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“Try To Be A Man”: The Rabbinic Construction Of Masculinity*

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What does it mean “to be a man”? Whereas in most societies at most times the determination of “maleness” is straightforward (does he have male genitalia? what is his chromosomal make-up?), locating the cultural constructions of “manhood” is far more difficult. Many anthropologists have noted that in contrast to models that postulate a common psychology for all men, everywhere, all the time, constructions of manhood are varied and culturally dependent.¹ For example, the highly aggressive behavior necessary for retention of manhood for a male resident of Andalusian Spain can be contrasted to the sanctioned behavior of males of Tahiti. Unifying these diverse constructions of masculinity, however, is the common idea that manhood is an acquired state that males must fight both to attain and maintain. Because manhood is an achieved state, it can never be taken for granted: a male must be constantly proving that he is a man. “[T]he state of being a ‘real man’ or ‘true man’ [is] uncertain or precarious,

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¹For an example of the essentialist position that there is a common core to the male experience, see Thomas Gregor, *Anxious Pleasures: The Sexual Lives of an Amazonian People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 9.

a prize to be won or wrested through struggle.”² Similar constructions of manhood are evident today throughout the circum-Mediterranean.³

These anthropological approaches can be applied to late antique cultures. What, if anything, did it mean to the Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Christians of antiquity “to be a man”? What are the contours of manhood in these societies? Is manhood constructed as something elusive, a “prize to be won” or a culturally transformed state? Are there correspondences or divergencies among the ideals of manhood that these overlapping groups constructed? For once, the fact that the vast bulk of the surviving literature from late antiquity was authored by elite men can help in answering these questions. Whether fictional, poetic, philosophical, religious, or moralistic, this literature, almost all written by elite males, often presumes assumptions of manhood.

This is no less true of rabbinic literature. Written and compiled over the course of five centuries (first to sixth centuries CE) by men who at least considered themselves members of the elite class, the literature of the rabbis can be mined for answers to this same question: to the rabbis, what did it mean “to be a man”? Although the rabbis rarely address this topic explicitly, there are many places within this literature that reveal rabbinic assumptions about masculinity.

In this article, I argue that the rabbinic evidence repeatedly returns to a consistent construction of manhood, which is portrayed as directly in opposition to the construction of womanhood in these texts. For the rabbis, being a man means using that uniquely male trait, self-restraint, in the pursuit of the divine through Torah study. For the rabbis, as for their non-Jewish elite contemporaries, manhood was an acquired status that was always at risk, and was thus consistently a focus of anxiety. This construction of manhood did not arise from nothing; it only slightly reconfigures elements found in both Jewish Hellenistic writings and in the literature of the non-Jewish elite, especially moralists and philosophers. In order to contextualize the rabbinic evidence, I shall briefly review some roughly contemporaneous nonrabbinic constructions of masculinity. Finally, because the rabbis represent only a single (and probably numerically very small)

²David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 1.

³See especially Julian Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” in John G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (1966; reprinted Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 19–77; Stanley Brandes, *Metaphors of Masculinity: Sex and Status in Andalusian Folklore* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980); David D. Gilmore, “Introduction: The Shame of Dishonor,” in *Honour and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean* (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1987) 2–21; Michael Herzfeld, *The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

class of Jews, I shall comment on how my understanding of the rabbinic construction of manhood compares with that of contemporaneous nonrabbinic Jews.⁴

■ Nonrabbinic Constructions of Masculinity

The rabbinic construction of masculinity derives from themes present in the prerabbinic Jewish wisdom traditions and non-Jewish (and Philonic) philosophy and medicine. Two themes in particular stand out in this literature. First, self-mastery is a prerequisite for a life of the mind (whether Torah study or the pursuit of wisdom); it is gendered as characteristically male. Second, the pursuit of the life of the mind also is gendered as a masculine activity. Together, these characteristics define what it means to be a man.

The importance placed on self-mastery by classical authors is well known. Philosophers and doctors frequently counseled elite men, who had absolute legal power over everything in their *potestas* (“authority,” “dominion”), to control their passions and desires. As early as Aristotle, the lack of self-mastery was a sign of weakness, a characteristic that was soon gendered as feminine.⁵ In both Greek and Roman society,

gender hierarchy lies close to the heart of the discourse of self-mastery. Life is war, and masculinity has to be achieved and constantly fought for. Men are always in danger of succumbing to softness, described as forms of femaleness or servility.⁶

Only males had the capacity to exercise the self-control that, at least in the eyes of the philosophers and doctors, made them men.⁷ It is likely that

⁴See Shaye J. D. Cohen, “The Place of the Rabbi in Jewish Society of the Second Century,” in Lee I. Levine, ed., *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992) 157–73; and Lee I. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America; Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1989).

⁵Aristotle *Eth. Nic.* 1150b 20.

⁶Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) 45. Stowers’s entire survey of this theme is excellent (pp. 42–82). My thanks to Shaye Cohen for this reference. See also Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 9–12.

⁷On the increasing tendency of all philosophies to emphasize male self-control, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3: *Care of the Self* (trans. Robert Hurley; New York: Random House, 1988) 39–68. The Stoics advocated sexual equality in the pursuit of philosophy, but for someone like Musonius Rufus this occurred only when a woman abandoned those traits that were gendered as feminine. See Musonius Rufus 3 (Cora E. Lutz, trans., *Musonius Rufus: “The Roman Socrates”* [reprint; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947] 41); 4 (ET 42–49, on educating daughters); 6 (ET 52–57, on training). Note that in fragment 1, Musonius disapproves of the man who allows his body to become “effeminate” (τεθηλυμμένον) (ET 34–35). On the Stoic attitude toward sexual equality, see Charles Favez, “Une féministe

these same ideas migrated from Stoicism to the early church.⁸

Stowers has described the Jewish Hellenistic writers as presenting Judaism "as a philosophy for the passions, a school for self-control."⁹ Whether or not that was the real intent of these authors, they clearly assume that self-mastery was both important and a distinctly masculine trait. The *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* sees women as constitutionally unable to restrain themselves.¹⁰ The *Testament of Job* most likely displays a uniform attitude that associates the female with the earthly and corruptible in contrast to the male, who is associated with the ethereal and spiritual.¹¹ In 4 Macc 15:29–16:4, manliness is linked to reason, and is contrasted with the female characteristic of passion. Philo clearly sees the self-discipline necessary for efficacious philosophical study as a male virtue. He advocates an almost ascetic regimen that would help a man transcend his "feminine," corporeal aspect.¹² His comments on women consistently emphasize female lack of self-control, while his "heroes" are all distinguished by their pos-

romain: Musonius Rufus," *Bulletin de la Société des Études de Lettres* 20 (1933) 1–8; C. E. Manning, "Seneca and the Stoics on the Equality of the Sexes," *Mnemosyne* 26 (1973) 170–77; and Marcia L. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1985) 1. 36–38. On Roman medicine and self-control, see Soranus *Gyn.* 1.30. Note that he also recommends virginity for women, but that he appears to assume that this would be much harder for women who had had intercourse than those who had not. See Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 105–23. On the idea of women being unable to control themselves, see Suzanne Dixon, "Infirmitas Sexus: Womanly Weakness in Roman Law," *Tijdschrift Voor Rechtsgeschiedenis* 52 (1984) 343–71.

