

Gender Representation in Biblical Hebrew

When a linguistic expression refers to a person, its representation of that referent's gender is a complex function of language structure, grammar, semantics, and pragmatics. To elucidate that relationship, this entry distinguishes four types of gender (Table 1). Herein, the term ‘reference’ means the designation of persons (including personified non-humans); it applies whether the expression is couched in the grammatical first, second, or third person.

Table 1. Four Types of Gender

<i>Gender Type</i>	<i>Description</i>
Syntactic	Formal concord that connects related words
Lexical	A noun's semantic gender specificity
Referential	A linguistic expression's characterization of the referent as being socially gendered (or not)
Social	The culture's continual construction of womanliness and manliness (West and Zimmerman 1987).

A text that employs word forms that are characteristically ‘feminine’ (or, in linguistic terms, ‘marked’ syntactic gender) regards its referent as womanly, e.g., *תַּהֲלֵד אֶת-קַיִן wat-tēled 'et-qayin* ‘[she] birthed Cain’ (Gen. 4.1). Conversely, a text with ‘masculine’ word forms (or, more precisely, ‘zero-marked’; Tobin 2001:179–185) regards the referent's social gender as manly, e.g., *וַיֹּולֶד אֶת-קְנָעֵן way-yōled 'et-qēnān* ‘[he] fathered Kenan’ (Gen. 5.9), or as either unknown, indeterminate, or irrelevant, e.g., *כָּל-אַكְל מַהְמֵּצָת kāl-'ōkēl mahmeṣet* ‘whoever eats [what is] leavened’ (Exod. 12.19). Forcing the speaker to make a choice, this linguistic convention provides a referential-gender dichotomy that is asymmetric: womanly versus not-specifically-womanly (Stein 2008c).

Often a referring expression categorizes (rather than identifies) its referent, meaning ‘whoever fits the description’. If it categorizes without using marked (‘feminine’) syntactic gender or womanly lexical gender, then the referential gender remains unspecified (Schramm 1992:207); if the referential function is generic, then so is the referential gender (Stein 2008c). This explains how numerous biblical passages manage to make gender-inclusive reference via so-called male nouns such as *בֵּן bēn* ‘offshoot’ and *צָרֵשׂ tsarēš* ‘participant’ (on this as the primary sense, see Stein 2008a), e.g., *כָּל-זָקֵר בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן kāl-zākēr bēnē 'ahārōn* ‘every male among Aaron's descendants’ (Lev. 6.11); *בְּנֵי שָׁבֵת ha-hū* ‘against that party’ (Deut. 29.19), whose antecedent in verse 17 is *וְתִשְׁפַּחַת אִישׁ אֶת-אֶשֶׁת 'o-tishphāħat 'iś-āset* ‘a nonwomanly or womanly member or a clan or a tribe’. Any related word that is subject to syntactic-gender concord is then zero-marked (‘masculine’)

only for the sake of concord (e.g., verse 19’s demonstrative pronoun *הַזֶּה ha-hū* ‘that one’); it has no bearing on referential gender.

When referential gender is unspecified, women are in view by default. This explains why, when a narrative's character makes a categorizing reference via a singular ‘masculine’ term, other characters matter-of-factly consider women to be included (Gen. 23.2–15; Exod. 35.5–6 in light of v. 22; Josh. 2.19 in light of 6.22–23; Judg. 11.30–31 in light of vv. 34–40; Jer. 34.14 in light of vv. 9, 16).

When a referring expression is a compound noun whose elements include both lexical genders (womanly and nonwomanly nouns), it necessarily categorizes its referent. Subsequent co-references maintain the gender inclusivity via syntactic zero-marking (‘masculine’), e.g., *וְגַם־בְּנֵי־וְבָנָה־אֲתָה wa-yānăšeq lə-bānāw wə-li-bnōtāw wa-ybārek 'ethem* ‘[he] kissed his sons and daughters and blessed them’ (Gen. 32.1; occasionally, the co-references are ‘feminine’; in prose texts, such usage is pragmatically motivated, imparting extra meaning [Ratner 1990; Joüon and Muraoka 2006:520–521].) As scholars classically state this rule, Hebrew grants its ‘masculine’ forms “precedence” or “priority” or considers them “more potent” (GKC 1910: 391; Corbett 1991:279–280; Joüon and Muraoka 2006: 514, 516; van der Merwe et al. 2002:181).

Some scholars attribute this syntactic pattern to androcentrism: the Israelites viewed the prototype human as male (Waltke and O'Connor 1990:108; Hellinger and Bußmann 2001:10). Some cite similarly non-linguistic reasons to account for how the Bible could use ‘male’ terms gender-inclusively, as discussed above. Thus David Kimhi (1847: 14) explained why *אִישׂ tsarēš* ‘participant’ can designate both social genders: *זָכָר zakar—išša le-śido* ‘a male [includes] a womanly affiliate at his side.’ Grudem (1998: 274) speculated that because the Israelites knew people to be “either male or female, not gender-neutral”, they must have initially construed a ‘male’ noun's referent as male.

However, given Hebrew's gender-representational schema, all such non-linguistic explanations are superfluous. Linguistic factors alone can account for both the Bible's preference for ‘masculine’ forms and its employment of ‘male’ nouns gender-inclusively. Such expressions arise naturally from the expected neutral function of zero-marking within a categorizing reference.

Gender-neutral reference does not mean that the actual referent includes women (Stein 2009). Intervening factors include: (1) *literary expression*: biblical style features synecdoche, a figure of speech that can reference a subgroup via a whole-group term—conveying that the subgroup functionally represents the whole. Thus the all-male militia can be designated by a (gender-inclusive) national term, e.g.,

לְאַתְּ רָאשׁ בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל ki tisšār 'et-rōš bənē-yiśrā'ēl 'when you count heads of the Israelites' (Exod. 30.12); (2) *social-gender homophora*: a societally based exclusion of women might go without saying. This applies, for example, when references are made to soldiers in military settings, because the ancient audience knew that only men were warriors; (3) *further specification in the co-text*: for example, when שָׂמֶן 'is' 'participant' is counterposed with שָׂמֶן ištō 'his [?] womanly partner' (Gen. 2.24), it alludes to the (heterosexual) institution of marriage, implying that the referent of the zero-marked term must be manly; (4) *lexical gender*: when the noun's lexical gender is invariably manly, e.g., זְכָר zākār 'male', that semantic component necessarily excludes a womanly referent.

If a speaker identifies (rather than categorizes) a referent, then unless the identification is womanly, zero-marked ('masculine') syntactic gender and/or lexically unmarked ('male') substantives are used, regardless of whether the perceived social gender is definitely manly. Thus to identify an about-to-be-born character of unknown sex, Gen. 38.28 employs zero-marked inflections (**וַיַּטְבֹּל** way-yitten-yād '[it] extended a hand'; **וַיָּשָׁאַל** 'yāṣāl' '[it] came out') and zero-marked pronouns (**וְיַדְךָ** yādō 'its hand'; **זֶה** ze 'this one'). Likewise whenever the Bible refers to Israel's deity, it zero-marks the syntactic gender, consistent with the perception of God as beyond social-gender categorization (Stein 2008b:110–111).

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