Sherwood, Yvonne

_A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture_


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It was not long ago that one could be considered widely read and even cutting edge in biblical studies by rounding out one’s form criticism (or tradition history or rhetorical criticism) with a smattering of narrative theory or folklore studies or what-have-you. But in the wake of Sherwood’s most recent book (she is author also of the very fine study of Hos 1–3, _The Prostitute and the Prophet_ [Sheffield, 1996]), that will no longer do. In this cultural history of Jonah one finds a close engagement not only with other biblical scholarship and with contemporary literary theory but also with literature, art, and popular culture. Thus Jack Sasson, Phyllis Trible, and Hans-Walter Wolff rub elbows with Jacques Derrida, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Roland Barthes, but also with novelists such as Paul Auster and Julian Barnes (and of course Herman Melville), with poets such as Hart Crane and Zbigniew Herbert, with artists such as Maarten van Heemskerk and Eugene Abeshaus, and with some who straddle disciplinary boundaries, such as Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and Norma Rosen. Throw in a healthy dose of premodern interpretation (not only Luther and Calvin, but the _Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer_ and the _Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael_, the early Latin poem _Carmen de Jona de Ninive_ and the Middle English poem _Patience_), and one could be forgiven for thinking that Sherwood has read everything. The result is an almost impossibly rich book, which for all its great learning is never anything but compellingly readable.
The volume is guided by the premise, stated early in the introduction, that “biblical texts are literally sustained by interpretation, and the volume, ubiquity, and tenacity of interpretation make it impossible to dream that we can take the text back, through some kind of seductive academic striptease, to a pure and naked original state” (2). While the title of the book places “a biblical text” before “its afterlife,” Sherwood is actually much more interested in the afterlife of the book of Jonah—that is, the way it manages to “survive” (as the subtitle puts it) in myriad historical and cultural contexts, all the while adapting itself to various ideological postures as needed. It is no accident if this way of formulating the issues seems to ascribe an intentionality—in the form of a desire to live on—to the text itself, for as Sherwood puts it, drawing on the work of both evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and biblical scholar Hugh Pyper, certain texts might well be understood as “memes,” the cultural equivalent of genes. The meme propagates by insinuating itself into a host community, replicating itself as it passes from individual to individual and from generation to generation, and mutating when necessary. For a biblical text such as Jonah, the replication takes the form of canonization and faithful copying and the mutations take place in the book’s seemingly endless interpretability. The concept of the meme—a sort of textual “selfish gene”—works astonishingly well in getting at the rich and varied afterlife of Jonah. As Sherwood puts it, “though measuring no more than forty inches square in my edition, the book of Jonah has generated literally acres of visual and verbal glosses, and has demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for cultural survival” (3). It is these acres and this capacity to which the author devotes most of her attention, returning to the forty square inches of the book of Jonah itself only at the end of her study.

The book is divided, following a brief introduction, into three large sections. The first section, “The Mainstream,” presents a more or less chronological overview of Christian and scholarly (the two are rarely separable) treatment of Jonah, beginning with Jesus’ riddle about the “sign of Jonah” in Matt 12 and Luke 11 and extending through the church fathers, the Reformation, and into the modern period. Sherwood is especially insightful in her treatment of the way in which the character Jonah becomes a negative cipher for “Jewish carnality,” which is opposed to the good of Christian spirituality in the first instance and later to the good of Enlightenment universalism. The second section, “Backwaters and Underbellies,” traces the travels of the book of Jonah outside of dominant Christian and scholarly readings, with extended treatments of Jewish interpretation and popular interpretation. If mainstream interpretation tends to be “centripetal,” shoring up social and religious order and discouraging dissidence, the backwaters are more “centrifugal,” allowing for challenges to the character of God, the authority of scripture, and the easy coherence of any settled, monolithic notion of identity. Sherwood is at her best in this section of the book, weaving together the fruits of
her wide reading with just the right amount of pungent commentary and analysis. In the third and final section of the book, “Regurgitating Jonah,” the author reflects on contemporary theories of reading and how they have informed her approach, then gives her own account of those “forty square inches” that constitute the book of Jonah itself. Here Sherwood demonstrates the sort of skillful close reading that was only hinted at earlier in the book. She is attentive to puns and wordplays in the Hebrew and to repeated words and themes, and in this sense can hold her own with the best of rhetorical critics (the New Criticism of biblical studies). But she is a much less deferential reader than most who fall into this camp, and rather than see the book of Jonah as an example of the well-wrought urn of language she describes it as a “mongrel text (neither purely comedy, nor tragedy, nor midrash, nor parable—in fact, not purely anything)” (236). Her reading emphasizes the parodic, even carnivalesque, elements that pervade the book, but it is at the same time alert to the more earnest questions that such elements may host. Thus, while noting that the personification of the worm and the qiqayon-plant of Jon 4 functions in a cartoonish way, Sherwood nevertheless adds that “they reinforce a subliminal sense of the sudden changeability and fragility of life—a life that can turn on a bizarre incoming word, a few pieces of sackcloth, or the fragile arbitrariness of a pun” (280).

A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives is surely one of the most erudite, compelling, and well-written books of the most recent generation of biblical scholarship. Sherwood combines a solid grounding in biblical studies and the history of interpretation, a sophisticated knowledge of the literature of cultural studies and literary theory, and an underlying commitment to the ethical and moral demands of reading. And mediating it all is the author’s distinctive prose style. By turns elegant and witty, urbane and laugh-out-loud funny, Sherwood seems incapable of writing a bland sentence. In an academy that has experienced a great flattening of prose style—where an imagined objectivity in scholarship has meant the submersion of the personality of the scholar—the present volume demonstrates that rigor of thought and method does not preclude a certain panache.