⁸On these themes in the early church, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "Sex, Shame, and Rhetoric: En-Gendering Early Christian Ethics," *JAAR* 59 (1991) 221–45; Aline Rousselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity* (trans. Felicia Pheasant; Oxford/New York: Blackwell, 1988) 129–40; and Marvin W. Meyer, "Making Mary Male: The Categories 'Male' and 'Female' in the Gospel of Thomas," *NTS* 31 (1985) 554–70. On Stoic influence on the church, see Michel Spanneut, *Le Stoïcisme des pères de l'Église de Clément de Rome à Clément d'Alexandrie* (2d ed.; Paris: Seuil, 1969); Colish, *The Stoic Tradition*, 2. Colish argues that early Christian Latin thought was far more influenced by Stoicism than has heretofore been thought.

⁹Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, 58.

¹⁰*T. Reub.* 5.1–7. See also *T. Judah* 13; *T. Joseph* 6.7, 10.2–3; *Ep. Arist.* 250. See further Anders Hultgård, "God and Image of Woman in Early Jewish Religion," in Kari Elisabeth Børresen, ed., *Image of God and Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition* (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1991) 46–47.

¹¹See Susan R. Garrett, "The 'Weaker Sex' in the *Testament of Job*," *JBL* 112 (1993) 55–70. See also Pieter W. van der Horst, "Images of Women in the Testament of Job," in Michael A. Knibb and Pieter W. van der Horst, eds., *Studies in the Testament of Job* (SNTSMS 66; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 99–113.

¹²Philo *Sob.* 5; see also *Mos.* 2.68. For ascetic tendencies in Philo, see Steven D. Fraade, "Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism," in Arthur Green, ed., *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1986) 253–88, esp. 263–66; Richard A. Horsley, "Spiritual Marriage with Sophia," *VC* 33 (1979) 38–40.

session of this quality.¹³ In this regard, Philo's portrayal of Joseph and Potiphar's wife is most telling. In response to Potiphar's wife's lustful advances to Joseph, Joseph gives a long speech in which he emphasizes the chastity and self-control of the Hebrews and the evil of licentiousness.¹⁴

These writers all share a fundamental assumption about what it means to be a man. Perhaps most telling in this regard is Philo's description of the Therapeutae. Philo discusses the Therapeutae, living on the banks of the Red Sea, with great admiration.¹⁵ They lived an ascetic lifestyle, spending the bulk of their days in philosophical contemplation. Although there are both men and women in this community, this is a male community; according to Philo, any women who are there have essentially renounced their femaleness by "becoming virgin":

The feast is shared by women also, most of them aged virgins, who have kept their chastity. . . of their own free will in their ardent yearning for wisdom. Eager to have her for their life mate they have spurned the pleasures of the body and desire no mortal offspring but those immortal children which only the soul that is dear to God can bring to the birth unaided because the father has sown in her spiritual rays enabling her to behold the verities of wisdom.¹⁶

The "ideal" philosophical woman, according to Philo, must sacrifice those very characteristics that he thinks are innate to women, "pleasures of the body" and the desire for children, in order to obtain a relationship with God. For Philo, to be a man means to control oneself by freeing the mind from carnal desires, use that control in the pursuit of philosophy, and thereby achieve a closer relationship to God. Josephus's description of the Essenes echoes these same themes.¹⁷

These themes are not confined to literature written in Greek. The fullest expression of these themes in a document originally written in Hebrew is

¹³Philo *Abr.* 253 (Abraham); *Sob.* 65 (Jacob); *Jos.* 42–48 (Joseph); *Mos.* 2.68 (Moses). On Philo's description of women, see Dorothy Sly, *Philo's Perception of Women* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

¹⁴Philo *Jos.* 42–48; 54–57.

¹⁵For the purposes of this paper, it is irrelevant whether or not his description is historically reliable.

¹⁶Philo *Cont.* 68–69 (trans. F. H. Colson et al.; LCL; 10 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) 9. 155. See further Ross S. Kraemer, "Monastic Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Egypt: Philo Judaeus on the Therapeutrides," *Signs* 14 (1989) 342–70.

¹⁷Josephus *Bell.* 2.120–61; *Philo Hypothesica* 11.1–12. The identification of the Essenes with the Dead Sea Community is likely, but not certain. See the review of positions in Lester L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian* (2 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 2. 494–99. Note that Josephus's description of the Essenes conforms even more exactly than the Dead Sea scrolls with the traits discussed here.

Ben Sira. Ben Sira abounds with maxims about vigilance with regard to women and their sexual wiles and about exercising self-control.¹⁸ According to Ben Sira, Wisdom's discipline will "be a torment to [its follower], and her decrees a hard test" (4:17). Self-control is the conduct most becoming to the pursuit of Wisdom: "Do not let your passions be your guide, but restrain your desires" (18:30). The author advises that one hold his wine "like a man," by which he means with restraint (31:25). As with the Jewish Hellenistic authors, Ben Sira sees self-restraint as the characteristically masculine activity that is a prerequisite for pursuit of Wisdom and Torah.¹⁹

This literature genders the pursuit of Wisdom and Torah study as masculine in two ways. First, as shown above, both activities require the masculine characteristic of self-restraint. Hence, these activities would be open to women only to the extent that they refrained from those activities that were gendered as appropriate for women. Second, both Wisdom and Torah are themselves, at least within the Jewish Hellenistic literature, gendered as female. Pursuit of Wisdom or Torah study, therefore, are presented as isomorphic to the erotic pursuit of a woman, an image that reinforces the masculine gendering of the activity.

The hypostasis of Wisdom as female appears as early as Proverbs 8–9, and continues throughout the Jewish wisdom tradition. In Proverbs 8, female Wisdom calls to men (vv. 4, 9, 32, 34) to heed her cry and accept her discipline (vv. 10, 33). The word for discipline (מוסר) elsewhere in Proverbs indicates God's commandments (6:23; 15:32–33). The link between pursuit of wisdom and masculinity is even clearer in Proverbs 9. This chapter portrays Wisdom in the first part as a sort of ideal woman (vv. 1–6), only to contrast her to the wicked earthly woman (vv. 13–18) in the second part. Wisdom is here portrayed as in competition with other women for a man's erotic attention.²⁰

Later Jewish wisdom texts exhibit the same elements, but with an increased identification of Wisdom with Torah. The fullest expression of these themes is in Ben Sira. Ben Sira personifies wisdom in erotic language that harkens back to that of Song of Songs, and connects the pursuit of Wisdom to obedience to God's laws:

¹⁸Sir 9:1–9; 19:2–3; 25:16–26; 36:21–25; 42:9–14. See further Warren C. Trenchard, *Ben Sira's View of Women: A Literary Analysis* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982) 95–128; Claudia V. Camp, "Understanding a Patriarch: Women in Second Century Jerusalem through the Eyes of Ben Sira," in Amy-Jill Levine, ed., *Women Like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) 1–39.

¹⁹See also Johann Marböck, *Weisheit im Wandel: Untersuchungen zur Weisheitstheologie bei Ben Sira* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1971) 34–133.

²⁰See Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985) esp. 79–147.

Like cassia or camel-thorn I [Wisdom] was redolent of spices; I spread my fragrance like choice myrrh, like galban, aromatic shell, and gum resin; I was like the smoke of incense in the sacred tent. Like a terebinth I spread out my branches, laden with honor and grace. I put forth lovely shoots like the vine, and my blossoms were a harvest of wealth and honor. "Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruit. The memory of me is sweeter than syrup, the possession of me sweeter than honey dripping from the comb. . . ." All this is the covenant-book of God Most High, the law which Moses enacted to be the heritage of the assemblies of Jacob. (Sir 24:15–20, 23)

Baruch also personifies Wisdom as a woman and identifies her with Torah (3:9–4:4).

