

RBL 09/2008



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Gender, Sexualität und Macht in der Anthropologie des Richterbuches

Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament 164

Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006. Pp. 390. Paper. €40.00. ISBN 317018556X.

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Renate Jost is a self-proclaimed German Jewish feminist who studies anthropological and sociological implications bearing on First Testament research. Her previous work includes *Frauen, Männer und die Himmelskönigin: Exegetische Studien* (Gütersloh, 1995) and *Freundin in der Fremde: Ruth und Naomi* (Stuttgart, 1992), along with articles giving feminist perspectives on Judg 1:12–15, poverty, Judg 17:1–6, magic and illusion in Exod 22:17, whores and sinners, Samson, and exegetical hermeneutics. She serves as Professor of Theological Research on Women (Frauenforschung) and Feminine Theology in the Augustana-Hochschule in Neuendettelsau.

The present work centers on the power possessed and exerted by woman in relationship to that of men in the book of Judges, including powers over personal sexual relationships, reproduction, productivity, politics, social position, and religion. As she studies historical models, she looks for present possibilities for egalitarian and symmetrical life among men and women through women gaining new power. She sets up the wilderness and wild people over against the system of ruling hierarchy that dominates the urban culture to learn if the egalitarian model is a real possibility or merely utopian.

Jost provides a brief introduction and then divides her work into two major parts: (1) presuppositions for work with Judges texts in view of questions about gender, sexuality, and power; and (2) investigation into selected texts from Judges in regards to questions of gender, sexuality, and power. Jost bends over backwards to ensure she has referenced the major positions and their proponents. She does this so thoroughly that at times the reader must ask which opinion the author adopts and which she rejects.

The presuppositions section has six parts. The first examines the determination of relationships of gender, sexuality, and power. She identifies sovereign authority (Herrschaft) as power established through a basis of legitimation (durch eine Legitimationsgrundlage verfestigte Macht). Such authority is built on charisma, tradition, and rationality and is established through being seated (Setzung) because of age, birth, or governing authorities (Obrigkeit). Sovereign authority has the right in crisis situations to force obedience to law and rulings through violent force (Gewalt). Such violent force may be inflicted directly by a person or more indirectly through a system or structure causing physical and/or psychological damage. Sexuality, in turn, is a complex social and cultural construction in which gender identity, bodily differences, reproductive possibilities, needs, desires, and phantasies are bound together. Such definitions lead to the natural conclusion that gender, power, and sexuality and their relationships to one another must always be defined anew in each cultural context.

The second part of section 1 deals with feminist anthropology where Jost sees both the social relationship and symbolical construct sides of gender. Gender, then, includes the differentiation from class/social stratum, sexual orientation, culture, history and symbolic constructions, and their effects on social fields of activity.

Next Jost turns to wilderness and the wild. The wild people do what is right spontaneously and instinctively to be happy. This sets them off from the noble wild in our culture who require a shrewdly, frankly totalitarian organized system to achieve such happiness. The wilderness refers to an agriculturally unused, forsaken, or desert region (steppe) outside of civilization and so outside all control by those who rule. It represents original chaos, grazing land, the place of danger and death where God must intervene to bring deliverance. Ultimately, wilderness is a place to flee or of exile and a place of revelation. Wilderness can also become simply the place of divine testing and confrontation. Jost chooses to emphasize the positive, utopian aspects of wilderness, to employ it as a metaphor, and to connect it to the meaning of egalitarian.

The section on wilderness and an egalitarian society defines wilderness as the radical antithesis to existing forms of inequality, thus a striving for a situation of social, political, and gender-related equality without necessarily eliminating violence. Judges provides

images of such a society. This society will be without states and without patriarchal relationship of the sexes. Wilderness is a form of societal community life that is not stratified, not organized hierarchically, and in which egalitarian, that is, symmetrical, relationships between the sexes can be conceived of or experienced. Here women have their own areas of power and activity equal to those of men, a balance of power in differing fields of power, or equal access to the central institutions of society.

