

DECEPTION AND WOMEN A RESPONSE

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0.1 In responding to the articles in this volume one by one, I wish first to attend carefully to the way the author has worked out her thesis, the scholarly argument to the end. Secondary is the question of the adequacy of the thesis in each case. Where I have questions about that, I find that almost always I wish the thesis were a bit more radical than it is—a conclusion that is to me both fascinating and surprising. Doubtless some of my colleagues, both male and female, will find it surprising as well.*

1. Three Radical Women: Tamar, Yael, Ruth

1.1 Johanna W. H. Bos sets out to show how, as “counter-type-scenes,” the stories in Gen 38, Judg 4:17-22, and Ruth 3 portray their feminine protagonists as both autonomous individuals and as subverting patriarchal value-assumptions. Without question, we must accept her demonstration of the autonomy of Tamar, Yael, and Ruth.

1.2 Tamar’s move from passive waiting in her father’s home, through the realization that, though Shelah has come of age, she has not been offered his husbandly services, to her ruse of dressing—and acting—as a prostitute in order to force Judah to deal with her, and her shrewd insistence on precisely the gifts she demands, together with the beautifully dramatic suspense of the dénouement and Judah’s recognition, wonderfully portrays autonomous action. The narrator, of course, passes over the act’s risks. Conveniently, her fertile period that month coincides with Judah’s trip to Timnah, a serendipity that fiction is allowed but fact might have lost. Conveniently, in the intimate embrace of whore and customer, the customer fails to recognize his partner (another instance of his “not seeing,” even though he is, as Bos remarks,

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at the פתח עינים, the “entrance to Enaim,” as even the JPS version prosaically renders it—or the “opening of the eyes” [par. 2.4.4]). Perhaps she concealed her face with a veil, though our narrator says nothing of it. Perhaps it is rather a sideways comment on how easily, in such patriarchal groups, superior men might think inferior women beneath their notice. Father-in-law has married Tamar to two of his sons and told her, no doubt with a kindly pat on the head, to wait with her Daddy until the next son is big enough, but he has never *seen* her clearly enough to recognize her even in intercourse.

1.2.1 One could hardly be more decisive than Yael, and if autonomy consists of acting in decisive distance from authority, implicit or explicit, she is autonomous. Ruth, too, fits Bos’ thesis, for, though she obeys Naomi’s proposals in ch. 3, she does so in her own way. Naomi could give her an outline of actions, but the talk in which the actions must issue could not be prearranged, and there Ruth handles herself with exemplary intelligence and humane sensitivity (and Boaz responds to the latter, 3:10). There is surely more than a smidgeon of luck in the story, and again the narrator passes over it. How was it, in ch. 2, that Ruth happened to land in Boaz’ field? How did anyone know that another woman would not be at Boaz’ side at the threshing-floor festival? We don’t ask. Still, Ruth’s initiative has enabled the proper conclusion to come about.

1.3 But it strikes me as a nice question whether the ingredient of deception in the stories—one of the structural members of Bos’ account of the “counter-type-scene” (par. 1.4)—will allow the conclusion. That Tamar, Yael, and Ruth are successful in their endeavors, and that those successes undercut some precious patriarchal suppositions, seems an unexceptionable conclusion. That the means by which the successes come about is best labeled deception seems to me doubtful. Tamar, to be sure, deceives Judah, and he deceives himself, even to the point of sending his sidekick to look for the wrong kind of prostitute. In a sense Yael deceives Sisera in not telling him that she does not necessarily buy her husband’s political alliances. Yet is not her deception as much a matter of not informing Sisera that his lordly warrior’s habit of ordering women and other subordinates around will backfire on him this time as of letting him think she will do only what he tells her to do? I wish Bos would say just what counts for her as deception or deceptive action. I am not quite persuaded that Yael is the deceiver; like Judah, Sisera deceives himself with his easy assumptions of male prerogatives. Yael uses that self-deception for her own ends, in the autonomous way that Bos portrays. As for Ruth, I simply cannot see deception at work in ch. 3 at all. “Keep it private,” is the effect of Naomi’s advice and of

Ruth's and Boaz' agreement. But private is not the same as ruse. That Ruth arrives after Boaz has fallen asleep is happenstance. It is not at all clear that she intended to do so.

1.3.1 I do not think that this disagreement with Bos undercuts her suggestion (par. 0.4) that the successes come from the women's use of strategies available to them, the strategies of the less powerful that nevertheless accompany the somewhat surprising autonomies. But perhaps the overstatement in her category of deception is an overstatement of the powerlessness.

