
The Fantastic in Religious Narrative from Exodus to Elisha is the reworked Ph.D. thesis of the Danish historian of religion, Laura Feldt. In this book, Feldt addresses the fantastic events, encounters, spaces, and agents in the Exodus story and other narratives of the Hebrew Bible. Taking fantasy theory as her theoretical and analytical point of departure, Feldt addresses the literary and cultural functions of the fantastic in religious narratives. She argues that these elements should not be rationalized, harmonized, or overlooked, as has typically been done. Rather, their disturbing and ambiguous character and functions in the narratives should be taken seriously in their own right. Feldt contends that the fantastic elements of the biblical narratives can be understood as sites of transformation and reflection. According to Feldt, the ambiguity, deceptions, and the general unease created by this imagery show that the narratives are process stories that allow for feelings of disorientation, blurring, and disruption in those who engage with them and that the narratives serve as dynamic media for further interpretation, reflection, fascination, and vigilance.

In the introductory chapter of the book, Feldt poses two questions, one theoretical and one empirical. The theoretical question concerns what literary fantasy theory may contribute to the study of religious narratives, whereas the empirical question addresses the fantastic in the Hebrew Bible and in the Exodus narrative more specifically.

The following two chapters provide introductory discussions of the relationship between religion and fantasy. In chapter one, Feldt discusses previous research on the relationship between religion and fantasy in the larger field of the study of religion, as well as earlier work on the fantastic elements in Exodus. Feldt points out how scholarly models have typically either facilitated the search for religion in fantasy, or, vice versa, explored fantasy in religion. Feldt positions herself in the context of the latter perspective, and points out that her project aims to perform a literary reading of the Exodus story, approaching fantasy as a cultural mode of expression. The remaining part of this chapter is devoted explicitly to previous research perspectives on the role and functions of the fantastic in the Exodus narrative. Feldt leads us through various earlier exegetical models, showing how the fantastic has been a source of controversy and unease in earlier interpretation.

In chapter two, Feldt presents her theoretical inspiration, first and foremost the theoretical frameworks of Renate Lachmann and her understanding of the fantastic as a discourse on alterity. However, Feldt expands on these
theoretical discussions, drawing, for instance, on recent theoretical developments in the cognitive sciences. She also further develops Lachmann’s fantasy theory, turning away from simple genre description to a more fully developed strategy for analysis of the effects and functions of the fantastic in narratives and their various modes of expression.

The subsequent four chapters are the core analytical chapters of the book. Chapter three is Feldt’s exegesis of the fantastic elements in Exodus, focusing on individual passages where fantastic strategies are used. Chapter four studies the cumulative effects of the fantastic, showing the excessive use and importance of these elements in the narrative. Chapter five takes the analysis one step further, discussing the functions of “the narrative fantastic” to ritual and to individual and cultural memory. In the last of these four analytical chapters, Feldt discusses the Exodus example in light of the larger literary environment of the Hebrew Bible.

Finally, in chapter seven and in the concluding summary, Feldt discusses the outcome of the analysis, answering the two questions posed in the introduction. She concludes that one of the main advantages of applying the fantasy perspective to biblical narratives and religious narratives in general is that it presents an interpretative shift from an emphasis on order, meaning, and steady orientation to a focus that also includes ambiguous, disorderly, and processual elements as well as their productive potential. According to Feldt, order and disorder are not binary oppositions in these narratives. Rather, they can be studied as interdependent aspects in the stories. These stories are not only stories of closure, but also stories of human possibilities. Feldt concludes that these narratives could therefore be seen as flexible and dynamic media for both individual and collective identity formations, maintenance, and transformations.

_The Fantastic in Religious Narrative from Exodus to Elisha_ is an intriguing book and a solid piece of academic work. It represents a fresh perspective on the Exodus narrative, one which takes seriously the strange and disturbing fantastic elements of the story and which also proposes a relevant and likely hypothesis as to the cultural functions and benefits of these elements for those who engaged with this literature. One of the blessings of Feldt’s analysis is that she neither gets lost in the overwhelming research literature on this biblical text, nor does she seem threatened by the canonical status of the text she investigates. She lets the theoretical framework be her guide through the analysis and performs her own highly interesting reading of the text. Another important outcome of the book is Feldt’s improvement of the fantasy theoretical framework. She has developed a model and a strategy for analysis that should influence further work on religious narratives. Most importantly, Feldt’s