This new work from literary critic Mieke Bal offers a fruitful meditation on several versions of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. Naming Potiphar’s wife Mut, Bal reflects critically on the representations of this relationship in Genesis, the Qur’an, three works by Rembrandt, and Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and His Brothers*. She interweaves her analysis of each text or artifact with a sustained methodological awareness, to the ends of articulating a distinction between fundamentalist and literalist ways of reading and of analyzing the differences between religion and aesthetics as each positions itself relative to ethical interest.

Bal opens with her first encounter with the story as told by a school-mistress. Without knowing what Potiphar’s wife wanted Joseph to do, the little girl gathers that women can be dangerous to men and that Joseph was in the right. This first childhood encounter is, in a significant sense, its own version, for it both lays down the dominant culture’s meanings and sets up Bal’s later surprise at dissonances between this version and the Genesis text. One wonders what first encounters and later surprises lurk unspoken in the psyches biblical scholars proper (Bal being always clear about her outsider stance toward biblical scholarship).
After this initial reflection, Bal discusses James Kugel’s *In Potiphar’s House* (Harvard University Press, 1994). Citing some of his more acrobatic maneuvers, she argues that the “why” questions that govern interpretation are not “in” the text but rather a function of the interplay between the interpreter’s cultural position and the text. The particularity of these “why” questions generates cultural memory, which she imagines as a speed differential between the artifact’s ongoing availability and the cultural currents in which the reader swims (6). This temporal position of the reader informs Bal’s awareness of her own historical position. She employs her concept of the pre-posterous: cultural memories (the schoolgirl’s reception of the mistress’s version) come before reading (13–14) but claim textual basis they do not really have.

Chapter 2 examines the Genesis text and the Deuteronomic context of Mut’s accusation of attempted rape. Here Bal’s reading of the phrase “lifted up her eyes” (Gen 39:7–8) establishes Mut’s subjectivity in the Hebrew Bible’s close association of sight and knowledge. Yet this subjectivity is undermined, for her desire for Yusuf—the cultural other—has no support. Bal presents her reading as literalist: an exact attention to the text and its key terms, accompanied by restraint in filling in gaps that are not there. Fundamentalist reading, as Bal defines it, insists not only that the questions are in the text but also that (a particular set of) answers are. That is, it obfuscates the reader’s position, temporality, and activity, confusing all of these with the text itself. Her use of the terms literalist and fundamentalist differ, productively, from their common uses in biblical studies.

In chapters 3 and 5, Mann’s episode is center stage, and the key critical terms are fantasy and sympathy. The novel includes a dinner that Mut hosts for her female friends, the ladies of the city. She provides them all with hyperbolically sharp knives and orchestrates Yusuf’s presence just as the ladies cut their fruit. Distracted by Yusuf’s unearthly beauty, the ladies cut their fingers. Bal reads this as Mut’s attempt to elicit the sympathy that cannot be had through words: the ladies experience desire for Yusuf, and through this common experience, community is generated. Employing psychoanalytical theory, Bal argues that fantasy involves a doubling of the self, the fantasizing subject and the fantasized self-representation inside the fantasy. In Mann’s episode, Yusuf elicits fantasies but has no core himself. In criticism, literal reading supports fantasy while also holding it up for examination, whereas fundamentalist reading fantasizes that “words can be killed” (75)—rather like moths pinned to a display board (my metaphor, not Bal’s). Where fundamentalist readings align readers with some figures and against others, Mann’s episode both depicts and elicits sympathy for Mut as a woman in frustrated love.

Bal turns to a sustained analysis of the qur’anic episode (Sura 12) in chapter 6. This account has some striking differences from Genesis: it includes the ladies of the city...
scene; it represents Yusuf’s reciprocal desire for Mut; the offense is against hospitality; and Potiphar and the male witnesses determine that Mut is lying. For Bal, these are not simple differences in detail but a significantly different story that meditates on seeing the invisible and privileging hearing over sight as the epistemically sound sense. Chapter 8 more directly compares the Genesis text with the Qur’an sura. Bal finds Mut’s lie as the “hard core” (164) of any version, thus a site of the construction of truth and falsehood in both traditions. Canonicity, to which she returns in the final chapters, is an instance of truth-construction writ large.

