Introduction

Marvellous excess and monstrous mutations: on dishing up and spinning (out) biblical words

> Interdisciplinary work, so much discussed these days, is not about confronting already constituted disciplines (none of which, in fact, is willing to let itself go). To do something interdisciplinary it's not enough to choose a 'subject' (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new subject that belongs to no-one.
>
> (Roland Barthes)[1]

According to the rabbis, when God gave humankind Torah he gave it in the form of wheat for us to make flour from it, and flax for us to make a garment from it: Torah is the raw material, to be ground, woven, and spun (out). Inevitably, as time passed, the grindings, stitchings, and weavings of the word became more and more elaborate, the cloths more exotic and fabulous, the recipes more complex. No longer satisfied with bread and cotton, readers revelled in the meta-textual equivalent of exquisite satins, Paisley patterns, Chicken Marengo, wild mushroom fricassee. The ur-words were cooked up/stitched together with contemporary buzz-words, fashions, anxieties, desires, to dish up the text in appetising ways.

This book offers a glimpse into the tailor's shop and gourmet restaurant that is the interpretative history of the book of Jonah. It watches readers as they spin out meaning, engage in careful exegetical stitch-work, and cook up ever more spicy and appealing recipes. It takes in all kinds of readings: reading as maverick and unconventional as Zandra Rhodes designs, and as repetitive and uncreative as a rationing cookbook, or *How to Do Things with Spam*. Above all, it looks at how the book has been stitched up (and closed

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[1] Translated quotation by J. Clifford in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (ed. J. Clifford and G. E. Marcus; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 1, from R. Barthes, 'Jeunes Chercheurs', in *Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), pp. 97–103 (no page cited by Clifford).

down) by a reading in poor taste, a reading that habitually pairs
Jonah with Jewishness, and it aims to unpick that reading and start
reading again.

So to the interpretative menu or bill of fare. The book is divided
into three sections (starter, entrée, and dessert). The first section
('The Mainstream') takes in the staple diet of Jonah readings: those
served up in the Mainstream scholarly and Christian tradition from
the first to the twentieth century. The second course ('Backwaters
and underbellies') is appropriately by far the largest, meatiest, most
substantial portion of the book, and looks at alternative serving
suggestions, the way the text is dished up in independent *bijoux* little
eating establishments: medieval poetry, Netherlandish art, Jewish
interpretation, and other hidden cultural corners and sidestreet
cafés. To finish, I stir these new ingredients into the book of Jonah,
and so cook up a 'new' interpretation, which is also a kind of hash,
or jambalaya – a combination of insights from biblical scholarship
mixed with older, more piquant, marginal readings. In 'Regurgi-
tating Jonah' I self-consciously stir up the text, swell it, fatten it,
inject it with new reading idioms: I take this perennial biblical
chestnut, turn it into purée, and serve it up, Terence Conran
fashion, with char-grilled peppers and *pommes de terre.*

Thus I am also stirring up the order and priorities of traditional
biblical studies, where the detailed discussion of the biblical text and
its setting in a specific historical context has been the main (and
indeed pretty much the only) course. Where popular non-scholarly
sources have featured, they have been featured as a pinch of cultural
spice (the odd quote from *Moby Dick*, the odd allusion to Aldous
Huxley, no more) and they have only been admitted at the point
where they cohere, or seem to cohere, with the largely sustained
official interpretation. In this study, interpretation comes first,
indeed interpretation overwhelms my text, as if to demonstrate how
it also overwhelms, eclipses, *and always precedes* the biblical 'original'.
My premise is that biblical texts are literally sustained by interpret-
ation, and the volume, ubiquity, and tenacity of interpretation make
it impossible to dream that we can take the text back, through some
kind of seductive academic striptease, to a pure and naked original
state. The corollary to the rabbis' statement is that though the
biblical text can always be re-deflected, it can never be recovered.
For how can flour be turned back into wheat, how can cloth be
turned back into flax, and how can the cooked be made raw again?

