviour of his own people (Exod 1:8–11, 22) but not two Hebrew slaves and women at that. On the other hand, if the women are deemed as Egyptians, the outcome is even more outrageous. That is, two citizens of Egypt, two lowly women, side with the God of their "enemy" and thus pave way for the downfall of Pharaoh and his kingdom from the inside out.[4] Whichever way we look at the tale, Pharaoh's inability to rule the wit and will of two lowly females seems to be the ultimate cause for

mockery in the story. After all, if a man cannot rule the women in his house, let alone kingdom, what good is a man for?

However, the midwives' opposition to Pharaoh's plan does not go unchallenged, and so in vv. 18–19 they are called back to meet with Pharaoh to present their reasoning for their insubordination. It is then that the two women state their famous excuse: "The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women for they are lively.[5] Before the midwife arrives to them, they have given birth" (Exod 1:19). Although some biblical commentators have found the midwives' excuse so convincing that they have accepted it as a valid reason,[6] others have not failed to notice the complete charade the midwives put together to explain their insubordination to Pharaoh.[7] As Trevor Dennis, with reference to research done by Jonathan Magonet, has pointed out, the explanation given by the midwives is a smart ploy that plays to Pharaoh's gender and racial prejudices. While comparing the quick, perhaps even "animal-like"[8] reproductive capabilities of the "Hebrews" (who have given birth even before the midwives have come to their aid) to that of the "Egyptian women,"[9] the midwives not only compare the Egyptians favourably with the Hebrews[10] but also draw their excuse from a realm of experience with which Pharaoh would not be familiar. As Dennis further notes:

> The pharaoh, being a man, and therefore never having witnessed the Hebrew women, or any other women for that matter, giving birth, believes it [the excuse]! (Dennis 1994: 93–94)

Indeed, the midwives' ploy cleverly incorporates a mix of preconceptions, a story about quick births of the Hebrews as opposed to the more drawn-out deliveries of the Egyptian women, which Pharaoh on the account of his own limited experience with childbirth would be unlikely to question.

However, if we accept that the midwives' tale is in fact a mix of prejudice and presumptions, even a "transparent lie" as claimed by some, (Dennis 1994: 93; see also Ackerman 1974: 87) we must enquire as to why, if the lie is so "transparent," would Pharaoh fall for it? Granted, we could suggest that he is simply a foreign fool, a dumb foreigner masquerading as a "wise" king which indeed could be what the story indicates (Ackerman 1974: 87; Exum 2001a: 79); yet, foolishness *per se* does not adequately explain Pharaoh's behaviour or, rather, it does not explain the cause of his foolishness. It is most intriguing that in the story the reason behind Pharaoh's ignorance does not appear to be his nationality or even his status. Rather, it is his sex that renders him ignorant

towards birth. As noted by Nahum Sarna and Carol Meyers, midwifery appears to have been a profession solely available to women in ancient times (Sarna 2004: 6; Meyers 2005: 40). In fact, the presence of a man at birth, according to Sarna, might have even been construed as a "violation of the code of modesty," even if the man in question was a doctor (Sarna 2004: 6). Although this paper does not have as its primary purpose an examination of historical data, it is most intriguing that if Meyers and Sarna are accurate in their estimations, it would explain at the very least elements of Pharaoh's gullibility: as a man, never having witnessed a birth, Pharaoh is unable to spot the midwives' trickery. Thus, whilst it may be necessary to portray Pharaoh as a foolish, foreign ruler, in order to trick Pharaoh in matters of childbirth it is necessary to ridicule him first and foremost as a man, regardless of his status or nationality. Like Yahweh who is the God in the exodus that ידע,"knows" (Exod 2:25) and Pharaoh who does not ידע, "know" (Exod 1:8; 5:2), the midwives' advantage lies in their knowledge, in the knowledge of the "other" sex which Pharaoh as a man does not possess.

Understood in this light, the female trickery is displayed in its full force. It not only ridicules a foreign ruler but, more importantly, the superiority of male wisdom. Such an understanding would lend support to the assumption that the story of the two midwives could have originated specifically as a "midwives' tale" and have thus been written by women, perhaps even by real-life midwives (Dennis 1994: 94). This being the case the ridicule of male ignorance pertaining to matters of birth would certainly have attained its pinnacle. Yet, none of this force is lost even if the author would have been a man with no such woman-friendly agendas. That is, whilst ridiculing the foreign ruler, the author could be claimed to inadvertently ridicule "himself," that is, the male gender as presented in the text. The midwives' excuse could thus be perhaps treated as a Freudian slip or a joke gone slightly wrong, ridiculing the creator of its own joke. However, regardless how we understand the origin of the midwives' tale, the conclusion that alongside Pharaoh all of the male sex is ridiculed in the story due to lack of knowledge seems inescapable.

