

The Catholic Biblical Association
of America

**Women and Gender Conference:
A Virtual Appetizer**



April 25, 2025
12:00 – 5:00 PM EDT



PROGRAM

FRIDAY APRIL 25, 2025

12:00 – 12:05 PM WELCOME

CORRINE L. CARVALHO, *University of St. Thomas*

12:05 – 2:00 PM SESSION 1: PARALLEL BREAKOUT SESSIONS

CHAIR: JOSHUA SCOTT, *Gustavus Adolphus College*

SESSION 1A – OLD TESTAMENT/SECOND TEMPLE PAPERS

◆ KARINA HOGAN, *Fordham University*

“Deborah in L.A.B.: Mother in Israel and Prophet Like Moses”

The figure of Deborah in *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (L.A.B.) 30–33 is greatly developed beyond the little that is known of her from Judges 4–5. On the one hand, L.A.B. fills out what it means to be a “mother in Israel” (Jud 5:7). Rather than literalizing this title by making her a biological mother, L.A.B. is as silent as Judges about whether Deborah had any children of her own. Instead, as Hanna Tervanotko has shown, L.A.B. construes this as a title for a woman leader of her people. Deborah is unique among the female characters in L.A.B. in many respects, including having a testament and having her death described as “sleeping with the ancestors” (L.A.B. 33:1–6). Although these facts might point to a masculinization of Deborah, in her testament she emphasizes her maternal relation to the people. Included in this maternal role are moral exhortation and instruction. At the same time, Deborah’s leadership of Israel is clearly modeled on that of Moses, and her role as a prophet is also emphasized in L.A.B. 30–33. L.A.B. uses metaphors of shepherding and bringing light, as well as Deuteronomic language in the mouth of Deborah, to connect her closely to Moses. Deborah and Moses also share certain knowledge that might be considered apocalyptic, relating to astronomical and meteorological phenomena (30:1; cf. 12:1; 19:10; 32:9) and the end times (33:3,5; cf. 19:13–14). The depiction of Deborah as a prophet like Moses is not in tension with her characterization as a “mother in Israel;” rather, both together serve to elevate Deborah to the status of one of the most important leaders in the history of Israel, according to L.A.B.

◆ ILONA RASHKOW, *Professor Emerita, SUNY Stony Brook*

“How Much Is She Worth? A Comparison of Six Ancient Near East Laws Relating to Bride-Price, Dowry, Inheritance, and Divorce”

Throughout the Ancient Near East there were plain and simple rules which define, among other things, permissible and forbidden alliances; marriage; remarriage; divorce; inheritance; and the penalties involved for violation of these laws. In some cases the laws differ depending upon the woman’s status (i.e., wealthy, poor, “free”, indentured, servant, slave, virgin, widow, minor, elderly, etc.). In all cases, however, they were detailed. These laws were not abstract, philosophical, or theological. This paper focuses on Ancient Near Eastern bride-price, dowry, inheritance, and divorce laws but none of the other laws relating to women found in the laws of Ur-Nammu (c. twenty-first century BCE), Lipit-Ishtar (c. 1950 BCE), Eshnunna (c. 1800 BCE), Hammurabi (c. 1792–1750 BCE), Middle Assyrian (c. 1400–1100 BCE), Hittite (c. 1400–1300 BCE), and the Hebrew Bible (c. 900 BCE).

◆ NATHAN C. JOHNSON, *University of Indianapolis*

“Messiahs and Masculinity: Gender and Rhetoric in Constructions of Popular Leaders in Josephus”

While the Jesus movement provides little to no detail about the physical appearance of its messiah, Josephus lavishes physical descriptors on his messiah figures. This paper examines these somatic descriptions of messianic actors in first-century Palestine and

considers their rhetorical effect. In order to gain traction on the intended effect of Josephus's physical descriptions, I engage these figures in conversation with masculinity studies (e.g., Gleason 1994; Conway 2008; Asikainen 2018). I then examine the physique of three militant messianic figures alongside Greco-Roman ideals of manliness: Simon of Perea, Athronges, and Simon bar Giora. Josephus exhibits variations on a theme with each--machismo is shown through strength, vitality, and "daring." However, I argue that Josephus's purpose is not to valorize these would-be messiahs, the enemies of the Roman empire. Instead, Josephus goes on to further mark them as hyper-masculine, foreign, and even animalistic. In so shaping these messiah figures, Josephus conjures a formidable foreign menace in the minds of his elite Roman audience. The rhetorical effect serves to justify Roman imperial violence and attempts to validate the superior masculinity of the Roman military during a "crisis of masculinity" (Wilson 2015) in the Roman principate. I conclude by offering contemporary parallels to the hyper-masculinizing "superpredator" rhetoric of the War on Drugs in 1990s American media, and close by reflecting on imperial strategies for justifying state-sanctioned violence and suppression.

