

THE POLITICS OF BIBLICAL NARRATOLOGY: READING THE BIBLE LIKE/AS A WOMAN

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Mieke Bal. "THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE: A CRITICAL ESCAPE."
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———. LETHAL LOVE: FEMINIST READINGS OF BIBLICAL LOVE
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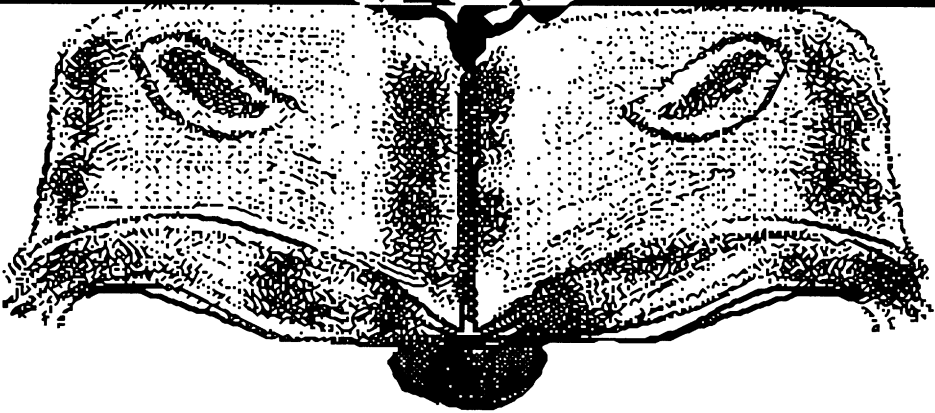
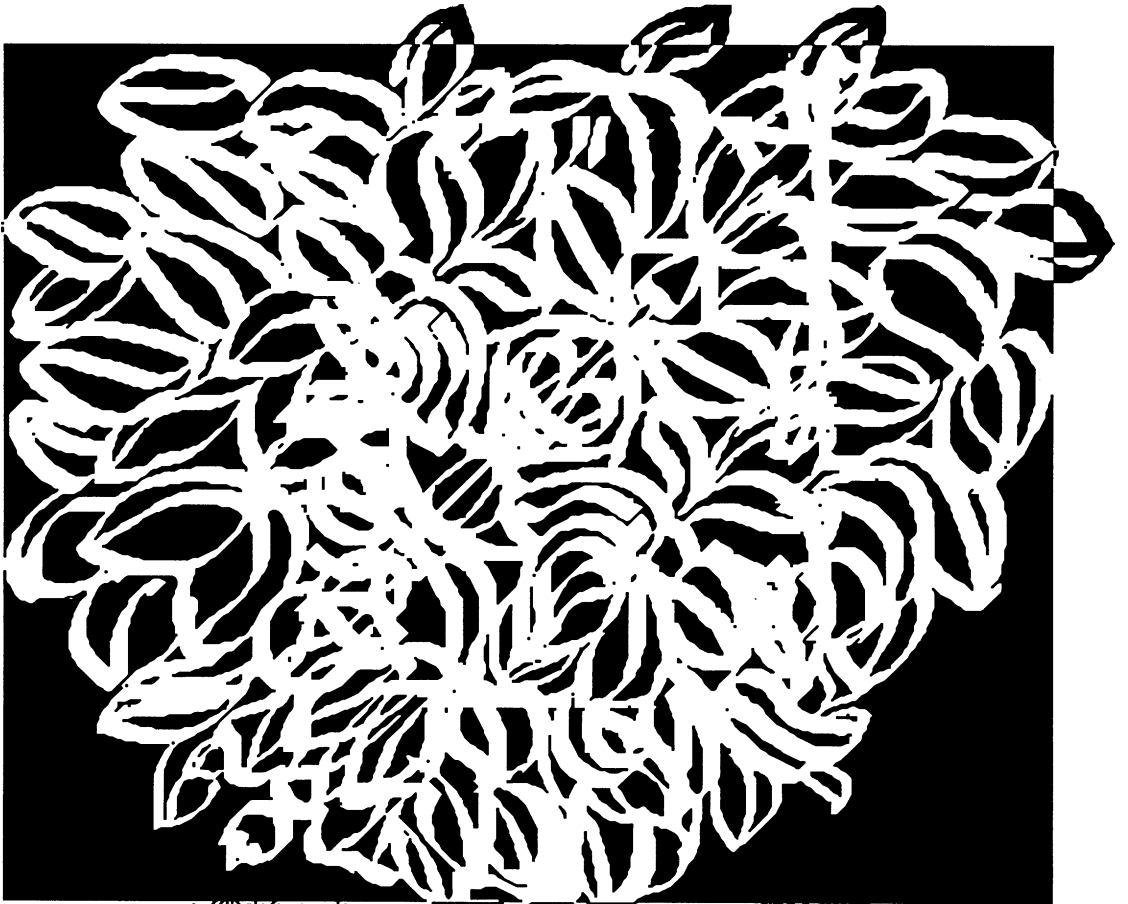
Meir Sternberg. THE POETICS OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE: IDEO-
LOGICAL LITERATURE AND THE DRAMA OF READING.
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Feminist theory is divided within itself (not against itself) between a desire to reassert and reinsert the feminine into culture, to valorize femininity itself, and a seemingly opposite desire to deconstruct the binary opposition of masculine and feminine altogether as an artifact of patriarchy and male dominance. Feminist literary theory is similarly informed by a division between a thematic feminism, which seeks to restore the woman's voice or critique the woman's suppression within the texts of male literary culture, and what might be called a strategic feminism, which seeks a different understanding of reading altogether from the one that patriarchy has promoted. Both of these dichotomies and their intersection with each other prove very slippery when read closely. Reading Mieke Bal's "feminist readings" and her assault on Sternberg, I am drawn into these reflections; attendant upon them as well are all of the ambivalences of identification with both the agent and the patient of the attack.

