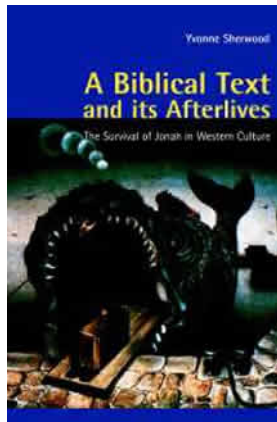


## ○ REVIEWING YVONNE SHERWOOD'S *A BIBLICAL TEXT AND ITS AFTERLIVES: THE SURVIVAL OF JONAH IN WESTERN CULTURE*

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George Aichele reviews Yvonne Sherwood's *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. xii + 321.)

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[T]he *infinity* of the signifier refers not to some idea of the ineffable (the unnameable signified) but to that of a *playing*; the generation of the perpetual signifier (after the fashion of a perpetual calendar) in the field of the text (better, of which the text is the field) is realized not according to an organic progress of maturation or a hermeneutic course of deepening investigation, but, rather, according to a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations (Barthes 1977, p. 158, his emphases).

Roland Barthes's concept of the 'perpetual signifier' receives an afterlife of its own in Yvonne Sherwood's remarkable study of the book of Jonah. Sherwood's book is not quite a history of 'reception' or 'effects', nor is it exactly reader-response or deconstruction or ideological criticism, but it draws on all of those approaches and others as well, including the new field of 'memetics' (pp. 196–198). She does not pursue the history 'behind' the book of Jonah, the linguistic, cultural, or economic factors that may have led to its production. Nor is her book a commentary, even though in it she does comment in depth on every part of the book of Jonah. Instead, Sherwood traces the ways in which Jonah's 'mongrel text' (p. 236) has reproduced itself, both within and (especially) outside of the Bible, in a wide variety of written, graphic, and even televised texts.

Many of these rewritings of Jonah were produced by Christians or Jews, but others have come from beyond any canonical or creedal context or control.

Standing as it does at the ‘edge of the canon’ (p. 95), the book of Jonah is an ideal ‘subject’ for Sherwood’s reading ‘experiment’ (p. 6). Her concept of textual afterlives echoes Walter Benjamin’s essay on ‘literal translation’:

a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife... The life of the originals attains in [literal translations] to its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering (Benjamin 1968, pp.71–72).

Benjamin’s concept of translation as afterlife itself lives on in the words of Jacques Derrida:

A text lives only if it lives *on* [*sur-vit*], and it lives *on* only if it is *at once* translatable *and* untranslatable... Totally translatable, it disappears as a text, as writing, as a body of language [*langue*]. Totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately (Derrida 1979, p.102; his emphases).<sup>1</sup>

Echoing both Benjamin and Derrida, Sherwood argues that the interpretive afterlife ‘overwhelms, eclipses, and *always precedes* the biblical “original”’ (p. 2, her emphasis). (The afterlife is, in Baudrillard’s terms, a simulacrum.) The afterlife is a translation, moving the ‘original’ through time and space, re-animating but also transforming and ‘betraying’ its precursor, re-creating signifiers or signifieds, sometimes in radically different form.

Sherwood’s droll style makes *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives* a constant delight to read. After a brief introduction, the book is divided into three massive chapters. Also included are 17 reproductions of graphic depictions of Jonah’s story from medieval to modern times, an extensive bibliography, and two indexes. Her first chapter explores ‘the Mainstream’, interpretations that have dominated the reading of the book of Jonah in the Western world from early Christian times to the present. These interpretations are predominantly Christian and often anti-semitic. In them, the reluctant prophet appears initially as a Christ figure, but later as a stereotype of the Jew, a cautionary instance of failed obedience to God, or a study in monstrous ichthyology. Through these readings, Jonah and the rest of the Jewish scriptures are appropriated and rewritten as Christian literature: the Old Testament is created as a colony of the New.