Wisdom of Solomon displays these same characteristics in a slightly reconfigured form.²¹ Like the Semitic wisdom literature, Wisdom of Solomon personifies Wisdom as a female, often in starkly erotic language: "Wisdom I loved; I sought her out when I was young and longed to win her for my bride, and I fell in love with her beauty" (8:2). In another passage the link between wisdom and masculinity is even clearer:

Wretched indeed is he who thinks nothing of wisdom and discipline; such men's hopes are void, their labours unprofitable, their actions futile; their wives are frivolous, their children criminal, their parent-hood is under a curse. No, blessed is the childless woman if she is innocent, if she has never slept with a man in sin; at the great assize of souls she shall find a fruitfulness of her own. Blessed is the eunuch, if he has never done anything against the law and never harbored a wicked thought against the law. (Wis 3:10–14)

A man without Wisdom is one without the capacity to discipline himself and others. Like Proverbs 9, this passage subtly contrasts Wisdom—the ideal female—and the human female, who, if she is without male discipline, tends toward frivolity. Yet all is not lost for the human female; gender, the Wisdom of Solomon says, is ultimately irrelevant for divine reward, as long as the woman or eunuch adopts the masculine virtue of self-discipline. Divine reward is available to women who become men, as defined by the author. Similarly, Philo allows women to engage in the life of the mind as long as they abandon their sexuality by "becoming a virgin": "[God] will not talk with Sarah till she has ceased from all that is after the matter of women (Gen 18:11) and is ranked once more as a pure virgin."²²

²¹David Winston dates the Wisdom of Solomon to the reign of Gaius Caligula, 37–41 CE (*The Wisdom of Solomon* [AB 43; Garden City: Doubleday, 1979] 20–25).

²²Philo *Cher.* 50 (ET 2. 39).

The presentation is slightly more complicated in Philo than in Wisdom of Solomon. Philo genders wisdom, or Sophia, as female; this, however, is a functional rather than ontological distinction.²³ Where Philo does portray Sophia as female, he does so only in order to illustrate one particular function of Sophia. Philo states:

As indeed all the virtues have women's titles, but powers and activities of consummate men. For that which comes after God, even though it were chiefest of all other things, occupies a second place, and therefore was termed feminine to express its contrast with the Maker of the Universe who is masculine, and the feminine always comes short of and is lesser than it. Let us then pay no heed to the discrepancy in the gender of the words, and say that the daughter of God, even Wisdom, is not only masculine but father, sowing and begetting in souls aptness to learn, education ($\pi\alpha\iota\delta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha\nu$), knowledge, sound sense, good and laudable actions.²⁴

Because Sophia occupies a second place to God, who is always gendered as a man, Sophia is functionally a female. In her relationship with humans, however, Sophia is ontologically a man. The gendering of Sophia is relative, depending upon the gender of Sophia's partner. This shifting use of gender stands in contrast to the Wisdom tradition, which constructs a manhood that involves an erotic attachment with the female wisdom through a disciplined life. Philo, nevertheless, clearly sees philosophy as an activity suitable only for the man, since "the female gender is material, passive, corporeal and sense-perceptible, while the male is active, rational, incorporeal and more akin to mind and thought."²⁵

This sketchy survey points to a relatively uniform construction of manliness that was pervasive in Jewish and non-Jewish, Semitic and Greek elite groups in late antiquity. On a fundamental level all of these groups share the same conception of what it means to be a man: to exercise that (nearly) distinctly manly attribute of self-control in order to pursue Torah study, wisdom, or philosophy. This construction of manliness is very similar to that of the rabbis.

■ Rabbinic Constructions of Masculinity

The rabbis undoubtedly held that a penis made one male.²⁶ Those characteristics that make a male a man, however, are more elusive. While

²³Richard A. Baer, Jr., *Philo's Use of the Categories Male and Female* (Leiden: Brill, 1970) 65–66.

²⁴Philo *Fug.* 51–52 (ET Supp. 2. 15–16). See also *Abr.* 99–102.

²⁵Philo *Quaest. in Ex.* 1.8 (ET 5. 37–79; modified). Judith Romney Wegner talks of Philo's "inextricable nexus between rationality and masculinity" ("Philo's Portrayal of Women—Hebraic or Hellenistic," in Levine, "Women Like This," 47; see also 48–49).

²⁶The emphasis on the penis as defining who is a man, which is of no small import in a legal

“manhood” is rarely explicitly discussed in this literature, an examination of those passages that contrast the behavior, constitution, and responsibilities of men and women reveals two coherent themes. First, men are perceived as possessing the ability to control their desires and urges, whereas women are not. Second, because this quality of self-restraint is a prerequisite for Torah study, Torah study is constructed as the masculine activity *par excellence*. Thus for the rabbis the manly characteristic of self-restraint is necessary for acquisition of the manly virtue, Torah study; and it is the virtue of Torah study which leads to a relationship to God. For the rabbis, therefore, manliness is never secure; it is achieved through the constant exercise of discipline in pursuit of virtue, and vanishes the moment a male ceases to exercise that discipline.

Although desire and other carnal impulses (יצר) threatened both men and women, only men are thought in rabbinic sources to have the ability to subdue those desires.²⁷ Whereas the “warrior” (גבור) in the Hebrew Bible is the man of war,²⁸ to the rabbis he is the one who exercises self-restraint: “Ben Zoma says. . . Who is a גבור? One who conquers his [evil] inclination, as it is written, ‘Better to be forbearing than mighty, to have self-control than to conquer a city’ [Prov 16:32].”²⁹ Self-restraint, like war, is constructed as a masculine activity.³⁰

system that assigns different liabilities to males and females, is most clearly seen in rabbinic discussions on those who have either male and female genitalia (אנדרונוס) or no genitals at all (טומפוס). A male can lack testicles and remain a male; he is simply a eunuch. On rabbinic definitions of the male see *m. Yebamot* 8.6; *t. Yebamot* 10.2; *b. Yebamot* 82b, 83b; *y. Yebamot* 8.6, 9d.

²⁷On the יצר, see nn. 31–35 below. It is important here to differentiate between rabbinic constructions and reality. Rabbinic sources do mention in passing that some women could indeed control themselves, but this observation never penetrated to the level of gender construction. Shame, it appears, was one societal institution that promoted female chastity among Jews in late antiquity. See Michael L. Satlow, “Sex and Shame in Late-Antique Judaism,” in Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 535–43.

²⁸For examples of גבור in the Hebrew Bible see Gen 10:8; 2 Sam 17:10; Jer 46:12; and Amos 2:14. God too is described as גבור in Jer 32:18.

²⁹*m. 'Abot* 4.1 (ET *The Mishna* [ed. Chanoch Albeck; 6 vols.; Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik, 1988] 4. 368–69). All translations of rabbinic texts are my own. I have indicated the original texts on which the translations are based throughout. Translations of citations from the Hebrew Bible are from *Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

³⁰The word used in this tradition for “conquer” (כיבש) also appears in Gen 1:28, in which God exhorts both Adam and Eve to procreate, “fill the earth, and conquer it.” One midrash expresses surprise that Eve too is commanded to “conquer”: “A man restrains (כיבש) his wife so that she not go to the market, for every woman who goes out to the market is destined to fall (להכשל), as it is written, ‘Now Dinah. . . went out [to visit the daughters of the land]’ [Gen 34:1]” (*Gen. R.* 8.12 [*Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* (eds. J. Theodor and H. Albeck; 2d ed.; Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1965) 66]; note the manuscript problems with this tradition). This tradition subverts both Gen 1:28 and 34:1, while relying on a complex web of assumptions.