Bal's feminist dispute with Sternberg turns on issues of authorship and authority. Near the beginning of his book, Sternberg makes the following argument for divine *implied* authorship of the Bible:

But, it may be objected, how does the narrator's claim to historicity accord with the incorporation of material not just undocumented but undocumentable: the hidden acts of God, the secret thoughts of all the participants, the abundant dialogue scenes? . . .

In the Bible's sociocultural context . . . truth claim and free access to information go together owing to a discourse mechanism so basic that no contemporary would need to look around for it—the appeal to divine inspiration. [32]



A similar argument had already been made in the Babylonian Talmud some 1500 years before Sternberg:

It has been taught: R. Eleazar said: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit [or by the holy spirit, D. B.], as it says, And Haman said in his heart [Est. 6:6]. R. Akiva says: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, And Esther obtained favour in the eyes of all that looked upon her [2:15]. R. Meir says: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, And the thing became known to Mordecai [2:22]. R. Jose b. Durmaskith said: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, But on the spoil they laid not their hands [9:10]. Said Samuel: Had I been there, I would have given a proof superior to all, namely, that it says, They confirmed and took upon them [9:27], [which means] they confirmed above [in heaven] what they took upon themselves below. [Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7a]

To be sure, the talmudic text reverses the premises and conclusions of the syllogism. Sternberg's argument is: if the biblical narrator "knows" things that *he* ought not to know, and if I do not want to claim that he is creating the world of the text in his imagination, how does he know those things? The answer, of course, is that he knows them by divine inspiration. Therefore, it is possible to claim that biblical narrative is historiography and not fiction in genre. (To prevent any injustice to Sternberg at this point, I will make it clear that he is *not* claiming that the biblical narrative is true, but only that it claims to be true.) The talmudic argument is: if we assume, as we do, that the narrative is historiography and the narrator knows things that he ought not to know, then the text must be divinely inspired (or even divinely authored). The lines of reasoning seem almost identical to me. So are the propositions (premises and conclusions): the narrative is "true"; the narrator knows hidden things truly; only God can know hidden things truly; the narrator is, in some sense, God.

Now we have some fair knowledge of what the implications of this position might have been in the world of the Talmud. For the rabbis, who "believed" in God and accepted the values of the text as "true," it seems the assertion of both historiographical accuracy and divine inspiration were relatively unproblematic. What can it mean to make such claims in our world? For Bal, the answer to this question is basically simple: it turns narratology into theology. "Sternberg confuses 'narrative' with 'theology,' and that is a confusion iconic of the contents" ["Escape" 79]. In other words, by reading God as the Implied Author of the biblical narrative, Bal claims, Sternberg is not producing a poetics at all but a theology. Now it seems clear to me that this characterization of Sternberg's discourse does not work. There is absolutely no consequence from the claim that God is the implied narrator of the Bible to a proposition that God indeed exists or that God, existing, is like this or like that, and only that type of proposition could make Sternberg's text into a theology.

Moreover, Sternberg explicitly denies that his claim is a claim about the world at all. In fact, his very argument for reading the Bible as historiography is based on the premise that the truth or falsity of the propositional content of the biblical text is irrelevant for determining whether it is fiction or history-writing. And he makes this statement precisely because he agrees with the common judgment of rational people that the biblical text is full of factual error [33].