Anthropology shows, however, that women lose power when society shifts from a prestate society to one with a state hierarchy. Jost surveys the well-known models used to explain Israel's appearance in Palestine. She decides on a long-lasting complex model centered on new settlements in the hill country resulting from a breakdown of the Canaanite culture, not an Israelite destruction of it. The new settlements were relatively quiet, with subsistence farmers structured into a relatively egalitarian society. Jost sees evidence for this in the absence of a hierarchical structure and in the assumption that women have more status when the public and private spheres are not widely separated and religion is relegated to the family, not to the temple. Such family-centered life also is supposed to give women more power, independence, and authority over certain aspects of life, especially the economic side. Women thus gain more prestige and self-esteem. The biblical narratives show in this time frame the participation of women in politics and war and their significance in the religious and symbolic orders.

Turning to the monarchy, Jost sees the texts as later polemic so that one must read against the texts and find that the religious power of women in cult and priestly function is much greater than has been assumed up to now. Still, in the final analysis she admits to an asymmetrical society in favor of the men. Exile and return then brought a brief improvement in the social situation of poor women. This period is comparable to that just before the monarchy, with the growth of utopian concepts of equality. Here she admits that sparse evidence makes it difficult to describe the social and cultural relationships of this period as well as that of the premonarchical period.

Finally, Jost turns to the book of Judges, surveying the history of research in an insightful manner, seeing in the end how far from consensus scholarly study remains and how many stages of development seem to exist in the developmental process leading to the current book. Parts of the book show sovereign authority in line with God's will, while other parts plead for a king. Jost decides that the Judges texts were first put together in the exilic/postexilic period by the Deuteronomists, yet the portrayal of the early history of Israel cannot be pure fiction even though the only tradition from the period of the judges appears in the Song of Deborah. Any reconstruction of the premonarchical period remains hypothetical.

Closing out the first main division of the book, Jost turns to questions of method, hermeneutics, and criteria for the choice of texts. She points to a combination of methods: historical criticism, history of religion, social history, literary studies, and especially feminist anthropology. This creates an “integrative exegesis” showing what the text meant in its culture and its modern relevance. She assumes that some texts come from feminine authors, while some male authors represent female interests. The aim is to study productive, reproductive, sexual, political, and religious power utilized by both men and women. All this is done with sympathy for a wilderness, egalitarian society opposing a stratified monarchy.

The major and concluding part of the volume examines texts from Judges—Judg 5 compared to Judg 4; 11:1–12:7; 13 and 16; and 19—each of which is newly translated in an appendix. Jost finds the Song of Deborah to be the major text that shows women’s possibilities for power. The Song represents a gender asymmetrical text favoring women, dated before 1000 and involving a long history of transmission.. Deborah stands for all the shepherds and farmers outside of the urban areas. Deborah’s power and influence over Barak shows her social power. She exercises religious power as a prophet and as a mother in Israel and military might in delivering Israel from their enemies. Her work is uniquely described without being related to a father or a husband. Mother in Israel also shows her productive and reproductive power.

Jael represents life in wilderness and mountains with productive power as a shepherd. Her tent is a holy place, and she is a religious functionary. Sexual language in the story clearly demonstrates Jael’s sexual power. Thus she exercises social, productive, reproductive, sexual, political, and religious power. The cooperation of Deborah and Jael in a sisterly way out of an egalitarian society stands opposed by Sisera’s mother and her companions, representing an urban, hierarchical society. Thus the Song is a strong defense for the wilderness. Apparently, the Song points to a time without separation of powers between the sexes or of private and public spheres. The Song shows that that type of society could be conceived if not realized. In comparison, Judg 4 proves to be gender symmetrical while built off of Judg 5. Chapter 4 describes Jael’s act as hospitality and female deceit used to humiliate Sisera and praise Barak, while emphasizing the stronger power of institutionalized religion. Deborah, then, is the only person combining all forms of leadership—productive, reproductive, religious, military, judicial, and political. The tradition, even into the Septuagint, tended to strengthen the role of Barak and weaken that of Deborah.

The story of Jephthah’s daughter (11:1–12:7) is quite ambiguous, combining several traditions that when joined create a gender symmetrical text out of the exilic/postexilic period. Here as throughout Jost refers to texts preserving organizational forms of the

premonarchic period but coming out of an exilic situation of the Deuteronomist facing similar organizational and political problems. Jephthah used his position of clan leader to gain power beyond his clan, thus leading toward a monarchy. Anthropologists would describe his position as head of a chiefdom or as a Big Man.

