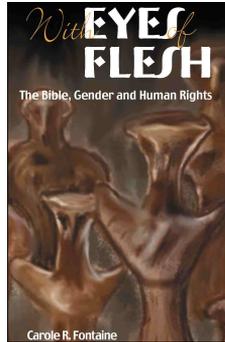


○ REVIEW OF CAROLE FONTAINE, *WITH EYES OF FLESH: THE BIBLE, GENDER AND HUMAN RIGHTS*

(SHEFFIELD: SHEFFIELD PHOENIX, 2004)

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This is a very personal, political and post-Enlightenment book. Its main objective is to find human rights in the Bible – a ‘preposterous’ move about which I will have more to say towards the end. Above all, the book is written out of deep passion and outrage at what the United States government and a good number of its people are doing at home and abroad. It is also written with a deep passion for the Bible, a desperate hope for a better country than the one in which Fontaine lives now, and for justice, especially for women but in the end for all human beings. It is a long book and to read it is to get a sense of a deep cleansing, a release of frustrations, anger, desire and hope that had been bottled up within the requirements of ‘objective’ and ‘scientific’ scholarship. It is no surprise, then, that the book is written with a strong autobiographical element, since it registers in a very personal way what the experiences of the September 11 attacks, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the tortures of Abu Ghraib (the pictures had just come out) and Guantanamo Bay mean for Fontaine as a biblical scholar.

The book has eight chapters as well as a very long preface that addresses one as ‘Dear Reader’ and an epilogue which is a reprint of a human rights poem. Many of the chapters are revised essays published elsewhere, which is not an unusual process, but in this case has facilitated the putting together of a long book in response to an immediate situation. The first three chapters are theoretical and visual, with many illustrations drawn by Fontaine herself; they are hand drawings of museum exhibits from the ancient Near East. Nearly all of them depict brutality and torture in war, coming from the same part of the world where American atrocities were being committed by US forces. It is as though the conventional boundaries of scholarship were not enough for Fontaine’s outraged response.

The first chapter, from which the book takes its title – ‘With Eyes of Flesh’ (Job 10.4): Toward a Concept of Human Rights in the Bible and the Ancient Near East’ – seeks a way to speak of universal human rights. Here we see the book’s main contemporary informant, which is Fontaine’s

activism for human rights throughout the world. What she wants to be able to do is produce a universal theory and practice of human rights which breaks out of the historical confines of the origins of that discourse. I am not sure that she succeeds.

The second and third chapters deal respectively with gendered abuse from Sumer and ancient Egypt to Abu Ghraib, usually in the context of war but also as a means of maintaining power, and then a nascent theory of human rights from the book of Job and the Egyptian Book of the Dead. These human rights arise, argues Fontaine, from the experience of brutality.

The remaining chapters are an exercise in control, working patiently through key biblical texts within their ancient Near Eastern context. So chapter four – ‘Reading for the Best: Toward Diversity in Interpretation’ – concerns textual abuse (since there is no visual material from ancient Israel) of captives, slaves, women and ‘Others.’ Fontaine argues problematically that verbal abuse implies real abuse. In doing so she makes a standard hermeneutical as well as homiletical move in trying to relate the ancient texts to the present. However, to Fontaine’s immense credit, she doesn’t try to exempt the Bible from criticism and condemnation. There is no intense twisting and turning to try and detoxify texts that are simply toxic. The Bible too must be held to account. The fifth chapter, called ‘The Abusive Bible: On the Use of Feminist Method in Pastoral Contexts’, deals with the ‘plain meaning’ of biblical texts on purity, sexual infractions and gender. What are the effects of such texts on people who have suffered rape, incest and abuse? Chapter six, ‘Many Devices’ (Qoheleth 7.23–8.1): Qoheleth, Misogyny, and the *Malleus Maleficarum*’, shifts ground to consider textual reception. Here Fontaine asks what the outcome is when a misogynist text is read by torturers. From there she weaves connections with the witch-hunting manual, *Malleus Maleficarum*, the torture of Muslim women, and a long report on a human rights conference. And the seventh chapter, ‘Come, Lie with Me!': The Mythology of Honor Killings and Female Desire in Biblical Israel and the Ancient Near East,’ traces the representation of women as seductresses of young and virile males. A huge range of texts are included here from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia and the Hebrew Bible – the ‘Sotah’ in Numbers 5, Mrs Potiphar, and the Beloved in the Song of Songs.

