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THEOLOGY

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GENDER AS LOVE: A Theological Account of Human Identity, Embodied Desire, and Our Social Worlds by Felipe M. do Vale. Baker Academic, 2023. 272 pages. Hardcover; \$69.99. ISBN: 9781540967022. Paperback; \$35.00. ISBN: 9781540966971. Ebook; \$34.99. ISBN: 9781493443925.

Theoretical approaches to gender, and consequently theories of gender, have historically divided into two opposing camps: the definition of gender as a social construct, and the definition of gender as a biological essence. In *Gender as Love*, Felipe do Vale, theology professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, connects the two approaches to argue that gender is an essence (though not necessarily biological), which is “concerned with selves or identity and with the way selves organize social goods pertaining to their sexed bodies” (p. 23). That is, do Vale defines gender as an identity which involves biologically sexed bodies and the meaning given to sexed bodies in specific social contexts. Within the divine economy of salvation, he argues that a Christian theology of gender must center on love. The social goods we love as gendered individuals define who we are as gendered individuals. For do Vale, gender is love.

He begins in chapter 1 by developing John Webster’s “theological theology” with its focus on God and the divine economy as a framework for his own approach to gender. Locating gender in the divine economy allows do Vale to distinguish between what qualities are essential or innate to being a gendered human, and what qualities are limited to a particular stage of the divine economy (even if those qualities are universally experienced).

In chapter 2, do Vale thoroughly reviews the history of theories of gender as a social construct. He critiques these theories for their rejection of any stability or consistency in gender categories across time and space. If there is no consistent understanding of what “women” are, then the category “women” has no moral value. That is, if it is impossible to identify “women” in particular historical or cultural contexts as the same kind of being as “women” in other particular historical or cultural contexts, then it is also impossible to make claims concerning gender justice and injustice. According to

do Vale, although social construct theories of gender are guided by the desire for gender justice, they functionally lead to injustice. They are ultimately inadequate for the work of defining gender.

Chapter 3 begins with a too-brief analysis of biological essentialism. Given the importance of definitions of gender that prioritize the body to the exclusion of social and cultural contexts within contemporary politics and church practice, it would be helpful to have a more robust discussion and critique here. Do Vale then charts his own middle path between essentialist and social construct theories. Drawing on insights from philosophers Charlotte Witt and Mari Mikkola, he argues that gender is an essence, though because of our location in the divine economy, we cannot fully define it. However, defining gender as an essence makes categorization as (for instance) “woman” or “man” possible across time and space, which in turn makes gender justice possible.

Finally, do Vale develops his definition of gender as an identity, which involves biologically sexed bodies given social meaning through the organization of gendered social goods. Social goods vary throughout history and across cultures, so the work of theology is descriptive: to discern and morally evaluate (based on justice and the gospel) the gendered social goods in a particular time and space. “Gender is tied to our created, sexed embodiment, but discipleship consists in knowing how to make use of and attach ourselves to cultural goods in ways consistent with the gospel” (p. 110).

The second half of the book develops do Vale’s definition of gender as love, beginning in chapters 4 and 5 with Augustine’s theology of love. According to Augustine, the objects of our love shape who we are. Do Vale extends this connection of love with identity to gender. If gender identity is defined as the organization of social goods around sexed bodies, and identities are formed by love, then what we love as gendered beings shapes and defines our gender identities.

[T]here are many things we love in virtue of our sexed bodies. Doing so grants these beloved objects a social meaning and to us a social role, and this is our gender. More than that, we identify with these beloved goods, for they make us who we are and shape our narratives. Because our chief love is to God, moreover, Christians always have an obligation to evaluate these gendered goods in accord with the moral norms of all properly ordered love. (p. 144)

Do Vale’s theory of gender resembles theologian Sarah Coakley’s work on gender as desire. In his review of Coakley, do Vale notes the ambiguity of her definition of

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“desire” (particularly with respect to sexual desire) and the underdeveloped conception of Trinitarian “three-ness” as a means of moving beyond a gender binary. Do Vale consequently argues that Augustinian love offers a more secure center for gender.

