

Review of Melissa Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image: A Jewish Theology of Art*, London and New York: Continuum 2009, 229 pp., ISBN 978-8264-9498-6

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Anyone, who has stood in wonder and amazement in caves and looked at handprints and depictions of animals drawn by ancient humans, can appreciate Melissa Raphael's claim that the creation of images is humanity's 'mark of their commonality with the divine' (p. 49). The 'will to self-revelation and presence' that speaks through these ancient cave paintings and decorative ornaments left at burial sites is considered the definitive characteristic of *homo sapiens* by evolutionary anthropologists. The Jewish tradition, however, is generally known for its hostility and suspicion of the visual arts.

This book builds on Raphael's previous publications *Theology and Embodiment*¹ and *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*² but does not have an explicitly feminist theological agenda. Instead, Raphael applies a gender-aware lens to develop a Jewish theory of aesthetics. Raphael examines the Jewish proscription of graven images and argues that Judaism is not as image-averse and text-centered as commonly assumed. Her defense of aesthetics arises from her earlier arguments that (1) the polemic against idolatry is usually closely allied with suspicion of the female body and the physicality of the visible world, and (2) that God did not withdraw and hide from the suffering of Jews in Auschwitz but was made visible in acts of embodied love in the midst of genocide and abjection. In this book, she argues that the God of Israel is manifest in the beauty of covenantal care, in artistic creations of restorative memory, and in the body of the people of Israel in history.

¹ M. Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment: The Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1996.

² M. Raphael, *The Female Face of Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust*, New York: Routledge 2003.

On the basis of Genesis, which describes the creation of humankind 'in the image (*tselem*) of God,' Raphael argues that the God of the Bible appreciates the creative process and the visual arts. God, referred to in male pronouns throughout the book in deference to classical Jewish thought, saw what he had created and called it good (*tov*). The biblical story links aesthetics with ethics, the beauty that can be seen with the goodness conferred by holiness. This takes up Raphael's argument from *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*, where she had argued that 'goodness' is more than a moral category but includes an aesthetic dimension. In *Auschwitz*, Raphael had maintained, the gesture of cleansing the dirtied and abject face was an act of covenantal love that manifested God's presence in the midst of despair. For Raphael, God's name is sanctified where Jews struggle to create human dignity and beauty over against the forces of evil and destruction. Goodness, beauty and holiness are interrelated categories arising from the commandment to resist annihilation, filth and grime, sin and despair: 'The command to holiness is an ethic-aesthetic commandment ontologically predicated on the *imago dei*. On these grounds we are permitted, or perhaps even obligated, to make images' (p. 54).

The proscription against Idolatry, in Raphael's view, applies to those images that dehumanize and drain a person of soul and God-given dignity. In a lengthy discussion of her disagreement with Emmanuel Levinas, who 'condemns the image as a totalizing injury to the Other' (p. 35), Raphael develops criteria to distinguish idolatrous from non-idolatrous images. While Levinas sides in principle with ethics over against aesthetics, Raphael sets conditions on how to integrate and link the two. She differentiates the pornographic gaze that objectifies and dehumanizes persons in order to consume images (primarily of women) from non-idolatrous art that bears 'witness to the sanctity and integrity of the human and call[s] for the redemption and resurrection of the human for those ideological structures and practices that diminish, exploit, abuse or erase it' (p. 17).

Interestingly, the pornographic gaze of the antisemitic imagination was primarily focused on Jewish men. Jewish women have traditionally remained invisible to the antisemitic eye because Judaism is ritually inscribed in the male body and publicly displayed by men's head covering (*kippot*), dress, hairstyle, and ritual implements (*tefillin*, *tallitot*). Jewish religious women follow laws of modesty (*tznius*) which mandate female invisibility in the public realm and accord women the privilege of 'passing' in a Gentile world. This is in stark contrast to Muslim women who by following Muslim laws of modesty, such as the *hijab*, are publicly exposed and embody the image of Islam in the West.

The pornographic gaze is also problematic in the context of Holocaust representation and imagery. In Chapters 4 and 5, Raphael examines the risks and potentials of the aestheticization of Holocaust images. She affirms the legitimacy of art and the need for icons despite the dangers of kitsch and entertainment that threatens to turn people's abjection into sublime edification for easy consumption. Despite the growing chorus of criticism of the 'industry' of Holocaust memory and memorialization, Raphael flat-out states that 'most images of the Holocaust are exempt from the prohibitions of the Second Commandment. By definition, an image of a victim of Nazi Germany, even one taken by a perpetrator, can never arrogate hubristic power to itself.' To her, every and any image of a victim of the Holocaust 'is a witness to the sin of idolatry, here, the idolatrous idea of a "master-race"' (p. 60). They are 'images of the broken body' and serve as an 'antidote to the idolatry of physical perfection' (p. 62) because

they bear witness to God's presence in a broken world. Beauty and holiness do not reside in perfection but in the redemption from imperfection and in the healing of brokenness: 'Redemption from evil is signaled, or perhaps consists in, the redemption of beauty from the forces of destruction' (p. 102).

Raphael draws on the Christian tradition of 'devout beholding' to explain the redemptive value of looking at images of victims of the Holocaust. Within a Christian context gazing at visual representations of the passion of Christ enables a 'religious experience of looking at a visual image ... that places it inside a redemptive theology of inter-human and divine-human relation; that holds the image up to the light by which it become translucent to God' (p. 119). Raphael borrows this idea to affirm and 'aesthetic *zakhor* [by which] we can shoulder some of the burden of suffering and reinstate their [the victims'] presence to Israel, an assembly of all Jews, living and dead' (p. 119). However, endowing images of the final agony of Jewish victims with religious meaning begins to sound dangerously Christian. While it is undoubtedly true that Jewish artists have reclaimed the iconography of the Jewish man on the cross in the aftermath of the Holocaust, they do so – to my mind – without the explicit redemptive connotations. The affirmation of a redemptive quality to the iconography of the Holocaust hovers precariously close to the borderline between Judaism and Christianity.

'The suffering Jewish body is the body of Israel itself' (p. 153) explains Raphael in her last chapter. Her earlier analysis of the sacrality of the female body set forth in *Theology and Embodiment* is now applied to the physical movement of the Jewish people across time and space of history: 'A Jewish aesthetic theology should be able to draw the spectacle of Jewish history into a unified object of aesthetic judgment' (p. 155). Hence, it is not the individual body of a man or woman, but the collective body of the people of Israel that comes into aesthetic view here. Raphael explores several examples of Jewish bodily movements, both individually and collectively, and insists that Jewish history, even during its most painful times, must be integrated into 'the figure of Jewish history' as a 'recognizable Jewish image' (p. 169).

From a feminist perspective, this book can be seen as either the culmination of a maturation process and the mainstreaming of feminist theology or as a return to more traditional theological topoi and frameworks. Anyone familiar with Raphael's previous book will readily recognize her feminist voice. Her ideas about women's embodied experience of the sacred become the foundation for her normative claims about Jewish theology and her insistence that Israel's covenant with God entails not only an ethical but also an aesthetic dimension.