1.4 Though recognizing that an element in the available strategies may be sexual, Bos seems to underplay it. Of course, she does not do so in the case of Tamar, where the sexual embrace is the center and pivot of the entire transaction. But with Yael, we have only hints of it in the reading, such as the remarks about "opening" and "covering" in pars. 3.2.2 and 3.2.3. Yet is not that "pressing" (par. 3.4.3) invitation to Sisera, "Turn, sir, turn to me, don't be afraid" (4:18), more pressing than mere politics would dictate? And does not the combination of that warmly repeated invitation to "turn to me" with the verbs of opening and closing suggest an implicit sexual promise? Perhaps that is where the deception enters. The sexual aspect has been somewhat submerged in Judg 4, to be sure, but the poetic version in Judg 5 is more nearly explicit, describing Sisera as "slumping, falling, lying" *בין רגליה*, "between her feet" (5:27). But I would reject Lagrange's emendation of 4:21 quoted in par. 3.2.5, which has Sisera falling "between her knees" (*בין ברכיה*). Bos specifically prescind from an overtly sexual interpretation of Ruth (note 7 and par. 4.3.3.7). But I am not satisfied with the alternatives she mentions. That the narrator is "serious" rather than "suggestive" (note 7 following Campbell) seems to me a *non sequitur*. And that the references to sexuality in Ruth 3 have to do with "business" rather than with "romance" (par. 4.3.3.7) seems a false dichotomy. To be sure, marriage in those days involved contractual obligations, and the transaction between Ruth and Boaz deals with them. But the contract and Boaz' promise to pursue it are not incompatible with the implication that the night spent on the threshing floor was not passed merely sleeping, and the harvest context as well as the way Ruth's coming to Boaz at that place is narrated make entirely normal the assumption of sexual relations. Nor, I would argue, is it "irrelevant" to the story at all, for here Ruth, like the other two women, acts out her sexual being in the course and in the interests of her decisive action in this problematic situation.

1.5 So I am not satisfied that Bos has made her case for deception as the strategy by which the women overcome their contextual weakness in winning through to their successful conclusions. Nor do I believe that she has taken sufficient account of the ways in which their autonomy is sexually expressed. As I read those episodes, the sexually explicit and implicit actions or attitudes suggest that, paradoxically, it is precisely in their acting with and against men *as women*, as sexual beings in their own right, that Tamar, Yael, and Ruth accomplish their decisive autonomies.

2. *Tricksters*

2.1 Naomi Steinberg brings us back to deceit through the figure of the trickster. It is fascinating to follow her through the trickster literature, and she is surely right to suggest that this mercurial concept badly wants a great deal of refinement. I wish I did not have to say that I think her own account of biblical tricksters is a bit narrowly conceived and itself wants the subtlety of refinement. Perhaps she was trying to show just one or two types of tricksters, but she does not say so.

2.2 She does well to remind us that "trickster" is as much a scholarly construct as an indigenous phenomenon. I for one had forgotten that. Nor is the construct merely modern. The Tricky Slave is a staple of classical New Comedy (e.g. Menander and Plautus), and from there came by direct routes of readers and, perhaps, players to Shakespeare. Whether comic actors in classical times specialized in stock roles, as they evidently did in Shakespeare's time, we cannot know. Were certain actors regularly cast in roles like that of the Tricky Slave? An answer might tell us much about the public perception of such indubitably "trickster" figures.

2.2.1 What troubles me about Steinberg's very brief discussion of biblical tricksters is that she flattens out the character to mere deceit, with the comment, "Whatever attention biblical scholars have paid to the trickster in the literature of ancient Israel has typically focused on the use of deception by women" (par. 2.1). There are many reasons to criticize biblical scholars, and, if Steinberg is right, this is one of them. But it is not encouraging that Steinberg herself focuses there, with a nod to male deception on the side.

2.3 I am not persuaded that deceit is simply identifiable with trickery. If it were, any lie would qualify its teller as a "trickster." But Abraham is not being a trickster in Gen 20 when he tells Abimelech the lie that Sarah is his sister. He is being merely a liar, trying to keep his wretched skin intact. That God must step in to correct Abimelech's misappre-

hension and set the matter straight seems to me sufficient indication that we do not have here a trick that turns a situation of power upside-down. Abimelech acts soberly and straightforwardly in restoring Sarah to her husband and in giving her "brother" (the one bit of humor in the episode) a little something for his trouble (Gen 20:16). Where is the trick? Where is the outlandish and role-reversing behavior? I can see it much more readily in the rather more skeletal version of the story in Gen 12, where Abraham first pulls the stunt on the Pharaoh—or unfairly orders Sarah to pull it and put herself in jeopardy. There at least the chauvinistic audience might well have laughed that Abraham got away with bilking the Pharaoh of some wealth. The effect of the gift of silver to Abraham in Gen 20:16 is quite opposite, showing Abimelech's righteous and high-minded responsibility as considerably more impressive than the patriarch's self-serving timidity. Given that outcome, the thought of Abraham's lie as a role-reversing trickster's act is inconsistent with the tone of the whole.