SESSION 1B – NEW TESTAMENT/EARLY CHRISTIANITY PAPERS

◆ ELIZABETH SCHICK, *Marquette University*

"The Wedding at Cana: The Unnamed Woman and the Bridegroom"

The wedding at Cana pericope (John 2:1-12) is the first instance in the Fourth Gospel in which Jesus interacts with a woman. However, Jesus's interaction with this woman—his mother—is cryptic and somewhat ambiguous. The setting of the scene—a wedding—prompts even further questions about how Jesus might relate to women. Thus the pericope presents both exegetical and ethical problems involving women. Exegetical: is there a nuptial Christology in this passage, or is Jesus merely attending a wedding? If there is a nuptial Christology here, then why would the messianic bridegroom attend someone else's wedding? Why is there no mention of a bride? And why is the mother of Jesus so prominent? Ethical: Does Jesus treat his mother disrespectfully during their exchange? If Jesus is not disrespecting his mother in the passage, then why does he refer to her as "woman"? And why does she remain unnamed? These questions will be addressed in this paper. With respect to the exegetical questions, it is maintained in the paper that the wedding at Cana pericope draws on messianic banquet imagery and contains a (hidden) nuptial Christology. With respect to the ethical questions, it will be argued that Jesus is not only not denigrating, but rather affirming his mother and, through her, women in general.

◆ TIMOTHY MILINOVICH, *Dominican University*

"Body Control: Ephesians, Colossians, and Conformity to Roman Ideals of Power and Gender"

This presentation will consider how the concept of "body" in the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians represent an initial attempt at conforming to Roman concepts of power dynamics that utilized gendered models to delineate between "proper" order and "harmful" disorder. While not as explicit or heavy-handed as the Pastoral Epistles' view of women, the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians demonstrate a progression from Paul's more egalitarian views of women to a worldview that conforms more to Roman culture than to the body of Christ found in Paul's undisputed letters.

Constructing a "natural" or "ordered" body for the cosmos and church coordinates with the household in which the wife, children, and slaves are obligated to submit to their proper authorities, the husbands, just as a body submits to the head, and the cosmos submits to its creator. The comparison with Paul and Pastorals will show a distinction in worldview that moves along a spectrum from radically egalitarian to conformist: the undisputed Paul, then Ephesians, then Colossians, then the Pastorals).

- ◆ **SHEILA E. MCGINN**, *John Carroll University emerita*
“Phoebe of Cenchreæ, Patron of Paul & Co.”

Phoebe of Cenchreæ is given two significant titles in Romans 16:1–2: deacon and patron. For years, these two verses were translated in ways that minimize the terms or even omit them altogether. Unlike Junia of Rome, Phoebe was never turned into a man to eliminate her power; instead, the now-familiar circular arguments were used: the church has never had women leaders, so this evidence of a woman leader must be wrong and has to be dismissed; Phoebe must have been a subordinate to Paul because women have always been subordinate to men, whether in the wider society or the early churches; the church has never had women deacons so Phoebe couldn’t possibly have been a deacon and the word here must mean something else. Historians since the late nineteenth century repeatedly have demonstrated that these basic assumptions are false, yet the long-held prejudice persists. And, as we saw from the recent Synod, many contemporary church leaders rely on these false assumptions to justify the continued exclusion of women from positions of leadership and clerical ministries in the church. Paul of Tarsus himself would be appalled. This brief discussion of Phoebe will argue that, if we understand Phoebe’s two titles in their social-historical context, Phoebe of Cenchreæ was Paul’s boss and, functionally, a bishop of the mid-first-century church near Corinth.

- ◆ **CARMEN PALMER**, *Stetson University*
“Wetnurses in the Greco-Roman World and Paul, Reconsidered: Slaves, Poor, Foreigners, and Exceptional”

Paul’s metaphor of caring for the Thessalonians like a “nurse tenderly caring for her own children” in 1 Thess 2:7 has provoked much interest over time. In one of the most fulsome assessments of this passage, Jennifer Houston McNeel concludes that the metaphor presents Paul as “an affectionate and trustworthy mother” (McNeel, *Paul as Infant and Nursing Mother*, 173). Part of McNeel’s assessment looks to the Greco-Roman context of wetnurses, noting that the practice of wetnursing was common among all classes of women. The present study continues this investigation of Paul’s wetnurse metaphor, with further assessment of the nature of the wetnurse in this period. While it is acknowledged that notions of kinship identity passed through breastmilk also exist within ancient Jewish tradition and that Paul may draw on both ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions within his use of the metaphor, this study focuses on expansion of Greco-Roman perceptions and what they may intimate for Paul and the Thessalonians. In general, the paper argues that wetnurses are frequently foreigners, enslaved, freedwomen, or poor freewomen, and that a description of nursing one’s own child is, in fact, “exceptional.” Thus, Paul seems to indicate not only the acceptance of low status, but also that his interactions among the Thessalonians are unusual in some way

