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My Lord the Queen: Gender Discord in Comparative Perspective

In Biblical Hebrew, with the exception of first-person forms, both independent personal pronouns and pronominal suffixes are marked for gender.¹ Gender discord describes the phenomenon in which there is a disjuncture between the gender of a pronoun or verb with its antecedent or subject. There are several instances of this phenomenon in Biblical Hebrew.² The directionality usually sees a masculine form supplant a feminine, for example with a masculine pronoun used with a feminine antecedent or a masculine verb with a feminine subject, although the opposite direction is also attested. In general, two main proposals have been put forward to account for this. Typically, gender discord in Biblical Hebrew has been understood as “a weakening in the distinction of gender” in which the feminine plural suffix was subsumed under its masculine counterpart due to the influence of colloquial language.³ This general linguistic drift is attested in spoken Semitic languages, where it is known as “gender

¹ On the history of the study of gender in Semitic, see Muhammad Hassan Ibrahim, *Grammatical Gender: Its Origin and Development* (Janua Linguarum 166; Paris: Mouton, 1973), 14–23

² Many instances are recorded in *GKC* §32i; Joüon §149bc; and Gary Rendsburg, *Diglossia in Ancient Hebrew* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1990), 44–48.

³ See, e.g., *GKC* §135o; Rendsburg, *Diglossia in Ancient Hebrew*, 49; G.R. Driver, “Colloquialisms in the Old Testament,” in *Mélanges Marcel Cohen* (ed. David Cohen; Paris: Mouton, 1970), 232–239; and Jaakov Levi, *Die Inkongruenz im biblischen Hebräisch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1987).

neutralization.”⁴ Accordingly, it has been taken as a characteristic of Late Biblical Hebrew, prevalent in the later books of the Hebrew Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls, and used as means to date the composition of biblical books linguistically.⁵ An alternative suggestion is to explain the use of apparently masculine plural pronouns for female antecedents as vestiges of a common dual ending in Proto-Central Semitic,⁶ drawing upon the dual ending forms *-humā* attested in Classical Arabic, and *-hm* in Ugaritic.⁷ There is, then, a significant disjuncture in the temporal implications of these two arguments, and depending on one’s vantage point, gender discord can be utilized to argue both for an early *and* a late dating for the linguistic register of the text in question. This incongruity stems from the diverse distribution of the phenomenon across the corpus of the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, neither hypothesis accounts for the use of feminine pronouns with *male* antecedents.⁸ Without discounting either of these suggestions, it is clear that gender discord should receive a reevaluation. In this essay, I consider an alternative approach to gender discord in Biblical Hebrew, focusing on the book of Ruth as a test case. By exploring gender discord in light of a parallel semantic phenomenon in Neo-Assyrian texts, I consider the literary effect of discordant gender in the book of Ruth, where grammatical gender is

⁴ See especially Rendsburg, *Diglossia in Ancient Hebrew*, 35–61.

⁵ So Joüon §149b; and Robert Polzin, *Late Biblical Hebrew: Toward an Historical Typology of Biblical Hebrew Prose* (HSM 12; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 52–54.

⁶ Jacob M. Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth* (Leiden: Brill, 1955), 20.

⁷ See Josef Tropper, *Ugaritische Grammatik* (AOAT 273; Münster: Ugarit, 2000), 227–228.

⁸ While less common, examples of gender discord in this direction occur in Ezek 42:14; Nah 2:5; Qoh 7:27; and Ruth 1:13 (x2).

playfully employed as an honorific address, or to describe women acting in roles more typically gendered as male. In so doing, I provide a new access to understanding the characterization of the male and female figures in the book of Ruth. While philology encompasses the study of grammar, literary criticism, and interpretation,⁹ grammar is often restricted to merely the linguistic aspects of philology, while literary criticism and interpretation are the primary modes used to unpack and uncover ancient texts like the Hebrew Bible. Yet as this essay seeks to show, grammar itself can be utilized as a literary strategy and as such, is essential to the interpretative task.

		Singular	Plural
Second Person	Masculine	<i>'attāh</i>	<i>'attem</i>
	Feminine	<i>'att</i>	<i>'attēnnāh / 'atten</i>
Third Person	Masculine	<i>hū'</i>	<i>hēmmāh / hēm</i>
	Feminine	<i>hī'</i>	<i>hēnnāh</i>

Table One: Independent Personal Pronouns in Biblical Hebrew

		Singular	Plural
Second Person	Masculine	<i>-kā</i>	<i>-kem</i>
	Feminine	<i>-k</i>	<i>-ken</i>
Third Person	Masculine	<i>-ō</i>	<i>-ām</i>
	Feminine	<i>-āh</i>	<i>-ān</i>

Table Two: Pronominal Suffixes in Biblical Hebrew

⁹ See the first definition of “philology” given by the *New English Dictionary*: “Love of learning and literature; the study of literature, in a wide sense, including grammar, literary criticism and interpretation, the relation of literature and written records to history, etc.; literary or classical scholarship; polite learning.”