But if as seekers for the truth, professional or amateur, we can take or leave the truth claim of inspiration, then as readers we simply must take it—just like any

other biblical premise or convention, from the existence of God to the sense borne by specific words—or else invent our own text. . . . This leaves us all free to reject the Bible's inspiration as a principle of faith and, as scholars, to challenge its figures, statements, astronomy, chronology, even historiography. [33-34]

Now this can be read very easily as no more than a statement of the willing suspension of disbelief required of the reader of any work of fantastic fiction. I cannot really read *Frankenstein* if the constant thought that I have while reading it is why this author is claiming that such a creature can exist when I know that it cannot. Put this way, Sternberg's statement here is a rather innocent argument that we read the Bible with the same conventions of reading that we employ for prose fiction. "Must be accepted" would refer then only to the *willing* acceptance of those conventions. Bal, however, turns this innocuous requirement into something almost sinister. "Attributing to the narrator a divine power that 'must be accepted' is, also, circumscribing the position of the reader who cannot but submit, passively, to what the text states" ["Escape" 72]. The question that I wish to ask is, given that Sternberg's statement can be given a relatively innocent interpretation, what is it that motivates the threatening reading that Bal gives it? If Bal's dubbing of Sternberg's reading as theology is invalid, what is it that she is getting at; what is really disturbing in Sternberg's discourse?

My suggestion is that there is an unthematized contradiction within Sternberg's argument. As I have presented the "innocent" reading of Sternberg's claim about the narrator of the Bible, it has led me to the assertion that what he is calling for is the willing (and ironic) suspension of disbelief of the reader of fiction. However, paradoxically, the major thrust (metaphorical associations intended) of Sternberg's introduction is precisely the claim that the Bible is indeed historiography and not fiction. This argument is posed as a counterpoint to Robert Alter's postulate in his *Art of Biblical Narrative*, that "prose fiction is the best general rubric for describing biblical narrative" [23–24]. Sternberg's reasoning runs something like this. First, he claims that "history" and "fiction" as terms represent two different sets of oppositions: one on the level of "world" and one on the level of "word." On the level of world, history is "what really happened" and fiction is "the sphere of the imagined or invented." But in the realm of word, "each term may point to a different mode of representation or writing—'history' to re-creative and fiction to creative discourse" [24]. Now Sternberg takes the apparently reasonable next step and argues that:

The shift of meaning leads to a symbiosis of meaning, whereby history-writing is wedded to and fiction-writing opposed to factual truth. Now this double identification forms a category-mistake of the first order. For history-writing is not a record of fact—of what "really happened"—but a discourse that claims to be a record of fact. Nor is fiction-writing a tissue of free inventions but a discourse that claims freedom of invention. The antithesis lies not in the presence or absence of truth value but of the commitment to truth value. [25]

I was almost seduced by this argument. But in fact, it just doesn't work, not because its premises are wrong, but because they are right. Historiography and fiction are indeed not distinguished by whether or not the narrated events are judged by us to be true or not. Indeed, as Sternberg argues, were the opposite to be true, texts would change their generic status from year to year. Indeed, some texts might be both history and fiction in the same year—maybe in the same academic department. So far, so good. However, again as Sternberg himself points out, what makes a text historiography in the generic system of our culture is the fact that it obeys certain rules as to evidence and inference from evidence.

Now, precisely one of the inadmissible types of evidence in our practice of writing and reading historiography is divine knowledge. This is true, whether or not I, the reader, believe in God, exactly for the reason that Sternberg adduces, that the determination of fiction or nonfiction as genre is independent of my belief in the plausibility or truth of the text's claims. Sternberg obviously knows this. His claim would have to be then, and indeed it is, that historiography was defined differently in the culture of the Bible, and in the way that the biblical culture defined historiography, this text was historiography.

This is already, it seems to me, a substantially different proposition than, "Of course the narrative is historiographic, inevitably so considering its teleology and incredibly so considering its time and environment" [30]; that is, this latter claim seems to mean that the Bible is historiography by the conventions of our culture, which it isn't. Moreover, it is a proposition that is impossible to prove or disprove. Indeed, the text does seem to make strong thematized claims to be truthful. However, the strength of these claims does not in any way determine genre. Our literary system is full of texts—called novels—which claim to be a record of the actual historical truth, *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*. Our practice of reading them as fiction, then, is in resistance to the truth claims that the text is making for itself, and our judgment of which texts to call fiction and which ones to call historiography a matter of conventions of reading, conventions of writing, and (sometimes) plausibility. None of these tests for historiography will work for the Bible.