Many rabbinic stories revolve around male resistance of the *יצר*. One (apparently Palestinian) tradition urges men, even when physically ill with love (or perhaps, lust) to resist.³¹ A series of Babylonian stories illustrates both the power of the *יצר* and the ability of holy men to resist temptation.³² According to a tannaitic tradition, “just as righteous men adjure their *יצר* not to act, evil men adjure their *יצר* to act.”³³ Men are portrayed as praying for God to help them control their *יצר*.³⁴ One tradition asserts explicitly that controlling the *יצר* is a manly ability:

“Happy is the man who fears the Lord” [Ps 112:1]. Happy is the man and not happy is the woman? R. Amram said in the name of Rav, “Happy is the one who repents when [*sic*] he is a man.” R. Yehoshua b. Levi said, “Happy is the one who overpowers his *יצר* like a man.”³⁵

Implicit in R. Yehoshua b. Levi’s statement is the assumption that a woman cannot typically overpower her *יצר*.³⁶

That self-restraint is constructed by the rabbis as a manly activity is seen more clearly against rabbinic portrayal of women and their own sense of self-control. Women are consistently portrayed as lacking sexual self-control. Women are thought to have an evil inclination at least as strong as men’s. According to one mishna, “A woman prefers one measure of material substance along with sex (*הפלות*) to nine measures of material substance and abstinence.”³⁷ According to one *baraita* (tannaitic teachings outside of tannaitic documents), when plied with wine, women will lose control to the point that they will sexually proposition animals.³⁸ The redactor of the Babylonian Talmud even goes so far as to suggest that a woman’s sexual urge can seize her, making her unaccountable for her actions.³⁹ Because

Use of the word *להכשיל* implies some kind of sexual transgression. Thus, “conquering” is understood as something that only a man can do, and should do to keep his wife (who lacks self-restraint) from wandering out and succumbing to sexual temptation (not rape, as in Genesis 34). The more common expression that denotes a man overcoming his *יצר* is *מתגבר* (“to become master [or man] over”), which contains the same root as *נבור*. See, for example, *b. Meg.* 15b.

³¹*b. Sanh.* 75a (with some variants at *y. Šabbat* 14.4, 14d and *y. ‘Aboda Zar.* 2.2, 40d).

³²*b. Qidd.* 80b.

³³*Sifre Deut.* 33 (ed. L. Finkelstein, *Sifre on Deuteronomy* [1939; reprinted New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969] 60).

³⁴See *b. Ber.* 17a, 60b; *b. Qidd.* 81b; *y. Ber.* 4:2, 7d.

³⁵*b. ‘Aboda Zar.* 19a.

³⁶According to Rashi’s exploration of this passage, both traditions contrast a man in his youth to an older man, who no longer has the power he once had. I assume that this interpretation is occasioned by the odd syntax of Rav’s tradition.

³⁷*m. Šot.* 3.4 (ET *Mishna*, ed. Albeck, 3. 240–41). See further Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person: The Status of Women in the Mishna* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 153–62.

³⁸*b. Ketub.* 65a.

³⁹*b. Ketub.* 51b, 54a; *b. Qidd.* 81b.

women are seen as sexually tempting to men and as unable to resist sexual advances, rabbis present them as posing a particular threat to male self-control.⁴⁰

This latter supposition generates some of the rabbinic laws against “seclusion” (יחוד).⁴¹ “A man should not remain alone with two women, but a woman may be alone with two men.”⁴² Why should a man be forbidden from remaining alone with two women, but not a woman with two men? Unlike women, men are assumed to be able to control each other: a single man may succumb to temptation, but if there are two men at least one will resist and prevent his fellow. Women, however, cannot prevent each other from sexual advances, because they cannot control their desires. As a *baraita* explains, “What is the reason [that a man cannot be alone with two women]? As it is taught of the school of Eliyahu, because women are light-headed.”⁴³ Women are understood as constitutionally unable to exercise self-restraint.

One striking example can be further adduced to demonstrate that the rabbis used the category of self-restraint for gender constructions. Among the many eugenic suggestions found in rabbinic literature (primarily the Babylonian Talmud), male modesty and self-restraint in sexual intercourse are seen as the most common techniques for reproducing *men*. Controlled sex leads to male children, whereas, one can assume, uncontrolled sex leads to female children.

The Babylonian Talmud contains several eugenic suggestions. These passages, which outline how one can guarantee (righteous) male children, assume that the way in which one has sexual intercourse influences the sex and character of the child conceived.⁴⁴ Two of these passages strikingly link the production of males with manly control during intercourse. According to one of these passages, a woman will conceive a male child if she “emits her seed” first:

(a) R. Yitzak said in the name of R. Ami, “If the woman emits her seed first she will bear a male. If the man emits his seed first she will bear a female, as it is written, ‘. . . When a woman who brings forth seed bears a male [she shall be unclean seven days] [Lev 12:2].’”

⁴⁰See, for examples, *m. ’Abot* 1.5; *m. Soṭ.* 1.5; *t. Soṭ.* 1.7; *Sifre Num.* 139; *y. Soṭ.* 3.4, 19a; *b. Šabbat* 62b (par. *b. Yoma* 9b); *y. Šabbat* 14.4, 14d (par. *y. ’Aboda Zar.* 2.2, 40d); *b. Sanh.* 75a). For a discussion of these passages, see Michael L. Satlow, “Tasting the Dish”: *Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995) 158–67.

⁴¹See *t. Qidd.* 5.9–10, 14; *y. Soṭ.* 1.3, 16d; *b. Qidd.* 80b–81b. See further Louis M. Epstein, *Sex Laws and Customs in Judaism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948) 68–75.

⁴²*m. Qidd.* 4.12 (ET *Mishna*, ed. Albeck, 4. 328–29).

⁴³*b. Qidd.* 80b. See also *b. Šabbat* 33b (women cannot be trusted with information); *b. Soṭ.* 32b; *Tanḥuma.vayikra*^c 22 on Gen 22:1.

⁴⁴On male modesty during sexual intercourse see the discussion in Satlow, “Tasting the Dish,” 298–303.

(b) Our Rabbis taught: “At first they would say that if the woman emits her seed first she would bear a male. If the man emits his seed first she would bear a female.” And the sages did not explain the matter until R. Zadok came and explained, “‘Those were the sons whom Leah bore to Jacob in Paddan-Aram, in addition to his daughter Dinah [Gen 46:15].’ The males depend on the females, and the females on the males.”

(c) “The descendants of Ulam—men of substance, who drew the bow—had many sons and grandsons [1 Chr 8:40].” Is a man able to increase sons and grandsons? Rather, it is because they restrained themselves on the stomach so that their wives would emit seed first, so that their children would be male. And scripture attributes to them as if they increased sons and the sons of sons.

(d) And this is what R. Katina said, “I am able to make all my children male.”⁴⁵

(a) and (b) offer alternative examples of the same conclusion, that the timing of female “emission of seed”—presumably orgasm—determines the child’s gender. This opinion is found elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud, attributed only to Palestinian sages.⁴⁶ According to R. Ami (a), this view is derived from the identification of female emission of seed with male children in Lev 12:2, while R. Zadok (b) derives it from the attribution of Jacob’s sons to Leah and Leah’s daughter to Jacob in Gen 46:15. In (c), an anonymous exegesis of 1 Chr 8:40 is used to demonstrate the effectiveness of the maxims presented in (a) and (b). Here it is clear that the Talmud understands the suggestions of (a) and (b) to refer to self-control; (d) is attributed to a Babylonian sage, and has the same purpose—that of attributing to men the power to reproduce men.⁴⁷

Assuming that “emits her seed first” means “have an orgasm,” this tradition links manly self-control during sex to the conception of male children. The longer the man controls himself, the more likely it is that his partner will emit her seed first, thus conceiving a male child. Moreover, the concern for female sexual pleasure as a demonstration of manly sexual competence is well-attested in both anthropological literature and contemporaneous non-Jewish sources.⁴⁸ This text, therefore, links the conception

⁴⁵*b. Nid.* 31a-b.