Gender Discord in the Book of Ruth

Discordant gender is particularly well represented in the book of Ruth, which features nine instances of gender mismatch with pronouns and pronominal suffixes (1:8, 9, 11, 13 [x3], 19, 22; 4:11), as well as with one *qatal* verb. In the majority of these instances, the pronoun matches the expected form of the masculine plural, though the obvious antecedents are two women (1:8, 9, 11, 13, 19, 22; 4:11). There are also two instances in which a feminine plural pronoun is applied to two men (1:13).¹⁰ The gender confusion is limited to three specific situations. The majority of the occurrences are in the first chapter of the book,

¹⁰ A further example of gender discord at the lexical level may be Ruth 2:21, where Ruth describes how Boaz had told her to keep close to his male servants, *hannē'ārīm*, although actually he had spoken of his female servants, *na'ārōtāy* (2:8). When Naomi repeats Ruth's statement, she reverts back to the female noun (2:22). However, this may be the result of a scribal error arising out of the graphical confusion of *n'rwt* with *n'rym* (so Paul Joüon, *Ruth: Commentaire philologique et exégétique* [Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1986], 52–53, 64–65; cf. Yair Zakovitz, *Das Buch Rut: Ein jüdischer Kommentar* [Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Biblewerk, 1999], 65, 129–130). Timothy Lim interestingly suggests that the author has Ruth misunderstand or misremember Boaz's words on purpose, in order to represent a speech phenomenon common among bilinguals, where an inappropriate word or term is used in the target language (Timothy H. Lim, "How Good Was Ruth's Hebrew? Ethnic and Linguistic Otherness in the Book of Ruth," in *The "Other" in Second Temple Judaism: Essays in Honor of John J. Collins* [ed. Daniel C. Harlow, Karina Martin Hogan, Matthew Goff, and Joel S. Kaminsky; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011], 101–115, here 107–108). Whether we prefer to account for this instance as scribal error or literary strategy, it seems less secure than the other instances of gender discord in the book of Ruth, and accordingly I have left it out of my discussion.

where they are spoken by Naomi, who is addressing her two daughters-in-law and describing the possible future male offspring which she is unlikely to have:

But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you (*‘immāhem*), as you have dealt (*‘āsîtem*) with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you (*lākem*) in the house of her husband!” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept (1:8–9).

But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your (*lākem*) husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, for them (*lāken*) would you therefore wait till they were grown? For them (*lāken*) would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your (*mikkem*) sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me” (1:11–13).

Further instances occur when the narrative describes Naomi and Ruth’s journey together into Jerusalem:

So the two of them (*šētēhem*) went on until they came to Bethlehem (1:19).

And they (*hēmmāh*) came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest (1:22).

And the final instance occurs in the blessing which describes Ruth in parallel to Rachel and Leah:

Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together (*šētēhem*) built up the house of Israel” (4:11).

Typical explanations for these instances of gender discord in the book of Ruth appeal to the phenomenon of gender neutralization, often noting that the book likely stems from the post-exilic period;¹¹ or alternatively to the linguistic retention of the dual,¹² in spite of the usually post-exilic dating preferred for the book.¹³ A third explanation accounts for the unusual masculine endings as dialectical variations,¹⁴ and in this context it is often noted that Ruth herself is a foreigner and therefore we might expect her Hebrew to exhibit regional

¹¹ Joüon §149b; *GKC* §135o; and Donald R. Vance, *A Hebrew Reader for Ruth* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 9–10, 12.

¹² Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 7; Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 65; Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 4; and Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 45. Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth*, 20, accordingly argues for an early dating for the composition of the book of Ruth.

¹³ Very often the book of Ruth is understood to be a literary response to the endogamic marriage legislation of Ezra–Nehemiah (Ezra 9:10–17; Neh 13:23–27) and hence dated to the Persian period. See, e.g., Marjo C.A. Korpel, *The Structure of the Book of Ruth* (Assen: Koninklijke van Gorcum, 2001), 320–333; and Zakovitch, *Das Buch Ruth*, 38–41, 62–64.

¹⁴ Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (NAC 6; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 633 n. 49; Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth*, 20.

peculiarities¹⁵ (albeit seven of the ten instances of gender discord are put into the mouth of the Israelite, Naomi—and none are spoken by Ruth).

