More Confessions of a Talking Head: Hollywood, Torah, and the Male Gaze

I liked my abstract so much, I thought I'd read it here. In Hollywood parlance, this is the 'teaser'.

Are there any credible reasons for supposing that a feminist voice can be heard in the bastion of patriarchy's storytelling machine? The present writer examines the substance and potential meaning of appearing as a 'talking head' expert in a national cable series delving into the Bible's 'mysteries'. Is it possible to re-tell an ancient androcentric text at the literal level without re-inscribing the dualistic values of gendered otherness? What are the possibilities for creative reappropriation of the biblical text in a visual medium for purposes of liberation and deconstruction? If Hollywood's 'gaze' on female characters is inevitably male, how might feminist theoretical discourse dislodge and de-center scholarly complicity in such voyeurism? Join us now for answers to these questions and more...(answer key: maybe; probably not; sublation of word by image, and vice versa followed by a tease of iconographic enjambment; "Thanks, But We've Decided to Go a Different Way").

(Miss Smith Goes to Hollywood...)

My husband once remarked that no one gets a Ph.D. in biblical studies by occupying the role of an 'innocent bystander'; at some point I must have actively cooperated in training myself in a discipline so inimical to feminists in general and visual artists in particular. Over the years, I have reluctantly come to grant the validity of his observation. It holds true as well for my presence in a semi-documentary series on the Bible, airing for several years on the cable Arts & Entertainment Network. There were 41 episodes made in this series by the now more-or-less defunct production company [Film Roos], and although I came in fairly late in the life of the series, I was featured in 29 episodes. My producer suggested that this makes me the undisputed female lead of *Mysteries of the Bible*, to which I responded that that and four dollars would get me a café mocha at Starbucks. It is with truly mixed emotions that I review here my tenure as a female lead in anything, much less an

American television series that stirred such enduring devotion to my work on the part of death row inmates in Texas prisons. I am glad to know that my work has had *some* significant benefit to someone somewhere: as it turns out, if you want to know if Jesus will still take you into heaven if you got raped in the shower, I am clearly the woman to ask. This, you must admit, is a bit more by way of job satisfaction that usually attends the career of a feminist toiling away in a conservative seminary setting.

So how did I happen to get into doing "Tabloid Torah", and why should *you* in particular care, such that I am here today talking about it, rather than just referring you to the interminable re-runs? The answers to these questions are quite simple, and will actually be given here in a cautionary tale of 'narrative greed'[1], so that you may take what wisdom from them that may be gleaned after this grim reaper. Apparently, there are certain topics in bible which, if typed into a search engine by a producer, yield my name with boring regularity. This is the sort of thing that producers twig onto: they want '*the*' expert in Whatever if they can get him—or her, if she meets the correct visual criteria according to the male gaze of Hollywood. To be fair, there ARE certain features which also disqualify a male from appearing as an expert, but those are few and far between.

When the first producer called me to ask a question about Samson's riddle, I was simply flabbergasted that anyone anywhere had read my work, much less that a person from outside the enclave of feminist biblical hermeneutics had read my stuff, and in this case, my stuff and Claudia Camp's. Add to this that the perky voice asking me questions picked up on a reply I had made and said, "Oh, are you referring to Micke Bal's work on this?" I was, indeed, and I was again astonished

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[1]A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Love Story* (Vintage Books: 1990): the need to know or imagine an ending for one's quest.

to that someone in my little Baptist professional world should know that name. Since eager feminist interlocutors come few and far between in my seminary, I settled back for an interesting phone conversation, with no idea where it would lead. Like many of us, I had been 'burned' by my previous encounters with the 'media'—misquoted, misrepresented, and refused the right to defend myself in later letters to editors and what-not, to the point that I had no particular desire to be listed anywhere as having participated in popularization of feminist work in bible. Nor was I wild to see myself on film, having never taken a good picture in my life. But my husband had just been 'down-sized' and was firmly seated at *my* home work station, resetting my defaults, wreaking havoc with my driver base, and carelessly downloading that which he ought not to have downloaded, so getting out of the house seemed like a good idea, and maybe getting paid for it seemed even better. Hence, Tracey showed up at my school with a Boston camera crew—and later I found out what an act of faith that must have been for her, since there was then no photo of me in existence anywhere that she could evaluate for my small-screen-ready qualities. She came prepared with lip-liner and blush-on ; I came with a BHS; the guys came with a variety of lighting gels, just in case, and a certain synergy went into motion.

Now I do want to add seriously here that, unlike some of you, I have no computer or slide library resources to speak of for graphic work in Bible available to me through my institution. When teaching, I routinely try to include material culture, but never had much access to making these things available to my students in audio-visual form (I did not start working in cable t.v. until 1996, so the Web was not a medium yet for distribution of visual materials to seminary students—and it's still something of a struggle, for a variety of reasons.) I thought that at the very least, doing some on-screen work might give me some videos with relevant art and archaeological artefacts to use with my students. I also thought that my little school, in its various typical small-

institution woes, might actually benefit from some faculty visibility outside the venues of New England mainstream churches.

Those two immediate goals aside, I also suffered from what I called "the Saussure Syndrome". You may recall that structuralist linguist Ferdinand de Saussure died without ever publishing any work beyond his Neo-Grammarian work, published in 1979 at the age of 22. The overwhelming nature of his dismay at the theoretical (w)holes in the method and findings of historical linguistics in which he had been trained rendered him mute, as far as print was concerned. His world-remaking work, *Cours de Linguistique générale*, had to be reconstructed from the course notebooks of his students and appeared 3 years after his death in 1916.[2] Imagine your students: now imagine *their* version, however collated, of what you actually said! Who would choose that for a legacy of their thinking? I had labored under a similar since of theory-induced 'verbal impairment' or loss of voice since my feminist conversion, such that I could barely recognize my early writing as coming from the same consciousness I now occupied. Add to this that my HMO had been condemning me to death for going on twenty years and further refused to take any part in actually helping manage a long-term illness, and you will understand why I thought it quite probable that I might go the way of Saussure. At the time, don't ask me why, I actually thought it might be important that some later person know what I had concluded about the book of Job over the long years of teaching and study since I had published on its structural subtleties. (I don't remember what it was I thought, but I don't need to, as I have it on tape. Any part not used in the interviews edited into shows by the production company and purchased by the cable network turns out to be my 'intellectual property', to do with as I will. This might actually be useful to me some day as, of

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[2]F. Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), p. 13.