We know virtually nothing and can know virtually nothing of the conventions of reading under which, for instance, the Book of Esther was produced. We know a little bit more about the conventions under which it was read in certain cultures, for example, the talmudic one. The Talmud itself, moreover, seems to have understood that its own reading conventions were, well, conventions. The passage quoted above continues by completely undermining its own arguments:

Raba said: All the proofs can be confuted except that of Samuel, which cannot be confuted. Against that of R. Eleazar it may be objected that it is reasonable to suppose that Haman would think so, because there was no one who was so high in the esteem of the king as he was, and that when he spoke at length, he was only expressing the thought concerning himself. . . . Against the proof of Samuel certainly no decisive objection can be brought. [25]

In other words, Raba argues that for all of the supposed "Divine" information of the narrator, we can substitute an assumption of inference based on the givens of the text, but Samuel's argument has no refutation. Why? Because it is based on a purely arbitrary, constructed interpretation of the verse. "*They confirmed and took upon them* [9:27], [which means] they confirmed above [in heaven] what they took upon themselves below." Since the narrator knows what was confirmed in heaven, He must be God. But the verse can easily be understood as referring to the Jews who confirmed what they took upon themselves, which is how Raba himself interprets it in another place [Shabbat 88a]! So, the only irrefutable proof that the narrator of Esther is divine and the text, therefore, is historiography (and not didactic legend) is an imposition from without, itself a construct of reading and not a foolproof implication from within the text itself.

As to conventions of writing, all that we can compare are conventions of writing history in the Bible's time and those in our own. As for the Bible's time, the claim is made that it is *sui generis*, so to what are we going to compare it? The mere fact that this text is meant to be taken seriously, even on pain of excommunication, does not qualify it as historiography, any more than the equally serious truth claims of myths qualify them as historiography. We certainly cannot assume an ahistorical organization of cultural productions into the familiar genres of our own time. There are other genres and possible organizations of textual cultures besides history-fiction. As for our own time and our

conventions of writing-reading, Sternberg grants to Alter, and his own reading practice shows, that the Bible's narrative reads like fiction. (The fact that much historiography is written like fiction does not obscure this argument.) All of his comparisons to various discursive strategies in texts closer to us in time and place are to fictional texts, and this is not accidental. In spite of the fact that the "narrative . . . illegitimizes all thought of fictionality on pain of excommunication," *since it does not generally verify its narrative claims by referring to evidence, but in fact at nearly every moment presents its data as that of an omniscient narrator*, it belongs to the genre of fiction and not historiography. When we read ancient historiography, we may enjoy its style and wit and be fascinated to learn what people thought about the world once, but we do not ask ourselves to suspend disbelief—precisely what Sternberg suggests we must do in order to read the Bible well. Since the major discursive gesture that Sternberg finds, the omniscient narrator, belongs in our literary system exclusively to fiction, I think that Alter is right when he asserts "prose fiction is the best general rubric for describing biblical narrative." Again not implying any belief or disbelief in the Bible's actual truth, just as Sternberg does, he brackets that issue and places *it* in the realm of theology.

What has all this to do with a consideration of the possibility of a feminist practice of biblical criticism? If my argument is cogent that Sternberg's reasoning *and critical practice* contradict his strenuously asserted conclusions, one might be left almost unconsciously with the impression that those conclusions are playing some other function in his discourse than dispassionate meditating. He begins by claiming we must suspend disbelief in order to read this text, a move which, as I have claimed, places it generically as fiction, and then insists at length that the text is historiography. There is something at stake in this claim for Sternberg, and it seems to be the authority of the Bible, or at any rate, I can understand why someone would read him that way. In fact, this follows from his very argument. As I understand it, his argument is that if the biblical text is not historiography, then it could not have the authority that it evidently claims for itself. Sternberg, it seems, privileges historiographical texts over fiction as authority, as do most people in our culture. I suggest then, very tentatively, that what motivates his strong interest in defending the Bible as historiography is a perhaps unacknowledged desire to maintain the authority of the text in some sense or another. The merging of his reading of the Bible with the Bible itself, then, doubles the Bible's authority with his own: "the foolproof composition" [Sternberg 51–56] which must logically produce a foolproof reader. Considering the history of such claims to mastery and the political force of such rhetoric, I can understand where Bal's fury could come from.¹ The patriarchal domination is doubled here: on the one hand, Sternberg the critic dominates the text, and on the other, the text, as it were, dominates all *other* readers—the "fools" from whom the composition is proof. Sternberg's theory of the foolproof narrator and the foolproof reader leaves no place for reading against the grain of the ideology of the text, no space for a resisting reading. Indeed, it leaves no space for an ideological critique of the cultures that have read the text in a certain way and no room for a suggestion that the text can be read differently and conserved as a source of tradition in the context of social change.

