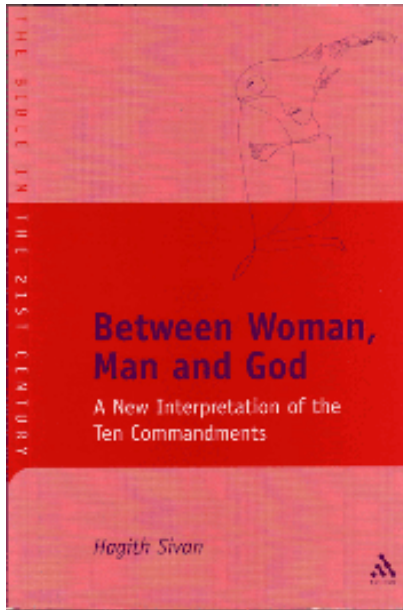


RBL 11/2008



Sivan, Hagith

Between Woman, Man and God: A New Interpretation of the Ten Commandments

Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 401; Bible in the Twenty-First Century 4

London: T & T Clark, 2004. Pp. xiii + 270. Hardcover. \$125.00. ISBN 0567080455.

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The Ten Commandments define Israelite manhood, but what do they say about womanhood? Professor of history at the University of Kansas, Hagith Sivan confronts this issue in *Between Woman, Man and God: A New Interpretation of the Ten Commandments*. She discusses wo/manhood implied by the Ten Commandments and developed in various legal texts and narratives of the Hebrew Bible. Sivan demonstrates that the “Ten Commandments determine themes and structures of narratives designed to illuminate their scope and the repercussions of transgression” (222).

Between Woman, Man and God is the sequel to *Dinah’s Daughters: Gender and Judaism from the Hebrew Bible to Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), in which Sivan, writing under the name Helena Zlotnick, explores the ancient Jewish identity. Sivan is influenced by Athalya Brenner’s “An Afterword: The Decalogue—Am I an Addressee?” in Brenner’s edited book *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) and by Judith Plaskow’s *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

Sivan begins with three premises: First, the Ten Commandments are not an “independent legal manifesto” (3), so one should examine their role “within a large canvass of biblical ‘history’ comprising both legal and narratological layers” (11). Second, the Commandments should be interpreted in the context of two histories: the history leading to securing Canaan, related in Genesis through Numbers, and the history of Israel residing in Canaan, related in Joshua through 2 Kings. Third, the Commandments are usefully interpreted through “competing and complementary ideologies.” Sivan offsets the male-oriented Commandments with “ideologies of biblical womanhood” (12).

Each chapter of the body of the book discusses a single Commandment or pair of Commandments. Sivan introduces the Commandments, comparing the versions of Exod 20 and Deut 5. Integrating mainstream and feminist methodologies, her chief contribution to scholarship is an explication of texts that explain and extend the Commandments.

The First Commandment (“I am Yahweh your God” [Exod 20:2]) and the Second (“You shall not have other gods” [Exod 20:3]) relate monotheism to monogamy, Sivan explains: “Since Israel is invariably a woman and Yahweh her betrayed spouse, the concept of monotheism as a cornerstone of Israelite religion implies the feminization of the Hebrew/Israelite male in relations to God” (30). Through narratives, Sivan expounds the Third Commandment (“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain” [Exod 20:7]) and the Ninth (“You shall not bear false witness” [Exod 20:16]). She demonstrates that authoritative words sometimes clash with social norms and that “words uttered in God’s name, regardless of gender, status and circumstances, are binding” (71). Relating to rest, liberty, and creation, the Fourth Commandment (“Remember to sanctify the day of the Sabbath” [Exod 20:8]) ignores wives and mothers, Sivan notes, and it supports male dominance. The Fifth Commandment (“Honor your father and your mother” [Exod 20:12]) seems to treat men and women equally, yet the “image of the mother, even of motherhood itself, remains a dubious proposition, at best, and a necessary evil at worst” (111). The Sixth Commandment (“You shall not murder” [Exod 20:13]) bears on women differently than it does on men, for the “vocabulary of ‘murder’ of and by women coexists with that of sexuality and marriage” (160). The Seventh Commandment (“You shall not commit adultery” [Exod 20:14]) concerns “betraying trust among males” (163), and the Eighth (“You shall not steal” [Exod 20:15]) prohibits acts with “far-reaching repercussions for social conventions” (192), such as stealing a woman’s virginity.

Sivan elaborates all Commandments similarly. As an example of her approach, consider the chapter on the Tenth Commandment (“You shall not covet” [Exod 20:17]), a law that summarizes the Decalogue by “designat[ing] the objects of desire that may result in subsequent offences.” This Commandment is especially relevant because it “indicates that

a rejection of the laws is a rejection of an identity” (209). After introducing the Commandment, Sivan turns to the two histories. She explicates passages that include women and that elucidate the relevance of the Commandment for men and women.

Examining covetousness in the first history, Sivan discusses Exod 34:12–16, 24, a warning about coveting foreign women. She points out that the passage extends the Tenth Commandment beyond a neighbor’s house, the area specified in the Commandment itself. The passage examines male selfhood, which is enfeebled by foreign women exciting “desire for the ‘other’” (213). The next text, Gen 2–3, relates the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. The story shows that covetousness ensues from “negative traits of cowardice, fearfulness and emotional liability” (214). By coveting, men are weakened, turning “from mastery over the self and others to surrender to desire” (215).

Proceeding to the second history, Sivan considers the Tenth Commandment of Deut 5, in which a neighbor’s wife, rather than his house, is named the first object of desire. In the Deuteronomic version, women are the “most desirable objects of coveting” (215). A woman is coveted, here, as the property of another man and, more importantly, simply as a woman. To conclude, Sivan explains the story in 1 Kgs 2:13–23, in which Adonijah asks for Abishag in marriage, as an attempt to usurp Solomon’s throne. In this account, “women provide a moral dimension to political actions” (220).

As seen in the chapter on the Tenth Commandment, Sivan gathers texts from various contexts to highlight aspects of Israelite identity, male and female. At the end of some chapters, I was left wanting a synthesis of the texts and a summary of their contribution to Sivan’s idea of wo/manhood.

Although Sivan introduces the Ten Commandments when reviewing mainstream scholarship, her book is for scholars who know the Hebrew Bible. It includes ample notes and a useful bibliography. Bearing in mind issues of Israelite identity, Sivan explicates legal texts and narratives that unfold the meaning of the Commandments. Turning from law to life, from abstraction to actuality, *Between Woman, Man and God* is useful to those seeking to understand identities implied by the Ten Commandments and developed in relevant texts.