2.4 Do we not need a *trick* in order to have a proper trickster, a humorous reversal of power? Steinberg's illustrations of the trickster from African and North American cultures seem to suggest that those figures, theriomorphic or not (and most of them are, from Coyote on), play jokes, that part of their appeal is not only in breaking boundaries but also in the humorous ways by which boundaries, whether of social constrictions or of mental straits, are breached. But I see few humorous trickeries among the examples in par. 4.1. Perhaps the episodes of the midwives in Egypt (Ex 1:15-19) and of Rachel's menstrual syndrome qualify (Gen 31, of which Steinberg gives a nice, if brief, account in par. 4.2). I think I would identify Samson as the trickster figure rather than Delilah. But perhaps that points up the issue in thinking of the trickster as deceitful. There seems no deceit in the episode of Judg 16:1-3, for instance, and yet the humorously unexpected feat of strength by which Samson leaves the Philistines lying in ambush with—as we must imagine—their eyes bugging out was a trick worth playing!

2.5 Steinberg's suggestion about the instability and vulnerability of those in power (par. 5.22) is a very interesting one. But what about a story like the Tower of Babel? Does not Yhwh act there at least somewhat like a trickster? To be sure, from our vantage point, the tower-builders in Shinar are not Yhwh's match. We are much too easily influenced by the dogma of divine omnipotence. Yhwh's own remark (Gen 11:6) suggests that they might succeed in their technological insulation from the divine. But the solution is, as I have argued elsewhere, humorously understated: don't knock them sprawling all over the landscape but quietly remove their means of cooperation. It does not neces-

sarily portray a weaker power overcoming a stronger. But confusion of the language is the kind of thing a trickster would do, and if the story circulated among Judahite exiles in Babylon as a bit of underground humor (notice the sarcasm about Babylonian building materials—lousy brick and bitumen as opposed to good, solid, Palestinian stone—v. 3), the thought of Yhwh as underdog God of underdog Judah might be implicit.

2.6 I wish I could be more positive about Steinberg's article. It strikes me as a prospectus for further research, and as such it is very provocative and interesting. She herself seems uncertain that the trickster figure will tell us a great deal more about women in the Bible than about men, and I share that uncertainty. We need much more work on this as on other comic aspects of the Bible.

3. *Deceptive Goddesses*

3.1 Carole Fontaine provides, I think, some of the work that Steinberg proposed as needed. I have no difficulties with Fontaine's basic thesis or the argument, and only a few qualms on details of her treatment.

3.2 First a mere question: Do we *know* that texts that narrate tales about goddesses tell us about their cultures' understanding of women? By the same token, can we be sure that what a culture says about gods informs us about what it thinks about men? I have not seen the evidence—or have I just missed presentation of it?—that this transfer from divine female (and male) to human female (and male) corresponds to certain knowledge. I am willing to entertain the idea, but it seems that I am invited to do more than entertain it. It is almost as if I look around and discover that I have, by whom I know not, been betrothed to it.

3.3 I enjoyed Fontaine's discussion of the Inanna-Enki contest over the *me*, a text that I have chuckled over for many years. One of the problems I have with Proppian analysis, however, is that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish among questions of genre ("divine journey," in this case, par. 3.11), *topos* (e.g., the relation of Inanna to Enki, par. 3.2), "type-scene" (e.g., banquet-contest, par. 3.4), and "character reading" (e.g., Donor, Villain, Innocent Persecuted Heroine, etc., par. 3.3 for example). And where in all of that does the identification of a trickster have bearing? Or does the trickster float freely among them all? Are we helped more by thinking of a "divine journey" genre than by thinking of a "banquet-contest" type-scene? I incline to think not. If we are concerned with Inanna as trickster, does it really matter that she changes "character reading" from (self-)Dispatcher to Donor to pur-

sued Hero? It matters, I think, that various male roles are occupied in this text by the female Inanna (if there is an answer to my question above, par. 3.2). But does Fontaine propose that trickster figures typically shift roles as their tales move along? I never find her suggesting that someone is a Trickster, for example, *rather than* a Donor. Ought Propp be redacted so as to include Trickster as a “character reading”? These are, I emphasize, questions.

