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Body Counts

The Almighty exists and acts and speaks here in the form of One who is weak and impotent, the eternal as One who is temporal and perishing, the Most High in the deepest humility. The Holy One stands in the place and under the accusation of a sinner with other sinners. The glorious One is covered with shame. The One who lives forever has fallen prey to death. The Creator is subjected to and overcome by the onslaught of that which is not. In short, the Lord is a servant, a slave. And it is not accidental. It could not be otherwise.

—KARL BARTH, *CHURCH DOGMATICS* IV.1.59

Fierce is the dragon and cunning the asp; but women have the malice of both.

—ST. GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS (329–89)¹

Lately we see the rise, not for the first time, of a tendency I call the macho-church—churches led and peopled by men who are frantic about what they consider a “crisis of masculinity” in Christianity. In the macho-church, the character of King David is given a special place; then Jesus is grafted onto David the warrior in order to preserve a masculinity that is rightly associated with David and mistakenly associated with Jesus. This is nothing new.

1. Quoted in Bufe, *Heretic's Handbook*, 125.

Jesus's own disciples mistakenly expected him to become a Davidic warrior figure; and that was why the cross was such a scandal.



The term *masculinity* (and *masculinities*) is going to reoccur in this book. Before we continue, then, we need a shared understanding of the term, and why I use the singular and the plural. I am appropriating the term, along with its complement, *femininity* (and *femininities*), from the academic field of “gender studies.” Understandings of masculinity and femininity differ from time to time and place to place.

If I say, “He is very masculine,” you and I know who *he* is and we share some notion of what “masculine” means. It is a concrete statement about an actual person. When we add the “-ity” suffix to make “masculinity,” we abstract a *general* idea about the meaning of masculine from its concrete instantiations. We emancipate the phenomenon from actual space-time. There is an advantage to this, and a danger.

The advantage is that we can criticize the idea apart from its specific context. The danger is confusing these abstractions with embodied reality. “Poverty,” for example, is a useful notion in discourse about economic conditions, but superimposed on an actual person who is poor in a particular way, it can become a distortion that leads us to treat actual persons as categories like “clients” or “problems” or “resources.”

The objective of studying masculinity and femininity for our purposes is to de-naturalize them. “Naturalization” treats the existing order of things as if it were decreed by nature. We are familiar with the conventional wisdom that “men are *naturally* more aggressive than women.” This appeal to “the natural” attempts to place relations of power beyond critical analysis. “It’s just nature, so there’s nothing we can do about it” implies something akin to natural *law*.

The point of cataloguing various types of masculinity is to make it possible to pull specific kinds of masculinity and specific aspects of various masculinities into critical range. A *natural law*—the Second Law of Thermodynamics, for example—does *not* operate differently in either time or place. However, what is masculine in twenty-first-century Houston is different from what was masculine in, say, third-century rural Persia. “Nature” cannot explain this difference.

Masculinity implies *gender*. The binary of masculine-feminine is constitutive of gender, which is more than *biological* sexual differentiations. Gender, as we will use it here, is a *social* system that divides social activities

between the two biologically normative sexes.² Social gender, with which we are concerned here, and which exists in all known societies without exception, marks the complementary difference between the tools, clothing, practices, spaces, preoccupations, and even language that are typically associated with men and women. Certain medieval European women had a different kind of scythe than their men, for example, with which to do different forms of work, but this *difference* did not automatically confer *hierarchy* or relative value, even though it did function complementarily as a division of labor. Both men and women were doing work essential to their community's subsistence, for which both received recognition and esteem. Gender in the social sense, however, most often *does* combine hierarchy with complementarity, which is where this book will place a special emphasis, because men are overwhelmingly on the top of that hierarchy and women on the bottom. Men use that power, often violently, to maintain the hierarchy across generations.

