
Book Reviews

The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea's Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective. By Yvonne Sherwood. Gender, Culture, Theory, 2; JSOT Supplement Series 212; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996. ISBN 1-85075-581-7. Pp. 357.

Yvonne Sherwood examines Hosea 1–3 using a variety of insightful approaches (metacommentary, semiotics, deconstruction, and feminist criticism). She presents the difficulty that biblical scholarship, through its emphasis on textual unity, has had with this disjunctive and problematic text. By contrast, Sherwood uses the disunity of Hosea 1–3 to direct her reading, asking “what particular features in the text, and complexities in the relationship between text and reader, conspire to produce such a disturbing and disorientating effect” (12). Sherwood’s interest in the “woman of harlotry” (Gomer) reveals a general feminist perspective that is evidenced throughout, and that culminates in her own feminist reading in the final chapter. Sherwood calls this chapter *bricolage*, a reading that “resourcefully adapts existing methods to the task” (16, n. 33). In fact *bricolage* accurately describes the strategy applied throughout the volume.

The first of four parts in *The Prostitute and the Prophet* is a metacommentative study. A variety of scholarly and non-scholarly works are considered, among them, midrashic, targumic and talmudic selections, various twentieth-century readings (metaphorical, psychoanalytical, and redaction-critical), several plays, and one image from a thirteenth-century manuscript. All of these, Sherwood observes, are united in their embarrassment about the “woman of harlotry.” Indeed, in this regard, claims to objectivity and historicity do not separate scholarly readings from pre-critical and fictional/artistic readings: in both cases demands of “logical and sexual propriety” (81) are placed on the text, meaning that the “woman of harlotry” must be tamed (contained, humiliated, erased, or improved [260]) so that she “befits a biblical text” (79).

The second chapter is devoted to a discussion of semiotics and Sherwood’s own semiotic reading of Hosea 1–3. The author covers diverse scholarly ground (Peirce, de Saussure, Kristeva, Barthes), establishing a glossary of terms that are then applied in her own reading. She observes that scholarship of Hosea’s imagery has tended to focus on what it means, rather than how it means. The determination of meaning is difficult, as Sherwood has already suggested, because of the text’s disjunctive nature. The signs that she considers (Gomer, the names of the children) and what they ostensibly signify (harlotry, the land, expected famil-

ial relationships) reveal that disjunction on a more particular level, and should, Sherwood argues, be studied for their capacity to shock or alienate readers, thus reversing their expectations. Sherwood ends her reading with the identification of a "countervoice" in the text, that of the silently defiant mother who does love her child, despite what the patriarchal text asserts.

Sherwood's third chapter builds on her second: if Gomer's nurturing of her child proved to be one countervoice in Hosea 1-3, Sherwood now explores others. Chiefly using the theoretical work of Derrida, she provides her readers with an excellent discussion of deconstruction partly through a series of "Deconstruction is (is not)" statements that defy the "method's" supposed indefinableness. Sherwood considers the applicability of deconstruction for biblical studies, arguing that it is suitable for tracing the inconsistencies of texts and for freeing the biblical text from the "totalizing" efforts of scholars. Sherwood's own deconstructive reading examines three "violent hierarchies" on which the rhetorical strategy of Hosea 1-2 operates (Innocence-Deviance, Yhwh-Baal, Love-Hate [Acceptance-Rejection]). She also looks at Derrida's notion of palaeonymy and, finally, Yahweh's ultimate deconstruction of his own name, hence the deconstruction of that between being and non-being.

As Sherwood observes, Hosea 1-3 will create tensions between the text and the twentieth-century feminist reader. In chapter 4 she considers these first with reference to feminist biblical scholarship on Hosea, as in chapter 1. She makes important observations about the scholarly opposition of "subjective" and "objective" readings, cautioning that feminist attachment to subjectivity may reinforce the existing hierarchy between androcentric and feminist readings. She warns that feminist readings often employ patriarchal discourse, rely on dangerous oppositions (e.g., "angel" and "whore"), and are sometimes willing to argue other perspectives over their own. It is this ability to see other points of view, however, that makes feminist criticism compatible with deconstruction, and Sherwood proceeds to demonstrate how deconstruction (once "extended and transformed" [295]) complements feminist readings. She then performs a deconstructive reading by looking at several hierarchies in Hosea 1-3 (subject-object, accuser-accused, possessor-possession), which she suggests can be read as anxieties in the text.

Sherwood's readings are convincing, complement each other adeptly, and provide new perspectives on a difficult text. At times one is aware of the book's origins as a Ph.D. thesis, where it is important to display a certain competence with methodology. Sherwood's competence is well demonstrated, but her reviews of scholarship work better in some places than in others. For example in chapter 2, the discussion of semiotic theories becomes confusing, especially when Sherwood oscillates between different theories and terminology as she applies them—it is not always easy to see how potentially conflicting theories, or aspects thereof, facilitate her reading. By contrast, readers are conscious of Sherwood's critical admiration of Derrida's ideas in chapter 3 and can follow their employment in her work easily. The same is true for chapter 4, where readers have little doubt that deconstruction is the logical tool for solving the problem at hand.

Proponents of deconstruction would doubtless argue that all texts can be

deconstructed, including Sherwood's. The author's exposure of various oppositions, both in the text and in critical scholarship on it, reveals an opposition on which her own reading depends, namely, consistency/inconsistency. In order to maintain a consistently feminist position throughout the volume, Sherwood relies on an inconsistent use of method (*bricolage*). Like the scholars on whose work she metacommentates, therefore, Sherwood must do some selective reading, only hers is performed on theory rather than on biblical texts. However, Sherwood's reading is brilliantly executed, and if one shares her ideological perspective, one will appreciate the reading(s).

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People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture. By David Lyle Jeffrey. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996. ISBN 0-8028-3817-0. Pp. xx+396.

Though the importance of the Bible to the evolution of Occidental culture has rarely been put into question, the more specific repercussions of a faith tradition, like Judeo-Christianity, so closely bound to a particular "text," has long been a matter of debate, within and without the tradition itself. Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, was neither the first nor the last to question Judeo-Christian reliance upon the written Word (as opposed to the Qur'an, the ultimate and distinctively "oral" revelation). What are we to make of a history of devotion focused on what is, whatever its origins, a decisively "literary" text—the Book of Books itself (a term that refers, significantly, not to the incomparability of the Bible, but rather to its collated, anthological character; i.e., as a book made up of books)?

David Lyle Jeffrey, professor of English literature at the University of Ottawa and renowned figure in the burgeoning field of literature and religion, addresses Mohammed's concern in *The People of the Book*. Jeffrey uses the Prophet's dual-edged term—showing the close ties of the Abrahamic faiths, as well as the disjunction of the first two with the third—in order to suggest, from the outset, the complexities surrounding Western (and specifically Christian) identity and literary culture. What follows can be read as an attempt to justify the ways of Christian writers and readers over the course of the last two millennia.

Jeffrey's burden rests on the suggestion that, contrary to postmodernist tendencies to relegate the entire history of Western religion (with philosophy and literature) to the dustbin of "logocentrism," this multiform history has been, in Levinas's words, an attempt to "admit the action of literature on men." The very application of the derisory term "logocentrism," Jeffrey argues, smacks of post-Romantic reductionism, especially when applied to the vast and diverse Christian legacy. It is, to borrow another term from postmodern parlance, a "misreading" of egregious proportions. To be *Logos-centered*, which the People of the Book (and Christians in particular) unequivocally are, is not, in itself, to be *logo-centric*. Con-