3.3.1 I wonder whether that wonderful tale about Inanna’s squirreling the *me* off to Uruk from Enki might not be a kind of character-parody. One thinks of Enki as trickster sometimes (e.g. his sidelong message to Utanapishtim in the flood story of the Gilgamesh Epic), but here Enki is on the receiving end of trickster-ish activity. If Inanna occupies male roles, is this one of them, a matter of hilariously out-Enki-ing Enki?

3.3.2 Indeed, I wonder whether this text might represent a quite special type-scene. Fontaine points to the “banquet-contest,” and to several examples of Enki in particular as the loser in them (par. 3.4). Perhaps one of the conventional *topoi* of the banquet-contest is that Enki is the butt of the contest. So the question is not whether his “guard is down,” as Jacobsen defensively suggests, but that females sometimes turn him, as Fontaine remarks, almost in passing, into “the foolish Lord of Wisdom” (par. 3.5).

3.3.3 But is it really a case of deception? I don’t see that it is. It is a case, to be sure, of “diminished capacity” on Enki’s part, if I may borrow that term, in which Inanna’s capacity is distinctly not diminished. But she does not sneak the *me* away from Enki; he gives them to her, one by one, in formal presentation. That he is susceptible to drink may be part of the humor of the banquet contest. But the point is surely that she shows herself more intelligent in the situation, more in command of herself, more competent, than “wise” Enki. She doesn’t trick him; if anyone tricks anyone, Enki tricks himself. Inanna bests him squarely, and, using her powers later to defend her boat against the attacks from his change of heart, she bests him again to the point where he acknowledges and participates in her victory. Is that not the humor of the trickster’s trick, that our laughter arises not from the underhandedness of the victory but from its straightforwardness? To be sure, the culture seems to say, the female’s victory is a surprising, and therefore funny, reversal, as males are supposed to win. I wish I could point—perhaps Fontaine can—to a text in which a male bests another male in such a banquet contest. A somewhat horrendous instance from another culture entirely is the Thyestean feast that lies behind Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. The Samson instance that Fontaine ad-

duces (Judg 14:10-20, par. 3.6) is different from the Inanna-Enki text in two ways: first, a female *does* deceive Samson into losing; but second, the hero loses, in effect, to the other males. But it is not quite the instance I would like, because of the intervention of Samson's bride. Indeed, we need some instances of banquet contest with no female participants in order to argue the point that Fontaine wants to make, that the female must make use of powers of weakness in order, surprisingly, to overcome the male. *All* of the instances we see are of feminine success, and it almost begins to look as if an element of the type-scene or genre is precisely feminine victory. That might make the victory less humorous, the status of the female less precarious. The beautiful parallel to the Inanna text that Fontaine draws in Judith 12-13 (par. 3.61) is surely not in the slightest humorous.

3.4 I am less well acquainted with the Hittite Inaraš myth, and I have questions only about one of the terms of the analysis and some of the parallels to Hebrew materials. The former is the use of the Proppian "Donor Test" terminology (pars. 4.4-4.41). The episode referred to, where the goddess gives sexual favor in return for assistance, seems to me rather distant from any point where she is Donor, and the Proppian analysis appears to add rather than subtract complication. Of course, there are desirable complexities, but a Token Male may be allowed a wistful reference to Ockham's razor. Moreover, down in par. 4.5 Fontaine seems to change her mind about the "Donor Test" in the Hittite case.

3.4.1 As to biblical parallels, I am not persuaded that in Gen 38 Tamar is *required* to give her favors to Judah (par. 4.4). On the contrary, as Bos convincingly showed, Tamar is acting autonomously and at her own volition in the prostitute ruse. She is the one who wishes to become pregnant. Indeed, here is one of only two texts I can think of in Hebrew narrative about which Fontaine is mistaken in saying that texts "condemn women and goddesses when they attempt to initiate sexual exchange" (par. 4.4). They certainly do, but precisely not in Gen 38 and not, in my reading, in Ruth 3. In fact, is not one differentiation between Gen 38 and 39 a thematic opposition that structures their juxtaposition, the rejected wife who morally plays the prostitute in Gen 38 and the wife who immorally plays the rejected prostitute in Gen 39? Moreover, ought we not to think of passages such as Song of Songs 2:17; 4:16; 7:10-13; 8:14 as counter-instances to the claim later in the same paragraph of moral condemnation of females who say "Come! Lie with me"? I would point to the Tamar-Judah story again as the contrary evidence to the statement that "Villainy" characterizes female seduction of men, where men's demand for sex as payment for assistance is

but a normal test (par. 4.41). That story, to be sure, is contrary to a great many conventions in the Hebrew Bible and elsewhere, which is why it is so inexhaustibly fascinating. Again, the comparison of the fate of the dragons in the Inaraš myth to Sisera and Yael in Judg 5 (par. 4.6) seems to me a bit stretched, in the sense that the dragons are done in by the Helper in the Hittite story, but Yael does not function as Helper (pseudo-Helper, perhaps, or anti-Helper) in either Judg 4 or 5. A better comparison, it would seem, is the Esther-Haman feast, which equally well points out the ambivalent character of the hospitable female, though both Sisera and Haman would have to be characterized as Despicable Men.