Bal's critical program stands as antithesis to the theory of Sternberg which so infuriates her. As she says in the introduction to *Lethal Love* (not specifically with reference to Sternberg's work):

1. *Theoretically at least, one could question such a univocal reading of his intention, and as an actual reader of "Sternberg" and Sternberg I would. I would prefer to put him into Bal's own category of "well-intended literary or scholarly readings," which do "not escape the dominance of male interests" [2]. Moreover, as Bal herself indicates, Sternberg's readings are often excitingly revealing and complex explorations of ambiguity, irony, and ambivalence in the narrative, and it would be more than a shame to lose sight of his contribution. The strong positive case for Sternberg's reading has been made by me (and Bal) in other contexts.*

The alternative readings that I will propose should not be considered as yet another, superior interpretation that overthrows all the others. My goal is rather to show, by the sheer possibility of a different reading, that “dominance” is, although present and in many ways obnoxious, not unproblematically established. It is the challenge rather than the winning that interests me. For it is not the sexist interpretation of the Bible as such that bothers me. It is the possibility of dominance itself, the attractiveness of coherence and authority in culture, that I see as the source, rather than the consequence of sexism. [3]

That is to say, it is the phallacy of mastery over the text which is the patriarchal and sexist gesture, and indeed the fallacy as well that the text masters its own materials and thus its readers. To that gesture of the dominant reading, Bal opposes a reading which is situated and contingent. That is to say, it accents both its own partiality and partialness. These are readings which take the woman’s part, but they are also readings which claim only to be part of the story. Both of these practices stand in opposition to patriarchy. The reading pays attention to different subject-positions encoded within the text—perhaps even “against the will” of the narrator or author—and to different subject-positions of readers as well. Neither the author nor any reader can fully comprehend or master the different subject-positions which any narrative must thematize. Bal’s readings, then, according to this theory, are less “complete” than Sternberg’s but much more responsive to different ideological options which the very process of reading makes possible.

As I have briefly described Bal’s reading, it is neither essentialist nor thematic in its feminism, but strategic; that is, it is the dispersal of authority both within the text and between the text and readers that is feminist in her practice. However, there is an unthematized tension in *Lethal Love*, which tends, in my opinion, to undermine this undermining of authority by appealing to a sort of essential feminine (not feminist) counterauthority, the authority of the clitoris—the feminine answer to the phallus. The concept of “clitoral” reading, derived from Naomi Schor’s work, is a reading practice that pays close attention to “a different, small-scale aspect of representation in its narrative modes” [3]. At certain moments in her text, Bal seems to lose track of her project and fall into a mode of reading parallel to Sternberg’s in its drive to coherence and mastery.

This substitution of feminine for feminist reading shows itself most clearly in Bal’s chapter “Sexuality, Sin and Sorrow,” in which she analyzes the story of the creation of Eve. The simple textual fact that we must begin with is that the story of the creation of man and woman in Genesis is a deeply problematic text—from the point of view of narrative logic. The root of the problem is that there is not one story of the creation of man but two, and the two seem to contradict each other, precisely on the issue of the origin of the two sexes:

[27] *And God created the earth-creature² in His image; in the image of God, He created him; male and female He created them. [28] And God blessed them, and God said to them: Reproduce and fill the earth. . . . [Genesis 1:27–28]*

This is the book of the Generations of Adam, on the day that God created Adam in the image of God He made him. [2] Male and female He created them, and He blessed them, and called their name Adam, on the day He created them. [Genesis 5:1–2]

2. Following Bal, I do not translate “adam” as man, but as earth-creature (at this stage), both to reproduce the pun of its name: adam/adama (earth) and not to prejudice the question of its gender.

[7] *And God formed the earth-creature of dust from the earth and breathed in its nostrils the breath of life, and the earth-creature became a living being.* [20] *And the earth-creature gave names to all of the animals and the fowls of the air and all of the animals of the fields, but the earth-creature could not find any helper fitting for it.* [21] *And God caused a deep sleep to fall on the earth-creature, and it slept, and He took one of its ribs and closed the flesh beneath it.* [22] *And the Lord God constructed the rib which He had taken from the earth-creature into a woman and brought her to the earth-man.³* [23] *And the earth-man said, this time is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called wo-man, for from man was she taken.* [Genesis 2:7 ff.]

In the first story it seems clear that the original creation of the species humanity included both sexes, while the second one is seemingly a narrative of an original male creature for whom a female was created out of his flesh. The solution of some modern textual critics is relatively simple. They claim that two contradictory stories have been combined in the text of the Bible: the first one belonging to a later stratum of more spiritual thinking, while the second is a folk tale of the creation of humanity, and that solves the problem. Whatever we choose to make of such strategies of reading, however, it is clear that ancient readers read the Bible as a single text, similar, therefore, to the reading strategies privileged in (for example) a Sternbergian poetics of narrative. Christian culture (and some of Jewish culture) has asserted the dominance of the story of Eve's supplementarity in creation over the egalitarian story in its drive to coherence.