The tools, clothing, practices, spaces, preoccupations, and language of *men* constitute a *masculine sphere* in a given society. *Masculinity* is where the social and psychological are merged as an *episteme*—a way of knowing that is shared within a culture.³ A masculinity is both an archetype and an attitude.⁴ Men adopt what they feel is the appropriate attitude to live into an archetype. Not every man can live into the prevailing masculine archetypes, so he sometimes does so vicariously and symbolically. Think here

2. This does not mean that there are not exceptions to being a reproductively functional biological male or female—for example, a person who is hermaphroditic, or a male or female who is incapable, for one reason or another, of biological reproduction. It means that the majority of people fall into one biological category, male or female, and that these categories are *recognized* as not just reproductively normative but as the basis for a binary social system that differentiates men and women socially. Sexual dysphoria, which is sometimes called transsexuality, on the other hand, is a psychological diagnosis for people who might be otherwise reproductively “normal.” This is a subject that combines medical diagnostic categories and social (gender) norms. These issues are important and complicated, but outside the scope of this particular discussion.

3. This is a term we will use with some frequency throughout the rest of the book. Its meaning is borrowed from French philosopher Michel Foucault. It does not mean knowledge as a direct reflection of reality—for example, “There is a tree outside my window and I *know* that tree is there”—but a set of shared cultural assumptions that are so frankly accepted that their bases are largely unquestioned, giving them the appearance of the kind of direct knowledge evident in the example of the tree. When we say an *episteme* is a “way of knowing,” we are not validating that way of knowing as either unchanging or universal.

4. We will also use the term *archetype* frequently in this book. This is not the archetype associated with Jungian psychology, but with literature and other forms of storytelling. An archetype, for our purposes, is a recognizable kind of character in recurring story contexts.

about modern American football. Not every American male can be an NFL player, but a man can participate in the *ideal* as a fan, thereby valorizing the archetype. That football culture then leads many men to use football as an analogy for work, life, relationships, politics, war, etc.

Masculine ideals differ among different peoples in different times, and so one particular masculine ideal cannot tell us everything about actual men in every time and place. It does, however, give us an insight into the dominant men in that very particular culture and time. The works of Homer, for example, give us some insight into how an ideal masculinity was constructed for men of the dominant class in Greece in the eighth century BC.

Our set of *socially shared certainties*, or *epistemes*—like those of every epoch and place—structure the world to make it apprehensible. Ways of knowing give us a sense of order and security. Notions like masculinity are enmeshed within a larger worldview, and any disruption of one notion—like masculinity—has the potential to disrupt the entire *episteme*, because the various facets of any *episteme* are interlocking or mutually defined. Disruption of one facet contributes to a sense of insecurity, which can lead to fear, which can lead to anger and reaction or, conversely, to a revised *episteme*, a revision in the set of socially shared certainties.

If disruptions in masculinity can disrupt the rest of an *episteme*, then likewise, any disruption elsewhere in the *episteme* might create a crisis of masculinity. Revolutions are disruptions of the status quo, and they are always characterized to some degree by an *epistemic crisis*—a crisis of *doubt* about socially shared certainties, therefore a crisis characterized by uncertainty and fear. The theological conviction undergirding this entire book is that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the decisive revolution of all time—God’s revolution—which inaugurated a political life of a new sort called the kingdom of heaven. This revolution engendered the *epistemic crisis* that we are still living through, because it puts the *episteme* of “the world” in doubt.

In focusing on the relationship between church, war, masculinity, and the status of women in the church, we have to look at what this new life means for masculinity, particularly as it is inflected by the practice of war, and then at how these constructions of masculinity are inflected (and inflicted) on women. Our understanding of men’s actions taken *against* women will be limited to the extent that our understanding of masculinity is limited.

I have just denied that masculinities are transhistorical, changeless across time. At the risk of sounding contradictory, I must insist that there *is* one transhistorical phenomenon that is exclusively associated with

masculinity, with men, and that is war. Not all war is alike, and it can be shown that differences in the practice of war result in differences in masculinity influenced by war. Yet there are transhistorical constants in the practice of war: violence, hierarchy, compartmentalization, dehumanization, and boundary enforcement. These then translate into transhistorical aspects of masculinity in societies that practice war.