The book of Jonah has been selected as my guinea-pig text for several reasons. Firstly, this is a book with which most readers will be – at least vaguely – familiar: most people know Jonah, as the Qur'an knows him, as the 'man in the fish', but there is much left to discover, for popular memory remembers little of the framing command to go to Nineveh, the flight to Tarshish, and wonderful details such as the sackcloth-wearing cattle, the shivering ship, the fabulously growing *qiqayon* plant and the plant-smiting 'warrior' worm. Secondly, this is a tiny text that is virtually capsising under the weight of interpretation: though measuring no more than forty inches square in my edition, the book of Jonah has generated literally acres of visual and verbal glosses, and has demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for cultural survival – surviving in spite of, and in some cases (as I will go on to show) living off, the energy of the demise of faith in the Judaeo-Christian[2] West. Thirdly, because it demonstrates the extreme divergence between Mainstream/scholarly/Christian and Jewish/popular readings, the book of Jonah obligingly concentrates all the issues raised in recent work on Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: issues about the separation of a loose cultural surplus from proper scholarly activity, and questions concerning which (if any) interpretative trajectories have the right to define, and contain the text.[3] Fourthly, and this point is intrinsically related to the last, since professional interpretation has orbited so obsessively around the motif of 'Jonah the Jew', the book of Jonah provides a graphic opening into a discussion of what can be called the 'colonisation' of the 'Old Testament' by a Christian logic that all too often sinks back into an essentially supersessionist reflex. Fifthly, since Jonah is by general consensus an odd-man-out in the Old Testament/Hebrew

[2] The difficulties of the term 'Judaeo-Christian' will be discussed later in the book (see pp. 72–4; 79–87).

[3] For a sampling of recent work on the Bible and Cultural Studies see A. Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); R. Boer, *Knockin' on Heaven's Door* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); S. D. Moore, *God's Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* (New York: Routledge, 1996); T. Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); J. C. Exum and S. D. Moore (eds.), *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); S. D. Moore (ed.), *In Search of the Present: The Bible through Cultural Studies* (*Semeia*; Atlanta: Scholar's Press, forthcoming). Other studies focusing on the text's afterlife or reception history include J. F. A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); M. E. Stone and T. A. Bergren, *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998); and J. L. Kugel, *The Bible As it Was* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), although the latter two volumes concentrate on early biblical interpretation.

Bible[4] canon, fitting neither into the Prophets, nor, more specifically
the Book of the Twelve,[5] it is the ideal book for raising the question
of what we mean by (and can possibly entertain in the context of)
the 'biblical', and what expectations scholars and general readers
alike project onto a biblical book. The scholarly reflex that tends on
the one hand to acknowledge Jonah as something of a mutant
biblical branch – the 'last and strangest blossom on an ancient
literary stem'[6] – and on the other, to retrieve the book as a purely
conventional specimen of the biblical, bears further investigation, for
it suggests that a certain homogenisation, standardisation, and
sacralisation (as well as Christianisation) instinctively attends our
readings of biblical literature. Sixthly, and finally, since Jonah has
been regarded as a 'GCSE-level', childish story (and on this, at least,
popular and scholarly interpretation seem to agree), this is the ideal
text to challenge our modern projections of 'primitive' and par-
ticularly 'primitive biblical' literature, without necessarily relapsing
into the hyperbole that assumes that the high moral/cultural value
of the Bible finds a corollary in (or can even be substituted by) a
superlative aesthetic. While scholars promote the myth of a school-
teacherly text, chalking out an all-too-simple lesson about 'loving
your enemies' on the blackboard, and post-Enlightenment, popular
interpretation plays in the seeming abyss between a knowing 'now'
and a naïve, mythical 'then' (when people could *believe* in a man-
swallowing fish), the book of Jonah is busy crafting newness from
twisted elements of tradition, creating intricate labyrinths of pun,
and so interrogating any sense of a naïve text, coming to us from the
religious childhood of consciousness.

   If it is the task of criticism to mimic, in some sense, its subject,[7]

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[4] The term Old Testament/Hebrew Bible is an attempt to do justice to the fact that the book
   does double duty as sacred text for both Christians and Jews. Though the term Hebrew
   Bible is not ideal – not to say tautologous – it is the term generally adopted in Biblical
   Studies to replace the problematic term 'Old Testament' and is the term that I shall be using
   throughout this book.