Bal's reading of the text of Genesis is entirely different from the one of the Fathers almost universally assented to in European Christian culture. She notices that the first created earth-creature is not identified as to sex at all. We read his gender back into him (it is even very difficult to call him "it"), *because* the name "Adam" has been so firmly associated with a male creature [Love 114]. This creature is lonely, and God understands that in order for it not to be lonely, it needs another one which is of the same species, but different. It needs to be divided over-against itself in order to have a fit companion. "The animals are unfit and the different human being is not, because it is the tension between the *same* and the *different* that creates sexuality. The earth-being has to be severed, separated from part of itself, in order for the 'other half' of what will then be left to come into existence." As Bal remarks, this text, read in this way, shows "deep insight into the nature of sexuality" [115].⁴ The separation itself is accomplished by the earth-creature being thrown into a state of deep sleep. Bal interprets what happens to it as a kind of giving birth.⁵ Following this birth and the subsequent existence of a couple, not hierarchically emplaced but apparently equal, the institutions of sexuality, marriage, and parenthood—but not male dominance or woman hating—are all established:

3. *Again, I am following Bal on this. It is true, of course, that if the earth-creature is sexually undifferentiated (in one way or another), only the production of a woman turns it into a man.*

4. *I have some difficulty with her translation of 'ezer as "companion," however. It seems to be unsupported philologically. On the other hand, she is spot on when she says that the usual translations miss the point that God is often identified as an 'ezer to man, so a translation that somehow takes this 'ezer as a kind of servant is missing the point even more. It certainly means something like a partner in the endeavor of living.*

5. *However, once again, I must assent to her interpretive sensitivity and dissent from her philology. The word tselā', commonly interpreted as "rib," can indeed mean "side," but I know of no evidence for interpreting it as a euphemism for "belly."*

*Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother
and cleaves to his woman
and they become one flesh*

Patriarchy will be instituted indeed, not yet here but as a result of sin [127–28]. It is not a condition of the ontology of humanity that the male should dominate the female. The Fall on this reading initiates not sexuality or even marriage, but patriarchy; not sexuality but sexual shame. Patriarchy is a punishment of the woman for her sin, not a condition that God intended or established essentially and from the very beginning.

Bal emphasizes that her reading is an alternative to those modern readings which assume that the two accounts of the creation of humanity belong to two different sources which contradict each other. Most biblical scholars of the “higher” critical school seem to entertain a model of a mechanical redaction process in which the editor simply assembled as best he could the canonical materials at hand. Robert Alter improves on this by ascribing coherent purpose to this redactor, turning him into a narrator. As Bal sums up his reading:

Alter (1981:142–43),⁶ for example, following the commonly accepted philological conclusions, distinguishes between the realistic (2:4b–25) and the theological (1–2:4a) versions of the creation. The editors, Alter claims, assumed that God created man and woman equal (Gen. 1) but, on the other hand, saw that in society there was not such equality. They therefore included the ‘sexist’ version of Genesis 2. Alter’s view seems plausible insofar as later interpretations have turned Gen. 2 into the sexist story it has become. The ‘equal rights’ version has, then, to be explained away. But its return in 5:1–2 makes the repression problematic. Alter’s defense of the paradoxical coherence of Genesis was, however, uncalled for. The text as it stands does not contradict Genesis 1 at all. [119; my emphasis]

Bal’s interpretation allows us, as she claims, to read the account in chapter 2 as an elaboration of what is reported in telescopic form in Genesis 1. “Male and female created He them.” She reads the account in chapters 1 and 5 as a later summation by “good readers” of their reading of the detailed story of chapter 2.

Now, even at first glance this reading appears to be precisely what Bal is rejecting, namely a push toward a better reading and more coherence and therefore, on her own account, a source of sexism. The very appeal to a “text as it stands” sounds more Sternbergian than Balian. Indeed here one could turn Bal’s critical language against her. Of Phyllis Tribble, she writes, “Tribble, however, seems to believe genuinely in the positive reliability of her analysis and lets herself be hampered by it in her critical reach” [“Escape” 74], and perhaps, not surprisingly, it is this chapter which owes most to Tribble in its content as well [see, for instance, her *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* 72–144]. Indeed, Alter’s reading is more in tune with Bal’s theory than hers is, because it respects difference within the text.⁷ There is one real crux in her reading which splits the text open. After the woman

6. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York: Basic, 1981].