Or is it? After all, if the story was penned by a man rather than a woman, then certainly a man must have had knowledge of childbirth at a point in time enough to make his audience understand his joke, which would have most likely been male.[11] Such a claim is certainly of merit; yet, we must also note that the world we are shown in the story of Exod 1–2 is that of feminine sphere and influence: the people involved in childbirth are solely women. Even if the Hebrew men in the story did

possess knowledge of childbirth, such knowledge is not demonstrated or indicated. Furthermore, the mystery of the nationality of the midwives could suggest that the very same rules that applied to childbirth in one nation, also applied to the other. As noted earlier, the realm of childbirth seems to have been the world of women without men of any nationality allowed access to it. What we observe in the midwives' tale is a story of a foreign man, Pharaoh, who as a man rather than as an Egyptian does not comprehend matters of childbirth. As his wisdom falls, so does that of mankind, at the very least within the parameters of the story even if not its audience.

However, lack of knowledge is not the only way in which Pharaoh's "wisdom" endangers masculine superiority in the narrative. A closer examination of the relationship between Yahweh and Pharaoh may give an indication in this regard. To begin with, in the first chapter of Exodus Pharaoh seems to be portrayed as a death-dealing ruler opposed to the life-saving ways of Yahweh: whilst Pharaoh attempts to destroy the Hebrews (Exod 1:8–16, 22), Yahweh remains busy with ensuring their increase (Exod 1:7, 17, 20). However, further in the story this distinction between life and death becomes more ambiguous. Indeed, during the plague narratives (Exod 7–11) Yahweh seems to adopt some of his opponents' death-dealing ways and even trump them with devises of his own making. In the manner of his opponent, Yahweh's wrath engulfs the first born sons of the Egyptians (Exod 11:1–12:30) but he also, among others, destroys their crops (8:20–32; 9:13–35; 10:1–20), causes diseases (9:8–12) and darkens their sun (10:21–29). Moreover, Yahweh interferes with Pharaoh's mind, causing him to make decision which Pharaoh, perhaps, would not have otherwise made (e.g. in Exod 14:4, 23 where Pharaoh's army chases the Hebrews into the sea).[12] Overall, it could be suggested that by committing these actions Yahweh creates, or even faces, his own mirror image in Pharaoh, a dark side which Yahweh is happy to manipulate and accommodate. In terms of deconstruction, such a relationship between Yahweh and Pharaoh could be described as that of a *parergon* or a confusion of limits, where one is not quite sure where one entity ends and another begins (Derrida 1979: 3–41; see also Sherwood 2004: 185–187).

However, how exactly does the relationship between Yahweh and Pharaoh concern our reading of the midwives' tale? Only this, if we accept that Pharaoh and Yahweh end up as mirror images of one another, then Pharaoh's lack of wisdom could also be claimed to be a reflection of Yahweh's lack of knowledge. Although Pharaoh is displayed in the story

as the king who does not "know" as opposed to Yahweh who "knows," that which Yahweh knows we actually do not "know" since the verse containing these words gives us no indication as to the content (Exod 2:25). Moreover, when this "unknown knowledge" is placed within the framework of the women's activities, we discover that what Yahweh knows could be said to be an instance of feminine insight.

In fact, both the deliverance effected by the women in Exod 1–2 and later by Yahweh in the exodus proper share certain thematic similarities: as Moses is rescued through water, so are the Hebrews (Exod 2:5–10; 14:15–31); as Moses is placed among the סוף, "reeds," on the bank of the Nile, so the Hebrews witness their salvation on the shore of the ים סוף, the "Sea of Reeds" (Exod 2:3; 13:18; 14:30). Moreover, the same semantic fields which first described the actions of the women in Exod 1–2 are re-established when Yahweh enters the story. Like the women, Yahweh will, for example, ירד, "come down" (Exod 2:5; 3:8), ראה, "see" (Exod 1:16, 2:2, 5; 2:25) and שלח, "send" (Exod 2:5; 3:10–15) (see Davies 1992: 109). Such similarities create an added dimension in the text, where the women in Exod 1–2 could be claimed to do more than "foreshadow" Yahweh's up and coming rescue. As Jacqueline Lapsley has noted, the women's deeds introduce

> the values of deliverance even before YHWH or Moses has begun to think of leading the Hebrews out of Egypt. When God enters the scene and in a sense takes over the task of deliverance from the women, at that moment the transgressive "women's values" become the normative "divine values" … (Lapsley 2005: 87)[13]

