

BOOK REVIEW

Wilson, Brittany E., *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke–Acts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). xv + 341 pp. Hbk. USD74.00.

New Testament scholars have long observed the unique way that Luke–Acts gives attention to female characters. But few have considered the notable manner in which Luke portrays masculinity. Brittany Wilson (Duke University) addresses this gap in her doctoral dissertation, recently published as *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke–Acts*.

Like many studies of its kind, Wilson begins by briefly surveying the relevant hermeneutical landscape. She notes that in the 1970s–1980s, it was trendy to contend that Luke was ‘pro-woman’, which soon changed to ‘anti-woman’ in the 1990s to the present. As it turns out, in Wilson’s assessment, ‘Luke’s female characters end up looking less marginalized than feminist interpretations often contend and his male characters end up looking less manly than traditional interpretations imply’ (p. 3). More importantly, ‘both interpretive traditions overlook how Luke’s male characters “measure up,” so to speak, with respect to ancient masculine norms, or what it takes to “be a man” in the Greco-Roman world’ (p. 2).

Wilson locates this gap of research within the larger concerns of Luke’s writings. ‘God’s power’, she argues, ‘has long been recognized as a central theme in Luke–Acts, and a study on the gendered ramifications of this power is overdue’ (p. 3). And just how is this power manifest? It is through ‘God’s apocalypse—or revelatory action in Jesus’, which ‘ultimately transforms prevalent ways of viewing the world, including conceptions of masculinity’ (p. 4). Indeed, Wilson’s approach is christocentric, not to mention that it is also well balanced in its portrayal of Luke. ‘Luke is not simply a perpetrator of elite or imperial values, as many scholars claim’, she observes, ‘for Luke’s interest in the good news takes precedence over making that good news

palatable to those who uphold elite masculine norms. Instead, for Luke, God's paradoxical act of self-emptying power sets the standard for how men are to act in the world' (p. 4). In this theological manner, Wilson is able to cut through decades of intense feminist interpretations that have tried to wield Luke as being either 'against' or 'for' women.

In the larger picture of gender studies, one might place Wilson's work as part of a new 'fourth wave' of feminism that focuses more on maleness than those in the earlier versions of twentieth-century feminism (see p. 15). The demand for equal rights and criticisms of patriarchy does not characterize this phase as much as positively transforming masculinity, grappling with transgenderism and social construction and encouraging men to use practically their power to empower women. Many twenty-first century projects, both ideologically and socially oriented, have revealed this shift as can be seen in such websites as heforshe.com or in the intentional pursuit (not mere acceptance) of women CEOs in corporate America. As such, Wilson's study may strike readers as refreshingly balanced, especially when compared with the feminist exegetes she continually corrects.

The book itself unfolds in a series of four major case studies that frame how Luke addresses masculinity: Zechariah (who loses his power to speak), the Ethiopian eunuch (who loses his ability to procreate, penetrate, father, etc.), Paul (who loses his power to see) and, finally, Jesus (who loses all power in the severest of bodily invasions, leading to death). At first sight, these may seem like an odd selection—until one realizes that all four men have lost their manliness according to worldly standards, and yet are portrayed as being key to God's kingdom and instruments of God's power and grace.

The first chapter, 'Masculinity in Luke Acts', unravels some of the complex theoretical problems associated with gender-related discourse. This chapter covers Foucault's notoriously sophisticated contributions from his three-volume *History of Sexuality* (the last two of which address Greco-Roman concepts). Two pertinent conclusions from his work are (1) that sexuality and power go hand in hand and (2) that sexuality itself is culturally constructed and therefore has a history. Wilson then moves to Judith Butler's work, furthering the discussion about 'gender' and versus 'sexuality' and giving attention to how one's gender is more or less an effect of bodily rehearsals. Finally, after provisionally defining 'masculinity', Wilson outlines Luke's literary context for her study.

As cogent as this section is, I was still left a bit uncertain with regard to the fluidity of sexuality (if it would even be distinguished from gender) in Wilson's view. Her framework might be adequately described as 'post-essentialist' (she describes it as 'pragmatic-constructionist'; p. 22). 'I do not deny that physicality plays an influential role nor that some constants...appear to persist' (p. 22), she writes, but that is generally all that is said about the topic, and no identifiable role of such 'constants' come into discussion.

If Wilson's theory on gender is essentially a subset of 'social-constructionism', then it will ultimately be necessary to address precisely these kinds of obstacles—what constitutes and qualifies as 'pragmatic', and what 'influential role' traditionally-identified 'constants' play—if this theory is to succeed in the long run. Works like Kenneth Gergen's seminal *Realities and Relationships* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) frame the larger contours of the social constructionist theory in which Wilson's approach (consciously or unconsciously) takes part, and so many of its theses (and shortcomings) naturally apply to Wilson's work. For instance, Gergen says, 'Required for social transformation are new visions and vocabularies, new visions of possibility, and practices that in their very realization begin to chart an alternative course' (p. 60). This is precisely similar to what Wilson's dissertation attempts. Elsewhere, Gergen says that 'Constructionist arguments generally militate against fixed and final formulations, even those of their own making' (p. 69). Again, this is true with respect to Wilson's 'pragmatic' approach. Frankly, however, the details involved in this theoretical area do not greatly affect her study, but since I believe her work is a success in changing the conversation in a more meaningful direction, eventually the inner workings of social constructionism must come to the fore.

