

DRAG ARTISTS AND CROSSDRESSERS

Transgender Study

Session 2

Deuteronomy 22:5

A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Sovereign your God.

Deuteronomy 22:5 is the only verse in the Bible that explicitly talks about cross-dressing. While it has not been used as extensively or stridently as biblical passages understood by some to condemn homosexuality, this verse has been troubling to faithful transgendered people who are concerned that they are breaking a biblical injunction and also to some people of faith concerned about the spiritual well-being of transgendered persons.¹

First, this verse includes prohibition against both men and women wearing the clothing deemed to be for the opposite sex. The word translated as “man’s apparel” refers to all things related to men, including weapons, ornamentation, and tools, while the second half of the verse refers only to men wearing women’s clothing.

Scholars cite a number of explanations for this section of Deuteronomy and its prohibitions, and no clear consensus exists about the meaning or reason for the prohibition of cross-dressing. Probably the most prominent explanation is that this verse was designed to prevent the Israelites from participating in pagan worship that included elements of cross-dressings and cross-gendered behavior.

Recent scholars cite as the impetus for this prohibition a connection with fertility cults connected with Canaanite and Syrian religious practices. They posit that male priests dressed as women as part of their devotion to a goddess, most probably Astarte and later Cybele. Cultic prostitution was forbidden in Hebrew Scriptures, and cross-dressing was seen as related to that practice. The Torah emphasizes keeping Israel pure and distinct from the religious expressions of neighboring societies, and this prohibition may have functioned as part of that process. One scholar notes, “Deuteronomy 22:5 then has nothing to do with unisex jeans, but aims to preserve the purity of Yahwehistic faith by checking the encroachment of such distortions as the manipulative fertility cults.”

Another theory is that cross-dressing could be used as a disguise. A disguise could allow a member of one sex to move freely among the opposite sex in a gender-segregated society, and thus increase the opportunities for forbidden sexual contact between women and men. This passage could be interpreted as an attempt to prevent men, while disguised as women, from gaining access to women’s spaces in order to commit rape. Similarly, this passage would also speak against women gaining access to male sacred spaces, such as the temple, where they were forbidden to go. With a disguise of the opposite sex, women could potentially gain access to those places, and this ban was designed to protect the integrity of gender-segregated space.²

Yet another interpretation notes that this section falls in the midst of prohibitions against mixing and blending things of distinct nature. The verses following this section, in the same chapter, state that:

You should not sow your vineyard with a second kind of seed, or the whole yield will have to be forfeited, both the crop that you have sown and the yield of the vineyard itself. You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together. You shall not wear clothes made of wool and linen woven together. (Deut. 22:9-11)

One speculation is that cross-dressing “blurs the sexual differences God created.” Mixing and blending various elements is a serious concern, and keeping these things separate was part of what distinguished Israel from its neighbors.

Note, however, that modern Christianity, and many in modern Judaism, no longer follow literally the prohibitions listed in Deuteronomy. We are not concerned about fields with more than one type of crop or with clothing made with fabric blends. We do not see these issues as part of the integrity of creation. We do, though,

¹ Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*, 62.

² *Ibid.*, 63-34.

make many distinctions about what people view as “feminine” and “masculine,” and our society has a great deal of discomfort with individuals who cross those lines.

The concept of the natural order of creation is one that links ancient and modern thinkers. Yet, how do we determine what is naturally “feminine” and naturally “masculine”? The type of dress and articles appropriate for men and for women are culturally determined and change with the times. No one is advocating that modern women and men return to the dress of the seventh century B.C.E., when Deuteronomy was written. In fact, the book of Deuteronomy restates the law articulated in Numbers in a way more accessible to the people of that time. Surely we should follow that process, rather than attempting to impose an ancient practice on modern people.

For me, the most compelling argument against this passage as a prohibition against cross-dressing is that we fail to follow any of the other directives around it. No outcry is heard in Christian communities against the eating of shellfish, even though Deuteronomy is clear that the practice is forbidden. The same chapter in Deuteronomy includes a provision to stone to death a woman who has been rejected by her husband and who is not able to prove that she was a virgin at the time the marriage took place. Certainly our society would condemn any church or synagogue that attempted to put this into practice, and we would charge those responsible with murder. No one is preaching about the dangers of mixing two or more types of seed in the garden. Modern communities of faith are unconcerned about any of the blending of things cited in Deuteronomy, other than the blending of male and female. My conclusion is that the concerns are more about gender and very little about the need or desire to follow the dictates of ancient law.³

Questions for Discussion:

1. Make a list of “men’s apparel” (don’t forget things like men’s wristwatches, power tools, pants, men’s cologne, etc.), as well as a list of “women’s garments.” Discuss which items, if any, you feel should be confined to a particular gender. Talk about who makes the rules about which item belongs to which gender.
2. Why do you think our society is so intent on making distinctions between “masculine” and “feminine?”
3. What are some reasons why people might intentionally wear clothes associated with a gender other than their assigned gender?

³ Ibid., 65-66.