Rather than act as a prelude to the all-important event of the exodus, the women begin the process of liberation later continued by Yahweh in a more grandiose fashion. Instead of relying on divine agency or male influence, the women survive by their wits, committing their acts of deliverance independently and self-sufficiently.[14] Did Yahweh then not know when or how he was going to bring the Hebrews out of Egypt until the women started the chain of events in Exod 1–2? If we take into account the prophecy the deity utters to Abraham in Gen 15:13–14 regarding the forthcoming slavery of the Hebrews בארץ לא להם, "in a land that is not theirs," as well as their subsequent deliverance from the said bondage, perhaps we could claim that Yahweh had an intention in this regard. However, even if this is so, the text before us in Exod 1–2 gives us little indication that Yahweh is about to take his people out of Egypt, let

alone how he is going to do it. Although Yahweh has been faithful to his promise to Abraham to increase the number of his progeny as stated in Gen 12:2 (and is made obvious in Exod 1:7, 20–21),[15] by the end of Exod 1 not only are all Hebrew baby boys under an impending death threat but Yahweh's adjacent promise of land (Gen 12:7) is certainly in jeopardy. Rather, we are told that it was after the acts of the women that Yahweh heard the Hebrews' cry and finally remembered his covenant promise in Exod 2:23–25 and consequently begun his actions of, among others, "seeing" and "coming down." Therefore, we could suggest that within the exodus story it is the women who first commit specific acts (even if not thoughts) of deliverance, followed later by Yahweh and his more "grandiose" scheme.

Overall, it appears that both Pharaoh and Yahweh lack knowledge of some kind and, moreover, in both occasions this knowledge appears to be that of feminine persuasion. Where Pharaoh does not comprehend childbirth, Yahweh "cuts and pastes" the plan of salvation first effected by the women and in the vein of true egocentrism makes the said plan more "extravagant" by adding the entire Hebrew nation, some illnesses and death into it. Together, such lack of or even a dependence on feminine knowledge and behaviour suggests the instability of male domination in the text[16] which is brought to a point of fracture in the actions of the women, even in a supposedly harmless joke directed at a foolish foreign ruler.

We started this paper by illustrating the various fashions the actions of the midwives and especially their excuse regarding their disobedience to Pharaoh's edict had been understood as ironical, ridiculing Pharaoh, his wisdom, and his supposed ability to rule and reign his own nation or that of his slaves. In the course of our discussion, it was discovered that like the proverbial double edged sword, the midwives' ruse inadvertently also ridiculed the male sex at large, where the ability to mock Pharaoh in matters of childbirth came down to his ignorance as a man rather than as an Egyptian ruler. Furthermore, Pharaoh's lack of knowledge could be stated to mirror a similar lack within Yahweh who also needed the women in order to effect his own plan of salvation later in the story. The irony inherent in the midwives' excuse could thus be claimed to have a two-fold function. The irony directed at the foolish foreign ruler bites back at the male hegemony, ridiculing its inability to write women and their wisdom out of the text.

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Notes

[1] For an alternative reading, see Fischer 2005: 113–128.

[2] In *Dissemination,* Jacques Derrida argues that deconstructive reading should aim at a "certain relationship" not perceived by the writer, between that which he "commands" and that which he "does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses." See Derrida 2004: xv, 158. See also Sherwood 2004: 150–151, 167.

[3] Note that the phrase למילדת העברית, "to the Hebrew midwives" (Exod 1:15), is in the LXX and V read as a construct relationship, that is, "to the midwives of the Hebrews."

[4] For arguments in favour of either Hebrew or Egyptian origin of the midwives, see, among others, Fretheim 1991: 31–32; Exum 2001b: 48–50 and Ackerman 1974: 85–86.

[5] Here we agree with Durham 1987 (10, 12) that חיות could implicate that the Hebrew women were "robust," "vigorous," "healthy" and/or "full of life". See also Sarna 2004: 7. Yet, we must note that due to the presence of כי חיות in a reproductive context, it is possible to read the term as carrying hints of fast reproductive capacities in which case an "animal like" quality might have been implicated even if not vocalised.

[6] Holzinger 1900: 4 suggests that "Arab and Syrian women of today are also said to have easy births". See also Dillmann 1880: 11.

[7] See, among others, Ackerman 1974: 87; Childs 1974: 17; Exum 2001b: 51; Meyers 2005: 37–38.

[8] See n.4.

[9] Note that the Egyptians are described as "Egyptian women," whereas the Hebrews are merely described by their nationality.

[10] Ellmenreich 1988: 42 has suggested that the midwives must have attended to both Egyptian and Hebrew women in order to compare them. See also Durham 1987: 12. Yet, if one accepts the excuse as a lie, for the midwives to have attended Egyptians becomes unnecessary.

[11] For support of male authorship and/or audience of Exod 1–2, see Exum 2001a: 77–82, and Steinberg 2010: 183.

[12] See Gunn 1982: 79. The issue of Yahweh hardening Pharaoh's heart is an often disputed and a long-standing one, and we do not have time to do it justice in this brief paper. For a more recent exposition on the matter, see Ford 2006.

[13] Here Lapsley is referring to such "women's values" as, for example, deflecting violence and preserving life (Lapsley 2005: 85, 87). However, we must note that the women's actions could be argued to cause both life and death since by not killing the Hebrew baby boys the midwives become part of the chain of events leading to Pharaoh's "final solution" in Exod 1:22 and the plague of the firstborns in Exod 11. Therefore the midwives' deeds could be likened to those of Yahweh whose actions likewise produce both life and death (Exod 1–2; 7–14).

[14] For the absence of God in Exod 1–2, see Gowan 1994: 1–7, especially 1–2, and Osherow 2009: 47.