I turn now to the lives of two Jews who are central figures in our biblical narrative: David and Jesus. How is masculinity constructed for David by his biographers, and how different are Jesus's teachings and example from that same construction? The point of this comparison is to understand the implications of Jesus's teachings and life for how members of the church think and conduct ourselves with regard to war and gender. Here I have no choice but to take a basic theological position that is likely to be controversial.

Here is my position.

Jesus's teachings and example were meant for real people, for us, and they were not meant to be foreclosed by pragmatism. Jesus's ethic of self-giving, neighbor-love, enemy-love, and sacrificial service are not anachronisms that apply only to first-century Palestine. Nothing in Jesus's teachings or example suggests that Christians must take up the "responsibilities" of political power, compromise self-giving, turn neighbor-love into clientelism, set aside enemy-love in defense of nation, or eschew sacrificial service in the name of political pragmatism.

Jesus's teachings and example do have *actual* social significance for us, now, and cannot be launched into an extraterrestrial orbit and deferred until we are all conveniently dead.

The Gospels provide us with a way of being that transcends time and place understood as "the way of the cross."

Works and faith are inseparable.

The world is redeemed in Christ, and not by progress, technology, democracy, political revolution, money, education, or any other idol.

These assertions form the basis of my own conviction, as a layman, that the good news of the Gospels is that we have moved beyond violence. Violence and domination characterize a world in rebellion. Yet we can embody the kingdom of heaven as the body of Christ—the peaceable

kingdom—here and now, as testimony to the redemptive lordship of Christ to a broken world.

That is where I start. So now let's look at David.



If masculinity changes with circumstances, then why does David's masculinity have anything to do with Jesus's person, though centuries separate them, and what does David have to do with us today? My answer is, again, that there are elements of masculinity that are transhistorical because there are elements of war that are transhistorical.

Old Testament scholar David J. A. Clines, in chapter 10 of his *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, provides an outline of Davidic masculinity.⁵ Clines's examination of Davidic masculinity will not appear particularly strange to us, because much of what he describes to us about Davidic masculinity is still recognizable today. We live in a warlike society, just as David did, and we also shower military leaders with accolades for their military virtues, real or imagined.

Clines begins with five basic rules for being masculine *in the modern West*.⁶

First, *do not be like a woman*. Second, *be successful*. While the meaning of success has changed, over time, from accomplishments of various kinds to the making of money, it relates in every case to "winning." Be a winner. Third, *be aggressive*. This can be conflated with, and even overlap with, courage, but it also and primarily has something to do with demeanor. Get in some faces. Don't back down. Fourth, *be sexual*. By that Clines means displaying a constant interest in sex that suggests you are always "up" and ready for it. It also generally suggests the objectification of women, understood as a primal male drive. Finally, *be self-reliant*. Real men don't need other people.

With these points of reference, we can readily see them in ourselves. Clines establishes the coordinates for understanding what he calls a "hegemonic masculinity." The noun *hegemony* and the modifier *hegemonic* were used by the Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s. It means the way power is exercised in stable societies prior to violence or the threat of violence. It refers to the general population's precritical acceptance of norms established by the dominant class in society, a class that also controls the signifiers and meanings that constitute knowledge and culture. When most people have accepted the point of view of the dominant class—in

5. Clines, *Interested Parties*, 212–43.

6. *Ibid.*

Gramsci's case, he was referring to the business class—then they have accepted a version of reality that creates conformity without force. *Hegemonic masculinity*, then, is a widely accepted version of masculinity that conforms to the beliefs or the needs of a dominant fraction within a society and that is supportive of the structures of that society.⁷

The story of David was not written simply as an historical chronicle, says Clines, but as the presentation of a hegemonic masculine archetype—an idealized version of how masculinity was actually constructed during, and for some time after, David's life.

The key characteristic of David was that he was a fighter, a military leader. David is described as “a mighty man of valor” (1 Sam 16:14). He fights wars, a lot of wars; David fights Philistines, Amalekites, Moabites, Arameans, Syrians, and Edomites, totaling up a body count of around 140,000 people, killing fourteen by his own hand.⁸

A second character trait of the Davidic man is persuasive speech. He is described as a man who is skillful at direct persuasion, “intelligent of speech” (1 Sam 16:18). David uses words skillfully as instruments of control.