By this time, 293 pages into the book, the overall effect is quite depressing. The Hebrew Bible, argues Fontaine, was formed in a crucible of violence and oppression. Many of its texts give voice to that brutality, as do those of the ancient Near East. The story of reception is no different, for many biblical texts have been and are used by invaders, colonizers and torturers to justify their actions. Perhaps this comment in the preface sums things up best: ‘Naturally, Dear Reader, I long to transmute my own shock and awe at the collapse of moral and religious discourse in the United States’ (p. xxiii).

But then she also says, ‘By writing, I hope to breed in myself some species of the endurance and rebirth that I have witnessed in the real lives of bodies which have been tortured, raped, humiliated, and imprisoned’ (p. xxiii). And that hope is found in Jesus of Nazareth, who turns out to be a human rights hero, one who is full of dignity and worth, and one who opens up the possibility of what Fontaine calls a partnership theology across three religions of the book. Or, as Fontaine puts it on page 279:

Jesus-our-Rabbi, faithful even unto death, shows us the way, a real Human Rights Hero to rival all the Greats of living memory whose names we speak with gratitude and wonder.

This is the message of the Book of Job.

This is the message of The Woman Who Lived in the Gospel of John.

This is the message.

What are we to make of this book? At one level it is difficult to offer a critical response, since the book is a call to action and the statement of a programme (Fontaine lists further resources and urges readers to become involved). It is very homiletic, outlining our sin and corruption, calling for repentance and offering hope. At another level, I do have a few questions. To its great credit, the book does not shy away from difficult texts, operating with the assumption that the Bible is a deeply ambivalent collection of texts – all of those fundamentalist Islamaphobes and torturers can use it as well as Fontaine. However, I wonder at Fontaine's clearly Democrat position (in the US sense). She has a deep belief that the project called the 'United States of America' is a good one. She believes it has gone off the rails with the neo-conservatives, but that it may restore itself and get on the right track. The book was completed after the elections of 2006 when the Democrats had won back control of the two houses of parliament. On this matter Fontaine expresses the beginnings of hope. Does that mean the election of Barack Obama is the recovery of Fontaine's dream? I am more suspicious, since the rhetoric we hear is of restoring America's global 'leadership,' which I am not sure many people would relish – a sort of kinder, gentler imperialism.

I am also suspicious of the discourse of human rights and the 'preposterous' effort to universalise what is a very specific and historical discourse. As Fontaine well knows, human rights began as an Enlightenment project, given brilliant expression by Tom Paine's trenchant and wildly popular *Rights of Man* (1791). It is very much part of the development of modernity with the political project of holding up the private individual as sacrosanct and inviolable. In other words, it is inescapably part of the ideology of liberalism and thereby capitalism, although it has worked overtime to universalise its position from that particular context. Add to that the fact that 'human rights' has been the mantra of US foreign policy for many years now, usually as a cover for imperial activity, and it becomes even more problematic.

In this respect the book is a very American one, responding to and coming out of a situation in the USA. The danger, as with so many books and studies, is that the particular context of the USA is globalised and made into everyone's problem. It is a sort of obverse imperialism of values. However, let me close with one further reflection. I have read and reviewed a good number of books now which express outrage and marginalisation within the US Empire. That phenomenon tells us much about the struggles going on within the USA over the Bible and its legacy. I would much rather that Fontaine and her comrades win that struggle, although it would be preferable if it wasn't done with universalising assumptions.