[15] Note the abundance of creation related verbs in the passage as observed by, among others, Ackerman 1974: 76–77 and Davies 1992: 36–37.

[16] This argument is in part supported by Fischer, who notes that although the actions of the women in Exod 1–2 are life-affirming, the 'word field of killing, striking, and fighting runs through' the episode of the adult Moses in Exod 2:11–25 (Fischer 2005: 123). Such opposed paradigms could be claimed to be descriptive of the death associated with male hegemony versus the life-protecting deeds of the women.

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE? THE FEMALE PRONOUN FOR GOD IN NUMBERS 11:15

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Introduction

The idea that there is a "female" pronoun for God in Num 11:15 may sound more than a little unlikely! Not only is this at odds with what we might expect to find in a monotheistic text from an ancient, patriarchal culture; there is also the question of how such a pronoun could "hide in plain sight" despite more than a century of critical scholarship that has been more than capable of bringing it to our attention. What may make this idea seem especially implausible is that this blind-spot in mainstream scholarship – if blind-spot it is – has persisted in feminist scholarship as well.[1]

Fortunately, the history of exegesis reveals that the feminine pronoun in question has not gone entirely unnoticed as Nachmanides, the great medieval commentator, not only took it at face value (as did Rashi) but also tried to make sense of it theologically.[2] When it comes to interpreting Num 11:15 today, however, this rarely gets a mention. Looking at the commentaries of the last 40 years, it is hard to escape the impression that when scholars have seen that the pronoun at the beginning of the verse is indistinguishable from the standard feminine form, they have simply paused, looked at the proposals for textual emendation and gender reassignment in the critical apparatus,[3] nodded, and moved quickly on. This paper is my attempt to say: *Not so fast!*

My thesis, that God really is addressed by means of a feminine pronoun in Num 11:15, will appeal to two main lines of argument: (i) that a feminine pronoun makes excellent sense in the immediate and wider

context; and (ii) that the strongest arguments used against this reading can, on closer investigation, be turned to its advantage.

I accept that my proposal must assume the burden of proof. Therefore, after looking at how a feminine pronoun reading can open up our understanding of Num 11:1–12:16, I will pay special attention to those considerations that would prevent a reading like this from getting off the ground. Initially, my discussion will focus on the text in its final form in the MT tradition, before asking questions about the likely shape of the text in its proto-Masoretic and pre-Masoretic form(s). Finally, given the possibility that feminist scholars may have overlooked this "female" pronoun for God because it seems "Too Good to Be True," I will conclude by raising some questions about the role of expectations in the task of biblical interpretation.

Numbers 11:15 in Context

To grasp the immediate context in which the pronoun in question occurs, we need to go back at least as far as Num 11:10, at which point Israel's desire for meat rather than manna comes to a head with "the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents."[4] Although we are told that "[YHWH] became very angry, and Moses was displeased," it soon becomes apparent that while YHWH's displeasure is with the people, Moses' displeasure is with God:

> 11:11: So Moses said to [YHWH], "Why have you treated your servant so badly [לָמָּה הֲרֵעֹתָ לְעַבְדֶּךָ, literally: why do you do evil to your servant]? Why have I not found favour in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? 12 Did I conceive [הָרִיתִי] all this people? Did I give birth [יְלִדְתִּיהוּ] to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom [שָׂאֵהוּ בְחֵיקֶךָ], as a nurse carries a sucking child [כַּאֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂא הָאֹמֵן אֶת־הַיֹּנֵק],' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? 13 Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' 14 I am not able to carry [לְשָׂאת] all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. 15 If this is the way *you* are going to treat [אִתִּי־עָשֶׂה] me, put me to death at once – if I have found favour in your sight – and do not let me see my [or: your[5]] misery."

Moses' insinuation, that *YHWH* is the mother who has given birth to Israel even though *he* has been stuck with the burden of nursing and carrying them all on his own, has long been recognized in mainstream

scholarship. Commenting on Moses' claim that YHWH has "dealt ill with him" in v.11, Martin Noth goes on to say,

> Bold as this statement certainly is, it is surpassed in v.12 by the assertion, cast in the form of a rhetorical question, that he, Moses, is, after all, not the people's mother and is, therefore not obliged to fulfil maternal duties towards them. Implicit in this is the very unusual idea that Yahweh himself is Israel's mother (Noth 1968: 86; German: 1966).

That was 1966. Although nearly twenty years later, Phillip Budd (1984: 128) would claim that he "presse[d] the metaphor too far,"[6] we might say that Noth did not go far enough! For in v.15, Moses extends his bold rhetoric by combining the direct accusation of v.11 with the maternal metaphor of v.12 to suggest that YHWH end his life and put him out of his misery "if this is the way *you* are going to treat me [אַתְּ־עֹשֶׂה]." In this rhetorical context, the second-person singular feminine pronoun, אַתְּ, which occurs at least 60 times in the HB,[7] makes excellent sense: if this is how *you*, the *mother* of Israel, are going to treat me, put me to death at once!

