Dictionary of Gender in the Torah

The following entries on selected topics encapsulate the revising editor’s assumptions and conclusions. (Entries for Hebrew terms are relatively technical.) Space permits neither the development of arguments in light of competing views nor full citation of sources. Nonetheless, we hope that this Dictionary orients the reader by explaining the import of, and the reasons for, renderings in the present translation. For convenience, many entries speak in terms of a word’s “social-gender sense,” i.e., when that word is used as a label to refer to someone, are women are in view (or not)?

## *’adam*

The grammatically masculine noun *’adam* (roughly: “earthling”) is normally a collective common-gender noun. It is regularly employed when considerations aside from gender are germane, signaling to the audience *not* to ascribe a social gender (e.g., Lev. 1:2). Outside of the thirty instances of *’adam* in Genesis 2–3 and two references elsewhere to that first *’adam* (1 Chron. 1:1, Job 31:33)—that is, the other 530 occurrences of *’adam*—none refers to a particular individual. Rather, *’adam* has an indefinite referent (i.e., it is unidentified or generic: “humankind, a human being, a person”), which means that the corresponding language is masculine only for the sake of grammatical concord, implying nothing about the referent’s gender.

The presence or absence of an article (*’adam* versus *ha-’adam*) is ambiguous—the reference may or may not be to someone specific.

That a certain male character has the name Adam does not contradict the gender-inclusive nature of the common noun. Rather, the name Adam is symbolic, like the names Cain, Abel, and many other biblical names.

The meaning of *’adam* in Eden (in particular, in Gen. 2:7–3:30) warrants particular attention because of the unique situation there. The Torah’s composer(s) would reasonably have expected its original audience to construe a story about the first human being in terms of their existing views of lineage: individuals cannot be envisioned apart from a patrilineage that situates them in the social structure (*see* Genealogy). Thus the original audience would have reliably read the story of *’adam* in Eden as an etiology not of human biology but rather of lineage—that is, of society. And as the progenitor of the species and originator of all patrilineages, this particular *’adam* would have been conceived most readily as male.

Hence the present translation understands *’adam* in Gen. 2:7–3:30 as having a special sense in context: “the first human being (whom it goes without saying was a male).” Such a special sense explains several features of the story that would otherwise be anomalous: how *ha-’adam* refers to a particular individual in the presence of another individual (2:25, 3:12, 20); why Adam is never formally named; and why he continues to be called *ha-’adam* (3:20) even after he is referred to by name (3:17).

## *’ish*

In order to understand gender in ancient Israel, we must first properly understand the terms that the Bible uses to label persons. Nowhere is this more important than with respect to the noun *’ish*, which in the Torah refers to persons 552 times (including its effective plural, *’anashim*).

The present translation takes the default meaning of *’ish* to be “a participant whose involvement defines the depicted situation.” That is, this noun signals to an audience that its referent is consequential for grasping the depicted situation. It is the preferred label when the speaker (or writer) wishes to frame a situation so that the audience can grasp it quickly (e.g., Gen. 39:14; 42:30; Exod. 21:12), or to re-situate a given participant of interest (e.g., Gen. 30:43), including as a point of reference (e.g., Gen. 24:61; Exod. 2:21), or to characterize their qualities (e.g., Gen. 6:4, 9) or emotional state (e.g., Gen. 20:8; 34:7). (In contrast, *’ish* is not used as a label when the depicted situation is already established, the participants are construed as given, and the speaker’s attention is oriented toward the depicted action.) In other words, *’ish* is employed to efficiently manage the discourse. *This role is its meaning*—far more than its informational content, which is largely incidental.

As many lexicographers have recognized, in the Hebrew Bible *’ish* is usually not used to identify its referent as a man (adult male) per se. The exceptions are those cases where this noun is counterposed with a term that specifically denotes women or children. (When gender is at issue and meanwhile the referent’s participation in a depicted situation is not at issue, other “male” nouns are preferred to *’ish*.) As with most personal nouns that have a feminine counterpart, if *’ish* is used to refer to a category of persons, and not counterposed with a female term, then the referent’s gender is not specified; thus women may well be in view—and in several cases clearly are.

In order to convey the aforementioned default meaning, in the present translation *’ish* is variously rendered as the context warrants. In legal, procedural, contractual, or conflictual situations, a rendering such as “(any) party,” “participant,” or “those involved” usually yields the most idiomatic translation. In the context of a leadership selection, “candidate” or “contestant” can be more fitting.

Regarding the classic rendering of *’ish* as “man,” it is employed either when, in context, this English noun mainly evokes its classic meaning, which (like *’ish* in Ancient Hebrew) is “a participant whose involvement defines the depicted situation,” or when *’ish* is used to elaborate upon someone’s character (e.g., “a man of the outdoors,” Gen. 25:27), which is likewise a classic discourse function of “man.” As is well known, however, in recent decades, “man” is increasingly construed as mainly indicating its referent’s manly gender (i.e., as a matter of lexical meaning). This shift in meaning now often makes “man” unsuitable as a rendering for biblical *’ish*, which did not become lexically gendered to the same degree until after the Bible’s composition.

*See also* Agent.