[5] In the Hebrew Bible there are four prophetic books: three 'Major' Prophets – Isaiah,
   Jeremiah and Ezekiel – and the 'Book of the Twelve', the collection of the twelve so-called
   Minor Prophets. The Minor Prophets are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah,
   Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (though they shuffle out in
   slightly different order in the Jewish and Christian canon).

[6] G. von Rad, cited without reference in K. Koch, *The Prophets*. II. *The Babylonian and Persian
   Periods* (trans. M. Kohl; London, SCM, 1983), p. 184.

[7] Of course in these postmodern/poststructuralist times we are supposed to have broken with
   ideas like mimesis and realism, and yet even the most self-consciously text-creating of critics
   finds it hard to transcend the belief that there should be some sense of (twisted) analogue in

then this book is not a 'proper' academic book, just as Jonah is not a
proper biblical text. It is not 'original', or at least it foregrounds its
reliance on the already-written: like Jonah it works on the basis that
knowledge and meaning are *agglutinative*, and that new products can
be made by bringing together existing traditions and recombining
them. To this end, biblical commentary, Jewish midrash, the
thirteenth-century poem *Patience*, sixteenth-century Netherlandish
art, and the contemporary TV series *Northern Exposure* all meet and
jostle between the same covers, and strange meetings between, say,
Zygmunt Bauman and Old Testament biblical commentary, or
between Michel Foucault and John Calvin, mimic the strange meet-
ings between Jonah and the rest of the canon (as it seems so very
different to a book like Deuteronomy, and so out of place at a
summit meeting of the members of the Book of the Twelve). And
insofar as it brings together subjects that are usually segregated –
Biblical Studies, Jewish Studies, English and American Literature,
Literary and Cultural Theory – this book falls into the catch-all
category of a 'multidisciplinary' or 'interdisciplinary' work, or – to
use a less official term also used of Melville's *Moby Dick* – an
'intellectual chowder'.[8] However, rather than reconciling myself like
Barthes to creating a new (free-floating) subject that belongs to no
one, I am concerned to *confront* already-established disciplines on the
basis that one discipline can provocatively destabilise and expose the
myopia of another. Thus Biblical Studies (specifically Old Testament
Studies) is challenged head on by Jewish Studies, and nudged by
literary and popular culture into engagement with a culture where
'God' is no longer a given; and conversely, Biblical Studies chal-
lenges literary/popular culture's rather naïve projections of the
'biblical' as a holistic, undifferentiated mass, defined by something of
an inferiority complex in relation to the 'Scientific'.

Crossing disciplinary boundaries inevitably raises questions of
how we legitimate 'proper' academic work and how we transfer

our relations with the text. So, for example, Stephen Moore writes: 'Rather than take a
jackhammer to the concrete, parabolic language of the Gospels, replacing graphic images
with abstract categories, I prefer to respond to a pictographic text pictographically, to a
narrative text narratively, producing a critical text that is a postmodern analogue of the
premodern text that it purports to read' (S. D. Moore, *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist
Perspectives: Jesus Begins to Write* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. xviii).
[8] The phrase, meant as a term of disparagement, was used by one Evert Duycknick, in an
early review of *Moby Dick*. An extract from the review can be found in H. Melville, *Moby Dick*
(A Norton Critical Edition; ed. H. Hayford and H. Parker; New York: W. W. Norton, 1967),
p. 613.