Yet none of these explanations take into account why these apparently masculine forms occur, sometimes even in the same verse, with the expected feminine plural suffix pronoun. The narrator consistently mixes his forms, problematizing explanations on the basis of gender neutralization, linguistic retention, or dialectical variation. Recently, Andrew Davis has reconsidered gender disagreement in the book of Ruth. Without discounting any of the alternative explanations usually put forward to account for the phenomenon, Davis suggests taking into consideration the *literary effect* of gender discord in the book of Ruth. His reading of the book suggests three possible intended outcomes. When placed into the mouth of Naomi, he argues that gender discord has implications for her characterization, with the use of masculine forms applied to her daughters-in-law due to her ambivalence toward them. Secondly, when applied to Ruth and Naomi together, gender discord highlights the incongruity of their partnership. Finally, the blessing, though usually read as a positive assessment of Rachel and Leah, actually revisits aspects of the troubled relationship between Ruth and Naomi, by reminding the reader of the earlier occurrences of the discordant forms. In so doing, the blessing actually highlights the tension between the pair.¹⁶

Another commentator who has considered gender discord in the book of Ruth from an alternative direction is Timothy Lim. Like Davis, he reorients the

¹⁵ Robert D. Holmstedt, *Ruth: A Handbook of the Hebrew Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 47, refers to this as “style-switching,” utilized to give the book a foreign coloring.

¹⁶ Andrew R. Davis, “The Literary Effect of Gender Discord in the Book of Ruth,” *JBL* 132 (2013): 495–513.

discussion by considering gender discord as a literary strategy, although the effects that he discerns as resulting from this strategy differ from the conclusions garnered by Davis. Davis typically understands gender discord in the book of Ruth to have a negative outcome in terms of character portrayal, determining that Naomi views her daughters-in-law with “ambivalence,” or that her pairing with Ruth is “incongruous.” Lim, on the other hand, argues that this linguistic feature constitutes a literary technique utilized by the author to distinguish the speech of the aged. Lim counts only six to Davis’s ten instances of discordant gender,¹⁷ noting that all but one of these occurs in the speech of Naomi and the elders. The author, he argues, is attempting to mark the speech of these figures as archaizing, reflecting their age in comparison to that of the younger characters. Accordingly, he explains away the two instances of discordant gender found in the mouth of the narrator as a scribal error.¹⁸

I find Davis’s and Lim’s suggestion that there is a literary intentionality to the gender discord present in the book of Ruth intriguing. Nevertheless, I wish

¹⁷ This is perhaps due to the disagreement among commentators concerning *lāken* in 1:13 (x2). Davis understands this as the use of the feminine plural suffix applied to Naomi’s two (hypothetical) sons and so as a further example of gender discord; an alternative reading is to take the lexemes in question as the Aramaic particle *lāken*, “therefore” (cf. Dan 2:6, 9; 4:24). Although gender discord in this direction is much less common in Biblical Hebrew (cf. e.g., Ezek 42:14; Nah 2:5; and Qoh 7:27), Davis notes that the versions unanimously support the reading “for them” (Davis, “Gender Discord in the Book of Ruth,” 499).

¹⁸ Timothy H. Lim, “The Book of Ruth and Its Literary Voice,” in *Reflection and Refraction: Studies in Biblical Historiography in Honour of A. Graeme Auld* (ed. Robert Rezetko, Timothy H. Lim, and W. Brian Aucker; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 261–282, here 275; cf. idem, “How Good Was Ruth’s Hebrew?” 111–112.

to problematize Davis's suggestion that gender discord must be understood to imply a negative outcome in terms of character portrayal, or Lim's proposal that it marks the speech of the elderly. In the case of Davis, there is an incongruity to the argument that gender discord marks Naomi's ambivalence to Ruth, while at the same time being utilized at precisely the instances when they act as a united front, or when the elders wish to praise Rachel and Leah. In the case of Lim, gender discord as a feature of the speech of the aged only works if alternative data is explained away as scribal error.¹⁹ Instead, in order to further explore the literary effect of discordant gender, I draw upon an additional pool of data in order to provide an alternative possible explanation for understanding the phenomenon. In the case of the argument for gender neutralization, the explanation derives from historical Hebrew grammar; while comparative Semitic philology may be utilized to make the case for the linguistic retention of the dual. Comparative Semitics typically focuses upon one of the major subsystems of language classification, be this phonology, morphology, syntax, or lexicon. But as well as these subsystems, more recently it has been recognized that comparative *semantics* may also be a valuable tool for elucidating language choice and change in a given language system.²⁰ Thus, as well as looking to

¹⁹ We might also wish to ask why gender discord is not put into the mouth of Boaz, who is also depicted as elderly (see Ruth 3:18). Indeed, Paul Humbert, "Art et leçon de l'histoire de Ruth," in *Opuscules d'un hébraïsant* (Neuchâtel: Université de Neuchâtel, 1958), 83–110, has argued that the addition of the archaizing *nun-paragogicum* in certain prefixed conjugations in the speech of Naomi and Boaz characterizes their speech as aged.

²⁰ See, e.g., Takamitsu Muraoka (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Hebrew Semantics* (Abr-Nahrain Sup 4; Louvain: Peeters, 1994); idem (ed.), *Semantics of Ancient Hebrew* (Abr-

lexical cognates employed across Semitic languages, we might also look to lexemes which, though not cognate, are employed to express a similar semantic range or with similar intent and purpose. Study of semantic parallels between languages can sometimes be more informative than a traditional comparison of formally cognate roots.²¹ We would do well to take into consideration cross-linguistic semantic comparisons as well as more traditional methods of comparative Semitic lexicography.