⁴⁶*b. Ber.* 60a (R. Yitzḥak b. Ami); *b. Nid.* 25b (R. Yitzḥak b. Ami), 28a (R. Yitzḥak), 71a (R. Ḥama b. R. Ḥaninah).

⁴⁷See also *b. Erubin* 100b.

⁴⁸See Galen, *De usu pertium* 14.6 (trans. Margaret Tallmade May; 2 vols.; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968) 2. 628–30. This approach continues throughout the Middle Ages. See Vern L. Bullough, “On Being a Male in the Middle Ages,” in Clare A. Lees, ed., *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 31–45.

of male children to two manly characteristics: the man's ability to control himself, and his ability to please his wife.

A second well-known story similarly links the conception of male children to manly self-control:

(a) R. Yoḥanan b. Dahavei said: "The ministering angels taught me four things: Why are there lame [children]? Because they [the parents] "overturned their table." Why are there dumb [children]? Because they [the parents] kissed that very place [that is, had oral sex]. Why are there deaf [children]? Because they [the parents] talked during intercourse. Why are there blind [children]? Because they looked at that very place [that is, at the female genitals]."

(b) An objection: They asked Ima Shalom, "Why are your children most beautiful?" She said to them: "He does not 'talk' to me either in the beginning of the night or at the end, but in the middle of the night, and when he 'talks' he reveals a handbreadth and covers a handbreadth, and he is similar to one whom a demon⁴⁹ forces. And I asked him: 'what is the reason?' And he said to me: 'so that I will not think of another woman' and his sons are found to come into *mamzerut* (offspring of a forbidden union)."⁵⁰

Manly modesty and self-restraint in sex reproduces men. The implication, of course, is that a man who allows himself to lose control during intercourse will produce female children. The difference could hardly be clearer: when males act like men they are responsible for the reproduction of males (who will be future men), but when they allow nature to "take its course" and do not exercise their manly attributes during sex then females are conceived.⁵¹

According to a *baraita*, women are exempt from the obligation of Torah study. This exemption derives from a narrow exegesis of Deut 11:19: "'Teach them to your sons'—your sons and not your daughters."⁵² Why are women exempted from Torah study? The exegetical reason cannot stand alone; frequently the word "sons" (בנים) is interpreted by the rabbis to refer to all children.⁵³ In order to understand the gender-valence that Torah study holds, it is necessary to discern how Torah is understood as a masculine activity throughout rabbinic literature. It is my contention that Torah study

⁴⁹MS Munich 95 reads, "prince" (שר).

⁵⁰*b. Ned.* 20a-b.

⁵¹See, for another example, the story of R. Yoḥanan whose sexual self-control is so strong, that women who merely look upon him conceive after his likeness (*b. Ber.* 20a). See the discussion on rabbinic eugenics in Satlow, "Tasting the Dish," 303–13.

⁵²*Sifre Deut.* 46 (ET *Sifre Deut.*, ed. Finkelstein, 104). See also *b. Qidd.* 29b; *y. Ber.* 1.3, 4c; *y. Erubin* 10.1, 26a.

⁵³For example, the commandment for a son to honor his parents is interpreted as referring to both children. See *b. Qidd.* 29b.

is constructed as distinctly masculine because women were seen as lacking the self-discipline needed for this activity.

Among its many social functions, Torah study was seen as almost as effective as consideration of the day of one's death in combatting the *יצר*.⁵⁴ When feeling overwhelmed with desire, men should hastily get themselves to a study-house, for Torah study is the antidote to desire:

“And you shall place these words upon your hearts” [Deut 11:18]—this says that words of Torah are like a life-saving remedy.⁵⁵ A parable: [This is similar] to a king who was angry at his son, struck him hard, and placed a bandage on the wound. He said to him: “My son, as long as this bandage is on your wound, you can eat whatever you want; drink whatever you want; bathe in either hot or cold water, and you will not be hurt. But if you remove it, immediately a sore will arise.” So too the Holy One said to Israel, “My children, I created for you the *יצר הרע* (“evil inclination”), which nothing is worse than—‘But if you do not do right’ [Gen 4:7]. When you are engaged in words of Torah, it will not rule over you, but if you separate from words of Torah, behold it will rule over you, as it is written [in the continuation of the verse], ‘sin crouches at the door.’”⁵⁶

As elsewhere in rabbinic literature, Torah study was seen as an antidote to desire. Yet the life of Torah study was represented as a difficult one that involves a substantial amount of individual deprivation.⁵⁷ Just as Torah study leads to self-restraint, self-restraint is a prerequisite for Torah study. Moreover, as Boyarin has shown, Torah study was represented in terms so erotic that Torah was in competition with women, vying for the time and energy of the Jewish man.⁵⁸ These references to Torah represent her as a demanding mistress. It is this representation of Torah as female, and the starkly sexual language often used to describe the Jewish man's relationship to it, that is relevant to this article. To my knowledge, Torah is never represented in rabbinic literature as “male.” To pursue Torah is an unquestionably masculine (and, by definition, heterosexual) activity. And it is Torah study, with its self-reinforcing cycle of self-control, that presents the clearest path to God.

⁵⁴*m. Abot* 3.1.

⁵⁵נמשלו דברי תורה לסם חיים; following some manuscripts. Apparently, this is a wordplay on ושמחם (“and you shall place”), which is read as סם חם (“an unfailing medicine”).

⁵⁶*Sifre Deut.* 45 (ET *Sifre Deut.*, ed. Finkelstein, 103–4). For other rabbinic comments on the efficacy of Torah study, see *b. Ber.* 5a; *b. Sukk.* 52a-b; *b. Qidd.* 30b; *b. Sanh.* 107a.

⁵⁷See *m. Abot* 6.4.

⁵⁸Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 134–66. Several passages in the Babylonian Talmud juxtapose male sexual impropriety and Torah knowledge. See *b. Erubin* 64a; *b. Sot.* 4b.

Within rabbinic literature, there are very few occurrences of phrases equivalent to the English phrase “be a man,” which would indicate quite clearly what traits exactly are expected of men. Yet the few times that the phrase does occur is in the context of Torah study. At the end of a passage that details the characteristics necessary for successful Torah learning, the mishna states, “in a place where there are no men, try to be a man (איש).”⁵⁹ The only other place that this expression is found is in connection with a saying attributed to Hillel. This saying says that where people are not receptive to the Torah one should “gather,” but where they are receptive, one should “scatter” his Torah learning.⁶⁰ The Babylonian Talmud follows the citation of this tradition with a statement attributed to Bar Kappara: “Where [goods] are cheap, hurry and buy. Where there is no man, there be a man (גבר)!”⁶¹ While it is impossible to determine the original context of this statement (if it is genuine), the Talmud understands it to mean that when one is in a place with no scholars, one should teach, but where there is a wiser scholar one should refrain from teaching.⁶² “To be a man” in these passages means at least to teach (and could easily imply study as well) Torah. Another Palestinian tradition links “being a man” to liturgical expertise.⁶³

As with the sources on manly self-control, when this construction of the role of Torah study in carving out manly identity is placed in contrast with rabbinic dicta on female Torah commentary, the differences between the gender constructions are highlighted. All of the rabbinic comments that condemn female Torah study do so on the grounds that because a woman does not have the requisite amount of self-discipline, she will use her Torah knowledge for ill. The signal example of condemnation of female Torah study is R. Eliezer’s statement that “anyone who teaches his daughter Torah, [it is as if]”⁶⁴ he teaches her licentiousness (הפלותה).⁶⁵ The Talmud itself comments that R. Eliezer opposes teaching one’s daughter Torah, because female Torah knowledge will make her temporarily immune from the *sofa* ordeal, the test of the suspected adulteress described in Num 5:11–31. Because she knows that she is immune, she will be more likely to commit

⁵⁹*m. Abot* 2.6 (ET *Mishna*, ed. Albeck 4. 359).