7. It may make no logical sense to have Eve created after Adam and inferior to him when we have already been told that she was created at the same time and in the same manner as he, but it makes perfect sense as an account of the contradictory facts of woman’s role in the post-edenic scheme of things. On the one hand, the writer is a member of a patriarchal society in which women have more limited legal privileges and institutional functions than do men, and where social convention clearly invites one to see woman as subsidiary to man. . . . On the other hand, our writer—one does not readily think of him as a bachelor—surely had a fund of personal observation to draw on which could lead him

is differentiated from him, he refers to himself as having been an 'ish, a term which certainly means a male human, even before the separation. This causes some difficulty for Bal, who answers

A first possibility would be that after allotropy, the change of physical properties within the same substance, the man retrospectively assumes that he always had this sexual identity. He focalizes his earlier version from his childhood state. Just as adults have no memories of their early childhood, during which they were not yet full subjects, let alone their prenatal life, the man understandably cannot imagine that he was once a nonsexual being. This need not make us angry at him, nor at the narrator who quotes his words in this way. [117]

I think that Bal's explanation, while showing a fine sympathy for the predicament of even the sexist narrator, is pushing too hard here for a coherence which just isn't there. This moment *does* introduce a consequential undecidability in the text, which is an important part of the explanation for the differing interpretation of the text as a whole given by traditional Christian readers (as opposed to midrash, which prefers a reading similar to Bal's).⁸ It is thus an excellent illustration of Bal's point that the drive to coherence itself is an inevitably exclusionary practice, even when the master code, the authority underpinning the coherence, is feminism. The narrative of the creation of woman in Genesis has an important moment of ambiguity produced by the fact that there are two seemingly contradictory accounts in the text. On the one hand, a coherent reading of the two texts together produces an interpretation in which the first human was dual or nonsexed and the creation of woman is the division of two equals. This reading is strengthened by the coherence that it offers the final, redacted text as a narrative. On the other hand, a reading that emphasizes the simple interpretation of the second story clearly seems to imply that the first human was male and the female was produced as a supplement or afterthought. This reading is most clearly supported by the verse [2:23], "This one shall be called woman, for from man was this one taken." The midrashic rabbis chose the first course of reading; the church fathers the second. Taking seriously, as Bal does for other texts (most explicitly in her *Murder and Difference*), the tension between the two accounts allows us to have some feeling for and perhaps even insight into the ideological tensions of ancient Hebrew society, contributing exactly to Bal's strategy of opening texts up to difference.

I dare to think that adding this attention to a detail leads more fully to the kind of reading of this text that Bal has taught us to desire, not because it reinscribes patriarchal ideology or misogyny into the text, but because it exposes once more how chimerical textual coherence is when studied closely. What saves Bal from falling completely into her own trap is her relativizing of her reading strategy. As she remarks, "Coherence is not, in my view, an absolute ontological or structural literary category; on the contrary. I conceive it as a reading device and subsequently as a device for the interpretation of editorial policy" [119]. Nevertheless, this interpretation, because of its attempt to explain away the moment of difference within the text, betrays Bal's project of seeking an interpretive practice of nondominance.

I have singled out the one reading in Bal's book that I find theoretically problematic because it gives me the opportunity precisely to emphasize what I find so important in her work in general, the thematizing of difference and not coherence as a feminist practice of

to conclude that woman, contrary to institutional definitions, could be a daunting adversary or worthy partner, quite man's equal in moral or psychological perspective, capable of exerting just as much power as he through her intelligent resourcefulness. [145-46]

8. See my forthcoming "Behold Israel According to the Flesh: On Anthropology and Sexuality in Late Antique Judaism," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 5.2 (1992).

reading. Bal's readings are over and over again moving and revealing, because they do not make love to the text as a body, and because they are aware of the many human bodies, subjects, voices in the cultures that produce and consume (and reproduce) the texts. The difference that Bal reads is not located in textuality alone but is the very difference which constitutes culture and which magisterial reading practices, whether ancient or modern, repress.

Any human cultural product is overdetermined; it has multiple causes and multiple significations. There is, therefore, no theoretical possibility of a foolproof text. Any text can be understood in several ways, and, indeed, from the point of view of a given ideology, any text can be misunderstood. Misunderstanding is the ground of which understanding is the figure. Certainly, in order for a text to achieve the kind of artistic complexity and subtlety that we admire in much of biblical narrative, it must sacrifice any claim to the simplicity of significance that would enable it to be "foolproof." Therefore, a theory of narrative that explicitly encodes the polysemy of narrative is superior, a priori, to one that insists on a single "correct" decoding, as do not only Sternberg but also many structuralist and even Marxist critics. Bal's narratology with its study of other subject positions within the text than that of the "author," namely the focalizers and speakers, is a powerful way of opening the text up to other ideological voices and empowering them. Furthermore, this is a reading practice that opens up the text not only to other voices *within* it but also to other voices *around* it as well—the voices of other readers. Bal explicitly thematizes a hermeneutic which "differentiates between empowering and intimidating interpretations. An unmodeled but seductive interpretation will be rhetorically powerful; students have no choice but to accept what seems appealing but is beyond their control. Modeled interpretations teach students not only what is interesting about the particular text but also how to deal with those things in other texts" [Love 15].

