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## Women in Wisdom Tradition: Review of Carol Fontaine, *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs and Performance in Biblical Wisdom*

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## Women in Wisdom Tradition

Carol R. Fontaine, *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs and Performance in Biblical Wisdom* (London: Sheffield Academic Press/Continuum, 2002). \$115.00. pp. 296. ISBN 0-82646-024-0).

*Smooth Words* is a well-researched and entertaining, if somewhat uneven, book on women in the Wisdom tradition in ancient Israel. Fontaine, a faculty member at a small Protestant seminary in Newton, MA, writes with her students constantly in mind, her interactions with them informing her scholarship throughout the book. She is also in dialogue with other scholars in the fields of Wisdom literature and feminist scholarship, a dialogue that gives the book academic rigor and depth.

The book falls into three basic parts, each one having a different tone and character. It is these differences in tone that make the book uneven. Chapters 1 and 2, "W/Wisdom the Signifier" and "Textual Women: The Social Roles of Women in the Private, Public and Cosmic Domains," give an overview of feminist scholarship in the field, disclose the author's goals and intentions, and review the depictions of women in the Wisdom literature of ancient Israel. Fontaine does a good job of synthesizing a large amount of previous scholarship into two chapters that are easily graspable by the average undergraduate or seminary student. She constantly reminds the reader that in Israelite Wisdom texts women are consistently seen as objects in the service of the patriarchal, androcentric society, and that we never hear an unmediated woman's voice in this literature.

Although the message of these chapters is serious, their tone is lighthearted, and I often found myself laughing out loud.

The third chapter, "Women Using Wisdom: Performing the Tradition," is a much more serious piece of original scholarship. Fontaine draws on folklore studies and anthropology to attempt to recreate how proverbs and tales found in ancient Near Eastern literature may have been used and performed by women in antiquity. Of particular interest is her use of evidence from Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Hittite Empire to flesh out her portrait of how Israelite wise women may have functioned. This chapter ends with an in-depth study of the figure of the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:1-10, 13; 2 Chron 9:1-9, 12). Fontaine moves beyond the biblical accounts to investigate all of Sheba's appearances in Jewish and Christian literature, from Josephus to the Ethiopic Church's *Kebra Negast*. The result is a fascinating account of the growth of a female character (unfortunately mostly in a negative direction) in the folklore tradition.

The final chapter, "The Wisdom of Newtons," consists of poems written in Wisdom style by Fontaine's students. While several of these poems were quite enjoyable and contain good sermon material, the academics may find themselves impatient. Scholars may want to confine themselves to the first three chapters, leaving the last to students and pastors.

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