

Overall Halpern has written an important and provocative book, one that puts forward good grounds for believing that there is a solid core of historical tradition (however much overlaid with pro-Davidic bias) lying behind the stories of King David, much greater than some recent revisionist historians have allowed. At the same time, however, it seems that Halpern's vivid historical imagination sometimes leads him into questionable speculations, and that on occasion he carries the hermeneutic of suspicion too far. But Halpern has put us all in his debt with an impressive and well researched volume, which will doubtless stimulate discussion as well as controversy among scholars for years to come.

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YVONNE SHERWOOD, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000. xii, 321 pp. £15.95. ISBN 0-521-79561-3.

The reception history of biblical texts is in vogue at present, and holds much promise. But it is very difficult to do well. You need two abilities that are seldom found together: voluminous reading, so as to be able to cover two or more thousand years of the study and appropriation of the chosen text, and sharp analytical ability, so that the resulting book is not simply an immense heap of information but is ordered and mapped. Yvonne Sherwood, happily, possesses both abilities in spades. The result is one of the most stimulating works on any biblical text that I have read in years. It sets a new standard for the study of reception history.

Sherwood deals with both 'historical-critical' commentaries (which she dubs 'The Mainstream' and sees as typically characterised by an anti-semitic bias in which Jonah becomes a cipher for an allegedly 'particularistic' Judaism) and with Jewish and popular treatments of Jonah, including both rabbinic commentary and much modern literature ('Backwaters and underbellies'). Here her background in English (and other) literature and her experience in postmodern theory come into their own. Informed by both mainstream and backwaters, her own work then proceeds to an original reading of Jonah. She reads it as a subversive text, in many ways parodic, generically shape-shifting and slippery, hard to pin down. But that in turn leads her to argue that the other prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible tend to have a similarly unsettling character, which a 'positivistic' biblical criticism all too easily overlooks.

As well as providing a survey of the reception of Jonah in commentary, literature and art, the book also has a thesis: that Jonah has been a text that has served the Christian 'othering' of the Jew. Sherwood's own reading reclaims the text from this abuse, showing that it need not be read as a protest against the 'exclusivism' of Ezra and Nehemiah, but as a much more profound exploration of the puzzling nature of the God of the Hebrew Bible, who defies our theological definitions and cannot be captured in the language of Christian (or Jewish) dogma. In postmodern style she does not of course claim that she has discovered the 'true' meaning of Jonah, but does maintain that her reading 'maps persuasively on to the book' (p. 233). I was certainly persuaded.

A bonus—or rather, an integral aspect of the book—is that Sherwood writes so well. Every page provides entertainment as well as academically rigorous argument. A lot of work on 'the Bible as literature' is so poorly written that it is hard to trust the author's literary judgement. This book, by contrast, is itself 'writing', not simply 'scholarship'. A very exciting work from an outstanding specialist in Biblical Studies.

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