David is frequently called beautiful. Physical beauty, in David's case, and in the case of several other Hebrew luminaries, was not understood as a lucky accident, but as a sign of God's favor, and therefore worthy of praise.

David bonds with men. David does not have women friends. He has wives and concubines who are essentially invisible, except when they figure into particular episodes in which he has moral failures—like rape and conspiracy to murder (2 Sam 11). Some of his friendships are genuinely affective and some are coldly instrumental, but when it comes to the kind of mutual recognition we today assume between friends or colleagues, David did not get friendly or collegial with women.

Reading about David and Jonathan today, we might be tempted to call the descriptions of their love homoerotic, but it was unlikely that this is what the author(s) meant in their own time. Real men loved real men, and they *had sex* with women. When David describes his friendship with Jonathan, he says it is better than anything a man can experience with a woman.⁹ Clines describes David as “a womanless man.” Obviously, David *had* women, in the sense of owning them.

7. Tosh, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” 41–59.

8. Clines, *Interested Parties*, 215.

9. *Ibid.*, 223.

“But,” writes Clines, “it is a striking feature of the David story that the males are so casual about women, and that women are so marginal to the lives of the protagonists.”¹⁰

David, in fact, is proud to have kept himself “clean” of women, meaning presumably from the context that he is not influenced in his decisions by them. He has lapses due to his lust for Bathsheba. By today’s standards, he certainly would be accused of raping Bathsheba, even if his male contemporaries would have understood the act as one of royal prerogative. And he is rebuked by Nathan, the prophetic challenger to David’s exercise of power, when David sends Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, to his certain death in order to have Bathsheba for his own.

The reason neither David nor his male contemporaries ever felt compelled to define their masculinity *against* women, as Clines does in his account of modern masculinity, and the reason there would be no modern squeamishness about calling a man beautiful, was precisely that men’s and women’s gendered realms were so thoroughly separate. Men’s absolute domination of and separation from women was unquestioned. Women were not subjects in the sense of having any real agency, unless they were “up to no good” as social disruptors, and so there was no threat of a man being confused with a woman. Men’s sphere did not overlap with women’s, and men and women were certainly not structurally competitive with one another, as they are today, in an economy of monetized scarcity.¹¹

Conflict was restricted to the sphere of men. When Amnon rapes Tamar, it is Absalom, her brother, who is the offended one. After Tamar leaves the stage in shame, we never hear from her again, and conflict between David and Absalom carries the story forward when Absalom gets his vengeance by killing Amnon (2 Sam 13:23–29).

Clines follows his comparison of modern and Davidic masculinities with an interesting account of modern male scholarship on the subject of David. There has been a good deal of censorship and misrepresentation of aspects of Davidic masculinity that runs counter to modern sensibilities. A David who is beautiful is rewritten as having superior moral quality, and the leader of the people who would produce the Prince of Peace has his

10. *Ibid.*, 225.

11. Monetized scarcity will be a recurrent point in the book. Briefly, this term refers to the transformation of society from subsistence (very local production and consumption) and partial subsistence—in which people had little to no need for money—to monetization, with production and consumption being separated by more space and greater specialization. The latter creates an ever more general dependence on money for survival, whereupon the finite amount of money, combined with greater accumulation by some against others, sets up competition between people for disbursements of this scarce medium (money).

embarrassing body count summarized as “being a bold leader.”¹² It is as if modern male scholars (and modern males) want to find ways to approve of David to underwrite their own versions of masculinity. In the hands of many modern male scholars, Clines shows, the complex and sanguinary story of David as understood by early Hebrews has been sanitized and reworked.¹³

This reworking was on the agenda of a movement called “muscular Christianity” that deployed the sanitized David as its central icon.¹⁴ Muscular Christianity was conceived in the mid-nineteenth century by Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, who had become alarmed, during a period of gender destabilization, that the Church of England was threatened with “effeminacy.”¹⁵ The image of Jesus was too gentle, and the overrepresentation of women in the sanctuaries was having a “feminizing effect” on the clergy and the music, thus “endangering” the men.¹⁶

