

Review of Laura Feldt, *The Fantastic in Religious Narrative from Exodus to Elijah*, Sheffield: Equinox, 2012

Emma England

IN THIS VOLUME, LAURA FELDT ASKS ‘what literary fantasy theory may contribute to the study of religious narrative and empirically what the work of the fantastic is in Hebrew Bible religious narrative. Her ‘theoretical sub-question concerns whether literary fantasy theory conceptualises religious narrative, and if so, how’ (p. 2). Chapters one and two set out to begin an exploration of these questions by tracing an overview of work undertaken on fantasy and religion to date, which Feldt states is minimal, and by exploring fantasy theory. Fantasy theory refers ‘to all theories of fantastic literature, fantasy, magical realism, horror and neighbouring genres and terminology (supernatural fiction, speculative fiction etc.)’ (p. 44). Tzvetan Todorov’s theory of the fantasy as a genre and Renate Lachmann’s theory of the fantastic dominate; the latter is used heavily throughout the book.

The presentation and form of the phantasms—fantastic events—within each section of Exodus (broadly defined along chapter lines) are discussed in chapter three. Exodus 4, for example, ‘centres on metamorphoses and belief’ (p. 85) as YHWH demonstrates how Moses will change objects to prove he is a messenger of God. But uncertainty and doubt cloud the demonstration because Moses is hesitant, highlighting his role as a human messenger and as a representation of Israel’s doubt.

A synchronic analysis of five fantastic strategies present in Exodus reverses the hermeneutic flow in chapter four: ‘metamorphosis’, a change in ontological category or status; ‘Adynaton’, an impossible event or being; ‘Hyperbole’, something improbable being rhetorically presented as impossible; ‘Coincidence’, an event to challenge credibility; and ‘Paradox’, inconsistencies and contradictions. As metamorphoses, the changes ascribed to the hand, staff and water in 4:1-9 are said to violate cognitive expectations but ‘are also staged, by the text, as boundary-transgressions, disturbances, violations of the normal and ordinary’ (p. 134). The reversible status of these changes further unsettles the observer of the spectacle. The emotional status of the personae in the text is critical to an understanding of the fantastic in terms of Lachmann’s ‘objective fantastic’ insofar as biblical the text ascribes the phantasms to ‘*ein wirkendes Anderes*’ (Lachmann 2002, p. 24), while the phantasms are questioned by the narrative’s actors (p. 145). The emphasis on doubt, hesitation and fluctuation between central dichotomies such as fantasy/reality and belief/disbelief encourage active reflection. Feldt argues that this is part of what enables Exodus to ‘work’ as a religious narrative.

This argument is extended using cultural memory in chapter five, with Exodus being described as ‘Mnemo-Fantasy’ and the fantastic forming a pattern to shape the future memories of communities. This fantastic makes this possible because the emotional responses of doubt and hesitation are transformed into acts of the imagination and autobiographical memory. Ultimately, the mnemo-fantasy in Exodus serves to instil future remembrance of the fantastic experience through the religious ritual of Passover.

Chapter six expands upon Feldt’s arguments using Hebrew Bible texts that focus on the fantastic as part of everyday life (where YHWH is inconspicuous): Numbers 11-14; Judges 6-9; 1 Kings 17-19 and 2 Kings 4-7. Again in these texts, the fantastic creates doubt, tension and ambiguity, responses which provide space for reflection on God and his relationship with humanity, while, importantly, not necessarily praising him.

The final chapter reasserts the role of the hesitation as a space for reflection and mediation between YHWH and humanity. Feldt argues that the presence of ambiguous phantasms in religious reception and religious texts more generally ‘are essential for making room for an agent/subject who is active and potentially creative, for change, conversion and transformation’ (p. 239). Suggestions for applying this fantasy-theoretical perspective to religious narratives and the study of religion are presented.

The Fantastic in Religious Narrative from Exodus to Elisha successfully demonstrates the value of reading ancient and religious texts through a fantasy lens. The argument is especially effective at dealing with texts where characters are disbelieving of the events they experience. A clear structure creates an easily navigable and accessible work, which helps make the work suitable as a reading of Exodus and as a new methodology.

As may be expected for such a thought-provoking work, it has weaknesses. By choosing to argue from the perspective of ‘fantasy in religion’, rather than specifying ‘fantasy in the Bible’ questions about the ‘Hebrew Bible religion’ (p. 241) are implied but left unanswered. What is the Hebrew Bible religion we are expected to be engaging with and interpreting? For whom and in what ways are we to review Exodus as a ‘religious narrative’? A methodological step engaging with these questions would have strengthened the book.

The scholarly distinction between ‘fantasy in religion’ and ‘religion in fantasy’ is also less clear than the author suggests. Given the enormous body of work about, for instance, Christianity in Grimm’s fairy tales, George MacDonald’s writings, and in C. S. Lewis’s Narnia stories, there is something of a missed opportunity in terms of developing the argument around how fantasy can both support and function as part of religious narrative. In general, Feldt’s reliance on a more limited area of fantasy scholarship results in something of a restricted reading. True, Feldt explains that she is selective in her approach, but this reader is left with key questions as a result of her specificity. What would Farah Mendlesohn’s idea of intrusion fantasy (Mendlesohn 2008) do to Feldt’s engaging reading of Exodus? This theory also involves protagonists being amazed, shocked, and hesitant at unexpected events, after all, and it relies on demarcations between the real and the fantastic and upon ‘escalations’ (similar to Feldt’s hyperboles) as a rhetorical feature. But, as Mendlesohn points out, Exodus is also frightening and frequently masks ‘a vicious colonialist attitude to the Other’ (p. 181). These broader ideas

could add interesting future avenues for exploring the relationship between God and humanity within these narratives and within the ideologies of reading communities. Furthermore, Mendlesohn discusses other forms of fantasy which does not rely on hesitation, something which Feldt seems to imply is critical for fantasy—though such an approach might have some heavy implications for Feldt’s reliance on ‘doubt’ as a defining feature of the fantastic.

If anything, these reservations highlight the accuracy of Feldt’s opening assertion that the arenas of fantasy in religion, religion in fantasy and (most certainly) of fantasy and the Hebrew Bible warrant further research. To anybody who is interested in exploring the intersections between the Bible, religion and narrative—especially in, but certainly not limited to, fantasy—I would warmly recommend this book.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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