2:00 – 2:30 PM BREAK

2:30 – 2:35 PM WELCOME

RHIANNON GRAYBILL, *University of Richmond* and
ELAINE T. JAMES, *Princeton Theological Seminary*

2:35 – 3:35 PM SESSION 2: 6x6 PANEL (6 presenters, 6 minutes)

- ◆ **MAHRI LEONARD-FLECKMAN**, *University College of the Holy Cross*
“Gendered Landscapes: Liminality and the Female Body in Judges 14–16”

This presentation examines the intersection of liminal place and the female body in the Hebrew Bible, focusing on two women in Judges 14–16 of the Samson cycle. I will explore how these characters embody a socially and politically liminal region of ancient Israel, serving as sites of entanglement and transgressive – often sexual – activity. Through their bodies, the Samson narratives unfold as gendered landscapes, where story and setting are inseparable.

- ◆ **JAMES NATI**, *University of Santa Clara*

“Women’s Speech in Ben Sira and Contemporary Ecofeminist Poetry”

This project seeks to illuminate the book of Ben Sira by pairing it with contemporary ecofeminist poetry, and I focus here on Ben Sira's language about women's speech. I demonstrate that Ben Sira participates in a broader Hellenistic discourse around the topic, and I highlight two features in particular: 1) Ben Sira's use of imagery of the natural world to illustrate that women's speech cannot be controlled; 2) Ben Sira's use of military imagery to describe women and the desire to control their speech. Lastly, I turn to a contemporary ecofeminist poem, “Ars Poetica: Cove Song” by Camille T. Dungy, to show how similar imagery may be put to a very different use.

- ◆ **LAURA PYCOCK-KASSAR**, *University of Montreal*

“‘Good to the Last Drop’? Ecofeminism and Testing for Water Quality in the Sotah Text (Num. 5:11-31)”

In this ecofeminist reading of the Sotah Text, we pause and glance suspiciously towards the bitter waters and their preparation. Building on the tradition of a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion in the Hebrew Bible as well as contemporary anthropological and environmental studies in the context of water safety and environmental justice, we’ll be prompted to ask: are the bitter waters safe to drink in the first place? This will lead us to reflect on the complex status of water as a site where dynamics of gender, power, and contamination are actively negotiated.

- ◆ **KELLY J. MURPHY**, *Central Michigan University*

“Millstones, Monstrosity, and Materiality”

The tale of Abimelech's failed attempt to establish a monarchy in Judges 9 has all the trappings of horror: fratricide, evil spirits, an entire city trapped in a tower, and, of course, a female killer whose victim is a man. It is also a story in which the natural/the material - stones, trees, axes, swords - shapes what unfolds. What might be revealed if we read the account along with other tales of horror and with an eye toward nature, bodies, and matter?

- ◆ **MARI JOERSTAD**, *Vancouver School of Theology*

“Persons: Considering Trees, Embryos, and Collectives with Leviticus”

Personhood is increasingly extended to beings beyond humans. Rights-of-nature movements attribute personhood to trees, rivers, soils, and animals. Pro-life movements argue embryos and fetuses are persons. Corporate personhood is the legal notion that corporations have rights and responsibilities similar to those of natural persons. I will briefly consider what personhood achieves in these three areas and suggest ways in which Leviticus might be a useful biblical conversation partner for thinking about personhood.

- ◆ **JACKIE WYSE-RHODES**, *Bluffton University*

“The Natural World as Friend and Foe in the Book of Numbers”

Numbers is the Bible’s paradigmatic wilderness book, frequently portraying the natural world as a source of obstacles for the journeying Israelites. Food, water, and shelter are hard to come by and often secured only by way of divine intervention, while natural phenomena like fire and earthquakes heed divine command to punish erring humans. But nature is more than just humanity’s foe. An ecological reading takes note of the moments when the natural world allies itself with the struggles of the book’s human characters. A rock provides water; a branch sprouts buds and almonds; and wilderness itself keeps Miriam safe when she is cast out of the camp by God. In Numbers, the natural world is more than a backdrop, and wilderness is more than a setting. Nature plays as complicated a role in the book as any other character, human or divine.

3:35– 3:45 PM BREAK

3:45– 4:30 PM

ROUNDTABLE

“Meta-commentary of LEAF”

DALE ALLIS RHIANNON GRAYBILL, *University of Richmond* and

ELAINE T. JAMES, *Princeton Theological Seminary*

4:30– 5:00 PM

DISCUSSION OF NEXT YEAR

If you are not able to make it to this part of the conference, please forward any ideas you might have to Corrine Carvalho (clcarvalho@stthomas.edu)

5:00 PM

ADJOURNMENT



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UPCOMING EVENTS

August 2-5, 2025

Loyola University Chicago & Zoom

87th International Meeting of the CBA

Annual General Meeting of The Catholic Biblical Association of America



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