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In these nine chapters, Rachel E. Adelman considers several narratives where women use female subterfuge to achieve what she suggests are divine ends, in her words the “inner workings of God through the female body.” (3) In these narratives “that promote the ‘providential plan’ . . . the female trickster plays a morally ambiguous role, in violation of social norms, [but in so doing] she enables renewal or transformation.” (3) Later Adelman will quote Phyllis Trible who suggests that “the human struggle itself is divine activity . . . As a whole this [drama] suggests a theological interpretation of feminism: women working out their own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in them.” (Brackets in original, 112)

Adelman begins with Rebekah’s “finagling the blessing” for Jacob (chap. 1); Rachel and Leah’s duping Jacob (chap 2); Tamar’s seduction of Judah (chap. 3); the pre-history of the Davidic dynasty specifically focusing in on its previous heritage of Lot’s daughters, Judah/Tamar, and Ruth (chap. 4); followed by a short piece titled “David’s Wives as Women of Oath” (chap 5). Then come three chapters devoted to David’s most prominent wives, Michal (chap. 6); Abigail, again a short chapter (chap 7); and Bathsheba (8). The final subject of Adelman’s gaze is termed “‘Passing Strange:’ Gender Crossing in the Story of Joseph and Esther Narratives” (chap. 9). Several of the chapters are followed by addenda.

By her own admission, Adelman is deeply influenced by her mentor, Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, and she often refers to Zornberg’s writings. Adelman also draws on the scholarship of among others, such scholars such as Judy Klitsner, Tikva Fryer-Kensky, Jon D. Levenson, and Robert Alter.

*The Female Ruse: Women’s Deception and Divine Sanction in the Hebrew Bible* frequently offers psychological understandings of the actions of the women here portrayed. “My focus, primarily, is on the study of character and psychological transformation across generations.” (8) Adelman draws on modern scholarship as well as often on classical Midrash and biblical
commentaries. Adelman, similar to Judy Klitsner, suggests that the texts often have a potential afterlife, in that they resonate with other narratives in the Bible. She explains that she is “primarily interested in the *inter-text*, in the way each narrative speaks to another across the spectrum of the twenty-four books of the Bible…[which reflects] the creative decisions and craftsmanship of the final redactor, before the text was sealed in its final canonical form.” (Emphasis in original, 7) Since Divine Sanction is a prominent part of the title of this work, it is unsurprising that she explains that “[m]ost importantly, I am interested in how God as a character of the Hebrew Bible can be read into the inter-textual resonances. God works through the feminine ruse to redeem people, political power, even the law over the course of biblical history.” (8)

An example of how one biblical text hints or links to the future (or the past) finds expression in the “Rebekah Unveiled” chapter where the tensions between Esau/Jacob play out in later history. Esau, who is directly connected to Edom, (see Gen. 36:8-9) will in rabbinic literature be connected to both Rome and Christendom. Rome “for a period, would rule over the Jews; Christianity would presume to supersede Judaism.” (21) In her discussion of the pre-history of the Davidic dynasty, she shows how both “David’s paternal and maternal lineages are overcast by…shadowy sexual liaisons…[implying an] excess of intimacy, endogamy gone awry.” (103) Ruth, David’s maternal forebear is a Moabite, a descendant of the incest of Lot/Lot’s elder daughter (Gen. 19), and Boaz, David’s paternal forebear is a descendant of the incest of Judah/Tamar (Gen. 38).

Adelman’s prose is incredibly intense. Each chapter is crammed with innumerable insights; nearly every page is filled with many footnotes. Some of these chapters appeared earlier as journal articles. She makes clear to the reader that she has done her homework; she has seen what many have said before her on these subjects. As noted, she draws from traditional Jewish sources, but interwoven in her chapters are numerous literary allusions often to Shakespeare, but also to Lewis Carrol, and William Butler Yeats. For example, even the title of chapter three, “Of Veils, Goats, and Sealing Rings, of Guarantors and Kings: The Story of Judah and Tamar” is her
adaptation of Lewis Carrol’s “The Walrus and the Carpenter” from *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*. Adelman enjoys alliterations; oftentimes her sentences feature words with the same beginning letters: chapter 1, Reading Rebekah Unveiled; chapter 5, David’s Wives as Women of Oath; chapter 7, Abigail: Woman of Valor or Woman of Wile? Or, the opening line of chapter 1: “Oscillations between continuity and discontinuity, rupture and reconciliation” describe the patriarchal narratives of Genesis. (11) Or, “Ruth responds…and identifies herself as his handmaid.” (117) “Astute character studies of Abigail’s story are surprisingly rare in the corpus of biblical scholarship.” (151) Joseph is “visible, vulnerable, subject to being stripped.” (217)

As noted, Adelman’s final chapter focuses on Joseph and Esther, and deals with transgender issues. Numerous scholars have written about the links between the narratives of Joseph in Genesis and the book of Esther, both who are “prominent Jewish figures in the Diaspora” as Adelman clearly notes. She then explains that in this chapter the area of her concern are “the gendered aspect of their character development.” (199) Although she does not make a reference to Israeli poet Nurit Zarchi’s poem “She is Joseph” (*Hi Yosef*), Adelman explains how Joseph’s story shows a feminized character, a matter well understood by rabbinic Midrash – *Genesis Rabbah* 87.3. (208) In an addendum, drawing on the precedents of others, Adelman notes parallels in the Joseph-Esther narratives, highlighting such matters as passivity, beauty, grace and favor (*hen* and *hesed*), double naming, attempted “seduction” and resistance, dressed in royal robes, and so on.

Given the title which mentions “Divine Sanction,” although “God as a character of the Hebrew Bible” is interwoven into the text, a separate chapter addressing this specific issue would have been helpful, as would additional attention to the work and motives of the redactor(s) of the Bible since as noted earlier (7) this is a primary interest for her. This work is very well researched and footnoted; it features in addition to the bibliography, an index of Biblical references and to other ancient texts, as well as to an index of authors quoted. This is a worthwhile read and contains many references for additional exploration of these sacred texts.