The fourth and seventh chapters treat three Rembrandt works. In chapter 4, Bal examines Rembrandt’s etching “Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife” (1634). Building on the concept of fantasy, she reflects on how an image invites projections that are neither wholly in the viewer nor wholly in the image, a process Bal calls “intersubjective persuasion” (83). The possibilities of such readings, in turn, disclose the cultural nature of fantasy. As for the etching, Bal sees a split in Yusuf: his body turns away, but his eyes glance back. The phallic bedpost in the image’s lower right figures the absent Potiphar and the patriarchal authority to which Yusuf binds himself (91). The etching shows Yusuf fantasizing an encounter, with powerful conflicting emotions about his own fantasy.

Chapter 7 analyzes the two Rembrandt paintings, both titled “Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife” (both 1655). The paintings share key features: Yusuf is positioned behind the bed, with Mut and Potiphar in front of it and closer to each other than either is to Yusuf; the light illuminates the bed, Mut, and Yusuf’s face, while Potiphar stands in shadows; the color schemes are similar. Both scenes compose interlocutions that the Genesis text separates (149). Yet one has Mut gesturing at the torn garment as Yusuf hovers like a fantasy, not engaging either Mut or Potiphar. The other has Mut gesturing directly at Yusuf, who kneels on the other side of the bed and has a facial expression ambivalent between despair and amusement, depending on viewing distance. With her readings of the paintings, Bal integrates Spinoza’s anti-Cartesian, social, porous self, the self represented in Rembrandt’s works.

The final chapters, 9 and 10, step back from the interpretation of texts and artifacts and reflect on the nature of canons. Both religious and literary canons foster identity construction, with the latter easing the fit between individual identity and the binding cultural authority of a religious canon. Both, however, are implicated in fundamentalist attempts to fix the sign as the signified and deny the fluid relationships of real semiosis. Bal dismisses merely liberal expansions that leave canonicity itself intact. Instead, she argues for literariness and literalist reading as a means of identity construction. On the related matter of aesthetics and ethics, Bal favors “ethical nonindifference” in literature and art, that is, a stance of ethical interest and responsibility rather than the ethical-
aesthetic split that employs ethical indifference to protect the “aesthetic” value of canonical works that have pernicious ethical effects.

During this discussion of religious and literary canons, Bal makes one of her few errors. She differentiates these types of canons by asserting that religious canons are “fixed forever,” whereas literary canons are more fluid (187–88). This is an ahistorical overstatement: ahistorical because it covertly privileges the canonical stage, ignoring the flux of formation, the contestations of interpretive authority, and the possibility of postcanonical lives (by which I mean a loss of canonical status); and overstatement because religions vary, from each other and from themselves over time, in the degree to which their canons are fluid or fixed. Overstatement of fixity is something one might expect from a fundamentalist, but it seems odd coming from Bal. In my view, the case for literalist reading is unaffected, but the methodological stance vis-à-vis historicity may need some qualification. These issues should be important areas for discussion of the book.

In the introduction, Bal characterizes the book as an essay in the proper sense, an attempt (18). As such, it achieves fascinating intercultural readings that respect the integrity of each text and artifact studied. Her distinction between literalist and fundamental reading is a significant contribution that I hope biblical studies will take up. Responsible reading must be literalist, and fundamentalism is not. Finally, as scholarly interest in biblical “afterlives,” to use the name of the series (but after what?), grows, Bal’s work in this book and others serves as an excellent model for interpreters who would interpret biblical texts and other “versionings” (69–70) beyond the strictures of assessing influence or source appropriation. Bal’s kind of reading both reads and catches reading in action, and our present experience of interpretation is our best, fullest case for how it is done at any time.