Chapters 6 and 7 situate do Vale’s conception of gender in the divine economy. First, gender is a good within the goodness of creation. Using John Walton’s interpretation of the biblical creation story, do Vale identifies gender as a way for human beings to function well in God’s creation—to “organize and appropriate social goods as a means to manifest [the sexed body] socially” (p. 190). In this section, do Vale addresses the specific question of intersex persons and those with disorders of sexual development (DSD), arguing that such conditions are one way among many that sexed bodies might malfunction. He encourages epistemic restraint to allow for ambiguity in an individual’s sexed body, while seeking ways for all people to flourish in their sexed bodies.

Do Vale specifically addresses the experience of shame shared by many intersex/DSD individuals as a limitation on human flourishing. The experience of shame is also important to the consequences of sin for gender identity. As a second act in the divine economy, human sin distorts creation and thus gender, making gender a source of injustice. Do Vale illustrates gendered sin with sexual assault against women, including within Christian communities. Redemption is then the story of grace enabling social transformation, including healing for the victims of gendered sin. The discussion of gendered sin, shame, and redemption would benefit from a clearer distinction between “sinner” and “sinned against.” Moreover, while do Vale carefully distinguishes between intersex/DSD conditions and gendered sin, the common element of shame across these discussions creates a problematic ambiguity.

Finally, do Vale explores gender within eschatological consummation. Here, he focuses on Galatians 3:28, often interpreted as the ultimate erasure of gender categories. Following Augustine, do Vale instead argues that “no longer male and female” represents the perfection of gender. In this reading, gendered categories remain in the eschaton, but without the negative evaluations or exclusionary practices associated with gendered categories under the distortion of sin. The calling of the church is to work toward eschatological justice with respect to gender while we await the final consummation. “In the new heaven and earth, mysterious as they remain, we will be women and men who know perfect justice in accordance with our worth ... As we imagine

a just world, we conform our lives now in anticipation” (p. 234).

Do Vale’s expert dialogue with key scholars makes this book a valuable introduction to gender studies as a theological discipline. The book makes an important contribution toward integrating essentialist and social constructionist approaches to gender, providing a potentially fruitful starting point for theologies of gender. His focus on justice as a core guiding principle and evaluative tool for definitions of gender keeps the humanity of gendered individuals centered amid his detailed, wide-ranging theological discussions. The book would be particularly useful for advanced undergraduates and graduate students in theology and gender studies.

There are several points at which the discussion could be more fully developed. Do Vale’s “theological theology” keeps the Bible centered through his theological and theoretical analyses. His recognition that the gendering of social goods, and thus historically particular gender identities, is contextual to particular times, spaces, and cultures, is important to his analysis of, for instance, 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. But as a biblical scholar, I wanted more, especially in the discussion of Galatians 3:28 and the eschatological future of gender. Do Vale sets aside other texts, including Matthew 22:23–30, as concerned with marriage rather than gender. But within first-century context (Jewish and Greco-Roman), marriage was a central social good in definitions of gender. The prioritization of “eunuchs” and the choice not to marry is, consequently, gendered. Or, rather, un-gendered, making this text essential for a discussion of gender and the eschaton.

Do Vale demonstrates why gender matters for being human in human society, and his development of Augustinian love as a center for gender identity is productive in this respect. Part of being human is inhabiting biologically sexed bodies. How we live in and use our bodies in interactions with each other matters—socially, culturally, and theologically. Do Vale’s emphasis on justice is important. But I am unconvinced by his argument that gender identity ultimately matters for Christian identity. In Galatians, Christian identity is defined not by social markers (Jew and Greek, enslaved and free, male and female) but by being “one in Christ” (Gal. 3:28). The entry point into this corporate identity—baptism (Gal. 3:27)—means getting “dressed” in Christ, wearing Christ-like clothing (one of do Vale’s gendered social goods, but here gendered distinctions are displaced by Christ). To return to Matthew 22:23–30, being a “eunuch” for God dissociates Christian identity from

one of the primary gendered social goods of the time. Together, these two texts offer an entry into a potentially rich discussion of the ultimate, eschatological significance of gender.