criteria of propriety and permissibility between different sections of
the university. As an English Literature graduate who has spent the
last ten years with at least one, if not both, feet in the field of Biblical
Studies, I find myself still in conflict with the pervasive positivism
that permeates the discipline, and I find myself reacting against the
tendency to take a literary text and convert it into a thesis – and so
project the author of Hebrew Bible texts as proto-Christian or
Proto-*Aufklärer*. Like Adorno, I believe that 'knowledge comes to us
through a network of prejudices, opinions, innervations, self-
corrections, presuppositions and exaggerations' and that 'Every
thought [and every reading] which is not idle bears branded on it
the impossibility of its full legitimation',[9] but I find that whereas a
sense of the fundamentally experimental character of interpretation
pervaded every corridor of the English Literature department, such
beliefs in Biblical Studies tend to confine one to a small coterie of
interpreters who crouch at the corners of the discipline under the
catch-all umbrella of the 'postmodern'. I find myself straining
against a system where we are encouraged to represent our conclu-
sions like mathematical calculations and always show our working,
or to progress slowly and stealthily towards a seemingly inevitable
conclusion, weighed down by footnotes that we wear like concrete
shoes. And I find myself pressing against the centripetal disciplinary
pressures that encourage readers to situate their own new observa-
tions at just the right spot between the proper (the unique) and
propriety (participation in the collective), and at just the right degree
of remove from the comforting flanks of received opinion. Such an
environment creates little space for the idea that thought can have
an antithetical function and be valuable precisely because of 'its
distance from the continuity of the familiar';[10] or that thought
should have an 'element of exaggeration, of over-shooting the
object, of self-detachment from the weight of the factual'.[11] But it is
precisely such volatility that pervades our biblical text. With its
extravagantly experimental narrative conditions, its big city, big fish,
and big triffid-like plant, and its 'what ifs' or 'perhapses',[12] the book

[9] T. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (trans. E. F. N. Jephcott; London: Verso, 1999), pp. 80–1.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 126–7.
[12] Adorno argues that a certain 'volatility of thought' is intrinsic to philosophy (*Minima Moralia*, p. 127) and Nietzsche famously claimed that thought is characterised by the ability to say 'perhaps' (cited in J. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (trans. E. Peronowitz; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 49).

of Jonah gives the distinct impression of deliberately detaching itself from the continuity of the familiar. I have no particular desire to bring the 'furious harmony of reasonable people'[13] crashing down on my head, but cannot help but feel that the best way to read and explore a book like this is by imitating its own strategies of *stretching*.

A note on footnotes

The text that wanders beyond the safe confines of a disciplinary home is constantly traumatised by anxieties about its weight: is it too 'thin', too cursory, or too dense and allusive? In an attempt to imagine – at every turn – a reader who is a specialist in the particular area under discussion, and a reader who is not at all, I have tended to put necessary explanations (together with modifications and apologetic, for specialists) down below, in footnotes. If footnotes in mono-disciplinary(?) academic works act, as Anthony Grafton suggests, as an 'impregnably armoured bottom, like a tank' or as proof of guild membership (like the certificates on a dentist's wall), [14] these footnotes serve the additional function of contextualising any allusive comments and explaining any specialist terms. Most importantly, they allow the plot of the book to progress quite crisply, without stopping for explanation at every turn.

But not without cost. Sadly, these footnotes and explanations undermine that wonderful sense of mutual flattery that authors and readers can establish with one another, as I assume that you, the polymath reader, 'know' *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* and Hebrew and Middle English and sixteenth-century Netherlandish art, and as you admire the cavalier familiarity with which I deal with different areas of knowledge. Personally, I think it's worth the sacrifice. My aim above all is that the book should be complete in itself, understandable in itself, for non-specialist readers (though I have, where possible, also suggested further reading and further lines of enquiry in footnotes). I have also used Hebrew as sparingly as possible, but where I have, I have given the Hebrew script and a very rough English transliteration, rather than the conventional transliteration code, because this has always struck me as a highly cryptic sub-language which manages to be both more difficult to read than Hebrew for the Hebrew-reader and,

[13] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 69.
[14] A. Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 56, 9.

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at the same time, about as indecipherable as Hebrew to the non-specialist. I have also used the verse-numbering of the English translations rather than the Hebrew (the only difference between them is at the end of Jonah chapter 1 and throughout chapter 2, where 1.17 (English) is 2.1 (Hebrew), 2.1 (English) is 2.2 (Hebrew) and so on, until the two texts join again at 3.1). God, who appears in the book of Jonah both under the specific name for the God of Israel, Yhwh, and the more generic term Elohim (or God) is referred to interchangeably as God or Yhwh throughout.