## *‘am* (“people” and more)

The grammatically masculine collective noun *‘am* has a wide semantic range. Its primary meaning in Semitic languages appears to have been “kin.” In the Torah it appears once—and only implicitly—in the restricted sense “paternal kin” (Gen. 19:38). More often, the term refers to a wider circle of kin or clan relations (particularly those no longer living; *see* Predecessors)—and by extension, to one’s retinue not necessarily related by blood (e.g., Gen. 32:8), or to a local council of householders (*‘am ha-’aretz,* e.g., Gen. 23:12), to members of the militia (e.g., Num. 31:32), or to an ethnic populace (e.g., Exod. 36:6, Deut. 31:12). In other words, a social-gender sense was neither inherent nor in practice fixed.

Thus, in each instance the social-gender sense of *‘am* must be gleaned from the context. This is often not easy to do. The gender sense can change from one verse to another in the same passage (e.g., Exod. 14:5–6). Further, contextual clues as to gender are often vague if not lacking.

## *‘edah* (“community” and more)

Grammatically, the noun *‘edah* is a feminine collective; however, its verbs and possessive pronouns are usually inflected in the masculine plural (e.g., Num. 1:2). It is a key term in the book of Numbers, being intensively used there (83 out of its 110 occurrences in the Torah).

After its first revision (1967), the njps *Torah* generally rendered *‘edah* as “community.” The term often denotes the entire nation (men, women, and and children), but sometimes its immediate scope is instead a subgroup that stands for the whole community—and is best considered to consist of men, such as the adult fighting force (as in Num. 1:2) or the leadership. By metonymy, the subgroup is labeled in terms of the larger group that it is representing, as it acts on behalf of the whole community (as in Exod. 12:3; Lev. 24:14–16; Num. 1:16, 8:9).

In such cases, the social-gender sense of *‘edah* is more restricted than what the (gender-inclusive) noun “community” normally suggests in English. Thus the metonym can be misconstrued due to a linguistic mismatch: contemporary English does not employ “the whole community” (or the like) as a conventional metonym. In order to avoid misleading the reader when the context suggests a gender-restricted sense, a more precise rendering is warranted, such as “the community leadership.”

## Agent

The conventions of agency in ancient Israel are vital to understanding the gender implications of the personal nouns *’ish* (*see entry*) and *mal’akh* (*see* Messenger). In the ancient Near East, the dispatching of agents such as couriers was an ordinary occurrence in all aspects of society: commerce, diplomacy, family relations, the military, and more. Agency was the main means of communicating over a distance, and it was often carried out by professionals.

With respect to the mission, the principal (or sender, in the case of a messenger) and the agent were conventionally treated as practically identical. Thus the speech of biblical messengers and their senders often are portrayed as interchangeable (e.g., Gen. 22:11–12). Similarly, an agent’s action is sometimes attributed to the principal (e.g., Gen. 46:29), or an agent is sometimes labeled by the principal’s name or epithet (e.g., Gen. 19:14) to underscore that the agent is acting or speaking on the principal’s behalf.

The role of agent per se was not gender marked. In Mesopotamia, not only men but also women served in those capacities, both as professionals and as part of other roles such as a servant. (The evidence for women is attested rarely yet consistently across the region and over more than a thousand years—throughout the biblical period.) It appears that men tended to send male agents, while women tended to send female agents, but this appearance of gender differentiation may be due to limitations of the extant evidence. Such gender differentiation, if it existed, did not extend to the recipient; in carrying out their assigned tasks, female messengers regularly confronted men.

Presumably the Torah text’s original audience would have been familiar with female agents (cf. 2 Sam. 17:17; Prov. 9:2–3; Isa. 40:9; *see* Messenger). Therefore nonspecific singular references to an agent, as well as specific plural references, may well have women in view.

When an agency situation is already apparent, the Bible often labels the agent with the noun *’ish*. When a participant is labeled as *’ish* in an agency situation, such usage can readily cast that referent in the role of agent—which is inherently a situation-defining position, and which thus accords with this noun’s default meaning (*see entry*). Consequently, the present translation sometimes uses the word “agent” where njps and others have typically read “man.” This nuance of *’ish* would have significantly affected the ancient audience’s interpretation of several passages in Genesis, such as 18:2 and 32:25, as noted in the footnotes to those passages.

## *Ben* (pl. *banim*) “son”

It is a commonplace that the grammatically masculine relational noun *ben* means “son” (or “son of”) in the Bible. Yet when it is employed to make a nonspecific reference, *ben* is not sufficient to indicate maleness. Rather, it is unmarked for gender; it refers more generally to offspring, taking its social-gender sense from the context (cf. Jer. 20:15)—like kinship terms in general. Where lineage is at stake, *ben* can connote a male given the society’s patrilineal norm (e.g., Gen. 17:16). Yet in other cases, the circumstances argue for a gender-inclusive sense (e.g., Exod. 10:2, 32:27–29).

## Dependents — *See ṭaph*

## Elders (*zeqenim*)

As used in the Torah, the plural noun *zeqenim* almost always refers to a body of peers that has certain functions; that is, it is a social status term, only loosely related to age. (The exception is Gen. 18:11, where it refers to old age, as does the singular form in some Genesis passages.) The Bible does not specify how one became an “elder.”