Although a number of commentators have concluded that the text is critical of Moses in this chapter,[8] YHWH's own reaction to his protest is consistently sympathetic. Recognising that he is overwhelmed, YHWH proposes taking some of the spirit that is on Moses and placing it[9] on the 70 elders that they might share the burden (vv.17, 25)[10] – this being a re-iteration, in part, of the advice of Moses' father-in-law in Exod 18.[11] Although the limitations of this arrangement become apparent when the prophetic activity of those gathered around the tent of meeting comes to a halt, it continues in the case of two men who had remained in the camp, much to the chagrin of Joshua, prompting Moses to express his desire that the spirit might fall on all of YHWH's people in Num 11:29. While the text supports this non-institutionalised dissemination of authority, YHWH's response to Miriam and Aaron's subsequent complaint against Moses makes it clear that the office and activity of the prophet also has its limits as Moses' "face to face" [פֶּה אֶל־פֶּה, literally: mouth to mouth] relationship with YHWH (12:8) far exceeds prophetic insight.[12]

All this is important in relation to Moses' use of the feminine pronoun. For although the text does raise questions about Moses' reluctance to mediate between YHWH and Israel – it does this by pointedly placing 11:4–12:12 between two brief narratives (11:1–3 and 12:13–16) in which he overcomes this reticence – it is important to recognize that Moses' bold

language in 11:11–15 is not criticised. Indeed, as anyone familiar with the Psalms will know, this kind of assertive rhetoric belongs to the discourse of covenant.[13] Within the spirituality of the HB, Moses' protest that YHWH is not pulling her weight fits surprisingly well. The rhetorical reinforcement of this claim by means of a bold, well-timed, feminine pronoun may be unprecedented;[14] but within the face-to-face relationship between Moses and YHWH, it is not out of place.

Unfortunately, not only have commentators failed to make the connection between the feminine pronoun and Moses' protest that YHWH is not coming through as the true mother of Israel, but they have also overlooked how the mothering motif continues into Num 12.[15] For here, Miriam, upon YHWH's angry departure from the tent of meeting, is seen to have a white skin condition that prompts a repentant Aaron, in 12:12, to say to Moses: "Do not let her be like one stillborn, whose flesh is half consumed when it comes out of its mother's womb [מֵרֶחֶם אִמּוֹ]." If the original form of this verse is to be inferred from the *Tiqqune Sopherim* – the "emendations of the scribes" noted here in the Masorah[16] – then Aaron actually refers to "*our* mother's womb,"[17] which further underlines the fact that there is a gendered significance to the sacred space from which Moses, Aaron, and Miriam have just emerged.[18]

For her part, Miriam's almost apocalyptic birth experience – cf. Num 12:12 LXX and 1 Cor 15:8[19] – is followed by her banishment outside the camp for seven days. But the mothering motif continues. A number of modern interpreters, taking their cue from Rashi and the Targumim, have seen in the reference to the people refusing to leave until Miriam has safely returned, an echo of Exod 2, where it is an unnamed Miriam (cf. Num 26:59) who waits to see what will become of the infant Moses.[20] This insightful observation can be greatly strengthened if we recall that Miriam also finds a way to bring her brother to an Israelite *nurse* who also happens to be his biological *mother*. This then allows us to connect Miriam's actions in Exod 2 both to Aaron's enigmatic reference to "our mother" in Num 12:12,[21] and to the related YHWH-as-mother theme we have been exploring. In bringing this stage of the exodus-wilderness narrative to a close, Miriam's safe return, in 12:15, forms a most fitting *inclusio*.

All this means that the "female" pronoun for God in 11:15 coheres with and contributes to the narrative themes. That said, there are at least two factors that may account for why scholars have lost sight of the pervasive and ongoing maternal imagery in these chapters. First of all, if there are intimations of God's womb in 12:12, then the link between womb (רֶחֶם) and compassion (רַחֲמִים) that is evident elsewhere in the

HB,[22] is hard to find in Num 11–12. Even if we grant that there can be angry or vengeful mothers (2 Chr 22:10) just as there can be long-suffering, forgiving fathers (Ps 103:13), YHWH's decision to fill the Israelites' craving for meat with so much quail that it comes out of their nostrils (Num 11:20) does not help the maternal paradigm shift that I am arguing for! Secondly, and more specifically, it is understandable that scholars who have been taken aback by YHWH's reference in 12:14 to Miriam being in a state of disgrace as "if her father had … spat in her face," may have consciously or subconsciously aligned YHWH with this father figure and thus lost sight of the womb imagery of v.12. I will briefly comment on these two issues in reverse.

Like the narrative that addresses the desire for food and the dissemination of the spirit in the previous chapter, Num 12 is concerned with two interwoven, yet distinguishable, issues. If this is overlooked, it is easy to see the rebuke of the "father" as simply the flip-side of YHWH's affirmation of Moses and thus infer that the critique or defence of a (male) hierarchy is the central issue. In my view, this is a misreading.

