

A Rabbi Claims That God Is Transgender

In an August 12 op-ed piece for the *New York Times* entitled “Is God Transgender?”, Rabbi Mark Sameth claims that “the Hebrew Bible, when read in its original language, offers a highly elastic view of gender” and that, “counter to everything we grew up believing, the God of Israel—the God of the three monotheistic, Abrahamic religions to which fully half the people on the planet today belong—was understood by its earliest worshipers to be a dual-gendered deity.”

Are there any truths to these claims?

Certainly not.

For Rabbi Sameth, these are issues of social concern and not merely theological abstractions, as he states explicitly at the outset of his article: “I’m a rabbi, and so I’m particularly saddened whenever religious arguments are brought in to defend social prejudices—as they often are in the discussion about transgender rights.”

The real question, though, for Jews and Christians who look to the Hebrew Scriptures as God’s Word is very simple: What do the Scriptures teach? What is the explicit testimony of the Bible?

Had Rabbi Sameth simply stated that God transcends gender, I would have no argument.

Had he only said that when God created human beings He created them male and female, indicating that the fullness of the meaning of both male and female is to be found in God, I would have concurred.

And had Rabbi Sameth pointed out that there are aspects of

motherly care attributed to God in the Scriptures (for example Isaiah 49:15), I would also have concurred. (Note that rabbinic teaching about the Shechinah emphasizes the motherly aspects of God).

But what the rabbi argues for is much more than this, and since he is making these arguments with social implications, it is important that we respond with clarity.

Rabbi Sameth claims that, "The four-Hebrew-letter name of God, which scholars refer to as the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, was probably not pronounced 'Jehovah' or 'Yahweh,' as some have guessed. The Israelite priests would have read the letters in reverse as Hu/Hi—in other words, the hidden name of God was Hebrew for 'He/She.'"

There is not a stitch of evidence to support this—and I mean not a stitch. Nowhere do we read in any ancient biblical text that the divine name was read backwards by priests; you might as well argue that readers of this article read my name backwards. This is not suggested in any authoritative writing and there is zero evidence that YHWH was ever taken to mean "He/She."

The argument is utterly preposterous, and I write this with all respect to the many years of study that Rabbi Sameth has put into this subject. Perhaps he is reading his ideas into the biblical text?

The name YHWH is introduced in the context of God's self-revelation that "I am that I am," or "I will be who I will be" (Exodus 3:14), using the related root HYH, meaning that the name YHWH is derived from HYH/HWH. To be precise, it is a third-person, masculine singular imperfect verbal form.

More importantly, of the more than 6,000 times that the name YHWH occurs, it never occurs with a feminine adjective or verbal form. The name is exclusively masculine.

Even more importantly, this is the consistent revelation of God in the Scriptures: He is the heavenly Father, not the heavenly mother; He is a man of war, not a woman of war; He is the King, not the queen; He is the Shepherd, not the shepherdess; He is the Husband to the widow, not the wife of the widower; He is the Lord, not the lady, the Master, not the mistress; He is the Groom while Israel is the Bride—and on and on it goes, countless thousands of times.

So we can say emphatically that Rabbi Sameth is flat wrong in claiming that the God of the Bible “was understood by its earliest worshipers to be a dual-gendered deity.”

What about his claim that the Hebrew Bible, when read in its original language, has a “highly elastic” view of gender (he adds with emphasis, “And I do mean highly elastic”)?

Here too he is completely wrong, as even a cursory reading of the Hebrew Bible indicates, with its very specific outlining of gender roles and gender expectations, which many “progressives” find troubling, and with verses like, “A woman must not put on man’s apparel, nor shall a man wear woman’s clothing; for whoever does these things is abhorrent to the LORD your God.” (Deuteronomy 22:5, New Jewish Version).

What about specific arguments he brings to support his case, including: “In Genesis 3:12, Eve is referred to as ‘he.’ In Genesis 9:21, after the flood, Noah repairs to ‘her’ tent. Genesis 24:16 refers to Rebecca as a ‘young man.’ And Genesis 1:27 refers to Adam as ‘them.’ . . . In Esther 2:7, Mordecai is pictured as nursing his niece Esther. In a similar way, in Isaiah 49:23, the future kings of Israel are prophesied to be ‘nursing kings.’”

The first three examples (Gen. 3:12; 9:21; and 24:16) simply reflect spelling variations or unusual spelling conventions. For example, the verbal form in Gen 3:12, referring to Eve, is feminine, while the preposition in 9:21, referring to Noah’s

tent and which is allegedly feminine, actually reflects an ancient masculine prepositional form.

As for referring to Adam as “they” in Genesis 1:27, there’s no mystery here (English readers see this as well as Hebrew readers), since “Adam” here simply means humankind, which God creates as male and female and commissions to “be fruitful and multiply,” which one individual, quite obviously, cannot do. As to how this is accomplished, see Genesis 2:1-25.

As for the idea that Mordechai, or, the Lord Himself, as Rabbi Sameth argues, is presented as a “nursing mother,” this too is misstated. Rather, the verb ‘-M-N, which is used in Esther 2:7, basically means “support, nourish,” as opposed to Y-N-Q, which refers to nursing a child. And the verb ‘-M-N, when referred to a male, means a foster-father and when applied to a female, a foster-mother. This can be seen clearly in Isaiah 49:23, a verse cited by Rabbi Sameth in support of his thesis, where it says, “Kings will be your foster-fathers [the root ‘-M-N], their princesses your nurses [the root Y-N-Q]” (Complete Jewish Bible).

So, the rabbi is not simply making a mountain out of a molehill, he is making one out of a non-existent molehill.

Again, had he argued that both male and female derive their personhood from God’s image, or had he claimed that God transcends gender, I would have agreed. And had he simply stated, “God’s Word teaches us to be compassionate towards all, and that include those who identify as transgender,” I would have affirmed this as well.

But his attempt to use the Hebrew Scriptures to support transgender activism is utterly misguided, fatally flawed and unworthy of serious consideration.

(For those curious to as my own academic qualifications in penning this response, see [here](#). For my video response to Rabbi Sameth, see [here](#).)