

Tossing Jonah again

Sea of Readings

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Word for word, Jonah has plummeted into the whitewash of more methodological waves than has any of the other prophets (biblical or otherwise). Waves of so-called traditional, mainline, experimental and minoritized approaches have over the years encircled Jonah. And each time, Jonah has surfaced unto a *wavering* “afterlife” (to borrow Yvonne Sherwood’s image).

In this issue of *Bible and Critical Theory* Jonah is again tossed, into another sea of readings. Splash!

The waves (read: articles) in this sea of readings twirl from and in several directions, rolling over different barriers, toward alternative shores, where Jonah (character, story, book) could be received by a growing list of audiences, assisted by various theories (trauma, performance, spatial) and reading strategies (postcolonial, intertextual). There are mixed and mixing motions in this sea of readings, together with the sprayings of old and new readings, *seasoned* with ancient and latter-day texts.

Drawing upon trauma theory, **Elizabeth Boase** and **Sarah Agnew** read on behalf of Jonah’s community, understood as a postexilic audience that, still burdened by the traumas of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon, lived under the oppression from the Persian Empire. The narrative gaps and textual silences in Jonah (e.g., no explanation is given in 1:1-3 for why Jonah fled, and the book closes with the silencing of Jonah thus leaving God’s question in 4:11 unanswered) speak into the traumatic memories of Jonah’s community. They would have understood the flight of Jonah as an appropriate response to trauma, and Jonah’s silence at the end of the story as evidence to the collapse of meaning and the failure of language: “The trauma of the community whispers in the sounds of the silences of Jonah and his story.”

Trauma theory offers Boase and Agnew comforting readings (for Jonah’s community, as well as for other trauma communities) in the place of the popular reading for God’s mercy and justice (toward Nineveh), which ends up silencing and further wounding Jonah’s community (which was a wounded community already).

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Jonah's community is not the only audience that reads or hears the silences in Jonah. In reading Jonah as a performance, **Jeanette Mathews** invites readers to enter the story world by performing (enacting, embodying) the text, whereby they may hear the silences in the text. One of the upshots of this performance reading is that it unmoors Jonah from the harbours of historicity.

Mathews offers four guidelines for Biblical Performance Criticism (BPC)—performance-oriented translation, embodiment, dynamism and re-enactment. BPC affirms the role of the audience, whether in Jonah's community or in more recent times, in the dynamic meaning-making reading process. When the text is rendered as a performance, the audience is drawn into, as they embody and re-enact, the script (Mathews provides a script in the Appendix to her article). When BPC performs (works), it pushes the audience towards activism. It is not enough to perform and understand the text. It is more desirable to respond to the text (as performed) by "hitting the ground in practice."

The first two waves in this sea of readings come to Jonah from the direction of two different audiences. There is motion in these readings, carried by trauma and performance theories, and to those **Anthony Rees** adds another motion (this time, in the text): Rees appeals to Edward Soja's spatial theory in his reading of the "ups" and "downs" of Jonah. There is a seesawing in the positioning of Jonah in the story—up and down, up and down, and so on, but never out—and in God's response to Jonah, all of which invite "third space" readings that bear heavily on Nineveh and Jonah.

At the end, Rees exits upon one of the readings that Boase and Agnew problematized: "Yahweh bears down on Jonah again, teaching Jonah a lesson we never know if Jonah heeded. And so the story ends with a faint, wind-burnt and dehydrated Jonah looking over the city of wickedness that had found redemption, with us wondering if we can say the same for him." Notwithstanding, Rees' spatial reading problematizes the drive to read for and with audiences—audiences are like whirlpools of "third space."

From the direction of Kwok Pui-Lan's postcolonial imagination, **Rebecca Lindsay** reads with Nineveh. Yes, Nineveh, that huge third-spaced evil city. Reading with Nineveh is made possible by the blurring of boundaries in the story and the textual "cracks, fissures and openings" that readers fail to see or, put more directly, because of textual gaps and fractures that readers *imagine* to be level, closed off or not there.

Reading with Nineveh is about "hitting the ground in practice" and Lindsay makes room for two more subjects to the audience list: Australians, especially in light of Australia's colonial legacy and white policies, and church folk, who do not have to identify only with biblical Israel-Judah in their reading of biblical texts. Both Rees and Lindsay "third spaced" Nineveh, but from different directions and for different ends. Lindsay widened "the cracks in readings of the big, bad city" and floats Nineveh as a buoy in this sea of readings.

The last three waves in this sea of readings offer intertextual readings that come on Oceanic ripples. Inspired by "oceanic readings" from the Pacific islands, **Andreas Kunz-Lübcke** intertexts Jonah as a sea adventure story with classical Western and Egyptian stories about shipwrecked travelers. Kunz-Lübcke finds the sea and the big fish to be more homely than most readers allow, and affirms that Jonah's sea adventure led to a profound encounter with God. In the adventure of

Jonah, the sea is also a place of revelation and freedom. And in the adventure of Kunz-Lübcke, oceanic reading is not the privilege for Pacific islanders only.

Paying attention to the contemporary challenges of climate change, seen very clearly in Oceania but affecting the whole world, **Anne Elvey** re-reads Jonah 2:1-11 in conversation with the retelling of the big fish incident by the Australian poet Peter Porter and with Shakespeare's Caliban. Elvey also finds the idea of sovereignty problematic, and her reading favours the otherkinds (other-than-human characters, taken as a trope for human hybridity) in the text together with the "speaking earth." She therewith suggests that "we craft our responses to climate change conscientiously and humbly as hybrid, co-agents with otherkind, where divine rescue, if there is any, is part of the spewing forth of our illusions of human (and divine) mastery."

While Kunz-Lübcke and Elvey look outside the Bible for "intertextual friends" for Jonah, i wind up this sea of readings by turning back in to the Bible in order to sit Jonah with Job.¹ And so i give Jonah another audience, and i encourage Jonah and Job to "poke" one another. My intertextual reading assaults many of the historical and literary rules of engagement, and in the end my reading washes over the biblical border in order to bring Jonah to West Papua, by way of Palestine. Otherkinds. Imagination. Spaces. Performances. Traumas. Shipwrecked?

The three intertextual readings at the end of this sea of readings create a space similar to what the people of Tuvalu call *siku moana* (tail of the deep ocean), a place where creatures of the deep (*moana*) often come to rest and refresh. *Siku moana* is also the first place where the shipwrecked may climb out of the *moana*.

I humbly admit that this sea of readings, notwithstanding, is not bottomless. In fact, no *moana* is without a bottom. Similarly, every reading has a bottom. And so every audience.

The seesawing (sea-sawing?) effect of the waves (articles) in this sea of readings might upset some readers. Motion, is an effect of reading. Vomit is a trauma response. Ask Jonah's big fish.

In the end, i expect that, in this case also, Jonah (character, story, book) will surface and will again dry up. Until other readers come along, and toss him again.



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¹ I use the lowercase "i" because i also use the lowercase with "you," "she," "they," "it," and "others." I do not see the point in capitalizing the first person when s/he *is* in relation to, and because of, everyone/everything else.