3.5 I am back to the question of deception, then. Do we need to be somewhat more precise in identifying what counts as deception? If additional precision helps us to gain a clearer perspective on how these cultures perceived the female, it will serve the cause.

4. *Wise, Strange Tricksters*

4.1 It is a long while since I have been made to work as hard by a reading of anything as by Claudia V. Camp's powerful, subtle musings on the conjoined and opposite females in Prov 1-9. Among other things, the essay sent me scurrying to a note pad to scribble the outlines of a completely new perspective for me on the Yhwh speeches in Job—not insignificant for a chapter yet to be written. That was contribution only to me. What this reading of Prov 1-9 does for all of us is merely to change the passage from a banal, conventional, moralistic homily to a presumably pious young male into a superbly provocative slant on the world.

4.1.1 Perhaps my only question is whether Camp really needed the trickster figure. I mean that question not biographically but literarily. As a mental exercise, laying the phenomenologies of trickster figures over female images in Prov 1-9 might be one of those imaginative experiments we all do, to the benefit of our scholarship, from time to time. Sometimes such an experiment results in our seeing with the alien structure what we could not see without it (I think of my own experience comparing the structure of Aristophanic comedy to the stories in Daniel in "Apocalyptic as Comedy: The Book of Daniel" in *Semeia* 32 [1984], 41-70). Whether or not the juxtaposition is justifiable historically or philologically, it works and we use it. Sometimes the alien structure shows us something that is there even without the demonstrative intervention of that structure, something that works even if we lay aside the occasion in which we first saw it. From what she herself says (par. 6.10), Camp has used the trickster idea in this way. Thinking

about it showed her some things about Prov 1-9 that she had missed before, things that allow a quite new sense of what the passage might mean, but they are there whether or not one expounds the trickster myths. She could have shown how they work without the trickster material, though it does no harm that she used that material.

4.1.2 Why am I not sure that Camp needed the tricksters for this reading? It is partly that she keeps reminding us that the fit is not exact, that especially the hilarity of most trickster myths is absent from Prov 1-9. I have raised that point before in this response, and the fact that there are traditional trickster tales without the usual comic atmosphere (Camp points to only one, par. 0.22, and I cannot from my own knowledge add any) does not really damage the point. If the Bible has adopted tricksters into its ambit, it has transformed them, it seems, eliminating a sizable amount of what makes them in other cultures *tricksters*.

4.2 I continue to have some small difficulties in detail with some of the applications to Biblical matter. When, for instance, Camp claims (par. 1.3) that Judith, like Tamar and Ruth, "break[s] [her] society's boundaries on sexual behavior in order to accomplish good for [her-self], for society, and, ultimately, for Yhwh," I have the problem that I cannot see that Judith breaks any sexual bounds. When she is left alone with Holofernes, he is dead drunk and quite incapable of sexual activity, and she promptly kills him and spirits away his head. She allows Holofernes the impression that she is willing to break sexual bounds, but she is not actually brought to the test.

4.2.1 The discussion of Gen 3 (pars. 4.3-4.32) most intriguingly pushes that passage past the obvious ways the tradition has read it. To move it away from the dogma of Original Sin is all to the good, and to question Mendenhall's idea of the critique of wisdom is a positive step as well. But it seems to me that Camp has dropped back into a unitary reading of the passage. And her descriptive rather than condemnatory reading banalizes it. Perhaps Gen 3:14-19 "describes what every Israelite knows to be the nature of existence" (par. 4.31), but it does a great deal more than that. Must we not see this passage too as multi-dimensional and with multiple meanings? Surely the disobedience to a specific command is contained therein, but at the same time, Yhwh is responsible for the intolerable situation that leads to it, and he overstates the penalty. The snake overstates the positive prediction of the outcome, but is not really mistaken about it: their eyes are opened (3:7) and they are said to have become "like [God], knowing good and evil" (v. 22). Whether or not the snake is wrong in saying that the deity is afraid of the