The Bible mentions different yet overlapping types of elders. Variously they were the senior staff members of a *household* (Gen. 24:2, 50:7); or leading members of the more prominent lineages, who represented their community on a *national* level (e.g., Exod. 3:16, 18:12; Lev. 4:15; Num. 11:16; Deut. 29:9); or the *local* village or town leaders who had a number of overlapping functions—including adjudicating conflicts, serving as notarizing witnesses of transactions and agreements, and arranging cooperative projects for the common good. Even locally the referent of “elders” seems fluid: local householders, the leaders of a lineage, or the leaders of a locale—groups that usually were overlapping and in some cases identical. In practice, then, *zeqenim* means “the relevant elders” for the particular function or type of decision at hand. Although this term literally means “bearded ones,” as a masculine plural it is referentially and lexically unmarked for gender. The reader must infer the social gender of this noun’s referent by using knowledge of Israelite social structure and from any particular functions mentioned in context. Given that men typically headed both households (*see* House) and lineages (njps “clans”), *zeqenim* probably connotes men.

That being said, the possibility of some women serving among the elders cannot be excluded. Indeed, the book of Samuel depicts an *’ishshah* of special status (njps “clever woman”; *see ’ish*) who claimed, and was treated with, the authority to represent her town in emergency negotiations with a hostile general (2 Sam. 20:15–22). Although that account does not label her as one of the town’s elders, if she wasn’t one, then they are conspicuous in that story by their highly unusual absence.

## Father (*’av*)

The noun *’av* in the Torah means something rather different from what its typical translation, “father,” means to most readers of the Bible in English translation. In the ancient social structure, the role of father was a more key position, due to the fundamental nature of the corporate household (*see* House). Typically the head of a corporate household (*see* Householder) was designated the “father” of the household’s members, even those who were not his literal offspring. He bestowed standing in the household and determined who was to receive what portion of the estate as heirs.

The “father” role in ancient Israel is highlighted best in situations when he was absent. Both the Bible and the literature of nearby Levantine cultures designated persons without a “father” by a special term—even while the mother was still alive (*yatom* “fatherless, orphan”; Exod. 22:23, Ps. 109:8, Lam. 5:3). Throughout the Bible, children who lacked a “father” were exemplars of vulnerable persons in need of special communal protection.

Beyond the household, the term “father” usually refers to *patronage*—that is, to a patron who provides economic support and intercession in return for the beneficiary’s service and loyalty. *See* Male metaphors for God.

As with most personal nouns that have a feminine counterpart, if the term *’av* is used to refer to a category of persons, and not counterposed with a female term, then the referent’s gender is not specified; thus women may be in view—and in several cases clearly are.

## Father’s house — *See* House

## Gender

Of the characteristics that vary from one human being to another, each society recognizes certain features as meaningful and important: only certain differences make a difference. Such differential weightings underlie the social system, which by its nature is a structure of inequality. Society allocates prestige, power, and privilege according to an individual’s fit into the recognized categories. Those in each category are encouraged to access certain aspects of human expression and development, while being discouraged from attending to other aspects. The structure of inequality both opens up and constrains one’s ways to be human.

Among each society’s categories are those that divide people according to *gender*—that is, “manly” and “womanly” categories that are loosely based on biological male and female sex characteristics and procreative functions. Like all conceptual categories, gender consists of an image of the ideal “man” and “woman” as well as a set of attributes that typify the category. Physical characteristics as well as social roles and expectations are defined by what society chooses to notice and to value. Therefore, “sex” is as much socially constructed as the rest of the gender categorization. Thus in this book “gender” refers not only to roles such as mothering but also to anatomical characteristics and to what the society makes of sexual functions such as pregnancy.

Ancient Israelite society did not construct gender precisely the way that contemporary American society does. For example, the spontaneous expression of emotion via tears was part of what defined a real and authentic man in the former case, but not in the latter. Similarly, in ancient Israel manual dexterity was more central in defining a “real woman” than it is today. To some extent, when the Torah uses language that is customarily rendered as “men” and “women,” it is not necessarily referring to what we mean today by those gender terms.

Although ancient Israelite society was highly gendered, the lives of its members, and the functioning of society as a whole, were determined by more than gender alone. Other categories were at least as significant, which means that viewing Israelite society only through the lens of gender yields a distorted picture. For example, in a corporate household, the prestige, power, and privilege of its (male) householder differed dramatically from those of its subordinate men, while those of the principal wife differed dramatically from those of its other women.

Men and women were socially and economically interdependent; their roles were not hierarchical so much as complementary. The ancient Israelite construction of gender with its inequalities was not something established and enforced by men “over” women. Rather, women and men were both responsible for the ongoing realization of the social system, which allocated opportunities and constraints differentially to each gender.

## Gender of God

The question of whether Israel’s deity is depicted as gendered (or not) in the Hebrew Bible is debated among biblical scholars. However, the matter cannot be proven definitively one way or the other. It is quite plausible that the Torah’s composer(s) had good reason to believe that the ancient audience would construe the depicted deity as being beyond human gender categories. This is because a close look at how referential gender works in Hebrew, together with a reconstruction of ancient plain-sense reading conventions and concepts about deity, brings the following three factors to the fore.

