A Review of Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen. *A Sword between the Sexes? C. S. Lewis and the Gender Debates.* Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010.

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The September 8, 1947, issue of *TIME* magazine ran a cover story on C. S. Lewis—one he judged to be "ghastly," mainly because it said he disliked women. He retorted that he never disliked any group of people *per se*, commenting, "I wouldn't hang a dog on a journalist's evidence myself."[1]

Journalists aside, feminist Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen is prepared to hang the early Lewis as a misogynist on the evidence of his writings—particularly *That Hideous Strength*, where the Christ figure urges a woman to choose motherhood over an academic career, and *Mere Christianity*, where the husband is declared the better party to execute the family's "foreign policy":

> [H]e always ought to be, and usually is, much more just to outsiders. A woman is primarily fighting for her own children against the rest of the world.... She is the special trustee of their interests. The function of the husband is to see that this natural preference is not given its head. He has the last word in order to protect other people from the intense family patriotism of the wife (29).

These and other passages drive Van Leeuwen to join Dorothy Sayers in the judgment that Lewis has written "'shocking nonsense' about women" (127). His sin, by Van Leeuwen's account, is that he was an essentialist and a hierarchicalist; he said that men and women had significantly different natures and that the difference better suited the men to lead.

But Van Leeuwen is pleased to contend that Lewis "repudiated" this stance in later years, and that, throughout his professional life, in his dealing with female students, colleagues, and visitors to his home, he was "a better man than his theories." Even when he opposed the ordination of Anglican women on grounds of dissonance with God's masculinity ("Priestesses in the Church?"), he granted that women were "no less capable than men of piety, zeal, learning, and whatever seem[ed] necessary for the pastoral office," for a woman was not "necessarily or even probably less holy or less charitable or stupider than a man" (48).

But the smoking gun that showed he'd done in his old "misogynist" self appeared in *A Grief Observed*, after the loss of his spouse to cancer:

> A good wife contains so many persons in herself.... What was [Joy] not to me? She was my daughter and my mother, my pupil and my teacher, my subject and my sovereign, and always, holding all these in solution, my trusty comrade, friend, shipmate, fellow soldier. My mistress, but at the same time all that any man friend (and I have had good ones) has ever been to me. Solomon calls his bride Sister. Could a woman be a complete wife unless, for a moment, in one particular mood, a man felt almost inclined to call her Brother? (10).

This poetic reflection accords nicely with an observation he offered in *The Discarded Image*: "There is, hidden or flaunted, a sword between the sexes [cf. the reviewed book's title] till an entire marriage reconciles them" (56). Thus we see Lewis freed from his "previous tendencies toward

misogyny as a crude cover for the scars of an early-wounded, and in some ways insecure, man" (56), or so concludes Van Leeuwen, whose "formal training is in academic psychology" (13).

How did such a remarkable man as C. S. Lewis become so broken and confused in the first place? Van Leeuwen advances a variety of factors—the loss of his mother when he was nine, which, according to friend Ruth Pitter, "must have seemed like a black betrayal" (103); his youth in Edwardian times, an age which groomed girls "for adornment and domesticity, rather than economic self-sufficiency" (91); the contentiousness of Janie Moore, for whom he became a "lifelong fictive son" after the death of her real son in WWI (99, 102).

It was not surprising then that he got gender concepts wrong, especially since he was a bachelor into his 50s, working within the predominately male world of elite academic leisure. (You can hear the echo of those who claim the Pope has no business "pontificating" on contraception or the unmarried Bill Gothard on child-raising.) But his heart and language became more tender through the years as his understanding of and appreciation for women grew.

Van Leeuwen would have been wise to leave it at something like that, happy to get on base with a walk or a single. But she insists on swinging for the fences—and fails.

For one thing, she's determined to show that the findings of empirical psychology can trump traditional readings of the Bible, and she uses Lewis as a foil. The poor man was leery of the social sciences, regarding much of what they offered as "either intellectually vacuous or potentially dehumanizing" (164). Though he shows traces of Freud and Jung in his thinking (30), his bondage to Cartesian dualism kept him from appreciating the sort of "bell curve" and "standard deviation from the mean" work that Van Leeuwen favors. He just couldn't let go of the conviction that soul and body were radically different entities and that it was absurd to attach equally the label "science" both to the study of thoughts and synapses.

To help matters, Van Leeuwen devotes a chapter ("Men Are from Earth, Women Are from Earth") to show how her science works effectively to embarrass the gender essentialists. She cites studies, traces refinements of those studies, and offers critiques of various studies to block whatever strategies the traditionalists might use to differentiate the sexes psychologically—whether through talk of averages, optimality, or thresholds. But the complexities she rehearses are dismaying, and the contradictory tides of thought she tracks can strengthen the impression that the social sciences are a very messy affair, in a different league from those disciplines served by Bernoulli and Mendel, Watson and Crick.