⁶⁰*t. Ber.* 6(7).24. There is a close parallel in Aramaic at *y. Ber.* 9.8, 14d. See further Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-Fshuta: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta* (10 vols.; New York: JTSA, 1955) 1. 125 [Hebrew].

⁶¹*b. Ber.* 63a. A close parallel, attributed to Hillel himself, can be found at *Sifre Zuta, Pinhas*.

⁶²See also the commentary of the *Tosafot, b. Sof.* 23b, s.v., שרין.

⁶³*Lev. R.* 23.4.

⁶⁴Some versions do not have this clause, which most likely migrated into the mishna from the talmudic discussion on *b. Sof.* 21b.

⁶⁵*m. Sof.* 3.4 (ET *Mishna*, ed. Albeck, 3. 240).

adultery. A tradition in the Palestinian Talmud expresses fear that a woman will use her knowledge of Torah to seduce unwary men.⁶⁶

Here is the ultimate subversion of Torah knowledge: that women were seen as unable to engage in Torah study because they lacked the requisite self-control lends the so-called “Beruriah traditions” their force. These traditions, scattered throughout rabbinic literature, involve a woman, sometimes identified as “Beruriah,” who demonstrates knowledge of Torah and rabbinic law.⁶⁷ Regardless of the historical value (or lack of value) of these stories—that is, what they can tell us about the rabbinic education of women—the presence of a learned woman in the tradition serves a heuristic function.⁶⁸ The function of a learned female in most of these traditions is either to shame men or, in one case, to emphasize the danger of a woman, especially one thought to be learned in Torah. Thus, when a rabbi uses the example of Beruriah to shame a man who is of doubtful origin and who wants to learn Torah, he is essentially saying that “you can not even equal the learning of a woman.”⁶⁹ Other traditions present her besting a Sadducee or rebuking a student—the force of both would have been to shame the men involved.⁷⁰ In another tradition one rabbi advises another to give wide berth to Beruriah, exchanging with her not a single word more than necessary.⁷¹ Her knowledge of Torah, the passage implies, makes her a sexual danger.

Similarly, the “Matrona traditions” use a woman for heuristic purposes.⁷² One of the more virulent Matrona traditions reads:

Matrona asked R. Liazar, “Why did the Israelites commit one transgression with the golden calf, and yet were punished with three [different kinds of] death?” He said to her, “The only kind of wisdom a woman possesses is the distaff, as it is written, ‘And all the skilled (בַּחֲכָמָה לֵב) women spun with their own hands’ [Exod 35:25].”

Hyrcanus his son said to him, “Let me lose 300 *kor* of tithes every year in order not to answer [a woman even] a word of Torah!” He said

⁶⁶y. *Sot.* 3.4, 19a.

⁶⁷t. *Kel. B. Qamma* 4.17; t. *Kel. B. Mes.* 1.6; *Sifre Deut.* 307; b. *Ber.* 10a (2); b. *‘Erubin* 53b–54a (2); b. *Pesah.* 62b; b. *‘Aboda Zar.* 18a–b (2).

⁶⁸On the tendency to approach these stories positivistically, see the sophisticated study of David Goodblatt, “The Beruriah Traditions,” *JJS* 26 (1975) 68–86. Boyarin (*Carnal Israel*, 167–96, esp. 181–96) takes seriously the heuristic function of these stories as evidence for rabbinic ambivalence over female Torah study.

⁶⁹b. *Pesah.* 62b.

⁷⁰b. *Ber.* 10a; b. *‘Erubin* 53b–54a.

⁷¹b. *‘Erubin* 53b. If Boyarin, following Rashi, is substantively correct that the enigmatic “incident of Beruriah” mentioned at b. *‘Aboda Zar.* 18a–b refers to her being seduced by a disciple of her husband’s, that may be another example of this function. Although Rashi sees her Torah knowledge as making her the target of the seduction, it is easy to imagine her Torah knowledge as leading to her own seduction of a man.

⁷²See the recent study of Tal Ilan, “Matrona and Rabbi Jose: An Alternative Interpretation,” *JSJ* 25 (1994) 18–51. Ilan also offers a positivistic interpretation of these stories.

to him, "Let the words of Torah be burned rather than transmitted to a woman!"

When she left, his students said to him, "Rabbi, you put her off, but what will you answer to us?"⁷³

Matrona is used as a foil. Her question, which this text itself admits is a good one, is derisively dismissed.⁷⁴ The only point of her question is to serve as a vehicle for the comments of R. Eleazar and his son. These comments are the strongest comments in this literature against women learning Torah.

In several other Matrona traditions, Matrona is given the role of presenting easy, almost child-like, traditions to R. Jose. Through these questions, R. Jose is given an opportunity, sometimes through dialogue, to respond to these issues. Matrona's literary function in these stories is to pose exceedingly simple, but ultimately troubling questions. The questions are safely attributed to a woman: they would have seemed foolish coming from a learned Jewish man.⁷⁵ Whenever rabbinic sources portray a woman learning Torah, there is a heuristic reason that depends upon the assumption that women, unlike men, do not learn Torah.

■ The Elusiveness of Rabbinic Masculinity

The rabbinic construction of masculinity posits men as polar opposites of women, and their traits as opposite those that they gender as "feminine." Whereas women are constructed as having little self-restraint and thus no true access to the primary means of a relationship with God (namely Torah study), the rabbis define men as almost the precise opposite. A woman is born a woman and no matter what she does she can never be anything but a woman. Manhood, however, is the result of a cultural transformation: a man can never lose his biological maleness, but he can lose his standing as a man. This model accounts well for the correspondences between rabbinic constructions of women and non-Jews. Gentiles, like women, are portrayed by the rabbis as totally lacking the ability to control themselves.⁷⁶ To be

⁷³y. *Sot.* 3.4, 19a (par. *Num. R. Naso* 9.48). The version of this story recorded at *b. Yoma* 66b appears to have been tacked on to a tradition cited from *t. Yebamot* 3.

⁷⁴For a similar literary device (woman goes to rabbi who mocks her), see *b. Ned.* 20b. On these traditions, see further Michael L. Satlow, "'Texts of Terror': Rabbinic Texts, Speech Acts, and the Control of Mores," *AJS Review* [forthcoming].

⁷⁵They could equally have been attributed to a Gentile. This could have been the heuristic function of Antonius in a cycle of rabbinic stories in which he plays a role.