Although this passage merits a far more detailed treatment than can be offered here, a good case can be made for seeing the "father" who is invoked at this point as Moses' father-in-law, as he is the father of the "Cushite" woman that Miriam has maligned in 12:1.[23] In this light, the force of YHWH's statement in 12:14 would seem to be that "if her [own *Israelite*] father" were to respond in kind to this kind of contempt, then quite apart from the fact that Moses' request for healing is granted – immediately so, according to Gray and Milgrom – there would still be a period of banishment outside the camp.[24] The fact that the insult was directed at a non-Israelite does not change this.

Precisely why YHWH draws attention to such a specifically paternal reaction here remains an important question that has been obscured by readings that allow the status of Moses to eclipse the significance of the Cushite woman. Elsewhere (see Ansell [forthcoming]), I have argued that the reference to "Reuel" in Num 10:29, just prior to the events of Num 11–12, is a "catchword"[25] that takes the reader back to his only other named appearance in Exod 2:18, where we are introduced to the father of Zipporah, better known to us as "Jethro." This not only establishes Zipporah as the wife in question in Num 12,[26] but also identifies the key issue as Moses' ongoing embrace of Midianite-Cushite wisdom (Exod 4:24–26; 18; Num 10:29; 11:16–17, 23–25).[27] What is at stake in Miriam's contempt, therefore, is not Moses' place in some kind of divinely sanctioned hierarchy (*contra* Trible 2001: 176), but his openness – and

Israel's openness – to divine revelation coming to Israel from beyond Israel. As this makes sense of YHWH's reference to the "father" of 12:14, there is no need to posit a "human father … heavenly Father" parallel (*contra* Milgrom 1989: 98) that would detract from the maternal imagery under discussion.

As for the rather alarming way in which YHWH'S anger in Num 11–12 is so untempered by compassion, the reason that this is so marked in these chapters, I suggest, is that one of the implications of the face-to-face relationship between Moses and YHWH is that Moses participates so intimately in the shaping of YHWH's actions and reactions that his reluctance to intercede has striking consequences. In Num 11–12, Moses is so intent on claiming that YHWH and not Moses is the Mother and Nurse of Israel that he fails to re-present, and thus bring into Israel's historical experience, the maternal God he boldly addresses.[28] If, as Milgrom has argued, YHWH's harsh words can be read as deliberate attempts to provoke Moses into interceding for Israel, they fail.[29] This is an ongoing issue in the Pentateuch,[30] and it comes to a head here before being somewhat resolved in Deut 5:27, which we shall look at below. That this passage has a strong intertextual connection to Num 11:15 is not a coincidence.

The Counter-Arguments

Having made an initial case for there being a "female" pronoun for God in Num 11:15, given its narrative setting, I will now turn to look at the reasons why the kind of reading I am suggesting simply fails to get off the ground in the scholarly literature. There are three main counter-claims that need to be faced in this regard. These may be stated as follows:

(i) The pronoun in question cannot be feminine as the surrounding grammar is masculine;[31]
(ii) What now looks like a feminine pronoun in the extant MT was, in the consonantal text that the Masoretes inherited, originally a defectively written masculine pronoun;[32]
(iii) What looks to us like a feminine pronoun is actually a rare masculine form.[33]

I will respond to these briefly in turn, noting that most scholars (in keeping with the constraints of logic) appear to combine the first assertion with either the second or the third.

The *first* of these counter-claims is partially correct as the surrounding grammar in Num 11:15 is certainly masculine.[34] What it overlooks,

however, is the possibility that a feminine pronoun could, for rhetorical purposes, be deliberately at odds with the masculine grammar. The grammatical irregularity is thus intended and fits the kind of exegesis I have suggested.[35] I will offer another example of this phenomenon, in which a masculine sentence is (arguably) "punctuated" by a feminine pronoun, in the next section.

The *second* assertion is also partially correct. For in the small number of cases in which the second-person singular masculine pronoun is written defectively in the MT, it is missing the final *he mater lectionis* that distinguishes it, at a consonantal level, from the feminine form. When this is put to work in the second counter-argument, however, what it bumps up against is the fact that the Masoretic tradition was fully aware of this potential problem, for which it had developed a very sensible solution. Thus in the five cases in the HB where their tradition detected a defectively written masculine pronoun (1 Sam 24:19 [ET: 24:18]; Ps 6:4 [ET: 6:3]; Job 1:10; Eccl 7:22; and Neh 9:6), the Masoretes left the consonants intact, out of reverence for the received text, but underwrote them with the vowels belonging to the masculine form, thereby ensuring a masculine vocalization (אַתָּ). This use of the well-known Ketiv/Qere distinction – the distinction between what is written and what is to be read – was also clearly indicated in Masorah parva (Mp). What is most interesting, however, is that the Masoretes did *not* use this convention in the case of Num 11:15. Consequently the pronoun used by Moses to address YHWH remained visually and vocally indistinguishable from the standard feminine form.