(1) The use of masculine Hebrew inflections and pronouns does not necessarily mean that a particular referent was construed as manly (although that would be the default inference). In Hebrew, the correlation between grammatical gender and social gender is actually asymmetrical. Given this fact about the language, the Torah’s use of masculine God-language means only that God was not thought of as a solely womanly being.

(2) In the ancient Near East in Israel’s heyday, as well as in Israel itself, deities were often imaged *without* an articulated personality. Thus social gender was *not* an ineluctable property of any deity. The Israelites were accustomed to imagine a deity as something other than a personal being with a particular gender

(3) The introduction of God as a character in the Torah (Gen. 1:1–25) depicts an active being that was so obviously unlike any known entity in the ancient Near East (human or deity) that the text’s audience would have been hard pressed to ascribe social gender. After all, gender has meaning only with regard to a corporeal body, interpersonal interactions, and cultural roles—all of which are conspicuously absent in that opening passage. The most likely ancient construal of the Torah’s opening is that it was depicting a deity whose breathtaking otherness demanded a “beyond gender” categorization—which would then apply for the remainder of the Torah, as well.

In any case, given the irreducible gender ambiguity of the Torah’s God-language, the best way to preserve that ambiguity in a gender-accurate translation (which by definition reserves masculine pronouns only for male figures) is to employ a gender-neutral rendering as the default. Such a default enables a representation of this deity as a coherent and consistent character in the biblical account, in a way that occasional or alternating gendered English pronouns cannot do. In short, a gender-neutral rendering produces the least distortion of the Torah’s God-language.

## Gender roles

As throughout the ancient Near East, typically it was men who occupied the formal public leadership and military roles mentioned in the Torah text. The present translation employs “priest” and “Levite” as male terms. Readers should likewise understand nouns like “magistrate” and “warrior” as probably referring to men. Yet women cannot be excluded from such roles with certainty. The Bible is not explicit in this regard, while it does give rare examples—as were found occasionally in nearby societies—of women holding high-profile offices or military posts. (*See* Elders.)

Indefinite references to positions of authority that did not arise directly out of the corporate-household social structure (*see* House), such as “prophet” or “master (of a slave),” should be understood to have generic referents unless the context suggests otherwise.

Many occupational activities were not restricted to one gender. Thus, for example, mention of an otherwise undefined group of shepherds might well have some girls or women in view. Occasionally, women had professional lives—as singers, dancers, musicians, poets, prophets, midwives, perfumers, lamenters, spiritual mediums, and prostitutes, and possibly as scribes and as messengers. Yet most women, like most men, were engaged in agriculture. In ancient Israel, some aspects of “working the land”—such as clearing rocks, building terraces, and plowing—were understood as men’s work. Other vital aspects of field and orchard agriculture, horticulture, and viticulture (namely, sowing, weeding, and harvesting) were shared by both men and women: all available hands. And women were the experts in food preservation and processing—activities without which the agricultural enterprise was unsustainable.

Furthermore, women typically cultivated the household’s vegetable gardens; fed and milked animals (sheep, goats, cows, oxen); made most clothing, starting with fiber preparation; probably fabricated many of the household’s utensils (pots, baskets); and socialized, educated, and trained young children.

In agricultural societies such as that of ancient Israel, even typically gender-marked roles may occasionally be played by a different gender. Thus every once in a while the Bible portrays men as preparing food or caring for young children, and women acting in military capacities.

## Genealogy

The Torah’s genealogies use the idiom of kinship to express relationships of various kinds—familial, ethnic, social, and political. Genealogically encoded relationships regulated all aspects of Israelite daily life. People related to others hierarchically on the basis of the rankings that were encapsulated in the genealogies, with persons or groups on the same genealogical level being considered social equals.

Biblical genealogies rarely mention women. However, comparison with the practices of similarly organized cultures suggests that the male-focused way of marking relationships presumes and reinforces the practice of endogamy—marriage within the lineage. Meanwhile, because endogamy results in kin who are related to each other in multiple ways, a patrilineage is a shorthand reckoning. It also allows for flexibility in expression as group alignments change over time. In short, genealogies in male terms should not be taken as signaling women’s lack of value in Israelite society.

Indeed, female-mediated kinship ties clearly formed part of the social structure. Biblical stories take for granted that persons are considered to be kin even when they are related to each other only through a woman (Gen. 19:12, 14; 24:24; 29:12; Judg. 9:1–3; 2 Sam. 13:37 in light of 3:3; 21:4–8). The same is true of the order in which Jacob’s sons are mentioned in Genesis 49, and the position of the resulting tribes for the wilderness encampment described in Numbers 2: the sequential address in the former case, and the spatial layout in the latter case, are both organized according to their mothers.

*See also* Social order.