Granted, the table she supplies ("Some Effect Sizes … from Various Meta-Analyses of Studies of Sex Difference") is mathematically crisp, with men at a 2.18 standard deviation over women on "throwing velocity" and at .87 on "desires many sex partners." I suppose those are simple enough to measure: Just watch men and women hurl baseballs and ask them about the promiscuity of their hearts (though even here, they might be prone to tweak their answers to sound good). But when the study comes to "moral reasoning," where women score somewhat higher on "'care' orientation" and men on "'justice' orientation," I have to ask, what counts as "care" and "justice"? (Even the chart puts these words in scare quotes.) Is "tough love" care? Does justice require that you turn your own child in to the police if you catch him shoplifting? Ethicists strive mightily over these notions, and I'm not confident that Van Leeuwen and her psychologist colleagues are equipped to analyze successfully shades of moral reasoning down to the ".28s" and the ".19s" (181).

Then there is the problem of assigning "negligibility" to difference-scores lower than .20. When Van Leeuwen seeks in the next chapter to demonstrate that Lewis was right regarding the evils of divorce, she draws on an even smaller, more negligible, difference between the well being of children from broken and unbroken homes (at least according to one study). But here, we must take the "negligible" difference seriously, for we need to distinguish "statistical significance" from "practical significance" (209–10). Accordingly, she says

that we should ignore "negligible" gender differences because they can be used for discrimination but should respond to the "negligible" child-impact differences because they can be used, like medical data (say, concerning the effects of second-hand smoke in the home), to protect kids from harm.

But what if the shoe were on the other foot? What if we found that grade-school teachers favored girls over boys because of "negligible" differences in their behavior patterns, the boys being slightly more inclined to squirm in the classroom or engage in "rough and tumble" on the playground? Would our anti-discrimination spirit drive us to count respect for that difference "practically significant"? And would our sense of justice reel at the sight of a judge who handled divorcees roughly despite psychologists's testimony that the impact on their kids was "statistically negligible"? In other words, judgments of "negligibility" and "significance" can be more ideological than clinical, and Van Leeuwen's priorities are clear.

Of course, the standard retort is *tu quoque*—"You, too." After all, the biblical complementarian has her own priorities, which can color her assessment of the data. But this is not a matter of moral equivalence. For what one makes of the Bible is decisive, and, on this matter, Van Leeuwen falls behind.

She does speak of "biblical wisdom" and notes that, at Pentecost, Peter quotes Joel on women prophesying. But this book sits very lightly on the Bible when at all. And she seems squeamish over biblical inerrancy, which she stereotypes and marginalizes—in mocking the "biblical positivist" who said that "novels are all lies" (26); in assuring us that "the Bible is not primarily a 'flat book' of doctrines and rules but a cumulative, God-directed narrative whose successive acts … comprise a continuing, cosmic drama in which all persons are players" (27); in disparaging a "docetic view of the Bible … that ignores the human side of its composition and treats its inspiration almost as a matter of divine dictation by God" (257).

When Van Leeuwen does get to textual specifics, the results can be odd, as when she declares, "Lewis made no appeal to the Gospels to defend his theory of gender archetypes and gender hierarchy, for the simple reason that there is nothing clearly there to draw on." One would think she would at least take the trouble to comment on Jesus' stipulation that God be called "Father" in the Lord's Prayer, as well as on Jesus' repeated use of the title, "Father" in his own prayer and teaching. But she is impatient with anything that smacks of a "patriarchal reading" (168), so attention to the Gospels's ubiquitous "Father" talk may be irrelevant in her system.

In that connection, I wish she had also spent time on clearing up the gender "confusions" generated by such passages as 1 Cor 11:14–15 (on the matter of unisex hair styles), 1 Pet 3:7 (concerning the "weaker vessel"), and Proverbs 31 (which describes the ideal wife, not the ideal generic spouse). Of course, feminists have crafted their rejoinders, but it would have been natural and useful to see Van Leeuwen's treatment of them in a book one endorser calls "magisterial."

I think it might sharpen our view of her project to use biblical archaeology as an analogue. Biblical inerrantists appreciate the work of archaeologists, many of whom are themselves inerrantists. We celebrate discoveries that help bring the text to life—inscriptions, implements, ash-laden strata, etc. But when the professor returns from his dig to announce that David was a fiction or that nothing horrendous happened at Ai, the believer simply says, "Keep looking, you missed something." We know the Bible is true, and if a journal article contradicts it, the journal article is wrong. Archaeology is good, but not so good as to put Scripture in doubt.