While the *second* counter-argument does not pay sufficient attention to the Masoretes, in my view, the *third* actually takes its cue from them, though their influence on modern scholarship is usually mediated via the lexica. The idea that אַתְּ in Num 11:15 is a rare masculine form was the conclusion the Masoretes themselves came to, faced as they were not only with a fixed writing tradition but also with the absence of a reading tradition to the contrary.[36] In the Mp next to our text, an abbreviated Hebrew phrase, ג בלשון זכר, appears, indicating that the word beneath the circellus, our pronoun, is used "three times with a masculine meaning." The Masorah magna (Mm) then indicates that the other two examples of this phenomenon occur at Deut 5:27 (NJPS: 5:24) and Ezek 28:14 (see Kelley, Mynatt, and Crawford 1998: 103, 83).[37] These three examples are consequently cited as exemplifying a rare form of the masculine pronoun in Gesenius' grammar, in the revision of Gesenius' lexicon we know as Brown, Driver, and Briggs, and in the more recent lexica.[38]

With respect to vocalized, biblical Hebrew, these are, to the best of my knowledge, the only three examples ever cited of this (alleged) phenomenon. As one of these, Ezek 28:14 is regularly emended to give us the preposition, אֶת־ (with), following the LXX (cf. NRSV),[39] this means that apart from Num 11:15, which is in dispute, there is, at best, only one clear example of this rare form: Deut 5:27! As things stand, therefore, an appeal to the MT of Deut 5:27, in which our feminine-looking pronoun is used with Moses as the referent, constitutes the strongest challenge to the idea that the feminine-looking pronoun in Num 11:15 should be taken at face value.

However, I do not intend to let this challenge stand for long, as I will be offering a different interpretation of Deut 5:27 in the next section. The thrust of my argument will be that the Masoretes were right to see Num 11:15, Deut 5:27, and (probably) Ezek 28:14 as related,[40] but mistaken about the nature of the connection. If accepted, one of the implications of my proposal will be that the rare masculine form, now firmly embedded in our lexica, probably never existed.[41]

Deuteronomy 5:27 in Context

What emerges from this evaluation of the three main counter-arguments to my understanding of Num 11:15 is that Deut 5:27 is a crucial text for testing and refining my thesis. To fully appreciate the significance of its feminine-looking pronoun, we must look at this intriguing text in context. For it is not a coincidence that if we go back to Deut 1:6–45, we find Moses taking his audience back to Horeb and to the events of Num 10–14.

It is particularly interesting that Moses, in Deut 1:9, specifically refers to how numerous the Israelites had become, with the words, "At that time I said to you, 'I am unable by myself to bear you [לֹא־אוּכַל לְבַדִּי שְׂאֵת אֶתְכֶם]'," here echoing his words of protest voiced to YHWH in Num 11:14 [לֹא־אוּכַל אָנֹכִי לְבַדִּי לָשֵׂאת], and then follows this with an account of the subsequent delegation of authority to the tribal leaders. Then, after an account of the sending out of the spies and the subsequent fear of the people, Moses reminds his hearers, in Deut 1:31, that YHWH "carried you [נָשָׂאֲךָ]" in the wilderness "just as one carries a child [כַּאֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂא־אִישׁ אֶת־בְּנוֹ],"[42] here drawing on the nursing motif of Num 11:12, except that on this occasion, Moses describes YHWH as doing what he accused him of failing to do in his original complaint.[43]

In all this, Moses addresses his audience as if they were present at the events of Num 10–14 even though the narrative makes it quite clear that

they are a later generation. This conscious "fusion of horizons" (cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer's "*Horizontverschmelzung*") is especially evident in Deut 5:1–5, where Moses says,

> 5:1 Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. 2 [YHWH] our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. 3 Not with our ancestors did [YHWH] make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. 4 [YHWH] spoke with you face to face [פָּנִים בְּפָנִים] at the mountain, out of the fire. 5 (At that time I was standing between [YHWH] and you to declare to you the words of [YHWH]; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain.)

After the re-iteration of the 10 commandments in 5:6–22, we reach the text that contains the pronoun form we are investigating, this being part of the response of the elders of the people, who, according to Moses, approached him with the words:

> 5:24 "Look, [YHWH] our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the fire. Today we have seen that God may speak to someone [אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם] and the person may still live. 25 So now why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of [YHWH] our God any longer, we shall die. 26 For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive? 27 Go near, you yourself [אַתָּה], and hear all that [YHWH] our God will say. Then [*you*: וְאַתְּ] tell us [תְּדַבֵּר אֵלֵינוּ] everything that [YHWH] our God tells you, and we will listen and do it."