## House (*beth ’av*; “father’s house”; corporate household)

Ancient Israelite society was overwhelmingly rural and agricultural. Daily life centered on one’s corporate household (“father’s house”), which was self-sufficient for most basic needs. Typically it consisted of about a dozen persons, spanning three generations. Forming its core were a primary spousal pair, their married sons and those sons’ children, and unmarried sons and daughters. The household often included more distant kin displaced from less stable households, plus transients, foreign slaves, or indentured servants. All lived in a cluster of two or three houses that shared a common courtyard, which was an integral part of the living space. The corporate household also included a garden, fields, orchards, livestock, tools, and equipment. (The typical household was situated in a village of fewer than three hundred people. Even in the half-dozen large “cities” during the monarchy that boasted populations of maybe two thousand, many residents were farmers.)

The majority of Israelites spent most of their time within their corporate household’s boundaries. Generally when women married they moved to the corporate household of their husband—who typically was part of the same lineage, so that the bride was still among her kin. Occasionally, a groom moved to his wife’s household. At any rate, members of the household specialized in particular aspects of labor—according to age, position in the household, and gender (*see* Gender; Gender roles).

The corporate household was the basic social and economic unit in ancient Israel. Individuals gained their sense of identity from their household, subsuming personal interests under its interests. Their sense of honor came largely from their household’s prestige. Their ability to thrive depended on its well-being. (Even if, through a reversal of fortune, they happened to be reduced to debt servitude, their household-of-origin continued to protect them.) Their deity was the household’s deity, which the Torah typically refers to as the “father’s God.” The corporate household served as nursery school, day school, place of employment, retirement home, final resting place, and the key to peace in the afterlife. It was an organic entity, persisting across lifetimes. Through hard work and honorable behavior—and with divine favor—its living members aspired for it to grow more stable and prosperous and to gain in reputation and influence.

Not every Israelite lived in a multi-generation corporate household, nor one headed by a male, but such was the social norm. Given that the Torah’s audience was oriented in that way, it’s not surprising that the text often discusses its concerns in household terms. This also explains much of the Torah’s apparently male-centered language (*see* Householder).

In Hebrew the corporate household is referred to as *bayith* or as *beth ’av*. In the present translation both “house” and “household” may refer to both persons and property (as an ongoing entity), or it may refer only to the resident persons.

## Householder (and his primary wife)

Ancient Israelite society raised certain of its men to function as the head of its corporate households (*see* House). Such persons were supposed to know the agricultural practices that best suited the local ecology. They would also possess the authority and responsibility for their household’s overall health. They decided whom the household comprised, and who would inherit its assets (*see* Father). In comparison to present-day social roles, the Israelite householder was less like today’s typical father or husband, and more like the CEO of a family business with several employees.

Because a corporate household typically comprised several nuclear families, one “father’s house” could be nested inside a larger one. Who was then viewed as “head of the household” varied depending upon one’s perspective and the topic at hand.

The householder’s primary wife was responsible for managing the tasks of those junior to her, including the men in the household besides her husband. She functioned as the household’s COO (chief operating officer), and as the acting CEO in the householder’s absence or incapacity.

The Torah’s regulations are often addressed to whichever party is most salient—that is, the one that has the applicable societal authority and responsibility (*see* You; Elders). Typically this would have been the (male) head of the household. When the Torah’s grammatically masculine wording is addressed to a nonspecific category of persons, women may still be in view. Sometimes the addressee actually includes the householder’s primary wife (e.g., Exod. 20:10; Lev. 10:14; Num. 18:11; Deut. 5:14; 12:12). At the same time, that “male” language is *not* addressed to most of the society’s men, who—like most women—were subordinate members in their “father’s house.”

Rarely were women householders themselves. Widows in some cases seem to have functioned as householders, at least temporarily (although most did not have that opportunity). Divorcees may occasionally have been of independent means (although most probably found a place in their household-of-origin, as did unhappy or abused wives; cf. Lev. 22:13; Judg. 19:2–3). One indication of the existence of women householders is the occasional appearance of women’s names in Israelite genealogies—names that tend to match known place names, suggesting a woman’s local prominence.

The present adapted translation sometimes uses the word “householder” where others typically read “man.” Biblical Hebrew did not have a unique term for “householder” but rather relied almost always on the more general noun *’ish*. In matters involving the control of a corporate household or its resources, the text did not need to employ a more specific term in order for the most salient participant—namely the householder—to be understood as the intended referent. (*See ’ish*; Elders.)

## Inheritance

Israelite society was *patrilineal*; normally it was a householder’s son who inherited the corporate household—including the patrimonial land-holding—and carried on the family line. The society was also *patrilocal*—a female first-born (like daughters in general) tended to leave the homestead upon marriage. But this does not mean that daughters were inherently excluded from inheriting all or part of the family’s estate.

All across the ancient Near East, the familial drive was strong to preserve the corporate household with its patrimony into the next generation. By the time that the Torah came together as a normative document, the text’s audience would have been familiar with stratagems that enabled a female to be an heir and even to transmit her father’s lineage to her son, so as to preserve the household as an entity. The Bible presumes the occasional resort to daughter inheritance without disclosing the exact legal mechanisms, which probably were varied. Such arrangements had long been known across the ancient Near East, including in rural Western Semitic nations: everyone preferred that a daughter inherit in the absence of sons. Apparently such practice was a sort of open secret, for despite extant evidence of its longstanding practice, the only extant supporting law or explicit statement of principles in the entire ancient Near East appears in Num. 27:8–11.