⁷⁶See, for examples, *b. Yebamot* 103a–b (par. *b. Hor.* 10b; *b. Nazir* 23b); *b. Qidd.* 49b; *b. Sanh.* 39b, 95b. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Satlow, "Tasting the Dish" 146–53. The underlying link between women and non-Jews may account for the three things for which a man should thank God each morning: that he was not created a non-Jew, an ignoramus (בִּיר), or a woman. See *t. Ber.* 6(7).18. It is interesting to note that according to the Bible, it is Adam who is created from the earth, implying a more natural state. The rabbis deal with this by revaluing earth in their treatment of these accounts. See *Gen. R.* 17.8; *b. Nid.* 31b.

a woman or a Gentile is essentially to be in a natural state. To be a rabbinic man of God is to be transformed, to rule over those natural tendencies that women and Gentiles manifest.

A rabbinic tradition that combines this link between Gentiles and loss of self-control and the contrast of “natural” and “civilized” can be found in the Babylonian Talmud. According to the Mishna, a Jew should not leave an animal alone with a Gentile for fear of bestiality.⁷⁷ After discussing the possibilities of leaving a male or female animal with a man, and a male animal with a woman, the Babylonian Talmud asks:

- (a) What is the reason that we do not leave alone female [animals] with female [Gentiles, since there is no fear of sex between them]?
- (b) Mar Ukba b. Hama said: “Because Gentile men search for [literally, at the place of] the wives of others, and sometimes when they do not find them they will find the animal and mount it.”
- (c) As the Master said: “The animals of Israel are dearer to them [Gentiles] than their own women.”
- (d) As R. Yoḥanan said: “When the snake had intercourse with [בעל] Eve, it placed in her filth.”
- (e) If this is so, then Israel too [should have this filth in them]!
- (f) When Israel stood on Mount Sinai [and received the Torah], their filth ceased. But the filth of the Gentiles, who did not stand on Mount Sinai, has not ceased.⁷⁸

Gentile men are portrayed as so lustful that when they fail in their attempt to commit adultery, they settle for an animal. They are so lustful because they were not “civilized” at Sinai. By standing at Sinai, Israel lost its natural state of lust. Moreover, the text leaves unclear whether “Israel” is meant to include Jewish women. Whether or not the rabbis would historically place women at Sinai, exempting them or even prohibiting women from Torah study (and thus continuing revelation) suggests a link between even Jewish women, lust, and a natural state.

Because the rabbis understand being a man as transcending nature, manhood is always at risk; it is always there to be lost. As noted above, Gilmore asserts that among many cultures manhood is a prize to be won and a status males usually must struggle to preserve; I argue that this also applies to the rabbinic construction of manhood. Two major forces always threaten to emasculate the rabbinic man: the יצר and, to a lesser degree, the loss of Torah knowledge.

⁷⁷m. *Aboda Zar.* 2.1. See also t. *Aboda Zar.* 3.1.

⁷⁸b. *Aboda Zar.* 22b (par. b. *Šabbat* 145b–146a; b. *Yebamot* 103b); (a) and (b) are paralleled at y. *Aboda Zar.* 2.1, 40c, and (c) at b. *Git.* 38a. My thanks to Shaye Cohen for this reference.

The body is seen as a battleground between the good and evil inclinations:

Rav said: “The יצר הרע can be compared to a fly that sits between the two openings of the heart, as it is written, ‘Dead flies turn the perfumer’s ointment fetid and putrid’” [Eccl 10:1].

Shmuel said: “It can be compared to a kind of thread. . . .”

Our rabbis taught: “In a person (אדם) there are two kidneys. One counsels good, the other bad.”⁷⁹

The יצר הרע dwells within a person, always waiting to wreak its havoc. Unchecked, the male יצר הרע was thought to increase in strength:

At first, [the יצר הרע] is weak like a woman, and afterwards it gets stronger like a man. R. Akiba said: “At first, [the יצר הרע] is made like a spider thread; later, it is made like the rope that drags the plow, as it is written, ‘Ah, those who haul sin with cords of falsehood and iniquity as with cart ropes’” [Isa 5:18].⁸⁰

The יצר continually assails a man’s defenses. Women, who share with men a strong sexual desire, are portrayed as presenting a particular threat to male sexual self-control, hence to their manhood.⁸¹ A man must daily fight the same battle in order to preserve his status as a man. Letting the יצר do its will unhindered for even a short while is to risk increasing the strength of the יצר, ultimately to the point of completely overwhelming the man. Constitutionally, women cannot defend themselves against this; but men must be aware of even the slightest temptation or provocation and battle it.

For the rabbis, Torah knowledge, like self-control, is never safe. Knowing something today is no guarantee that one will know it tomorrow. Without constant reinforcement, Torah knowledge is easily lost, and the price of that loss is high: “R. Dostai b. Yannai in the name of R. Meir says: ‘Anyone who forgets a single thing of his learning, the Scripture accounts him as if he is liable with his life.’”⁸² By losing Torah knowledge, a man risks descending to the status of the עַם הָאָרֶץ, the common man who is just a little above the woman and Gentile.⁸³

I think, therefore, that the several rabbinic sources that portray Israel or the patriarchs as feminine in contrast to the masculine job are best under-

⁷⁹*b. Ber.* 61a. See also *b. Erubin* 18b.

⁸⁰*Gen. R.* 22.4 (*Mishna Bereshit Rabba*, eds. Theodor and Albeck, 210). See also *b. Sukk.* 52a; *b. Sanh.* 99b.

⁸¹See *m. Abot* 1.5; *b. Šabbat* 62b (par. *b. Yoma* 9b); *b. Ketub.* 51b, 54a, 62b; *b. Qidd.* 81b; *y. Ketub.* 1:8, 25d, 1:9, 25a; *y. Sanh.* 2:3, 20b.

⁸²*m. Abot* 3.8 (ET *Mishna*, ed. Albeck, 6. 365). See also *m. Abot* 3.7; *b. Menah.* 99b; *b. Ber.* 8b; *b. B. Qam.* 14b.

⁸³*b. Pesah.* 49b (partial par. *b. Sanh.* 90b). The tradition is placed in a series of *baraitot* that condemn עַם הָאָרֶץ (“people of the land,” “common folk”).

stood functionally rather than ontologically.⁸⁴ They do not set a model for how the rabbis see themselves and their endeavor as much as they provide a metaphor to describe God's power, which is never represented as feminine.⁸⁵ Whenever a metaphor shows the direct relationship between God and individuals or the people Israel, God is always the player with more social power: Lord/servant; king/subject; parent/child; man/woman. When, then, the rabbis seek a gendered metaphor to portray the relationship between God and any people or individual, it is not surprising that Israel is feminized. Similarly, this functional use of gendered characteristics for describing power relationships seems to me also to explain best the feminized representation of rabbis in relation to their rabbinic superiors. Rabbinic masters might be feminized in the portrayal of their relationship with God, but their students (תלמידי חכמים) are feminized in the portrayal of their relationship with their masters.⁸⁶ In both cases, a relative social hierarchy is being worked out. This portrayal, however, in no way confuses what to the rabbis were very clear gender lines.

For the rabbis, manhood is elusive. It is difficult to win and difficult to keep.⁸⁷ When a man relaxes his self-defenses, when he succumbs to his יצר, he risks his manhood. Thus, it is not surprising that the rabbis linked femininity, loss of control, and male homoeroticism.⁸⁸ Male homoeroticism, especially as the receptive partner in anal intercourse, is seen as merely the embodiment of the loss of control that turns a man into a woman. Manhood, for the rabbis, is a prize to be won and constantly rewon.