My Lord the Queen: Gender Discord in Neo-Assyrian Texts

In the case of discordant gender, there are also instances of mismatch between grammatical and biological gender in Mesopotamian texts, and here these occurrences seem to be purposefully and deliberately employed. In a recent monograph, Saana Svärd has considered the role of women in Neo-Assyrian palaces.²² Svärd maps hierarchical and heterarchical power dynamics held by women at the royal court through a close study of the textual evidence. In particular, she considers the *šēgallu* (MÍ.É.GAL, lit. “women of the palace”²³),

Nahrain Sup 6; Louvain: Peeters, 1998); and the articles collected in *Zeitschrift für Althebräistik* 6:1 (1993) and 7:1 (1994).

²¹ Sonja Noll, “The Semantics of Silence in Biblical Hebrew” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oxford, 2018), 309.

²² With “palace” here functioning as a cipher for more abstract conceptions of “administration” and “government” rather than the physical structure itself.

²³ The derivation of *šēgallu* from **issi ekalli*, “the woman of the palace,” has been elaborated by Simo Parpola. Parpola argues on the basis of analogy to the derivation of the phonologically comparable Neo-Assyrian pair *issi aḥāiš*, “together,” which became a conjunct, with the crasis of the final vowel of the first element and the initial vowel of the second: *issi aḥāiš* > *issāḥāiš*, whereby Parpola argued **issi ekalli* > **issēkalli*. This

usually translated as “queen” by most modern commentators (*šarratu*, lit. “female king,” is instead reserved for female tribal leaders and goddesses rather than a queen proper). Svärd cautions against too easily associating the title with the wife of the king or mother of the crown prince. Indeed, while the king could father children with a number of different women, Svärd argues that only one woman at a time could enjoy the title, and that this individual could continue her role even after the death of her king. Only in death—or deposition by the king—was the title passed on. The title could also be applied retrospectively, as seems to have been the case with Esarhaddon’s mother, Naqi’a.²⁴ This “rewriting of history” by Esarhaddon saw his mother’s status elevated according to his own long-range political agendas. As a *šēgallu*, Naqi’a was able to take on a role “similar to that of the king,” as documented by the Zakûtu treaty (SAA 2 8) and building inscriptions associated with the queen: Naqi’a and *šēgallu* like her had real, hierarchical authority at court.²⁵ Accordingly, Svärd uncovers an important

latter lexeme then underwent aphaeresis of its initial vowel with the concomitant simplification of the *ss* cluster (cf. *iššaššūmi* > *šaššūmi*; *ikkillu* > *killu*; **akkēlamši* > *kēlanši*, etc.). Since in Neo-Assyrian intervocalic *k* tended to be voiced, we get *šēgallu*. See Simo Parpola, “The Neo-Assyrian Word for ‘Queen,’” *SAAB* 2 (1988): 73–76. This is a “semantically perfect” ancestor for Biblical Hebrew *šēgāl*, “queen” (Neh 2:6; Ps 45:10). See Paul V. Mankowski, *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew* (HSS 47; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 135–137.

²⁴ Saana Svärd, *Women and Power in Neo-Assyrian Palaces* (SAAS 23; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2015), 44.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 58–59.

governmental office for the *šēgallu*.²⁶ The queen at the Neo-Assyrian court, then, could wield significant power, at times parallel to that of the king himself.

In the context of the powerful and important role held by the *šēgallu*, it is particularly instructive that there are several instances where grammatical discord seems to have been purposefully utilized as a form of reverence when addressing or describing them.²⁷ There are a number of instances in which the masculine noun *bēlu*, “lord,” is applied in requests and petitions to the queen. Although these instances reflect a slightly different phenomenon from the pronominal and verbal gender discord found in the book of Ruth, I suggest that we take these instances of the application of the grammatically masculine noun *bēlu* to the queen as examples of a comparable semantic situation. This

²⁶ This is in common with recent discussions of the role of the queen mother in ancient Israel, where it has been suggested that the appellative *gebîrâ*, which is applied to three of the biblical queen mothers (Maacah: 1 Kgs 15:13//2 Chr 15:16; Jezebel: 2 Kgs 10:13; and Nehushta: Jer 13:18; 29:2; but also used in other contexts elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, of a female ruler in Isa 47:5, 7; and of a mistress corresponding to the term “master” in Gen 16:4, 8, 9; 2 Kgs 5:3; Ps 123:2; Prov 30:23; and Isa 24:2), describes a formal position denoting an official role at the royal court. See Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (HSM 46; Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 181; and more recently Ginny Brewer-Boydston, *Good Queen Mothers, Bad Queen Mothers: The Theological Presentation of the Queen Mother in 1 and 2 Kings* (CBQMS 54; Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2016), 62.