## Male metaphors for God

The Torah expressed certain aspects of God’s being, and of Israel’s relationship with its patron deity, via metaphors that derive from the activities of men (adult males). The Torah, however, reserves that male God-language for personal address and for poetry. Such metaphors appear to point toward the roles that God plays, rather than making a statement about God’s gender.

When a character addresses God as “lord” (e.g., Gen. 18:27, Exod. 5:22), the maleness of the imagery is germane. In Israelite society, someone addressed as “lord” was someone who had autonomous authority. This is how ancient Near Eastern slaves would have addressed their male householder, and how royal ministers would have addressed their king. Thus someone who calls God “lord” is acknowledging divine authority—not making a statement about God’s gender. (*See* Gender of God; Social order.)

Similarly, in the ancient Near East, kinship terms were regularly used metaphorically and without gender being at issue. For example, when Phoenician regents described themselves as “father” to their subjects, clearly they were not referring to their own gender, because they also called themselves the people’s “mother.” And given what fatherhood represented (*see* Father), it was only natural for the Torah to apply such language to God. The meaning is evident from the context: God vivifies, sustains, nurtures, protects, and guides the nation (Deut. 32:6, 18). The terminology is *not* a reflection on God’s gender, which is not at issue.

Gender is probably also not at issue with regard to the poetic styling of God as king (e.g., Exod. 15:18). In the ancient Near East, women occasionally ruled dominions (cf. 1 Kings 10). This does not mean that women rulers were considered men; rather, royal authority was expressed via the male term and masculine symbols. In other words, for the Torah to call God “King” in poetry most likely points to the significance of that office, as can be gleaned from the context: the metaphor expresses divine protection and caring, not maleness.

Similarly, where poetry styles God as a warrior (a manly role) or depicts the Deity as handling quintessentially manly weapons (Exod. 15:1–4; Deut. 32:41–42), gender is not at issue. Deliverance is what the context emphasizes, not divine maleness. This distinction holds even when God is called *’ish milḥamah* “[regular] participant in warfare; warrior”(Exod. 15:3). In such a construction, the noun *’ish* means “expert in . . .” (*see ’ish*) and the point is that Israel’s deity stands up against an opposing army. Again, such metaphors do not show that God is imagined as male outside of the poetic figures or forms of address.

## Marriage

The Bible neither defines marriage nor even has a word for it. Yet clearly it was a basic societal institution in ancient Israel. A woman’s transfer of from one corporate household (*see* House) to another greatly affected the daily life and the economy of both—particularly if she was becoming the primary wife in her new household. Because it was such an important transaction, it was negotiated by the heads of the two households (*see* Householder).

A man’s acquiring a wife was not the same as purchasing property. It was more like a modern sports team acquiring a player who is currently under contract to another franchise in the league: the originating team needs to be compensated for its loss. The exchange also helped to strengthen the alliance between the two families. The society had legally binding expectations that regulated marriage even in the absence of a written contract between the parties.

The Torah typically calls the act of marriage “taking a wife,” which in almost every case meant that the bride moved into the groom’s household—i.e., he took her into the household in which he lived. Unlike njps, the present adaptation uses that terminology—rather than the word “marry”—in order to underscore marriage’s gender-marked spatial relocation.

## Menstruation

The Hebrew term *niddah* refers to menstruation (e.g., Lev. 12:2, 15:19) and falls within the scope of a gender-focused study because of what its rendering conveys about the valence with which women were viewed. njps rendered *niddah* as “impurity,” following a plausible view that this word means “something to be shunned.” According to other opinions, the terms are more neutrally about the need to avoid contact, for the text does not imply that this type of impurity is to be “shunned” more than other types. And still other scholars point to a different root and state that *niddah* refers to the flow of blood itself. The present adaptation adopts the second view (which yields a basic rendering as “separation”) while incorporating the third sense as an overtone.

## Messenger

The present translation uses the word “messenger” to render the Hebrew term *mal’akh* regardless of whether the latter refers to a human or a divine agent. (Like *mal’akh*, “messenger” designates not only one who bears a message but also one who does any kind of errand.) Ancient Near Eastern usage did not distinguish between such agents. Thus the Septuagint—the ancient Jewish translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek—similarly used the same term (*angelos*) either for a human or a divine messenger. In contrast, whenever the context suggests a divine being, njps—like many other English translations—rendered *mal’akh* as “angel.” In the Torah, the njps approach seems inapt, for it misleadingly conjures an image of a white-robed winged figure. But in the eyes of the Torah’s original audience, the biblical terminology would have evoked an emissary who happens to be from God but is expected to follow the protocols observed with human emissaries (*see* Agent).

In the ancient Near East, messengers not only delivered messages but also escorted individuals on the principal’s behalf (e.g., Gen. 12:20; 24:7) and faced those whom the principal wished to confront (e.g., 2 Kings 6:32; Gen. 32:25).

Regarding the gender of divine messengers (“angels”): In the ancient Near East, the tendency was for men to appoint male agents, while women appointed female agents. To the extent that the Torah presented its God as *beyond* gender—and quite apart from other contextual indications of social gender—it might well have portrayed that God either as an “equal opportunity employer” of messengers, or as dispatching non-gendered divine agents. Two of this deity’s divine messengers are depicted as womanly in Zech. 5:9.

