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Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg. *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*. New York: Doubleday, 2001. Pp. 582. \$35.00 (Cloth).

[1] Zornberg invites her readers into *participation* with the Book of Exodus. Those who derive satisfaction through a mere reading of the biblical narrative will likely be amazed to discover the myriad worlds of meaning that lie in wait beneath the surface of the text - hiding between gaps in the narrative, encrypted in its language, and revealed in the fluid interplay between conscious and unconscious levels of mind and text.

[2] This way of engaging and being engaged by the biblical text is not new, but is an example of the rabbinic process of *midrash*. Based on the Hebrew word *darash*, "to seek out," or "to inquire," midrash is a method of exegesis which affirms the Hebrew Bible to be the revealed word of God - an inexhaustible treasury of wisdom and insight in which every letter, every word and phrase, holds indispensable meaning for the human creature. Midrash also refers to the results of this rabbinic activity, a voluminous compilation of texts with which Zornberg is intimately familiar.

[3] With a doctorate in English literature from Cambridge University and daughter of an Orthodox rabbi, Zornberg marshals rabbinic tradition with creativity and insight expressed in a masterfully poetic use of language. Her previous work, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis*, earned the 1995 Jewish Book Award for Nonfiction. A teacher of Torah in Israel and throughout the world, Zornberg was one of the experts consulted by Bill Moyers for the 1995 PBS special on Genesis.

[4] *The Particulars of Rapture* - its title borrowed from the Wallace Stevens poem, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," describing the effect of opposites in flux - comprises ten chapters arranged according to the synagogue's liturgical cycle of the *Parsha*, which presents the Torah in weekly sections in its entirety over the course of the year. Each essay is enlightened by insights which Zornberg draws from midrashic sources, a number of medieval and later rabbinic commentators, and a wealth of ideas gleaned from world literature, philosophy, and psychology. There is room for the sensual, even erotic, in this intellectual endeavor, for here one finds Milan Kundera quoted alongside Rashi, the great Torah commentator of eleventh-century France.

[5] Enlisting these resources in service of her own midrashic endeavors, Zornberg escorts her readers below the *peshat*, or surface meaning of the base text, entering through gaps in the narrative into the depths of unconscious layers of meaning that interact with the reader's own experience. This is just one level in the interplay of opposites (the "particulars") which allows new narratives to emerge (the "rapture"). An example of this is found in the immediate distinction between Israelite and Egyptian, the former destined for redemption emerging from the alien lifelessness of the latter. Here the reader not only "tags along" with Moses's party, but, presented with the existential import midrashic investigation demands, must endure all the necessary perils of the redemptive process, including the question of whether or not one is deserving of redemption.

[6] The reader experiences personal interaction with other oppositions in and about the text itself - man and woman, day and night, past and present, finitude and infinitude - each pair engaged in a creative flux, producing an energy which sparks additional potentialities. Such a process occurring within the text, between texts, and in the interaction of reader with the text, allows for an infinite number of narrative possibilities generating a multiplicity of answers and a plurality of truths.

[7] It is this aspect of the midrashic method which conservative Christian readers of the Bible may find foreign and most troubling. Conditioned by Christianity's appropriation of philosophical absolutism, many expect the text of the Bible to yield only one exclusive though not always fully discernible *true* reading and that all other readings are therefore false. However, if indeed truth arises out of the reconciling interplay of opposites, the highest level being the reconciling of the finite and the infinite, then the Bible as Word of God may be seen as the repository of an infinite number of truths. This is what the rabbinical tradition has been gleaning for all these centuries, and what Zornberg is doing as well - engaging the Bible as the living and relevant Word of God. Midrash provides a refreshing alternative to literal, surface readings of the Bible, the sterile application of the historical-critical method for its own sake, or the value placed on the Bible because it is the mark of a Christian or Jewish home and happens to look good resting on the coffee table.

[8] Perhaps the best example of what Zornberg is about may be seen in her treatment of the near complete omission of women from the biblical text. The story of women, she observes, lies as a repressed narrative beneath the mere hint of their mention in the surface text. The midrashic process delves into the unconscious of the narrative and liberates the hidden alternative history latent in its telling. It is the reader's participation in the interplay of the opposites - male and female - that keeps the grand narrative of Exodus the never-ending story from which future narratives may be spun. The brief mention of the "mirrors" which the women offered to the fashioning of the bronze basin for the altar in Exodus 38:8 is expanded through the midrashic process into a vehicle for defiance of Pharaoh's decree and the multiplying of the Israelites. Building upon a Talmudic source that credits Israelite women with having multiple births as a result of the fertile desire sparked in their husbands as a result of the women's use of mirrors, Zornberg writes:

Subtly, the midrash yields its meanings. The mirrors are not simply the means by which women adorn themselves, set in motion the processes of desire, procreation, the creation of a nation. A much larger claim is being made:

through these mirrors, each woman conceived six hundred thousand babies at a time (59-60).

[9] Another example of Zornberg's continuation of the midrashic process is found in the creative opposition of night and day in relation to the Exodus account. Exodus 12:33-42 recounts the night when Pharaoh banished Moses and his people from the land; but the midrashic intersection of Numbers 33:3, which affirms that on the *day* after the passover the Israelites went out boldly in the sight of all Egyptians, permits a multitude of possible stories to spin off from this interplay of elements in the seemingly conflicting accounts. In addition, the archetypal significance of night and darkness, associated with chaos and terror, becomes linked with the redemptive process in God's *leap* over the houses of the Hebrews, inviting questions over the event for generations to come.

God interferes, as it were, with the terrible consistency of the Angel of Death, who has been given hegemony over the night. God's movement through Egypt is now characterized, not by the ruthless, unswerving logic of law, but by a responsiveness to the particular, to signs of blood, daubed on Israelite doors (170).

[10] So it goes throughout the volume - the grand narrative of Exodus refracted through the midrashic process into a myriad of stories, such as those just described, which collectively witness to the infinite depth and breath of revelation. The narratives that spin off from the whole as a result of the midrashic method allow the hidden to be seen and the repressed to be set free. Such participation in text with text, and reader with text, raises the existential dilemma of *self, not self*, further authenticating the self in the process. In that sense Exodus is recreated and recreates down through the ages. "If the Exodus is to be a narrative for all times and places," Zornberg writes, "it must be capable of particular reincarnations through time" (10).

[11] This book is not meant for those who are satisfied simply to sit arm's length from the text, analyzing its surface meaning at a distance and experiencing a sterile, flat version of narrative as a result. It is meant for those who truly appreciate the Bible as, in some way, the Word of God revealed. Those who engage the text of Exodus in this way, with Zornberg as their guide, will read the Bible in a richly rewarding new way.

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