²⁷ See Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *A Sketch of Neo-Assyrian Grammar* (SAAS 13; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2000), 115; and Mikko Lukko, *Grammatical Variation in Neo-Assyrian* (SAAS 16; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2004), 185.

suggestion is corroborated since very often this masculine lexeme is employed alongside instances of verbal and pronominal gender discord, exactly paralleled to the phenomenon in Biblical Hebrew.

A petition written during the reign of Esarhaddon is addressed to Queen Balti-lešir. The petition itself seems to concern a will. The letter writer begins his request by addressing the queen as “my lord” (*bēlu*):

^l <i>a</i> ^l - <i>na</i> MÍ.GAŠAN-[GIŠ EN]- <i>iá</i> ARAD- <i>ki</i> ^{md} PA-PAB-AŠ	To (the lady) Balti-lešir, my lord : your (f.) servant Nabû-ahu-iddina. (SAA 16 56).
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Interestingly here, although he calls Balti-lešir by the grammatically masculine noun *bēlu*, he goes on to use the grammatically correct second person feminine singular possessive suffix when describing himself as her servant, so ARAD-*ki*, “your (f.) servant.” This type of phrasing is not always used when addressing a queen, as we shall see below.

One letter details a correspondence between Na’id-Marduk, governor of Sealand between 680–673 B.C.E., and Naqi’a, mother of King Esarhaddon. Na’id-Marduk is fearful of an attack by Elam and consequently declares his loyalty to Assyria while at the same time requesting help. Throughout, he refers to the queen as AMA-LUGAL *be-lí-ia*, where *bēliya* could belong with either *šarri* or *ummi* and thus refer either to the king or his mother.²⁸ However, there are also

²⁸ Indeed, while there are a number of instances in the Neo-Assyrian archives where *bēliya* could belong with either *ummi* or *šarri* and thus refer either to the king or his mother (e.g. SAA 10 16, 313; SAA 13 77; and SAA 13 188), the frequency with which elsewhere *bēlu* is applied to the queen suggests translating at least some of these

two instances in which *bēlu* is explicitly applied to the queen. The first occurs in the context of the request for help, while he is expressing the urgency of the situation:

a-šap-pa-ra be-lí e-mu-qu lik-šù[d]- The forces must reach us, **my lord!**
¹*da-a'-na'-ši* (SAA 18 85, l. 15).

The letter writer uses the same strategy when expressing his devotion to Naqi'a, thus he proclaims:

a-na É.GAL al-tap-ra be-lí lu-ú i-di ki- **My lord** should know that my heart is
i ŠÀ'-ba-a it-ti É be-lí-ia gu-um-mu-ru completely devoted to **my lord's** house.
 (SAA 18 85, rev. 13'-15').

Naqi'a is in fact addressed as *bēlu* on numerous occasions. In a text known as “The Queen Mother’s Curse,”²⁹ and another known as “The Report to the Queen Mother About a Ritual,”³⁰ we find further examples of this phenomenon. In these two texts, we also find grammatical gender discord in the verbal forms with Naqi'a as their subject. Thus in “The Queen Mother’s Curse” we read:

instances as the “king’s mother, my lord,” and not the more common “the mother of the king, my lord.” See Svärd, *Women and Power in Neo-Assyrian Palaces*, 83.

²⁹ SAA 10 17.

³⁰ SAA 13 76.

ina UGU *ša* AMA-L[UGAL] **[b]e-lí iš-** Concerning what the mother of the k[ing],
pur-an-[ni] [*ma*]-[*a*] *mì*-[*i-nu*] x[x x] **my lord, wrote** to me: “What [...]”
 (Remainder lost).

(SAA 10 17, l. 6).

Here both the noun *bēlu*, as well as the verbal form *iš-pur-an-[ni]* are grammatically masculine. Unfortunately, the text breaks away and so we never find out what it was that Naqi’a had written. “The Report to the Queen Mother About a Ritual” has two instances of grammatically masculine verbal forms used with Naqi’a as their subject. The first also refers to her writing, utilizing the same lexeme, and again employed alongside the familiar use of *bēlu* (the translators from the *State Archives of Assyria* series seem unsure of what to do with this grammatically incongruous usage, and hence enclose “lord” in quotation marks when it is applied to Naqi’a):

ina UGU *ša* AMA-MAN **be-lí iš-pur-** As for what the queen mother, **my ‘lord,’**
an-ni *ma-a mi-i-nu ina ŠÀ dul-li il-lak* **wrote** to me, saying: “What is going into
 the ritual?”

(SAA 13 76, ll. 10–11).

The second instance again sees a grammatically masculine verbal form employed in the immediate context of the use of *bēlu* to designate the queen, and describes the queen mother making a command, namely concerning who should carry out the ritual in question:

man-nu ša AMA-LUGAL **be-lí i-qab-** Whomever the queen mother, **my ‘lord,’**
bu-u-ni *qu-up-pu li-ip-te dul-lu le-e-pu-* **designates** should open the basket and
uš perform the ritual.