Similarly, the Christian has no use for psychological, sociological, or anthropological attempts to supplant or to qualify into triviality the biblical teaching on human nature and conduct. When Margaret Mead announced in *Coming of Age in Samoa* that adultery was innocuous and happily accommodated by these gentle islanders, the church didn't have to rethink its ethic, apologizing for its puritanical hang-ups. The people of God just knew that she was confused and/or devious in her work, both of which proved to be the case with Mead.

On the other hand, when such social scientists as Paul Amato, Bruce Keith, Elizabeth Marquardt, and Andrew Cherlin, all of whom she cites, trace

the baleful effects of divorce on children, the Christian community can nod and say, "Surely they're on to something." This isn't inconsistency; it's deference to Scripture.

But Van Leeuwen risks the reverse. She thinks she knows what is "statistically significant," and if the traditional reading of a passage contradicts her social science, then she tells the biblical exegete, "Keep looking, you missed something." Alternatively, if she finds interpreters who serve her psychological conclusions (such as that gender differences are ephemeral), she will encourage them right along.

For Van Leeuwen, terms like "manliness" and "womanliness" are fingernails on the blackboard, and certainly, as Lewis once observed, talk of a "man's man" and a "woman's woman" can be off-putting (164). (After reading this section of the book in the Seoul airport, I saw a newsstand issue of *Esquire* bearing the cover question, "What is a man?" along with an article title, "How to be a Man." I was frustrated to discover the inside text was in Korean, though I did recognize a photo of Clint Eastwood.) But to suggest that the psychological and expectational distinction between men and women is nothing more than a cultural construct is to cross a bridge too far.

Nevertheless, she storms on across, urging us to use "gender" more as a verb than as a noun; "gendering is something we are responsibly and flexibly called to do more than to be" (70). Furthermore, "God is not 'for' androgyny or 'for' gender complementarity. God is for just and loving relationships between men and women—and because of this, we may be called to 'do gender' differently at different times and in different places" (188).

Van Leeuwen goes on to say this will work itself out variously in different cultures, whether to serve "nomadic herding," "nineteenth century family farming," or life in the "twenty-first-century post-industrial city" (188–89).

At this point, she acknowledges that some would find her approach "too loose and relativistic" or susceptible to the "polymorphously perverse," but she assures us that "experience does not allow us to make too many wrong turnings" (189).

Oh?

Then, she U-turns abruptly to announce, "Empirical social science and biblical wisdom have also begun to converge on other aspects of gender relations" (189)—which prove, in the next chapter, to be divorce and parenting. She made a similar move earlier in the book when she jumped from the awkward topic of Christ-male headship in Ephesians 5 to disputing God's eternal headship over Christ, a matter she found more congenial.

Back to Van Leeuwen's flirtation with the "polymorphously perverse." I think she has set herself up to accommodate homosexuality. Elsewhere, she carefully hedges her language on the topic, as when she writes, "Egalitarians hope to defend themselves against accusations of moving toward what is perceived as an unbiblical acceptance of homosexuality" (170). So is this alleged moving simply a matter of perception? Or is there a properly "biblical acceptance of homosexuality"? What is she saying? And it is fair to ask whether she is really prepared to rebuke those who are "gendering" their way into same-sex relationships.

There is really no way to tell where one will end up when rejecting essentialism. Sartre pictured the possibilities when he cast existentialism against ancient notions of a given human nature, using the now-famous paper-cutter illustration. The tool's "essence precedes its existence." That is to say, its design is set before it appears on the office supply store shelf. But, in contrast, man comes into existence before his essence is established. It is his job to shape his nature, and in doing this, he is not answerable to any external guidelines or authorities, neither can he find comfort in them. This makes him responsible, but for what?

This is not a happy philosophical path to take on gender issues. For one thing, it forsakes the clear teaching of Rom 1:26–27, which speaks of *natural*, gender-specific sexuality. For another, it makes Jesus' apocalyptic title "King of Kings" in Rev 19:16 seem arbitrary, pointlessly offensive, and/or a toss-up. It could have just as easily been "Queen of Queens," since masculinity and femininity are just what we make of them, with nothing essential to it.

It is interesting to read Van Leeuwen's episte-

mological caveats, and then follow her performance. She cautions, "Research in neither the biological nor the social sciences can resolve the nature/nurture controversy regarding gender-related psychological traits and behaviors in humans" (171). So "any conclusions about male and female 'essences'—biological or metaphysical—are purely speculative" (174). Nevertheless, she goes right ahead and rejects essentialism, much as methodological naturalists in the sciences become metaphysical naturalists in their philosophy.