Looking at Jephthah's daughter, Jost sees the multivalence of the text, especially in the question as to whether she was sacrificed in the end. Either way, Jost sees the girl as representing biblical "Girliepower," especially in the religious realm, no matter her fate. The text moves from asymmetrical, favoring Jephthah, to asymmetrical, favoring the daughter. The text serves to criticize monarchy and plea for the wilderness life.

The Samson narratives show the ambivalence of women and the wild man. Jost's thesis is that the Samson narratives deal with a defense of the wilderness, with asymmetrical gender in favor of the women. These narratives provide samples of how tightly the relationship of gender, sexuality, and power is tied to the theological question of the saving God.

The wilderness woman (Judg 13)—Samson's mother—has particular religious power, of which Delilah has none. This power is seen as she meets with the man of God and becomes pregnant by him (a seemingly huge exegetical step taken by many) and displays all the qualities of an ideal Israelite wife. She manifests power in production, reproduction, the social arena, religion, sexuality, and politics. The story eventually calls for strong men and women to help rebuild the right kind of social and political structure for postexilic Israel, a structure coming from the wilderness, not the urban hierarchy.

Judges 16 shows God's ability to work through people related to the urban culture for the interests of the wilderness. Philistines play the determining role in the chapter, controlling what Delilah does. Her decisive power is sexuality. She also exhibits power as an independent woman making business decisions without male advice. She gains wealth by representing urban culture, not the wilderness, but ultimately the structured hierarchy will reduce her power. Samson's dealings with the other women show the power of sexuality and the male fear to surrender oneself completely to a woman. The Samson narratives thus form a plea in defense of the wilderness wild life while calling the reader to a personal decision as to the interpretation of the texts. Women are reminded that deciding for the powerful and against the wilderness means a loss of power for women.

The brutal text of Judg 19 seeks to convince readers that a return back to a "charismatic sovereign authority" without a king is dangerous. The narrative describes social structures that develop as increasingly disadvantageous for the women. Women are the first to lose power on all levels as a society becomes ever more structured. The wilderness

theme is here only indirect. The woman makes her way through the wilderness to her father. The Levite and wife cannot find a place to spend the night in the wilderness. Action turns clearly to the cities. Again sexual power is at the center of the depiction, along with social power. The story shows the power of the woman to break off her relationship with the Levite. The total lack of power experienced by the woman's father leads to a plea for a king. The Levite exercises a bit of power over against the father but then finds himself without any power as he seeks hospitality in a strange city. The men of the city of Gibeah are pictured extremely negatively and call into question the existing legal and cultic laws, all of which are based on the monarchy.

Having studied the selected texts, Jost concludes that all the women but Delilah represent valid role models for women. The texts favoring the wilderness picture a society only slightly changed but with stronger gender symmetry and more possibilities for women to exert influence. To this structure belong power in traditional categories such as production and reproduction as well as in religion, politics, and military. In postexilic times priestly circles led a movement to restore the monarchy and thus reduce the possibilities for women to gain power. The book of Judges thus retrojects its utopian vision back into a period of the judges. This involves an egalitarian society with gender symmetry or asymmetry in favor of women. This brings liberation from foreign rule and opposition to colonization.

Jost has provided a detailed and enthusiastic plea for more power for women based on a quite imaginative reading of Judges, a reading quite distinct from this writer's forthcoming Judges commentary. Putting Jael in a priestly office and refusing to let Jael or Deborah have husbands require exegetical illusion. Seeing the few examples of powerful women in Judges and extrapolating from them and from anthropological study an egalitarian society is quite a feat, in view of the power exercised by Gideon, Abimelech, Jephthah, Ehud, Samson, and others. Judges does show a few strong women, but their narrative role is more often than not to show the weakness of Israelite men that causes the miserable situations rising in the period of the judges. These female exceptions to the patriarchal rule do not represent a period in history when their bravery and leadership provided the rule, not the exception.

Anyone studying early Israelite history will have to deal with this well-written, thought-provoking volume and will profit greatly from its marvelous bibliography.