The second chapter, 'Masculinity in the Greco-Roman World', digs deep into primary sources of first-century literature to uncover what exactly it meant to be 'man'. She concludes, 'With these polarities of dominant/subordinate, active/passive, and self-controlled/excessive, the underlying assumption is that "man" is both the social superior and the unspoken norm...' (pp. 40-41). This is nothing new for those familiar with Greco-Roman culture. What might strike readers as more interesting is how 'unmanliness' was projected on anyone 'at the bottom of the social hierarchy, as well as those outside the Roman Empire' (p. 41). Additionally, 'Men who led luxurious, self-indulgent

lifestyles by building ornate houses, wearing expensive finery, hosting elaborate banquets, or flaunting large retinues of slaves often had their masculinity called into question' (p. 43).

Along the way, Wilson takes note of some interesting etymological connections (e.g. between *virtus* and *vir*, and between ἀνδρεία and ἀνήρ). She also contrasts Luke's portrayal of Jesus with First Testament portrayals of Moses, David and Saul—persons who received attention for their fine physical features (see p. 198). The Roman obsession with the male sexual organ and the demonstration of power through sexual intercourse, the rather negative public perception on circumcision, the topic of fatherhood and the interconnections made with powers exhibited in the military sphere are all addressed clearly and concisely.

Chapter 3, 'Preparing the Way', carefully examines the story of Zechariah and his loss of speech. 'Speech equaled power', Wilson notes, 'and stories that recount men losing their voices due to an external source correspondingly reflect the emasculating nature of that loss... Luke suggestively lingers on the loss of a man's voice and fills that silence with the faithful speech of two women' (pp. 89-90).

Chapter 4, 'Promulgating the Gospel', provides an illuminating exposition of the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. Readers will gain more sensitivity to the awkwardness of the whole situation, and thereby appreciate the power of the story—the issues of eunuchs and gender, the question about baptism and the matter of conversion. 'Because he is a eunuch, the eunuch is neither "here nor there"; he is neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, elite nor nonelite' (p. 136). How incredible, then, that 'Luke presents the Ethiopian eunuch as a model convert whose gender liminality in many ways exemplifies Jesus' own embodiment of paradoxical power' (p. 115).

Although it is not directly addressed, readers may find potential theological and ethical import for contemporary transgender/transsexual debates in revisiting this popular Lukan narrative. Those who sexually 'do not fit in'—outcasts and/or the socially awkward—are apparently ripe candidates for the good news of Jesus. When the eunuch asks what is keeping him from being baptized, the Christian in this situation does not capitulate to a phobia and responds, 'well, everything! You're weird and don't fit! The church doesn't want people like you,' which might very well have been a tempting inner response by some Christians held captive to that first-century (or, perhaps twenty-first century)

environment. Instead, the gospel vindicates its power by taking root in perhaps a most unexpected place.

In a way, then, the story of the eunuch challenges a post-modern assumption that no one story or framework of interpretation (or ‘metanarrative’) can possibly serve all people. ‘No metanarrative, it appears, is large enough and open enough to include the experiences and realities of all people’ (Walsh and Middleton, ‘Apologetics in a Post-Modern World’ [1995]: 139). The Christian story—the gospel—largely claims to do precisely that, and the Ethiopian eunuch, one of the very first converts to Christianity, is an evidence.

Chapter 5, ‘An Out of Control Convert’, reviews Paul’s Damascus Road moment through the eyes of first-century masculinity. Her brief discussion of ‘ocularcentrism’ and power through ‘the gaze’ is particularly fascinating. Although it is probably not intended, many readers will draw connections beyond Wilson’s discussion of phenomena and ideas like the Eye of Sauron (in the *Lord of the Rings*), the modern pornography industry, the NSA and the surveillance state and a whole host of other contemporary concerns that center on sight and power. In any case, Wilson argues that, ‘by blinding Paul, Luke disassociates Paul from elite understandings of what it takes to “be a man”’ (p. 171). More critically, ‘By losing his seeing power, Paul is able to “see” God’s power’ (p. 189).

The final case study in Chapter 6, ‘A Crucified Lord’, examines the de-masculinizing shame related to Jesus’ trial and crucifixion; ‘Jesus’ beating and blindfolding in particular mark him as unmanly’ (p. 229). The concluding chapter provides a sweeping overview of all the ground covered. Among other things, Wilson reiterates that ‘masculinity and power were virtually synonymous in the ancient world’ (p. 245), and that Luke refigures ‘elite norms to serve his larger theological purposes: above all, his understanding of God’s power’ (p. 247).

Unmanly Men is first-rate New Testament scholarship; it is compellingly argued and saturated with primary sources, and it is an original contribution. Best of all, the book, considering that it derives from a dissertation, is remarkably readable.

At some points, however, I did feel that Wilson’s thesis is being pushed a bit too far. For instance, in speaking of Jesus’ crucifixion, we read that ‘Phallic-like objects penetrate his flesh, thus mirroring the symbolic penetration of his bodily boundaries throughout the passion narrative’ (p. 234). Wilson could very well be on to something here, but

I do wonder about the limitations of such symbolisms. Elsewhere, Wilson raises concern about how Luke's writings transfer power from men to God; 'such divine power plays are troubling' (p. 254), because they depict God as (in a Greco-Roman manner) masculine. But, in a broader theological framework, is not power and its exercise of it a function of humanity in general—male and female, as God's own images, given the command of God to subdue the earth (Genesis 1–2)—to provide but one counter-point? Power may be definitional to masculinity in a first-century Greco-Roman context; however, properly understood, it is also a permanent attribute of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and of Jesus, υἱοῦ θεοῦ ἐν δυνάμει (the Son of God with power; Rom. 1:4). Much more could be said, but perhaps this is a case of when focused exegetical study could be balanced by a modest dose of biblical theology.

Whatever the case, these are but quibbles and, as such, should not cast a shadow on the powerful finds and eye-opening realities that Wilson unearths. *Unmanly Men* will likely change the conversation about gender in Luke's writings for many decades to come—and for the better.

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