This leads to a final lingering question: What do the definition of gender as love and the emphasis on justice as an evaluative tool contribute to our contemporary conversations around transgender identities? Do Vale's insistence on the significance of sexed bodies and the distinction of the essence of gender from biology offer suggestive starting points, but he does not thoroughly explore this complex, complicated issue. His fullest statement comes in a footnote claiming the compatibility of his definition of gender with "full trans* affirmation" (using trans* to refer to a range of gender identities):

To affirm trans* identities using this understanding of gender, one would simply have to add that what is at issue is perceived biological traits, that an individual need only be perceived as having a certain sexed body to be truly of a certain gender ... All this is to say that, in the end, my view does not decide the matter one way or another. (p. 108)

In this respect, as in many others, doVale's *Gender as Love* offers a fresh, theologically rich beginning for conversations in the church and academy.

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GENESIS 1-11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary by Ronald Hendel. Yale University Press, 2024. 466 pages. Hardcover; \$85.00. ISBN: 9780300149739.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis provide a set of important texts in faith-and-science discussions. This well-informed, in-depth treatment of Genesis 1-11 enhances not only one's understanding of the original Hebrew, but also such things as the text's literary features and the cultural milieu out of which it arose. Add to this the author's forays into Jewish and Christian interpretation and there is something here for every keen interpreter of Genesis 1-11. It culminates more than forty years of the author's scholarly interest in Genesis and is helpfully preceded by his critical edition of the text of Genesis 1-11 (Oxford University Press, 1998).

Ronald Hendel, professor emeritus of Hebrew Bible and Jewish Studies at UC Berkeley, describes his approach as "a literary philology, which combines detailed historical-critical scholarship with attention to the nuances of literary conventions, style, and resonance" (p. xi). This wide-ranging approach offers further evidence that

gone are the days of strictly historical-critical mainline commentaries, dominated as they were by speculative, quasi-scientific reconstructions of a text's prehistory that were of little interest or relevance to readers of the Bible as scripture for the church.

The book is structured as follows. Three sections precede the main body of the commentary: an introduction, a bibliography, and a fresh translation of the Hebrew text that signals in varied type his understanding of the sources and redactional elements. The body of the commentary consists of notes and comments on each pericope of Genesis 1-11. Each section begins by including the relevant portion of the translation offered earlier. Then come "Textual (i.e., text-critical) Notes," more general "Notes" that tease out nuances and, finally, synthetic "Comments" that include literary and structural features as well as parallel texts (Ancient Near Eastern, OT, NT, Jewish, and occasionally Christian).

The last time we saw an in-depth commentary on the same corpus was in the late eighties and early nineties by Gordon Wenham and Victor Hamilton. Not only is Hendel's commentary more up to date, but its consideration of Hebrew and cognate languages is at least as extensive. Hendel's comparative analyses (Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Canaanite) also include much that is different. These are extraordinarily rich, bringing both clarity and vitality to the text. To be sure, evangelicals will still find Wenham and Hamilton more helpful on topics of particular interest to them than this work. Nevertheless, Hendel's deep engagement with philology, context, literary structure, et cetera, paves a good way toward rich theological engagement.

The commentary has a few shortcomings. First, the print size is ridiculously small. Second, the introduction reads as if to promise more to follow than actually appears. Thus, tantalizing introductory subsections, such as "Between the Figural and the Real"—which deliciously contrast the historical-literal stance of Luther with the more nuanced stance of Calvin that anticipated understanding Genesis 1 as accommodation to ancient cosmology—whet the reader's appetite for more than what follows. Third, although Hendel's separate discussion of the priestly and Yahwist sources is helpful for distinguishing the distinctive character perceived by historical critics in the accounts of creation and the flood, I would have liked to have seen more emphasis on the meaning of the text in its final canonical form. The reader is left thinking in terms of doublets—for example, two creation stories or, even more oddly, two