She cautions against the "The Drunk under the Lamp Post" syndrome (he dropped his keys outside the tavern up the block, but he is looking for them under the lamp post "because that's where the light is") (191), and argues that Lewis was something of a drunk in searching for the truth on gender in the light cast by classical, medieval, and Renaissance literature. But it is fair to say Van Leeuwen undertakes her own search in light of the feminist agenda and hermeneutic.

In its favor, the book is packed full of information, often in generous footnotes, including one in which Van Leeuwen expresses disappointment at N. T. Wright's statement that Lewis's assignment of the family's "foreign policy" to the husband is "worth pondering deeply" (182). Along the way, the reader picks up such interesting tidbits as that Hannah Moore of the Clapham sect refused to encourage literacy among her poor Sunday School pupils (87); that Dorothy Sayers had a child out of wedlock (96); that Lewis never learned to drive (127), that he shared some of Chesterton's and Belloc's fondness of "distributivism"—"a kind of 'third way' between capitalism and socialism" (147), and that he was unknowingly indebted to Oxford colleague Helen Gardner for stepping aside when he reconsidered the offer of a chair at Cambridge (128).

The quotes can be arresting, too, as when Lewis observed, "The Greeks [sinned] in owning slaves and [in] their contempt for labor"; when, regarding apologetics, Lewis said, "[W]e expose ourselves to the recoil from our own shots; for if I may trust my personal experience, no doctrine is, for the moment, dimmer to the eye of faith than that which a man has just successfully defended" (122); when Lewis Smedes explained, "It is simple to make an idol. Just slice one piece of reality off from the whole and expect miracles from it" (28); when Dorothy Sayers wrote (not very inspiringly, in my estimation), "I do not know what women *as* women want, but as human beings they want, my good men, exactly what you want yourselves: interesting occupation, reasonable freedom for their pleasures, and a sufficient emotional outlet" (106).

Van Leeuwen also provides some useful short takes on the philosophical writings of Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and G. E. M. Anscombe, as well as a look at competing schools of thought in the social sciences (the functionalists vs. the Marxists in sociology; the psychoanalysts vs. the behaviorists vs. the humanists in psychology). Her report on the Anscombe/Lewis Socratic Club debate is instructive.

The book supplies a useful collection of Lewis's complementarian writings, and Van Leeuwen may unwittingly broaden the Lewis fan base in this connection, encouraging fresh or first-time reading of *The Four Loves*, *That Hideous Strength*, *The Great Divorce*, *Surprised by Joy*, and *Perelandra*, as well as *Mere Christianity*, which she finds particularly galling since it seems to place complementarianism among the Christian basics.

Throughout the book, Van Leeuwen would have done better to shy away from such rhetorical infelicities as false dichotomy (e.g., the consistent complementarian vs. the gentleman); argument from silence (e.g., "Lewis never suggested to her that [continuing to teach after becoming a mother] is an inappropriate choice" (118); and excessive hedging (e.g., "Lewis effectively retracted . . ." [29]; "there is evidence to suggest" [77]; "with a distinct nod toward" [61]).

After all is said and done, it is still not clear that Lewis "repudiated" his earlier complementarian, essentialist, hierarchical views. (John Steinbeck did not become a vegetarian when he wrote on the nutritional wonders of beans in *Tortilla Flat*; and no, I am not comparing women to beans.)

Of course, the big question is not whether Lewis moderated and even rejected his earlier views on women, but whether, if he did so, he did

the right thing. We are all familiar with pastors who became more liberal on one subject or another the older they got, and in some cases the change was disappointing; where they used to stand firm in the truth, they went wobbly. Perhaps a biblical teaching hit too close to home. Perhaps they just tired of conflict. All this is understandable, but it does not impact the truth of things. Neither does Van Leeuwen's biographical and psychological sketch work.

Early on, Van Leeuwen speaks of a colleague who lamented "the 3:16 bait-and-switch." Here, the preacher evangelizes the woman with John 3:16, only to drop Gen 3:16 on her ("your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you") once she is in the fold, victimizing her by his "crude proof texting" (32–33).

From what I read in *A Sword between the Sexes?*, the feminist offense may well extend to 2 Tim *3:16* ("All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness"); to 2 Pet *3:16* (which recognizes scriptural authority in Paul's writings); and perhaps to Jas *3:16* (which warns against envy and selfish ambition).

Hard words? Yes. But Van Leeuwen could use a taste of her own medicine.

ENDNOTES

[1]This review originally appeared in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 15, no. 3 (2011): 78–83. Reprinted with permission.