But when we look at Jesus in the Gospels, he radically supplants the form of David’s kingship. He refuses to fight and tells his followers to “turn the other cheek” when they are assaulted. He never kills anyone. In his greatest vexation he turns over tables and stampedes livestock. His speeches are

12. Clines, *Interested Parties*, 231–33.

13. Clines summarizes his conclusions about why this sanitization takes place: “What I should like to suggest is that what male scholars (most who have written on the David story are males, not surprisingly) are responding to in the character of David is his masculinity, of which they themselves approve or to which they themselves are attracted. They view his masculinity through the lens of their own, of course, but there is enough commonality for them to identify themselves and their own desire with David. This is a gender-based hero-worship. They can, and must, excuse his faults and crimes because he is at bottom a man after their own heart—which is to say, their own image of masculinity” (*ibid.*, 236).

14. Putney, “Muscular Christianity.”

15. Kingsley was also a proponent of social Darwinist racial theories, which he merged with his biblical interpretation into an amalgam he called “natural theology”: “Physical science is proving more and more the immense importance of Race; the importance of hereditary powers, hereditary organs, hereditary habits, in all organised beings, from the lowest plant to the highest animal. She is proving more and more the omnipresent action of the differences between races; how the more favoured race (she cannot avoid using the epithet) exterminates the less favoured, or at least expels it, and forces it, under penalty of death, to adapt itself to new circumstances; and, in a word, that competition between every race and every individual of that race, and reward according to deserts, is (as far as we can see) an universal law of living things. And she says—for the facts of history prove it—that as it is among the races of plants and animals, so it has been unto this day among the races of men” (“The Natural Theology of the Future,” paper read at Sion College, 1871).

16. One young man in the thrall of this movement’s present-day manifestation wrote me via email recently that “Jesus was a thirty-something male who was ripped from hard work.” “Ripped,” of course, is a body-building term, used in the context of our discussion to portray Jesus as the opposite of “effeminate.”

few, short, and counterintuitive, addressed not to the important men of the world but to the lowest of the low; and when he converses with influential men, he speaks to them obliquely using parables and verbal traps. He makes multiple and meaningful contacts with women, befriending them, violating table protocol and purity codes with them, protecting them from legal punishment, making them messengers of new life, and, of course, asking that question at Simon the Pharisee's table: "Do you see this woman?" Jesus does not have sexual congress with anyone, and he says scandalous things about divorce as well as subversive things about the traditional patriarchal family (Matt 19:1-12; Matt 10:35-39). He teaches love, care, and forgiveness, to the chagrin of his disciples; and he lives as a beggar when he conducts his mission. He washes Peter's feet, rebukes the use of the sword, and submits to his own execution. He does not appear to "win" until God intervenes after his death, not to wreak vengeance on his killers but to resurrect him.

All constructions of masculinity forged in war, yesterday and today, require an enemy. To be a *real man* one must be measured *against* an enemy, whether that enemy is another tribe, "race," or nation, a persecutor, or the "opposite" sex. David gained esteem by fighting and killing more and more enemies. Jesus neutralized the category with the command to forgive and forgive again.

"But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44).

The fact that his own disciples continually expect him to unleash a Davidic form of power (Luke 9:46-48), a nationalistic revival (John 6:15; Acts 1:6), and the fact that this form of power was central to Jesus's own temptations by the evil one (Mark 1:12-13; Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13), only serve to highlight how Jesus, in following David, supplants David, and how this rejection of Davidic power—along with David's martial masculinity—is absolutely central to the Gospel stories. David figures heavily into the expectations that accompany Jesus, expectations that serve to make Jesus's actual example all the more startling.

It is unsurprising that men, even men in the church, have continually tried to overthrow Jesus the peacemaker and friend of women. It is also unsurprising that the vehicle for that attempted overthrow has so frequently been war. During one episode of war, the church marked women as "collateral damage" in a particularly shocking and shameful way: witch killing.