humans' acquisition of knowledge, clearly the deity wishes to prevent their getting it, or else the prohibition is only a test (which is no more acceptable here than in Job). Wisdom is attractive to the woman, and it does come to be part of the human condition, but at a cost. Because the humans have wisdom, they must leave the Garden. Yes, human wisdom is condemned as a trespass on divine territory, but it is also described as part of the human condition. The divine command is justified by reference to divine authority, but it is also called into question by its incoherence with human ability to think (and notice that only the woman thinks in this passage [3:6]—Adam certainly does not). The description of the human (and reptilian) existence in vv. 14-19 is, of course, not an unrealistic one, but it is not merely a rehearsal of "what every Israelite knows," even though every Israelite does know it. It is also, and most obviously, a series of curses. Gen 3 seems to me, then, an exceedingly complex, multi-layered myth that cannot satisfactorily be read in any unitary way but that requires a multiple reading. Indeed, I think it requires a deconstructive reading, as the conjunction of opposites is one of the clearest characteristics of the text. Being no Hegelian, I find no over-arching *Aufhebung*.

4.3 These objections are minor and picky. Perhaps the one on Gen 3 is not just picky. When an entire article presents such subtle and widely multiple readings, one is surprised to find the multiplicity apparently falling away in one place. Otherwise, the way in which the multiplicities in Prov 1-9 are drawn and teased out is most illuminating. To turn the Strange Woman (an odd term, and I wish Camp would speculate more about it) and Woman Wisdom into a single but not unitary or univocal figure is a neat piece of maneuvering, which wonderfully lights up a text that, except for a couple of vivid patches, had become old and tired to me. The nicest thing about Camp's achievement here is the way in which the conjunction of the two figures and the conceptualizations and images that go with them spell the deconstruction and evaporation of moralism which is so dead a weight otherwise in Prov 1-9. And all without rewriting the text or pretending that there is in it what is not there!

4.4 Finally a word about the feminist concluding reflections (pars 6.1-6.22). Camp's political justification of a hermeneutics of suspicion (par. 6.2) strikes me as being not merely adequate but thoroughly apt. There is no place that is unreachable by the patriarchal power structures, and even the anti-structures of the liminal margins can be turned to their advantage. Camp recognizes the risk in either abandoning the center to the traditional power or taking up the political cudgels in order to live in the center of the culture, and I think she states the risk

precisely. What fascinates me about her proposal about the feminist embrace of the hazard is its comic view of the world, a view that laughs in both negation and affirmation, both denial and reconstruction, that accepts critique and admiration. "From woman is the beginning of sin." Of course that is a misprision of Gen 3, and far from the only one. "As in Adam all die" (1 Cor 15:22) is another. Can the tricksters, the comic brigades of our age, male and female alike, accept and reject both in the hilarity of a world most ridiculous when it takes itself most seriously? "She" is a completely adequate generic pronoun. I'm not yet willing, however, to abandon "him" entirely. I would rather pull a "Camp" trick, refuse to choose between them, and use them interchangeably. It might be a start on the language of the new age.

5. *Politics and Language*

5.1 Esther Fuchs is not fooling around. Her essay is tough and tough-minded, relentless in its logic, and compelling in its carefully considered stance. I had a curious kind of S-curve reaction as I read. The thesis, that language reflects a patriarchal political ideology, strikes me as unexceptionable and undeniable. As I went further into Fuchs' reading of Gen 31, I became uneasy with what seemed a careful but skewed attention to the story, so that the text appeared not necessarily to demonstrate the thesis. But then I came to see that it does demonstrate it—but not univocally or, strictly speaking, necessarily—and that the problematic to which Fuchs points is a quite devastating one to biblical theology. I see no point in wasting time repeating Fuchs' thesis about language and male power, with which I find no difficulty. I want to raise some problems about Gen 31 and its environs, first contentiously in relation to her thesis and then in a more comfortable connection with it (how comfortable Fuchs will find it, I don't know). Finally, I will suggest what I see as a catastrophic theological issue, catastrophic not because I particularly dislike it but because it seems to me devastating to the religious traditions in which it is an issue.

5.2 Every reading of every text, I presume, is skewed. None of us ever has the last word with a text, unless the text is so shallow that its possibilities can be exhausted. That is not the case with Gen 31. That I find Fuchs sometimes missing points that I think I see is no triumphal whacking off of her head. She sees points that I have missed too, and I would rather not have my head whacked off. We can talk, I mean to say, and I would like to do so.