Bal's feminist interpretation is accordingly at its strongest when she is reading for the female subject-positions within the stories that she treats, that is, when her reading is politically and not essentialistically generated and formulated. Thus, for example, I find especially strong her chapter "One Woman, Many Men, and the Dialectic of Chronology," on the story of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar in Genesis 38 [Love 89–103]. There is not much profit in summarizing the text here, but I would like to point out the following elements of her reading which make it so valuable:

1. It raises explicitly the ideological motivation of the convention of unity itself, whether in the hands of "higher critics" or "new critics."

2. It attempts to ask about and answer both the "editorial policy," that is, the ideology of the text, as well as the "subsequent doubts about that policy": contestatory ideological positions. The chronological "misplacement" of this story in the middle of the Joseph cycle is neither treated as an editorial error, as by "higher critics," nor harmonized and naturalized by a purely thematic reading. Its very placement is a mark of difference, a displacement of the male genealogical progression from father to inheriting son. ". . . it can hold up a mirror to the story. In that mirror, the image is analogical within a specific chronology: what seemed to come first changes places; what seemed certain becomes problematic. And that precisely is the function of subversion" [103].

3. The analysis is built on the dialectic and tension between different reading strategies, and not the promotion of one of them, thus opening up the text's heterogeneity rather than foreclosing it. Formalist and thematic readings are both actualized in the interpretive work.

4. It shows—as Bal's readings often do—how the reception history of the text has closed off subject-positions and ideological voices within the text. (Bal brilliantly suggests that the use of the term "onanism" to mean masturbation and not *coitus interruptus* is an enactment of the erasure of the female subject-position that this text encodes [99].)

This is another way of getting at some of the issues that Bakhtin was raising about narrative fiction as well and the way that it almost inevitably encodes heteroglossia—the Bible is if anything more heteroglotic than even *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is not the choice of a perspective from which to read the text that makes a reading superior or inferior but the recognition that there are several such perspectives that makes a theory superior. Thus, reading the ideological position of the “implied author” or “author’s meaning” is fine, and that is what Sternberg does so brilliantly, but we must also be alert to the possibilities of different readings, of different ideologies—counterideologies—which the text encodes or has tried to suppress, usually with only partial success. It is not so much, then, the necessity for criticism to “criticize ideologies” [“Escape” 76, citing Culler. Does a critic *always* have to be opposed to the ideology of any text?], but to show how any ideological production criticizes itself. Bal’s theory (if not always her practice) opts for a style of reading that not only allows the reader freedom to choose her strategy, but also provides for a much more nuanced understanding of the conflictual and dialogical richness of the field of the text. This opening up of the text is of special importance when the text has the authoritative nature that the Bible almost must have in our culture (at least till now) and creates possibilities other than just accepting the dominant ideology or rejecting the tradition entirely.

What then is feminist in this confluence of a nuanced narratology and a Bakhtinian heteroglossia? Bakhtin himself, after all, notoriously ignores the gender code or the female voice in the heteroglossia. Indeed, Bal’s very narratology, which provides the ground for her readings, was articulated outside of or prior to an explicit consideration of feminist issues in her own work.⁹ What, then, is the continuity between such concepts as focalization and feminism? This question comes back to the dichotomies in feminist theory named at the beginning of my text. When Bal is not seduced by an essentialist feminism, it is then that her reading has the most potential (so it seems to me) as a liberating force. Her feminist reading is like her narratology, because they recreate reading as a site of resistance to the hegemony of any single thematization of the text (and particularly of the authoritative texts of a culture). This is feminist simply because the almost universal suppressed of culture is female. It is reading as a woman, but not like a woman, that is, from the political subject-position of woman oppressed and marginalized in a particular socio-sexual formation and not from a reified determination of how women read. This formulation is, I believe, very close to that of Diana Fuss in her recent essay “Reading Like a Feminist.” Assertion of identification with women as an oppressed and marginalized subject-position within our culture does not in any way compromise the deconstruction of the sex-gender code. “Feminist” reading is privileged not because women are the only suppressed subject-position, but because that is the one that is nearly always there. Feminist readings, then, can model the ways that other suppressed subjects can “creep in, and rewrite themselves back into the history of ideology” [*Love* 132], including gays, blacks, and Jews into European culture and women and Palestinians into Jewish/Israeli culture. To me, this is a most moving and beautiful exemplum of how to tear down the master’s house without using the master’s tools.¹⁰

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9. See, for instance, her *Narratology*, published in English in 1985 and in Dutch in 1980.

10. I wish to thank Ilana Pardes and Jonathan Boyarin for reading earlier drafts of this essay and being of great help.

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