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Sherwood, Yvonne

A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture

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While no biblical book is devoid of some kind of afterlife in the history of its interpretation, it is perhaps arguable that the little book of Jonah is among those that have had the most variegated response to its interpreted meanings, embracing artistic, dramatic, and literary forms.

Following at least two article-length ventures into Jonah scholarship, Prof. Yvonne Sherwood of the University of Glasgow has turned full attention to a book-length study not only describing and characterizing the long history of Jonah interpretation (including some of the artistic responses it has elicited, of which a number are illustrated in seventeen black-and-white plates at the center of the book) but also presenting her own critical postmodern reading of what many deem a strange and perplexing book. Her training in English literature as well as biblical and Jewish studies has well equipped her for tackling this prodigious task.

After a brief introduction (1–8) in which Sherwood states her purpose in undertaking this study, her reasons for choosing the book of Jonah as its object, and the problematics associated with her own particular approach, she divides her treatment into three parts. First, she presents what she labels “the Mainstream approach” (ch. 1) as having five aspects: (1) beginning with the church fathers, the typological interpretation of Jesus as the new Jonah; (2) the more or less pejorative evolvment of the figure of Jonah into an anti-Semitized biblical character (a move that draws her vehement ire and rejection); (3) the Protestant Reformers’ portrayal of

Jonah, epitomized by John Calvin and John Hooper, who “squeeze images of pain and punishment from the book ... and clamp the text in the interpretive pincers of fear” (44); (4) the nineteenth-century interpretation of Jonah, which, reacting to the impact of rising scientific discoveries, became anxious about the book’s primitiveness and hyperbolic features (inspired by the fish episode), which was countered “by packaging its wisdom in the instantly recognisable, up-to-the-minute language of zoology” (47); and (5) the twentieth-century Jonah criticism that picked up on as well as rejected some previous emphases, with the resulting Christian colonization of Jonah calling for new interpretive approaches that allow for readings “against the grain” of the text, enlisting alternative traditions, and a reaction against “antiquated, venerated, canonized meanings” (87).

Second, Sherwood reflects on Jewish and popular interpretations (ch. 2), which are often at odds with “Mainstream” readings (hence the provocative title she gives to this chapter: “Backwaters and Underbellies”). She obviously feels more comfortable with many of the contrasting readings surveyed here. Yet despite the welter of disparate interpretations examined, she still thinks it possible to say something about why the book of Jonah continues as a cultural “meme.” Third, Sherwood presents her own poststructuralist reading of Jonah under the rubric of “Regurgitating Jonah” (ch. 3), prefaced by a discussion of the shortcomings she perceives in previous reading approaches, the problematics and strictures under which any reading should fall, and a summary of the values she sees in her own reading in light of her understanding of what the book of Jonah is as a text.

No brief review can really do this book justice, not simply because it covers so much of the vast history of interpretation of Jonah and the problems raised by that history, but also because Sherwood makes significant use of literary interpretive theory (showing the influence of such figures as Bakhtin, Barthes, Derrida, Eagleton, Fish, Foucault, and Kermode, to name only the most prominent), as well as the impact of cultural studies on biblical interpretation, posing all sorts of complex issues for which there is not sufficient space here to delve into.

Nonetheless, I think I can say with confidence that Sherwood's work represents a tour de force for the extent of her coverage, the depth and insightfulness of her analysis, and the stimulation and challenge of her own reading of Jonah. A noteworthy feature of her presentation is her highly metaphoric style of writing, eliciting delight at her often witty choices of tropes and images. There are few treatments of the history of interpretation of biblical books that are as comprehensive, exciting, and fascinating as this one, and for this Sherwood is to be congratulated.

At the same time, as a reforming "Mainstream" biblical critic whose various forays into Jonah studies (curiously, none of which are cited in Sherwood's impressive twenty-two-page bibliography) have deepened my interest in what Sherwood has produced, I am moved to make a few concluding observations.

While Sherwood is clear from the outset about her bias against "Mainstream" interpretations of Jonah, and her efforts to expose its myopia and unhelpful positivism meet with some success, there are moments when she acknowledges the value of some of the contributions from "Mainstream" scholars, whom she avers are not always to be interpreted as "bumbling stooges" (234), as some of her more negative evaluations might suggest. But to the extent that Sherwood is right that the tendency of "Mainstream" interpretations of Jonah is to be too univocal, coherent, rigid, and delimiting, I raise the question whether her "Backwaters-Underbellies" approach, which sees the entire book of Jonah as "an extended meditation on questions of identity and survival, marked by an exposure to the raw vacillations of life" (284), does not have its own univocal thrust that might preclude the reading of certain passages in Jonah as not necessarily amenable to such a thrust, thus foreclosing on a different interpretive slant.

On a more practical level, one wonders what the implications of her strategy for reading Jonah might be for the contemporary training of biblical teachers at both the more and less advanced levels. Are we looking at a new curriculum in which it will be *de rigueur* to include sophisticated literary theory and analysis along with cultural studies in a postmodern packaging? And what will this mean for the

untrained Bible student who would like to be able to understand the meaning of biblical texts, minus all the interpretive jargon and mystification?

In the end, I am put somewhat at ease by Sherwood's statement that her reading of Jonah has been undertaken "in the experimental spirit of the [captain's] 'perhaps' (Jonah 1:[6]), the King of Nineveh's 'who knows' (3:9), and the general spirit of 'what iffery' that pervades the biblical text (233, as emended). With that important bow to interpretive freedom and openness, I am less worried about the future of biblical studies.