(SAA 13 76 ll. 9–12).

In these three instances of verbal gender discord, then, we see the queen mother acting in typically high-status roles, writing and giving commands.

In another report addressed to Naqi’a, as well as two further instances in which the queen mother is described as a *bēlu*, we also find the second person masculine pronominal suffix applied when Naqi’a herself is clearly the antecedent. The letter writer Ašaredu is addressing a report to the queen mother:

a-na AMA-LUGAL *be-lí-ia* [[]] To the mother of the king, **my lord: your**
ARAD-ka ^m*a-ša-re-du* **servant**, Ašaredu.

(SAA 18 10 ll. 1–3).

Here Ašaredu describes himself as ARAD-*ka*, “your (m.) servant,” going on to request blessings for the queen mother from Nabû, Marduk, Nergal, and Laš. Further examples of discord in the pronominal suffixes applied to Naqi’a are found in the Sealand letter, when the queen mother is petitioned for help against an invasion. Na’id-Marduk also describes himself as ARAD-*ka*, “your (m.) servant,” again immediately following his employment of *bēlu* as an honorific to describe the queen.³¹

In all of the examples of gender discord in these Neo-Assyrian texts, the immediate context is one in which reverence and deference is required, that is, when making requests or when stating devotion. Gender discord is employed to describe high status activities of the queen, such as writing and legislation. It is not possible to construe any of these occurrences as derogatory. Indeed, in her building inscription, Naqi’a utilizes the grammatically masculine *bēlu* in her own

³¹ SAA 18 85.

first-person speech, recalling how her son gave her war captives “as my lordly portion” (*bēlūtiya*).³² Svärd writes that these influential women came to be seen as “honorary males” in a society where institutional authority was most often a masculine property.³³ As a corollary, it seems that in instances where one wished to be particularly deferential to these women, or to describe their activities in typically high status roles, grammatically masculine forms were utilized. We see this in both the application of the grammatically masculine noun *bēlu* to these women, as well as in discordant verbal forms and pronominal suffixes. And here gender discord must be understood as a utilization of a literary strategy, employed as an honorific in deference to these important female figures, especially when they take on typically male roles.³⁴

³² RINAP 4 3003 and 2004.

³³ Svärd, *Women and Power in Neo-Assyrian Palaces*, 83.

³⁴ In this essay, I have focused on gender discord as a literary strategy in Neo-Assyrian texts. However, the phenomenon is actually more widespread than this in the Mesopotamian world. The brevity of this enquiry is not supportive to a full sketch of the uses of discordant gender in the Mesopotamian material, however Philippe Abrahams has considered the use of masculine determinatives before women’s names in some of the Nuzi documents as an indicator of special status for these women, who are given legal capacities usually ascribed only to men. See Philippe Abrahams, “Masculine and Feminine Personal Determinatives before Women’s Names at Nuzi: A Gender Indicator of Social or Economic Independence?” *CDLB* 1 (2011): 1–3; cf. Brigitte Lion, “Work and Gender in Nuzi Society,” in *The Role of Women in Work and Society in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Brigitte Lion and Cécile Michel; SANER 13; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 354–370, here 364, who argues that male determinatives could be used at Nuzi for women working in typically male professional roles. I would like to thank Jonathan Stökl for directing me towards these references.

Reinterpreting Gender Discord in the Book of Ruth

This use of discordant gender as a form of reverent address or honorific could be instructive when applied to some of the instances of gender discord in the Hebrew Bible. If we return to the three situations in which gender discord occurs in the book of Ruth, it is possible to interpret each situation accordingly. Thus, while Davis argues that Naomi uses discordant gender in her speech when talking to her daughters-in-law in order to highlight her ambivalence toward them, we might also understand this as Naomi highlighting her reliance upon them: Naomi is addressing her daughters-in-law as the sons whom she had lost. Indeed, the sons she did have were no good to her, their uselessness reflected in their very names, *mahlôn* and *kilyôn*—the former from the root *hlh*, “to be weak, sick,”³⁵ and the latter from *klh*, “to be complete, at an end, accomplished, spent.”³⁶ Both names have an *-ôn* suffix used for diminutives, suggesting the translations “Sickling” and “Weakling.”³⁷ In her speech, Naomi bemoans not just the loss of these first two useless sons but also the uselessness of any other possible future sons who may be born to her:

If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, for them (*lāken*) would you therefore wait till they were grown? For them (*lāken*) would you therefore refrain from marrying? (1:13).

³⁵ GK 2703, 2704.

³⁶ GK 3983, 3986.

³⁷ There is a further pun here between the name *mahlôn* with *naḥālātô*, “inheritance.” See Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991), 252. A “weakling” was never going to be able to ensure the inheritance or survival of a household—but Ruth will.