So this is where we encounter the feminine-looking pronoun once again, except here it is used to refer not to God but to Moses. What are we to make of this? My proposal is that "אַתְּ" in Deut 5:27, which goes beyond Moses' allusion to Exod 20:19 here, should be understood as a "catchword" that refers the reader back to Num 11:15.[44] This can be understood in at least two ways, which are not mutually exclusive. *Firstly*, we may understand that the generation that hears Moses' address in Deuteronomy but that is also understood, in some sense, as the generation that has witnessed the events of Exod 20 and Num 10–14, is now using Moses' own rhetoric against him. So whereas Moses, in a state of exhaustion due to the perceived absence of YHWH, had once sought to remind YHWH that the God of Israel was also the true nurse and mother of Israel, now the people, in a state of fear due to the perceived presence of

YHWH, are keen to remind Moses of the nursing role he had wanted to distance himself from. The way this is structured is subtle as the narrator is (in effect) quoting Moses quoting the people (i.e., his contemporaries in Deuteronomy) creatively quoting Moses' own words to YHWH back to Moses! But this fits the complex and self-aware fusion of horizons that characterises Deuteronomy. *Secondly*, and more straightforwardly, we can also understand Moses' words in Deut 5:24–27, which are followed by YHWH's acceptance of what the people say here, as evidence that Moses is now consciously and willingly embracing the nursing role he had previously wanted to avoid.[45]

In both reading strategies (which are complementary), the placement of the feminine pronoun – you (masculine) go listen to YHWH and then you (feminine) come and tell us what has been said – fits perfectly, punctuating the surrounding masculine grammar in a way that fully supports my interpretation.

The Special Case of Ezekiel 28:14

Although it is not vital for the case I have been making for an intertextual relationship between Deut 5:27 and Num 11:15, it is interesting to see whether the same kind of analysis can be extended to Ezek 28:14, where we find the third instance of our feminine-looking pronoun. In this passage, YHWH addresses the king of Tyre and describes his status, prior to his recapitulation of humanity's fall into sin, with the words, "You were in Eden, the garden of God" (28:13). When we reach v.14, the translations diverge between those that follow the MT, such as the NASB:

> "*You* were the anointed cherub who covers [אַתְּ־כְּרוּב מְמְשָׁח הַסּוֹכֵךְ],
> And I placed you there.
> You were on the holy mountain of God;
> You walked in the midst of the stones of fire"

(cf. ASV, AV, ESV, NIV, NJB; also Vulg.), and those, such as the NRSV, that accept the non-Masoretic vocalization of the feminine-looking pronoun that occurs in the LXX, thus understanding the opening line to read: "With [μετὰ = אֶת] an anointed cherub as guardian I placed you" (cf. NET, RSV).[46]

On strictly text critical grounds, James Barr has argued persuasively that while the unexpected pronoun form of the MT explains what we find in the LXX and other versions here, the converse is not the case.[47] Furthermore, a particular strength of the MT, exegetically speaking, is that

it allows YHWH's words to make contact with Tyre's own portrayal of its kings as cherubs while reinterpreting kingship as an (angelic: messenger between heaven and earth) office akin to the royal/priestly office held by Adam in Eden. This also allows the passage to see in the walking of the cherub of Ezek 28:14 [הִתְהַלָּכְתְּ] an allusion to Adam's walking with God (implied in Gen 3:8–10 [v.8: מִתְהַלֵּךְ]) among the (high priestly) stones of Ezek 28:13-14 and Gen 2:12.

So what are we to make of the feminine-looking pronoun in this context? If an argument can be compared to a building that depends on its foundations, then, with respect to the thesis of this essay, what follows is not a load-bearing wall. But it does cohere with, and in that sense extend, the argument developed thus far. For if אַתְּ in Ezek 28:14 is taken as a catchword, once more, it could function to connect this passage to Deut 5:24–27, which not only refers to Moses' unique "face to face" relationship with God "at the mountain" (5:4, cf. Ezek 28:14) despite the "fire" that is too much for the people (5:5; 5:24–25, cf. Ezek 28:14), but which also (in 5:24) has the people describe Moses as literally "the Adam (who talks) with Elohim" [אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם].[48] Arguably, in addition to providing an allusion to Moses as a Nursing Mother in Deut 5:27 (and Num 11:15[49]), the feminine pronoun at the beginning of Ezek 28:14 not only fits the possible description of the cherub as protective or sheltering (Ezek 28:14 NASB: "the anointed cherub who covers [הַסּוֹכֵךְ]"; NJB: "with … shielding wings") but also evokes with the maternal royal imagery of the ANE that is taken up and transformed in the promise of Isa 60:16,

> "You shall suck the milk of nations,
> you shall suck the breasts of kings."[50]

There is no doubt that Ezek 28:14 is a difficult text. But here, as in Deut 5:27 and Num 11:15, understanding אַתְּ as a feminine pronoun, and as a catchword, seems to make excellent sense.

The Proto-Masoretic Text?

Thus far, my exegesis has been based on the extant form of the MT. But how confident can we be that the presence of a feminine-looking pronoun in Num 11:15 and the switch from a masculine pronoun to a feminine-looking pronoun in Deut 5:27 are not simply peculiarities of the later Masoretic tradition but go back at least as far as the consonantal "unified text" of the late first century CE?[51]