Sherwood’s second chapter delves into ‘Backwaters and Underbellies’, alternative understandings of Jonah that appear throughout the same time period, but on the margins of Western culture. These peripheral readings come in two forms: Jewish readings, beginning with the earliest rabbinic sources, and ‘popular’ readings, which include both secular interpretations and other readings that are outside the control of religious orthodoxy. Numerous similarities between Jewish and popular readings justify Sherwood’s joint consideration of them. These readings tend to be more playful and diverse, fantastical and polyvalent, and yet more ‘literal’, than the mainstream ones. Despite this, the mainstream and backwater interpretations of Jonah do not simply oppose one another. One of the delights of Sherwood’s book is her detailed demonstration of how backwater or underbelly readings can be influenced by readings from the centres of power, and how mainstream readings become infected by themes that appeared originally on the margins.

She scrupulously avoids binary ‘good guy/bad guy’ distinctions, although she confesses that her heart is with the peripheral readings (pp. 288–289).

The book’s final chapter presents the conclusions that Sherwood draws from her investigations, including her own reading of Jonah. Because this reading draws on the numerous interpretive ‘voices’ that she has already acknowledged, it is more anti-commentary than commentary, an explosion of semiosis in which the book of Jonah becomes almost infinitely polysemous. Given the careful preparations that Sherwood has made for this reading of Jonah, anything less would have been a disappointment. She does not disappoint. Instead she opens up a new model for the commentary, a postmodern commentary (if that isn’t a hopelessly oxymoronic concept) which, instead of controlling and domesticating the text as traditional commentaries do, liberates the text from all canonical and other orthodox constraints, producing a ‘mutable canon’ (p. 287). Sherwood’s concluding paragraphs express a hope for ‘a new kind of biblical interpretation... seeking out a certain kind of insecurity and destabilization’ (pp. 291–292) instead of reaffirming current orthodoxies, as so much biblical scholarship does. One eagerly looks forward to further ‘commentaries’ derived from this model.<sup>2</sup>

As Sherwood’s final comment suggests, this book is much more than a discussion of the book of Jonah. Her extended reflections on relationships and differences between the varied rewritings of Jonah probe the dynamics of biblical interpretation itself. Although her focus remains resolutely on the book of Jonah, she is not afraid to address larger hermeneutical, theological, political, or cultural issues, and she does all of this, and frequently, in a sensitive and thoughtful manner. *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives* is a fitting tribute to the late Robert Carroll, to whom the book is dedicated. As biblical texts are increasingly de-canonized and transfigured in this post-colonial, postmodern world, we need to learn how to trace the uncontrolled flows of semiosis into previously uncharted territories. The reader’s ideology plays a crucial role in all of this, as do larger cultural, economic, political, and even geophysical forces, including shifting tides of intertextuality.

Sherwood’s book raises the question (but does not answer it, and perhaps there is no answer) of how far these semiotic flows can extend or stretch. In other words, what is *not* an afterlife of Jonah? Must each afterlife in some way acknowledge its relation to its precursor? (If so, how is this any different from notions of ‘historical influence’?) Or can the relation between a text and its afterlives be purely coincidental and even quite fortuitous, more a product of the reader than of the texts involved? For example, is the old cartoon, ‘Popeye’, an afterlife of Jonah? Pinocchio is an afterlife of Jonah (of course!, p. 61), and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is another (pp. 91, 260), and probably Jack and the Beanstalk as well. But Sherwood mentions neither Jack’s beanstalk nor Popeye. What would one make of ‘Popeye’ as an afterlife of Jonah?

Sherwood’s fine book should be read not only by students of Jonah but by anyone interested in biblical intertextualities and cultural studies. Jonah is ‘at once translatable and untranslatable’, and the ‘serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations’ that Sherwood traces among Jonah’s many afterlives both illuminates and disfigures the original, as any good translation does. In addition to offering careful scholarship that ranges over a massive accumulation of texts and shows us a great deal about the book of Jonah, Sherwood demonstrates that understanding of the afterlives of biblical books – how, where, and whether they get recycled – is not only desirable, but indispensable.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Sherwood does not mention Benjamin, but she cites both Barthes and Derrida frequently.
- 2 Such a commentary series is currently in preparation for Blackwell.

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## REFERENCES

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