5.2.1 That Gen 31 is a crucial episode in the Jacob story (Fuchs, par. 1.2) is certainly so. It proposes a kind of closure to the series of deceptions by Laban, though an ambiguity remains to which I will

return below. That that closure, however, represents any sort of cap to the deception between Jacob and Esau seems to me quite impossible. For when we come to the reunion of those two in chs. 32-33, we see that that reunion, detailed and motivated as it is, with Jacob's feisty message (32:5-6), his terror at Esau's approach, his careful deployment of a procession of gifts and family members to keep Esau occupied before he gets to Jacob, his obsequious behavior (33:3), is not exactly straightforward. Esau attempts to turn down the gifts, and Jacob likens seeing him again to "seeing the face of God" (vv. 8-10), a sight that in the preceding episode gave Jacob both a limp and a blessing. The phrase itself, then, as we the readers know, is extremely ambiguous and, indeed, misleading, deceptive in Fuchs' definition. Moreover, Esau proposes that they go back to Seir together, and he will slow down his pace so that Jacob's flocks and children can keep up. Jacob deceives Esau again with the assurance that he will go there and his refusal of Esau's proffered convoy (vv. 12-15). And as soon as Esau is out of sight, Jacob slips away to Succoth and thence across the Jordan to Canaan and Shechem, "safe," as the text has it (vv. 16-18). That is to say, Jacob is still deceiving Esau with false promises and misleading expectations. Ch. 31, then, is in no sense at all a closure to the earlier Jacob-Esau episodes, and the manner of Jacob's dealing with Esau sets a serious question against Fuchs' contention that the point of this chapter is "to dramatize Jacob's moral transition from a cunning Ya'akov to an upright Israel" (par. 4.4). If in chs. 32-33 Jacob is still cunning, then he has made no moral transition. Though he becomes Israel, he is not "upright" Israel but, throughout chs. 32-33, "uptight" Israel.

5.2.2 That points for me to the aspect of Fuchs' reading that I found most surprising: she takes everything Jacob says and does quite at face value. It almost seems as if her case with Gen 31 depends on supposing that either Jacob is portrayed ambiguously and ironically or Rachel is, but both cannot be. For example, I find Jacob's speech to Leah and Rachel, vv. 5-13, ironically pious in the extreme. He claims a revelation from God in a dream as justification for his breeding practices, narrated in 30:37-43. But ch. 30 made no reference to divine inspiration, and why should we believe one here? Jacob is clearly both angry at and afraid of Laban in his somewhat careful statement (31:5) that Laban's "face" is not as it was before, and the anger is justified by the statement of cheating (v. 7). But Jacob thinks he has done no cheating of any sort, and his success in breeding is now ascribed not to his shrewd manipulation of the breeding environment, as 30:37-43 had it, but to divine intervention. Why should we accept this astonishing piety here? Especially if, as one could argue, Leah and Rachel did not. Fuchs argues that Jacob's reference to divine intervention puts him in a better light than the women's somewhat crass economic reasoning in

vv. 14-16 (pars. 2.1-2.3). I suggest that we can read it in the opposite way: that his references to God are a smokescreen, and that his wives bring him down to earth by exposing his real motives. In that case, the dialogue, far from "exonerating" Jacob of the suspicion of economic motives (par. 3.1), underscores them, and so does his excessive generosity in his gifts to Esau in ch. 33. To be sure, Leah and Rachel agree with Jacob's evaluation of their father's attitude. But Jacob is not thinking so single-mindedly of Laban's good as he claims. His eye is distinctly upon his own advantage, and his return to Canaan, in response to the divine command, needs acquiescence from the women. Jacob himself deceives them in his manner of presenting the case for departing, and with no more credible explicit motivation than Rachel's motivation for taking and hiding the household gods. The argument that Gen 31 presents Jacob in a moral transition seems to me exceptionally weak, and I think Fuchs depends on it much more than she ought. It seems to motivate her saying that Jacob is "incensed" at Laban's accusation of theft of his gods (par. 4.2). The text does not say so, though it is careful to say in v. 36 that he is "incensed" (JPS) at the entire situation, with Laban rummaging around in his, Jacob's, tents with nothing resembling a search warrant. I do not think we can reason in a straight line from "curse" to "incensed," in a culture where curses were much more objective than we think of them, and, more significantly, I am not persuaded that we can read v. 32 as rhetorically a "curse."

5.2.3 Just as I do not find persuasive the contention that Jacob undergoes moral transformation in this (or any) chapter, I think Fuchs misses a tone of truculent distrust at the end of the passage. What she calls (par. 5.1) "conciliatory speeches" by Laban (vv. 43-44, 48-53) seem to me just the opposite. The "covenant" into which these two ground-pawing bulls enter is not conciliation but is the establishment of watchful hostility. Laban first lays claim to the women, the children, and the flocks, then throws up his hands in resignation and proposes a monument of "witness," something that will stand there objectively and to which appeal in strife can be made (vv. 43-44). Then he invokes the divine name as one who "watches" (צפה) between the two, one who spies on Jacob's treatment of his wives (v. 50) and who keeps the two hostile camps separated from each other (v. 52). I should argue that this truculent covenant leaves the deceptive relationship between Jacob and Laban just where it has been all along, closed only in the sense that the deception and the mistrust are out in the clear where everyone can see them, but not in the sense that they are removed.