## *Na‘ar*

The common noun *na‘ar* can ascribe not only gender but also social status. However, as with most personal nouns that have a feminine counterpart, if this term is used to refer to a category of persons, and not counterposed with a female term, then the referent’s gender is not specified; women may be in view.

The term *na‘ar* affects the social-gender picture of the gathered crowd in the Sodom story (Gen. 19:4). Also, njps once renders the plural *na‘arim* as “some young men” in a nonspecific context where gender does not seem to be at issue (Exod. 24:5). After I analyzed the meaning of *na‘ar* in those passages, I reviewed its rendering throughout njps’s *The Torah*, for the sake of consistency. The term *na‘ar* most fundamentally denotes subordination, which is expressed in various ways. One of the most common tasks performed by *na‘arim* in the Bible is communicating information to their superiors, e.g., Num. 11:27.

In the present translation, the rendering of *na‘ar* depends upon whether social status or age is the more salient quality. As usual, gender is indicated only where germane and not already evident. Hence, for example, Exod. 24:5 now reads “some assistants.”

## Names

In the Bible and in extrabiblical Israelite texts, men typically have received names that are grammatically masculine (technically, the names are *unmarked* for gender), while women’s given names are usually grammatically feminine. However, some women have names that are unmarked or even masculine (e.g., Hodesh, Jael, Merab, Rahab, Tamar), whereas some men have feminine names (e.g., Becorath, Goliath, Hirah, Judah, Shammah, Uzzah). In terms of their form, the names Abimelech (a man) and Abigail (a woman) are identical, as are Eliezer (a man) and Elisheba (a woman). Most tellingly, Gomer, Micaiah, and Shelomith are biblical names for both genders. In short, in Hebrew the name alone is not a wholly reliable indicator of a character’s gender.

Israelites generally identified themselves and their family property by the “father’s” name only. Comparison with the practices of other cultures suggests that this naming practice indicated endogamy, rather than signaling the mothers’ lack of importance.

## Predecessors

The Torah often mentions predecessors when it speaks of death, employing idioms such as “going to one’s *’avoth* (ancestors),” e.g., Gen. 15:15, or “being gathered to one’s *‘ammim* (kinfolk),” e.g., Gen. 35:29. Likewise, one of the Torah’s commonly cited penalties for violation of covenantal precepts is to be “cut off from one’s *‘ammim* (kinfolk),” e.g., Exod 30:33. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the text’s original audience would have understood these references to predecessors as gender-inclusive. Archeology has shown that both men and women were buried in ancient Israel’s family tombs. Given the norm of endogamy (marrying within one’s lineage), one’s predecessors—regardless of gender—typically were buried nearby, within the area of one’s own village or that of the next village. That family tomb represented the larger entity of deceased ancestors, who remained in communion with the living (in a manner that is no longer clear to us). One’s corporate household (*see* House) included one’s predecessors.

Biblical evidence is consistent with a gender-inclusive view of predeceased kin (Lev. 21:1–3, 5; Deut. 21:13). Foremothers counted as national ancestors (e.g., Gen. 35:20; 1 Sam. 10:2; Jer. 31:15–17). And just as the Bible portrays mothers as possessing offspring (*see* Seed), so too it would seem that offspring perceived themselves as descended from female ancestors (Judg. 9:1; Mic. 5:1 in light of 1 Chr. 4:4; *see* Genealogy).

Furthermore, some ancient Near Eastern texts imply that the ancients imagined that gender relations continued relatively unimpeded after death, in the netherworld. This implies that the kinship relations (including the respect and authority commanded by mothers) were also preserved. In Mesopotamia, both male and female ghosts received offerings from their living descendants; many scholars leave open the possibility that the ancient Israelites also served their ancestors in a similar way.

Therefore the present translation renders inclusively the references to *’avot* and *‘ammim* as predecessors (typically as “ancestors” and “kin,” respectively).

## Sacrificial offerings

Leviticus opens its extensive discussion of sacrificial offerings with the conspicuous use of common-gender nouns (*’adam* and *nefesh*) that refer to the worshiper who brings such offerings (e.g., Lev. 1:2; 2:1) and thus is subject to the need for ritual purity (e.g., Lev. 7:20–21). Leviticus thus signals that its schema of offerings is open to, and required for, both men and women.

A person could participate in a sacrificial offering as the technician who literally executed the sacrifice. In ancient Israel—a rural society—nearly everyone worked and literally lived with livestock. Each corporate household slaughtered and dressed its own animals. The text of Leviticus thus presumed that most Israelites would perform their own slaughter at the sanctuary (cf. 1 Sam. 1:25). Although the Bible mentions women’s involvement only in profane slaughter (1 Sam. 28:24–25), ancient Near Eastern texts and pictures portray sacrificial slaughter by women as well as men. Thus the Torah probably had both genders in view when mentioning sacrificial slaughter.

A second way of participating in a sacrificial offering was as the representative of the corporate household that brought offerings on certain occasions. That person would lay hands on the designated animal, present it to the priest, and (after the meat was cooked) distribute portions of the meal. In the householder’s absence (due to illness or warfare), his primary wife could apparently play this role (e.g., Deut. 12:12).