⁸⁴For what appears to be a modified ontological interpretation of these sources, see Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon, 1994) 163–74. Eilberg-Schwartz cites examples of rabbinic traditions that feminize Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David. Nearly all of his examples are either directly from *Song of Songs Rabbah* or are exegeses of verses from Song of Songs.

⁸⁵Even rabbinic representations of the *Shekina* do not contain feminine elements, despite the gender of the term. See Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975) 65.

⁸⁶Daniel Boyarin discussed rabbinic texts that feminize students in "Dis/Owning the Phallus: Male Sexuality and Power in Early Christianity and Judaism," a paper presented at AAR/SBL Annual Meeting, 1994. Boyarin's conclusions are different from the one presented here. Use of the term "humility" in rabbinic literature also conforms to the model I argue for here: students should be humble before their social superiors (teachers), and all should be humble before God. My thanks to Jeffrey Rubenstein for bringing this to my attention.

⁸⁷Rabbinic Judaism, unlike many peoples, appears to show no knowledge of initiation rites. The *bar mitzva* does not appear to have been any kind of male initiation, and circumcision is performed when the child is so young that this too would not qualify as such a rite. To my knowledge, there is only a single text that might suggest a male initiation rite. In *Tanhuma vayikra* 22 on Gen 22:1, in which Abraham is trying to trick Sara into letting him take Isaac to be sacrificed, he says that he is going to take Isaac to a place where they מחנכים ("educate") youths. Elsewhere in rabbinic literature the term means to initiate through a process of teaching, a definition that would make little sense here (see *b. Nazir* 29a; *m. Yoma* 8:4).

⁸⁸See Michael L. Satlow, "'They Abused Him Like a Woman': Homoeroticism, Gender Blurring, and the Rabbis in Late Antiquity," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1994) 1–25.

The elusiveness of the rabbinic construction of manhood accords with that of that of the Roman construction of manhood. Santoro L'Hoir has argued that at least in Latin prose literature, the word for man (*vir*) is used to denote a certain set of attributes lacking in the mere male (*homo*).⁸⁹ Initiation into Roman manhood for the aristocracy was marked by the donning of the toga: to be a Roman aristocrat was inextricably bound to gender constructions.⁹⁰ Any gender-blurring activity (such as acting the "pathic") endangered Roman manhood.⁹¹ Even a man's appearance was the subject of scrutiny that sought to determine if he still retained his manhood.⁹² As with the construction of manhood as requiring self-control for the pursuit of study, rabbinic rhetoric accords with the writings of the contemporaneous non-Jewish elite.

Whether this conclusion is applicable to the non-elite, Jewish and non-Jewish, is a different matter. The Septuagint frequently translates the Hebrew term for "strength" (קוח) with a Greek cognate that means "be like a man, be manly" (ἀνδρῆς-).⁹³ Although Josephus modified his portrayals of biblical characters for apologetic reasons, he applied traditional Greek categories for praise: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, together with piety.⁹⁴ Inscriptions indicate that Jewish men in late antiquity, especially in Palestine, wanted to be remembered by those same traits used by their non-Jewish contemporaries: their money, piety, and "public" offices.⁹⁵ Rabbinic constructions of manhood were, I think, neither designed for nor adopted

⁸⁹F. E. Santoro L'Hoir, *The Rhetoric of Gender Terms: "Man", "Woman," and the Portrayal of Character in Latin Prose* (Mnemosyne Suppl. 118; Leiden: Brill, 1992) 1–5.

⁹⁰On taking the *toga virilis*, see H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (trans. George Lamb; London: Sheed & Ward, 1956) 233; Stanley F. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome: From the Elder Cato to the Younger Pliny* (London: Methuen, 1977) 84–85.

⁹¹See Musonius Rufus 12.3; Juvenal 2.54–56. See further Richlin, *Garden of Priapus* (rev. ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) xii–xxxiii, 81–143, 287–90, and the sources indicated on 246 n. 35; idem, "Not Before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the *Cinaedus* and the Roman Law Against Love Between Men," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3 (1993) 569–71; and Ramsay MacMullen, "Roman Attitudes to Greek Love," *Historia* 31 (1982) 484–502.

⁹²Maud W. Gleason, "The Semiotics of Gender: Physiognomy and Self-Fashioning in the Second Century C.E.," in David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, Froma I. Zeitlin, eds., *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 389–415.

⁹³See the LXX Deut 31:6, 7, 23; Josh 1:6, 7, 9, 18, 10:25; 2 Sam 10:12, 13:28; Micah 4:10; Ps 26:14, 31:25 (=30:25); 1 Chr 19:13, 22:13, 28:20; 2 Chr 32:7. See further 1 Macc 2:64 and Sir 31:25.

⁹⁴See Louis H. Feldman, "Use, Authority and Exegesis of Mikra in the Writings of Josephus," in Martin Jan Mulder, ed., *Mikra* (CRINT 2.1; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 485–94. Because *Antiquities* was written for a Roman audience, it is hard to know to what extent Josephus subscribed to this construction of masculinity in contrast to the one that emerges from the wisdom tradition.

⁹⁵For collections of primarily dedicatory inscriptions from Palestinian synagogues, see Joseph Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic: The Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Ancient*

by the larger Jewish community. The rabbis themselves may have been aware of this. One legend has the great R. Shimon b. Lakish abandoning a life of violence for study of Torah; another portrays David as moving between commanding his armies and studying Torah.⁹⁶ I read these sources not as evidence of change from one construction of masculinity to another, but as an expression of the conflict between the two, while promoting their own. This is similar to those constructions of masculinity that emerge from the vast majority of Roman texts, which were also probably not shared by the larger community.

■ Conclusions

I have argued throughout this article that for the rabbis, to be a man means to use that uniquely male trait, self-restraint, in the pursuit of the divine through Torah study. This conclusion appears to hold for all rabbis, early and late, Palestinian and Babylonian, and cuts across all rabbinic documents. For the rabbis, being a man is the opposite of being a woman, much in the same way that culture is constructed as opposite of nature. A woman is born a woman and no matter what she does, she can never be anything but a woman. A man, however, is the result of a cultural transformation: a man can never lose his biological maleness, but he can lose his standing as a man. Moreover, this rabbinic understanding of manliness is by no means unique. It is amply attested in pre-rabbinic Jewish sources as well as in contemporaneous non-Jewish sources drawn especially from elite intellectual circles.

To be a man means to exercise self-control in the pursuit of the divine through the study of Torah or a life of the mind. Women too could have a relationship with God if only they adopted those traits that were defined as distinctively male. As incomprehensible as this statement might have appeared to the Roman wag or the Jewish peasant, I think that it would have been readily understood by the Greek philosopher, Roman doctor, and Jewish sage.

Synagogues (Tel-Aviv: Maariv, 1977) [Hebrew]; Lea Roth-Gerson, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Synagogues in Eretz-Israel* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1987) [Hebrew]. For expressions of piety in Jewish inscriptions from the Land of Israel, see *CIJ* 1045, 1056, 1161. For Jewish inscriptions from Palestine that record an office or occupation, see *CIJ* 883, 902, 931, 945, 949. Curiously, terms that denote Torah study, commonly found in Jewish inscriptions from the Diaspora, are not to my knowledge attested in Palestinian Jewish inscriptions. See P. W. van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs* (Kampen: Pharos, 1991) 65–67.

⁹⁶Rabbi Shimon b. Lakish: *b. B. Meṣ.* 84a-b; see Daniel Boyarin, "The Great Fat Massacre: Sex, Death, and the Grotesque Body in the Talmud," in Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, ed., *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) 69–100. David: *b. Mo'ed Qaṭ.* 16b.