Landy, Francis

Beauty and the Enigma, And Other Essays on the Hebrew Bible

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This is a collection of 13 essays, a Bar Mitzvah collection in that numerical as well as the Jewish ‘coming-of-age’ senses you may say, all of them—excluding the last—written and previously published over a period of a little over 20 years. The chapters/essay are arranged by the author himself almost in chronological publication order, probably in writing order. They are (with the original publication date in brackets): ‘Beauty and the Enigma’, on the Song of Songs (1980); ‘Poetics and Parallelism’, on Kugel’s ‘The Idea of biblical Poetry’ (1984); ‘Narrative techniques and Symbolic Transactions in the Akedah’, on Genesis 22 (1989); ‘Vision and Poetic Speech in Amos’ (1987); ‘Tracing the Voice of the Other’, on Isaiah 28 (1993), ‘The Construction of the Subject and the Symbolic Order’, on the ‘Suffering Servant’ songs in Isaiah (1993); ‘Ruth and the Romance of Realism’ (1994); ‘On Metaphor, Play and Nonsense’, a response in a Semeia volume ed. C. Camp and C.R. Fontaine on Women, War and Metaphor (1993); ‘In the Wilderness of Speech’, on metaphors in Hosea (1995), ‘Strategies of Concentration and Diffusion in Isaiah 6’ (1999); ‘Flood and Fludd’, the Genesis flood story in cultural reception (1998); ‘Vision and Voice in Isaiah’ (2000); and ‘Ghostwriting’, a fictive autobiography of Isaiah (published 2002, after this book). In the ‘Introduction’ Landy writes about each and every article selected for re-publication, placing it in his personal journey as person and scholar and adding a few words in retrospect. Index of References and Index of Authors are supplied. There’s no General Bibliography (a pity perhaps), since lists of references are given in the notes or at the end of each individual essay/chapter.

This reviewer is an enthusiastic Landy fan, and always has been. I’m biased, he’s one of my favorite Hebrew Bible informed readers. I appreciate his erudition, and scholarly integrity, and respect for colleagues’ work, and humor, and tolerance, and the combination of the personal and the professional. But best of all, in my eyes, are two things: Landy’s deep—let me risk it, spiritual—love and understanding of how biblical poetics work (which is not to say that he embraces the contents unproblematic ally or
easily, not always); and his own personal poetics, and style, as developed along together with his critical treatments of biblical poetics.

So therefore there’s no essay here that I haven’t read previously. And yet, I find it interesting to return to them again, as they ‘re collected here. Author and publishers have opted for a chronological arrangement. This is a good choice, for it demonstrates Landy’s trajectory as an increasingly more articulate, confident, knowledgeable and modest thinker, critic—and writer, and person. This is all uniquely Landy-esque; and yet, the collection also supplies a microcosm of literary theories, methods and practices that have been influential in biblical criticism in the last decades. Theories of poetics, literary criticism, deconstruction and cultural approaches are several of those. Thus the collection is a mirror not only unto Landy, but also unto a certain branch of biblical criticisms as it’s evolving as well. And this arrangement foregrounds Landy’s movement from interest in the Song of Songs and Genesis largely to prophetic literature, especially Isaiah (5 essays), but also Hosea and Amos (1 each).

But let me depart from the chronological order of the book and try a re-arrangement by subject matter. Landy’s main interest seems to be invested in biblical poetry. If ‘poetry’ includes ‘prophecy’ almost by definition, then only 3 chapters/essays—on the Akedah, Ruth, the Flood and the final ‘autobiography’ of Isaiah—are about narratives or (in the case of the latter) a narrative. This re-arrangement will show that, with all the shifts to different texts, Landy’s main preoccupation, and love, has been and remains where he started, with the biblical poem. But let me refer you to his own ‘Introduction’, where he charts his progress with fairness and the right mixture of involvement and self-irony, frankness and gratitude, much more eloquently than I can hope to do it.

If I have a reservation, and I do, it concerns the Ruth piece, which I consider the relatively weakest (but by no means weak per se, relatively speaking) of the collection. Landy, the recognizer of complexity, is captivated by the ‘apparent perfection’ (p. 28) of the biblical story. Landy, who regards himself as a feminist man, states concerning his own Ruth piece that it was largely ignored by feminist critics although he considers it the most overtly feminist article in the present collection. And he writes:

Ruth provides an ideal opportunity for reclamatory feminism, and for most readers, I suspect, this is not altogether satisfactory or convincing…For me, the Bible is a feminist text (perhaps all literature is), because it is aware of the cost and the injustice of the social order it reflects. That is why it has such magnificent women: Jezebel, Delilah, and so on. Each one of these is an implicit critique. (p. 28)

Landy is entitled to his opinion, of course. I’m afraid, though, that many feminists would object or his characterization of Ruth as ‘reclamatory’, or the Bible as ‘a feminist text’, or to the notion of the text being ‘aware’, or to the role he endows Jezebel, Delilah ‘and so on’ with. Such a passage, such an essay, fall short of Landy’s general acuity and
sensitivity. And perhaps it’s no coincidence that the essay on ‘Metaphor, Play and Nonsense’, again on a ‘woman’ topic, isn’t too popular with feminists either.

Landy likes his last, ‘autobiographical’ sketch of Isaiah the best. My favorite? It’s a toss between his Akedah and Flood pieces. You may prefer another of his essays. But whatever the choice, there’s much to learn from this volume: about Landy, about the Guild, about its recent past, about the future. A pleasure to read and reflect upon, and upon the biblical texts it highlights.