In this context, it is worth noting that we have two further instances of gender discord here, this time in the opposite direction: Naomi describes these two hypothetical male offspring using the preposition *l-* with the third person feminine plural suffix. Naomi's sons, both actual and potential, have been as beneficial to her as daughters would have been: they have left her just as bereft of offspring as if she had had daughters who had married and moved away to the houses of their husbands.³⁸ Instead, it is her daughters-in-law that she has been left with, and so she blesses them, using masculine grammatical forms: "May the

³⁸ The use of grammatically feminine suffixes as a strategy to describe these ineffectual men could be instructive when applied to other apparently feminine grammatical forms utilized for male subjects, for example the name of the speaker in the book of Qohelet, *qōhelet*, which has the same grammatical form as the feminine singular *qal* active participle. This is usually parsed as a masculine form by grammarians, for example by explaining the feminine singular *-et* ending as an "intensive nuance" on the basis of parallels with Arabic (e.g., Joüon §89b; *BDB*, 875a); the verbs with *qōhelet* as their subject are masculine in Qoh 1:2; 12:8, 9, and 10. On the other hand, in Qoh 7:27 the MT reads *'āmērâ qōhelet*, "says Qohelet," using the third person feminine singular verbal form. The usual solution given for this is that here we have a scribal error of word division, with the feminine suffix on the verb understood as the *h* of the definite article. The corrected reading would then be *'āmar haqqōhelet*, "says the teacher" (see *GKC* §122r). Yet it is surely significant that this is the only instance in which Qohelet speaks outside of the prologue and epilogue to the book. Given the apparently feminine *-et* ending of *qōhelet* alongside this instance of the third person feminine singular verbal form, we might suggest that grammatical gender is also being utilized to literary effect at various places in the book of Qohelet. Grammatical gender in this case could be understood as a parodic or pejorative value judgement on the traditional wisdom tenets espoused by the speaker.

LORD deal kindly with you (*‘immāhem*), as you have dealt (*‘ăšîtem*) with the dead and with me” (Ruth 1:8). In this instance, it should be noted that at the close of the book, Ruth is praised as more valuable to Naomi than seven sons (Ruth 4:14).³⁹ Gender discord here could be understood as a form of respect or an expression of her reliance upon these two women. It is through Ruth and not her male offspring that Naomi will be able to preserve the familial line. In the same way, she entreats her daughters-in-law to return to their *mother’s* houses, and not their father’s houses, as we might expect. Our gendered expectations are subverted and reversed.

This understanding may also be at work with the discordant forms utilized to describe Naomi and Ruth walking together. Pace Davis, rather than stressing the incongruity of the partnership, instead we see Naomi and Ruth walking together with purposeful strength and solidarity. For the pair to survive, Ruth will need to glean in the fields, the danger of which is made apparent by Boaz’s request that she stay near to his servants (Ruth 2:8). Ruth’s activities are precarious and put her in the publicly visible sphere, and as such could be said to conform more to male gendered expectations than to female. To ensure their survival, Naomi and Ruth must adopt masculine roles and are hence described using masculine grammatical forms, just as was the queen mother at the Neo-Assyrian court when taking on traditionally masculine functions and responsibilities. As Davis notes in his article, this is also at play in at least two other examples of gender discord: the daughters of Zelophehad in Joshua 17 and

³⁹ See also Jacqueline Vayntrub, “Like Father, Like Son: Theorizing Transmission in Biblical Literature,” *HeBAI* 7 (2019): 500–562, here 518–524, who has described Ruth’s obedience to Naomi in terms of “filial obedience,” obeying as a son would.

the daughters of Job in Job 42 are referred to with masculine suffixes precisely in instances where the daughters assume the role of male inheritor.⁴⁰

The final instance of discordant gender occurs in the blessing which describes Ruth in parallel to Rachel and Leah. Davis interprets this instance to be a literary strategy employed to remind the reader of Naomi and Ruth's troubled relationship, even as Ruth is praised and the story reaches its happy conclusion. But rather than being applied to Ruth, the masculine forms are applied to Rachel and Leah, in praise of their reproductivity:

Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together (*šētēhem*) built up the house of Israel." (4:11).

Here again it could be argued that discordant gender is being utilized as a mark of respect. Interestingly, rather than being praised for adopting traditionally male roles or attributes, Rachel and Leah are praised for their fertility in producing sons. Thus, as well as being appropriate to describe women engaged in behaviors typically gendered "male," gender discord as a form of praise could be utilized precisely when a woman was considered to have successfully performed her biological obligation, the production of male offspring: praise where praise is due.

The literary artistry of the book of Ruth is well known to commentators,⁴¹ and perhaps as such, the use of grammatical gender to further aid characterization and rhetoric in the book should not surprise us. Elsewhere the author has made use of linguistic register to remarkably subtle effect. The book features several

⁴⁰ Davis, "The Literary Effect of Gender Discord in the Book of Ruth," 506.

