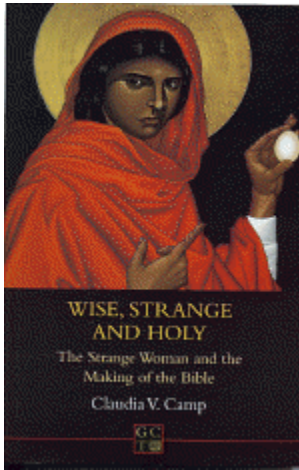


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Camp, Claudia V.

Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible

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This book offers a feminist analysis and critique of the priestly and ethnocentric ideologies informing the biblical attitude to narrative, poetic and legal figurations of the Strange Woman (“*isha zara*” or “*nochria*”) in the Hebrew Bible. Drawing on literary, anthropological and socio-historical methodologies and making use of post-colonial and postmodern theories, Camp calls our attention to the frequent association of the female stranger with cultic, moral, ethnic, and sexual Otherness. Pushing the concept of the biblical woman as Other to a new frontier, Camp argues that the Strange Woman embodies the antithesis of the biblical desideratum as such, the opposite pole the biblical male God. Through a sustained and wide-ranging reading of Wisdom, Priestly, and historical texts, Camp deconstructs the ambiguous image of the Strange Woman, presenting her instead as an expression of wisdom and holiness. The rejection of the foreign wisdom and strange holiness masks a political contest for ethnic, tribal or class superiority and for the power to define authoritatively Israelite identity.

The book is divided into three parts. As its title suggests, Part I, “Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman in the Book of Proverbs,” includes two chapters on the book of Proverbs. Chapter One, “The Strange Woman of Proverbs,” investigates the various references to the “*isha zara*” in the context of the xenophobic ideology of the books of Ezra-Nehemiah. In the book of Proverbs the warning against exogamy, or marrying foreign women, is metaphorized as the abstract “*isha zara*.” It is the woman’s deviant sexuality—notably her engagement with prostitution and adultery—that marks her as an

outsider to the Israelite family. The book of Proverbs is mostly concerned with female sexuality as an alien phenomenon, as expression of anxiety that is understandable in the context of a priestly epistemology according to which all women, as such are “zarot” or strange to the sons of Aaron. “Woman as sexual stranger is inexorably linked to Woman as Ethnic Stranger and to Israel as Estranged Wife” (p. 67). Chapter Two, “Wise and Strange: Woman as Trickster in Proverbs,” uses anthropological theories of folklore to illuminate the interdependence between two apparently contrasting figures: Woman-as-Wisdom and the Strange Woman. Drawing on the categories of duality, order and disorder, the language of deceit and the concept of theodicy, Camp argues that these two figures are complementary, and that both mediate between the human and the divine, death and life.

Part II, “Reading Biblical Narrative as Wise and Strange,” moves the discussion from Wisdom genres and texts to historical narrative as it exposes the priestly undertones in the stories of Samson and Solomon. Chapter Three, “Riddlers, Tricksters and Strange Women in the Samson Story,” draws on previous analyses by Susan Niditch, Mieke Bal, and Cheryl Exum as it highlights the function of Samson’s mother as well as his Philistine women as harbingers of death. Samson’s multiple encounters with Philistine women of questionable repute seem inconsistent with his Nazirite vow and the demands of priestly purity. Camp suggests that Samson’s use of riddles embodies his paradoxical behavior and ambiguous love-hate relationship with his enemies. Though portrayed as his ultimate enemy, Delilah herself, sweet as honey and fearless as a lion performs a priestly function as she cuts off Samson’s hair; thus, she is both destructive and holy. Chapter Four, “Reading Solomon as a Woman,” suggests that Solomon’s story as monarch and temple builder has important links to the Strange Woman and to Woman as Wisdom. On the one hand Solomon is the wise king who rejects his father’s adultery and murder and who uses wisdom in cutting through the deceptive speech of prostitutes claiming as their own the same child. He is the monarch who benefits from his mother Bathsheba’s wisdom and from the wisdom of the exotic queen of Sheba. On the other hand, Solomon succumbs to the gods of his foreign women. Because he builds houses for the daughter of Pharaoh, and other foreign wives, his own House, his kingdom and temple will eventually be destroyed. The final ironic twist according to Camp is that the Strange Woman who is blamed for Solomon’s fall eventually replaces him as Wisdom incarnate in the book of Proverbs—and other Wisdom texts—attributed to Solomon’s authorship.

Part III “Sister, Brother, Other: The Israelite Woman Estranged,” comprises three chapters each of which discusses a different aspect of the estrangement of Israelite biblical sisters. This part focuses on the ways in which the biblical sister is cut out of the male genealogy, which constitutes a priestly pre-requisite of holy corporate identity. Chapter Five “Of Lineages and Levites, Sisters and Strangers: Constructing Priestly Boundaries in the Post-Exilic Period,” posits that stories of Israelite sisters and their eventual exclusion from the group is only one manifestation of intra-priestly vying for power and privilege (e.g. the conflicts between the Levites and the Aaronites). According

to Camp, the book of Numbers shares with Ezra-Nehemiah the rhetoric of lineage and the rejection of foreign women as potential pollutants of holy space. Chapter Six “The (E)strange(d) Woman in the Wilderness: Miriam Among the Priests,” focuses on the sister of two quintessential priestly brothers, Moses and Aaron. Miriam is twice ‘made strange’ in the priestly mode: she is punished by leprosy and thus made impure (Num 12) and she dies where there is no water for purification (Num 20). Camp reads Miriam with the Cushite woman and with Zipporah, the foreign wife, construing all three as overlapping identities and mirroring characters. Though an insider, Miriam like the foreign women must be pushed out of the camp. Chapter Seven, “The (E)strange(d) Woman in the Land: Sojourning with Dinah,” focuses on yet another defiled and excluded sister. The story of Dinah reflects the competing (priestly) demands for endogamy (intra-marriage) and the practical need for exogamy (inter-marriage). According to the (priestly) brothers Simeon and Levi, Dina is defiled by her illicit contact with Shechem the foreigner. Like Shechem, Dinah is recuperated temporarily. While the circumcised foreigner is literally killed, the sister is eliminated from her family’s descent line. But Dinah’s disappearance is registered and reproduced in Jacob’s curse on Simeon and Levi. Eventually, Simeon who inherits land during the tribal allotments becomes insignificant, while Levi attains landless power. Paradoxically, the Levites’ fate mirrors that of the “ger,” the foreigner in the land: they are both everywhere and nowhere in Israel.

If the book seems at times marred by a dense surfeit of detail, tortuous transitions and lengthy and detailed debates with other scholars, the introduction and the conclusion help clarify its main concerns and arguments. In her conclusion Camp summarizes the Strange Woman as the mirror of language itself: “From her lips we hear the trickster’s riddles. In her house of mirrors we see the infinite regression of boundaries written on priestly bodies, a regression built into the canonical myth of identity” (p. 344). One may object that Camp gives undue attention to relatively marginal foreign women at the expense of such blatant cases as Jezebel, Potiphar’s wife, and Jael to name only a few examples. The response to such objection is simple: no book can be expected to deal with everything. Claudia Camp has undertaken an analysis of a figure that is crucial to our understanding of the ethnocentric patriarchalism of the Hebrew Bible. In this sense she has developed and elaborated previous feminist biblical criticism, and contributed to this growing body of work a learned and highly plausible analysis. The critical perspective of this book complements the feminist investigation that has already been articulated in such books as Cheryl Exum’s *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Pennsylvania: Valley Forge, 1993), Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn’s *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible’s First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) and Alice Bach’s *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).