The third way of participating in the offering was simply to eat the meal in communion with those present, including God. This was actually the operative step; without it, what had gone on beforehand was rendered meaningless. Deuteronomy insists that both men and women take part in this step (e.g., 12:18, 16:14).

## Seed (*zera‘*)

The grammatically masculine noun *zera‘* literally means “seed.” Where the term refers to human beings, njps typically renders *zera‘* as “offspring.” Calling human progeny “seed” is a metonym; it is analogous to calling agricultural produce “seed” (e.g., Lev. 27:30)—that is, the product is labeled by what gave rise to it, and what it itself produces more of. (However, the Bible employs the term *zera‘* to designate progeny six times more often than to designate plant grains or produce!) The significance of this trope is underscored by the fact that the Bible knows at least seven synonyms for referring to offspring in addition to *zera‘*—yet the latter term is by far the most common.

The Bible neither clearly confirms nor denies the mother’s biological contribution of “life-essence” to her offspring. The usage of *zera‘* does not appear to be relevant to that question. “Seed” is not about biology; rather, it is a social category. Thus female characters have “seed” (Gen. 3:15, 16:10, 24:60; Lev. 22:13; Isaiah 54:3) and yield “seed” (Lev. 12:2), but that does not reflect on the social-gender construction of procreation.

The noun *zera‘* by itself neither denotes nor connotes semen. The Bible employs the cognate verb (*zara‘* “to sow”) forty-two times and not once does it mean inseminating a woman. The noun alone—when applied to humans—never refers to the male’s contribution to procreation. In the construct expression *shikhvat zera‘* (which occurs with slight variations eight times in the Torah; lit. “a laying down of seed”), *zera‘* refers elliptically to the outcome: “the laying down of [what will become] seed (i.e., offspring).” (Compare the wording in Lev. 18:20, and contrast the reference to semen in 20:15—where *zera‘* is not mentioned presumably because offspring are not possible.)

Both in ancient Israel and in the Bible, generating both produce and progeny is ultimately the responsibility of the householder (*see entry*). For that reason, the Torah typically attributes the family’s “seed” (offspring) to men rather than to women.

## Social order

Social order in ancient Israel (even under monarchy or imperial governor) was maintained mainly by a “balanced opposition” between groups, each of which was typically headed by a man.

Speaking schematically, the social structure was nested: the nation of Israel comprised several (nominally twelve) *tribes*, each of which in turn included several *lineages* (which njps usually calls “clans”), each of which in turn consisted of several *corporate households* (*see* House), each of which was made up of several nuclear families. When individuals interacted, they desired to elevate the social position of their own group relative to other such groups. To the extent that two individuals each identified with parallel groups, their interests were viewed as *opposing* each other. (Hence the social-science term “balanced opposition.”) The overall societal arrangement is illustrated by two sayings from the present-day Middle East: “I against my brother, I and my brother against my cousins, I and my cousins against the world”; and “We are brothers; yet when we evaluate the inventory, we are enemies.”

In practically any social situation, all parties were expected to affirm where they stood, societally speaking; but where one stood depended partly upon the particulars of the situation—assessment always being relative to another person or group. As everyone jockeyed for relative standing, the social and political alignments between groups could shift—which would be conveyed by a corresponding change in the recited genealogy (*see entry*).

Encounters between individuals from different groups began with an accounting of relative social position, with the inferior or more compliant party showing deference (by prostration, and by referring to the other party as “my lord/lady” and to themselves as “your servant” or the like).

To re-align the allegiances between groups, a prime opportunity was the contracting of a marriage (*see entry*).

## *ṭaph* (“child, dependent”)

This is a collective noun, unmarked for gender. It refers to a variable category of a community’s members and takes its precise meaning—and thus its social-gender sense—from the context. It is not strictly an age grade, although in Num. 14:31 it refers to persons up to age twenty (cf. v. 29).

When counterposed in the text with *gevarim* (“men [who make their presence felt]”) or with the collective term *zakhar* (“combatants”), *ṭaph* is a technical term that refers to everyone else—that is, women, children, and the infirm or disabled men (Exod. 10:10, 12:37; Num. 31:9, 17, 18).

## You (second-person address)

The Torah often addresses its reader, or the Israelite people, in the second person. The implied gender(s) of the audience must be gleaned from the immediate context, understanding that the referent of “you” shifts fluidly as relevant. The speaker (e.g., God or Moses) may momentarily single out a portion of the audience—for example, only parents (Deut. 6:20); certain sub-groups of men (Deut. 1:41, 3:18, 20:1); householders and their wives (Deut. 5:14, 12:7; *see* Householder); or everyone except priests and Levites (who are then referred to as “them” rather than “you”). Yet all of these addressees remain inseparable parts of the Israelites as a whole. This is like a contemporary conductor who, during the orchestra’s performance, gestures momentarily to one section of musicians without neglecting the rest of the ensemble.

In short, grammatically masculine address to a category of persons does *not* in itself restrict the social gender of the addressee to men. Indeed, certain expressions confirm this usage (Deut. 7:13; 28:4, 68).