⁴¹ Campbell, *Ruth*, 10, describes the author of the book as "a genius."

archaizing verbal forms (the addition of *nun-paragogicum* in certain prefixed conjugations), a phenomenon which occurs some 304 times in Biblical Hebrew, particularly in earlier writings.⁴² While most scholars understand this in morphological terms, indicating the use of archaic forms, Paul Humbert has noted that in the book of Ruth these forms are exclusively placed in direct speech: twice found in the speech of Naomi,⁴³ the elder woman; and three times by Boaz,⁴⁴ who is elsewhere in the book depicted as aged.⁴⁵ The one other instance is spoken by Ruth: but here she is reporting the direct speech of Boaz; otherwise Ruth does not make use of this linguistic phenomenon. Rather than using this feature to date the book to an archaic period on the basis of a traditional recourse to historical Hebrew grammar, Humbert explains this phenomenon in a literary sense: “verbales archaïsantes” marks the speech of the elderly.⁴⁶ We might also note the somewhat idiomatic Classical Hebrew dialect in which Ruth’s own speech is couched, reminding the audience that this character is a foreign woman and not a native speaker of Hebrew.⁴⁷ Indeed, the reorientation of the question of Ruth’s linguistic register vis-à-vis Hebrew versus Moabite made by Timothy Lim is reminiscent of the move to consider the literary effect of gender discord. Lim reminds us of the fictional context of the book, and thus rather than couching his study into Ruth’s language according to the question of the mutual

⁴² Jean Hoftijzer, *The Function and Use of Imperfect Forms with Nun Paragogicum in Classical Hebrew* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1985), 2.

⁴³ Ruth 3:4; 3:19.

⁴⁴ Ruth 2:8; 2:9 (x2).

⁴⁵ In Ruth 3:18, Boaz praises Ruth for approaching him rather than younger men, implying that he is far older than she.

⁴⁶ Humbert, “Art et leçon de l’histoire de Ruth,” 83–110.

⁴⁷ See Lim, “How Good Was Ruth’s Hebrew?”

comprehensibility of Moabite and Hebrew, instead Lim asks “How good did the author make Ruth’s Hebrew?”⁴⁸ We might also phrase this as “what is the *literary effect* of Ruth’s idiomatic speech in the book that bears her name?”

Historical Hebrew grammar and comparative philology have been the traditional recourse to explain unusual linguistic phenomenon in Biblical Hebrew. Without ever meaning to deny the efficacy of this kind of approach, literary intentionality must also be considered in this context too. In the case of gender discord, comparative semantics offers an alternative solution to explain the phenomenon which is not mutually exclusive to the recourse to comparative philology, but rather provides a nuance to it. In the book of Ruth, just as in the Neo-Assyrian texts, discordant gender seems to have been utilized at precisely the instances when the author wishes to stress the male roles adopted by the female characters, or to bestow praise upon them. In the ancient world, the pervasive ideology of gender understood men as the norm and women as the other, as most devastatingly described in the Classical world by Aristotle.⁴⁹ In such societies, it is perhaps not surprising that women acting with authority or who held positions of high status were understood as honorary males. Whatever the unsavory

⁴⁸ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁹ Aristotle notoriously characterized the differences between men and women in his *History of Animals*: “The fact is, the nature of man is the most rounded off and complete” (608^a32–^b14). Aristotle wrote that women were incomplete males, unable to achieve the “heat,” “dryness,” or impermeability of their male counterparts (Hippocrates, *Acut.* 1.34; cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 3.3. See G.E.R. Lloyd, “The Hot and the Cold, the Dry and the Wet in Greek Philosophy,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 84 [1964]: 92-106). On Aristotle’s construction of gender, see Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution, 750 BC-AD 1250* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

implications of this observation, in the case of the book of Ruth, the author has utilized gender discord to literary effect. Understanding the implication of this effect is essential to properly comprehending and unpacking the story and its characters, where male and female roles are frequently upended and subverted. Ruth is indeed as valuable as seven sons would have been.

Summary:

Gender discord describes a phenomenon in Biblical Hebrew in which there is a disjuncture between the gender of a pronoun or verb with its antecedent or subject. Typically, scholarship has approached instances of this on the basis of Historical Hebrew grammar, arguing that there was a weakening in the distinction of gender in the Second Temple Period and hence the feminine plural suffix became subsumed under its masculine counterpart. On the other hand, certain Neo-Assyrian texts employ a similar grammatical strategy in which high-ranking Assyrian women are referred to, reverently, with male titles. Influential women of the court in a society where institutional authority was most often a masculine property come to be seen as “honorary males” in this patriarchal social system. Beyond the grammatical explanation, in this paper I consider the literary effect of gender discord in biblical narrative in light of a comparative semantic study between gender discord in Neo-Assyrian texts and the book of Ruth.

Keywords: Gender Discord, Historical Hebrew Grammar, Comparative Semantics, Book of Ruth, Neo-Assyrian Royal Women