It goes without saying, I guess, that the academic caveats and disclaimers that traditionally foreground the limits of knowledge and the inevitable incompleteness of the book become particularly relevant in this kind of work.

CHAPTER I

The Mainstream

> Then Jonah stepped into the book of himself – and into the
> world of sermons, literature, historical anachronism, tall tales
> and fables, Christian fulminations against the Jews, and
> cautionary tales for Victorian children . . .[1]

As the American poet Hart Crane indecorously puts it, interpreters
have 'widely ruminated' on Jonah's 'travels in the snare':

> how he was stuck there, was reformed,
> forgiven also –
> and belched back as a word to grace us all.[2]

This chapter is an attempt to navigate the breadth and scope of
Mainstream Christian and scholarly ruminations/navigations, and
to construct what Foucault might term an archaeology/genealogy of
interpretation.[3] New interpretations in biblical studies have always
involved some kind of excavation of the past, which tend to be
respectful to venerated scholarly figures, even while their purpose is
to critique their readings, reduce them to rubble, and so clear the
ground for a new construction. Archaeologies/genealogies of inter-

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[1] N. Rosen, 'Justice for Jonah, or a Bible Bartleby', in D. Rosenberg (ed.), *Congregation:
Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987),
pp. 222–31 (223).
[2] H. Crane, 'After Jonah', in D. Curzon (ed.), *Modern Poems on the Bible: An Anthology*
(Philadelphia and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), p. 336. The poem was not
published by Crane but can be found in M. Simon (ed.), *The Poems of Hart Crane* (New York:
Liveright, 1987), pp. 19–20. An editorial note alongside the poem reads 'Composed c.
1922–26'.
[3] Foucault borrows the term 'genealogy' from Nietzsche, and 'archaeology' from Kant. His
archaeologies/genealogies are concerned with tracing how our current conceptual universe
– comprised of givens such as punishment, 'madness', sexuality, man – comes to congeal in
the way it does. To sample the most famous examples of Foucault's histories, or de-
compositions of the present, see, for example, M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation: A History
of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Tavistock, 1971) or *The History of Sexuality* I: *An
Introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

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pretation, in contrast, take the spotlight off the autonomous subject, the transcendent scholar-hero, and occupy themselves with exposing how knowledge is sociologically situated and ideologically constructed, and how the traces of the dead make themselves heard in the voices of the living.[4] My purpose here is to show how the book of Jonah (as a sample of a biblical text) has been skewed by so much more than independent acts of genius, and to probe the sources, contexts, voices, and hauntings that converge in the solid tangible norm of Jonah commentaries. It's an attempt to decompose, and critique, contemporary critical 'knowledge'; to construct what Foucault might term a 'history of the (interpretative) present'.[5]

The story told will paradoxically be a story both of radical deviation and of endless repetition. On one level, the body of the text of Jonah undergoes bizarre and unpredictable mutations to form four very different meta-stories. Indeed, if it were possible somehow to scrutinise the book of Jonah in a cultureless, timeless zone of objectivity (to get into that ideal textual lab that scholars still yearn to inhabit), it would be impossible to predict the curious pathways that interpretation would take, and the strange chemical reactions between text and culture that would ensue. Looking at the text cold, for example, one might expect the man-eating fish to function as the book's 'monster' – not that Jonah would become, in a phrase that J. J. Cohen coins in his book *Monster Theory*, 'monsterised'.[6] Yet the site of monstrosity shifts dramatically in the history of reading, locating itself variously in the body of the fish, the interiorised monster within, the dangerous populace and, most persistently, the (national) body of the Jew. Yet even as readings undergo such dramatic shifts and mutations, they also show an equal and opposite tendency towards preserving themselves, cloning themselves, repeating themselves *ad nauseam*. The body of interpretation is both dramatically evolutionary and rather prone to sclerosis, as readings wear out a groove in the critical imagination.

Fortunately, at least from the perspective of information management, Mainstream Christian and scholarly readings seem to oblig-

[4] S. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 1.
[5] M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. A. Sheridan; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 31.
[6] J. J. Cohen (ed.), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).