5.2.4 But let us not have a "Witness Pillar" between Fuchs and me about Gen 31. In responding to some other papers, I have expressed my delight at the increasing possibilities of multiple readings. If my

reading of Gen 31 deconstructs Fuchs', then hers deconstructs mine. If I cannot see that Jacob comes out of Gen 31 smelling quite so sweet as she seems to think, I cannot also argue that our narrator has cast Rachel in a more positive light than she thinks. Indeed, I suspect that in the end Gen 31 deconstructs itself, forbids any unitary reading that tries to get anyone, Jacob, Laban, Rachel, or any of the others, to look at all good. That raises some questions about her contention that this chapter demonstrates the patriarchal power to exalt the male and denigrate the female. But if the chapter does not exalt the male, it certainly does not exalt the female either. The question is whether denigration by means of an excess of motivation, as with Jacob and Laban, is preferable to denigration by a paucity of motivation, as with Rachel and Leah. Maybe no denigration is preferable. But there we are in a world quite different from the one the Hebrew Bible gives us. In fact, I think Fuchs takes us afield from the point in some of her contentions. Take, for example, only the argument that the *niddah* laws of Lev 15, especially as they refer to menstruation, tie into this systematic denigration of women. Perhaps they do, but in order to make the point stick, it is necessary to deal with the fact that the law detailing the "uncleanness" of menstrual blood (Lev 15:19-24) is preceded by two laws that detail the "uncleanness" of semen, both in sexual intercourse (v. 18) and in any other ejaculation of semen (vv. 16-17). If the purity laws show that menstrual blood causes "horror" in men, they show that semen does too. I do not wish to claim that men are denigrated in the Hebrew Bible as much as women are, for I do not think so. But the grounds on which any claim about it are to be made must be carefully examined.

5.3 And that brings me to my last point. Fuchs does not need me to say that she is dead right in the claim that "An awareness of the interdependence of heterosexual politics and biblical narrative is the first step in a feminist critique of the patriarchal claim to absolute 'objective' truth" (par. 7.3). She is right in thinking that this awareness must inform both literary critics and "biblical feminologists." Exactly who the latter are is not entirely clear to me, but that probably does not matter. As she goes on to speak of the risk of validating androcentric epistemology, it seems to me that she points to a different problem from the one that is present with literary critics. The literary reading of biblical material entails a basic fairness to the texts themselves, to readers and their worlds, and to the stimulation of conjunctions and disjunctions between readers and texts. I do not think that literary criticism has to do with the sort of "truth" or, perhaps better, "truth claim," to which an appeal to epistemology points. When Fuchs refers to discourse in the "biblical academy," I read her as moving in some sense into the theological and religious realms of discourse.

5.3.1 And there is the problem. Androcentric epistemology and androcentric discourse, taken together, are a theological problem. The more I read the Bible (whether in its one-volume Jewish or two-volume Christian version), the more I am persuaded that it is (or they are) irredeemably androcentric. There may be a few pockets of variance, such as the inclusion of male domination as part of the curse in Gen 3:16, but they are the more notable for their rarity. What Fuchs proposes, then, seems to me to imply the theological program either of replacing the Bible as the ground of Jewish or Christian religious authority by something else or of recasting it in some thorough-going way to reflect the basic feminist claim to truth.

5.3.2 If she is right that (1) the Bible is androcentric and (2) androcentrism is an unacceptable construction of the world—and I believe she is right on both counts—then the Bible has ceased to be either an adequate ground of authority for religious truth or an adequate source of religious insight. If it has lost validity in either sense, because it is at best partial in its construction of the world, then Biblical authority is dead, and feminism has killed it. Feminism has done what Deism could not do, what liberalism could not do, what many modern efforts to modify Christianity's sense of the basis of its truth failed to do.

5.3.3 Am I just being dramatic? (By the way, I am absolutely not being sarcastic.) No, I do not believe so. From the first glimmerings by which I began to see the justice in various forms of the feminist critique of the traditions of our world-view, I thought it would probably come to this. As the consciousness has risen, and I have gone on reading the Hebrew Bible in the course of professional duty, I have become more and more certain of the hopelessness of the task facing anyone who wishes to give a positive feminist reading of the Bible. I think there is no way that it could be welcomed intact into the feminist orbit. I would rather occupy a generous, morally acceptable feminist construction of the world than stick by a religious authority that is characterized now as it always has been by a disagreeable bias and an illegitimate occupation of power.