

THEOLOGISCHE REVUE

126. Jahrgang
– Oktober 2025 –

Hylan, Susan E.: *Gender Mobility*. 7 Ideas about Gender in the New Testament Period. Oxford: OUP 2025. 192 S., kt. £ 22,99 ISBN: 9780197797334

Susan E. Hylan, who writes prolifically on women in the New Testament and their Roman historical context, efficiently argues in seven chap.s that gender in antiquity is determined not simply by biology or performance but also by social status, that it changes over time, is multifaceted rather than binary, involves power and economics, concerns emotional attachments (e. g., parent and child, lovers), is impacted by age, ability, appearance, and other personal attributes, and allows for mobility. The seven “ideas” comprising the vol. are: women were complex, men were complex, men and women were not opposites, gender was not fixed, gender is imbricated in social status, gender was not binary, and gender mobility. Each chap. offers textual and inscriptional source material, and each ends with brief remarks about how knowing the data might help New Testament readers better understand comments about women and men, the enslaved, eunuchs, beaten and crucified male bodies.

Consistently the vol. destabilizes the imposition of present-day views onto antiquity as well as stereotypes readers import when engaging the period. Hylan begins by noting, *inter alia*, that men often had both male and female sexual partners, that criticism of male-male sex largely targeted those being penetrated, and that the ancients had no notion of “sexual orientation” in the modern sense. For the ancients, masculinity was not an attribute of anatomy but something that required cultivation; to act shamefully put one’s status as a man at risk. Nor was gender regarded as fixed at birth. It was, however, structured to create and preserve class distinctions.

Demonstrating the complexity of women’s roles, Hylan shows that authors who commended women who remained indoors also described, without disdain, women’s participation in public activities. Divorce, Hylan notes, was common for elite women; on the other hand, it was also common for a freed woman to marry the man who had owned her. Hylan proposes that women likely owned about one-third of all property in the empire and provides evidence for women serving as civic and religious leaders as well as managing households and businesses.

Rejecting earlier cultural-anthropological New Testament studies that claimed women accrued honor only through purity and parturition, Hylan shows how women were often valorized as “manly” especially in the display of the “manly” philosophical mode of self-control. Also arguing against these earlier works, she demonstrates that divisions of public and private were less spatially determined than determined by focus: public issues concern matters of the state (*res publica*) while private matters concerned personal and household affairs including production and commerce. In these two arenas, the women and men overlapped in their economic roles.

Also helpful is her rejection of the construction of gender as a binary, with freeborn men at the top and everyone below as “unmen.” Disaggregating the category of unmen into status-based roles — freeborn women, freed men and women, enslaved men and women — she demonstrates the limitations for each category on marriage, inheritance, sexual subjectivity and expression, and so shows how status complicates gender. Hylen also notes how enslaved males were not “men” as Romans understood the category. Whether these enslaved males understood themselves as “men” as opposed to pieces of property remains undiscussed, but given that, as Hylen suggests, manumission was the largest type of ancient gender mobility, they may well have.

Concerning the complexity of what determined a man, Hylen turns to Valerius Maximus’s *Memorable Sayings and Doings*, written ca. 30 CE and so contemporary with Jesus. The anecdotes focus on how manliness involves self-control and the ability to show mercy, achievement in philosophy, the avoidance of luxury and lust, and valuing the common good over personal fortune; it can also be manifested in dying bravely in loyalty to one’s country. Because women could, and did, display such characteristics, they too could be considered “manly.” Hylen suggests that this material can help readers better understand the depictions of the beating, stoning, and crucifixion of, respectively, Paul, Stephen, and Jesus. Readers might also consider the tradition of the noble death found in both 2 Maccabees 7 and 4 Maccabees 7–14, texts not included in Hylen’s focus on Roman sources.

Continuing to argue against the construction of a gender binary, Hylen adduces eunuchs, intersexed individuals, *cinaedi* (men penetrated by other men), and *molles mares* (penetrated men understood by some to be females with male genitalia). For eunuchs, Hylen notes the different performances and expectations connected to enslaved, freed, freeborn, and *galli* (eunuchized priests of Cybele, the Anatolian mother goddess whose cult became prominent, and notorious, in Rome). Since some eunuchs were also honored, the historical data help to understand both Jesus’s commendation of men who eunuchize themselves (Matthew) and the Ethiopian official described as a eunuch (Acts 8). Building on the work of Bernadette Brooten, Hylen also discussed *tribades*, women who were understood to penetrate other women (the ancient understanding was that surely lesbians must be mimicking men and hence some sort of penetration was required in the sexual act). Finally, she also notes accounts demonstrating that gender was not considered fixed at birth, in part indicated by the appearance, or lack thereof, of expected secondary sexual characteristics.

Missing from this brief study, but possible discussion topics for readers, are the role of children and the disabled in the assignment of, and training for, expected gendered behavior; how Jewish sources — also relevant to understanding the New Testament — saw gender (including the six or more genders of the Talmud, which are less related to status than they are to anatomy), and speculation as to how less-empowered or dis-empowered people, such as the enslaved, understood their own performances of masculinity and femininity.

Against the increasingly popular view of the “tradwife” whose role is to maintain the home, bear and raise children, cook and clean and otherwise provide support for her husband, reconsideration of the context of the New Testament and so of the material contained in it can help complexify gender roles today. Ancient Rome was by no means egalitarian: women could and did take up arms, but they did not serve in the army. On the other hand, women could reign, as they did in Judea (e. g., Queen Salome Alexandra, 76–67 BCE) and Adiabene (Queen Helena, 50–56 CE); they served as patrons and synagogue rulers. Hylen demonstrates that women — Roman, Jewish, and

among them the followers of Jesus -- had access to their own funds, owned property, had independence, held leadership roles, and served in patronage capacities. Legal guardianship (*ad manus*) did not prevent them from working the system. While it was conventional to honor women as good wives and as good mothers, as shown in epitaphs, the lives of women in antiquity were richer, more complex, and complicated.

Über die Autorin:

Amy-Jill Levine, Dr., Rabbi Stanley M. Kessler Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at the Hartford International University for Religion and Peace (amy-jill.levine@vanderbilt.edu)