

○ REVIEW OF JULIA MYERS O'BRIEN'S *NAHUM*

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Edgar W. Conrad reviews Julia Myers O'Brien's *Nahum*. (Readings: A New Biblical Commentary. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press; 2002. 162 pp. ISBN 1 84127 300 7.)



Julia O'Brien's commentary on Nahum offers an evocative new reading of this 'oracle' also identified as 'the book of vision'. It moves beyond existing feminist readings that focus on Nineveh the prostitute in Nahum 3 by analysing the gender roles developed by the rhetoric of the three chapters read as a whole. As a reader encountering the violence of Nahum, O'Brien challenges her readers not to dismiss the violence of the book by historicising it but to mourn for all those who experience the brutality of rape and war.

The book is a little slow-moving in the beginning, where the author, in the introduction, outlines her strategies for reading, and in the pages that follow comments on the chapters and verses of Nahum read in succession. This part of the book is, of course, necessary for a commentary and sets the stage for very powerfully written sections on Nahum and (Wo)men, Nahum and Atrocity, and Nahum and the Nations. When I came to this part of the book, I could literally not put it down. O'Brien has developed a style in writing an academic monograph that provides the reader with hints about what is coming so that the reader becomes engaged with the arguments as intently as with a book of suspense.

She is not interested in the common concerns of traditional biblical scholarship: the date of the book or its compositional history. Rather, her interest is 'in *what* Nahum does to a reader but also *how* it does it'. In announcing this aim she realises that she is speaking about 'the agency of the text' (p. 3), an issue that opens up the question of where meaning resides. I want to come back to this issue at the end of the review. This strategy enables O'Brien to gain compelling new insights into the meanings of Nahum.

Because she does not read 1:2-8 as an independent unit (some see it as a possible acrostic) or any other parts of the book as editorial additions, she is able to identify pronoun referents that have often been seen as problematic in traditional historical-critical studies. She understands,

in fact, that a feature of the rhetoric of the book is to gradually identify addressees initially introduced only with pronouns.

O'Brien puts it as follows:

The three anonymous addresses of Nahum 1-2 have been named progressively in the course of the book. The confronted feminine character, addressed as 'you' in 1.11-14, was identified as Judah in 2.1. The threatened feminine character, addressed as 'you' in 2.2 and as 'she' in 2.8 was identified as Nineveh in 2.9. The threatened male character (the referent of 'his' in 1.13, addressed as 'you' in 1.14, and implied in the leonine analogy in 2.13) is only named as the king of Assyria in the penultimate verse of the book (p. 72).

This unfolding identification of the four main characters in the book is accompanied by the disclosure of an ideology of gender employed in Nahum. The feminine characters (Nineveh and Judah) are caught up in a power struggle between the male characters (Yahweh and the King of Nineveh). O'Brien describes the book's construction of gender as follows:

God rapes Nineveh not because of her crimes but as a means of humiliating the male who was supposed to protect her. The Lion-King [of Nineveh] who once provided a safe den, with no one to frighten (2.12), now must watch along with others (3.5) as Woman Nineveh is ravaged. Perhaps the rape of Nineveh in 3.4-7 is the king's 'wound', his 'incurable breach' (3.19). Or perhaps it is hers (p. 93).

Such a reading of Nahum makes it much more difficult to rescue any positive or enduring qualities in Nahum. This reading separates O'Brien's understanding from existing feminist readings that have primarily concentrated on Nahum 3. She argues that these previous studies have tended to essentialise sex despite their intentions to challenge the gender ideology of the book. For example, she quotes Cheryl Exum (1995, p. 265) that women's 'natural' identification [in prophetic books] lies with the sinful, humiliated woman. O'Brien points out that such an association not only suggests that all women are the same but also concurs with the ideology of the book 'that what makes women women is their ability to be raped' (p. 101). Reading the patriarchy of Nahum in a contemporary patriarchal culture suggests that readers of Nahum should not focus on identification with any of the characters in the book but look for 'new ways of being and living' in what remains a 'patriarchal fishbowl' (p. 103).

In a similar way, O'Brien argues that commentary on Nahum in the past has tried to resolve the problem of the book's violence and misogyny by taking sides. Earlier studies, she observes, have tended to identify the book as extremely nationalistic and morally repugnant in a modern context - without acknowledging that they exist in a culture which has also been responsible for villainising the Other. Later interpreters, since the holocaust, have been more sympathetic to the violence envisioned against the evil Assyrian empire (Nazi Germany). The latter reading resolves the issue of hubris by those who consider their moral standards to be superior to those embodied in the book, and reading the book as resistance literature also has appeal, she suggests. Yet she concludes that all of these readings fail to recognise that we know next to nothing about the context of this book. Furthermore, to defend God in Nahum by speaking about his justice tri-

umphing over evil fails to take seriously the savage and graphic depiction of the rape of the woman Nineveh.

O'Brien understands Nahum as depicting the 'Other' as a faceless evil. This means that to identify with Nahum/Yahweh is to take sides in a world of 'Othering' and to ignore the problems of division and conflict that such language creates. To address the ideology of Nahum is not to take sides, she suggests, but to recognise the problematic of language that creates Others and leads to the atrocity of war. Selves are other Others, and Others are other Selves.

In making her argument O'Brien raises an issue that has emerged in biblical studies with the advent of criticism that recognises the role of the reader as playing a central role in the construction of a text's meaning. She is concerned to show that the meaning that she finds is not simply a product of her own reading but that the rhetoric of Nahum comes across to her as an active agent in determining meaning. The passion with which she speaks indicates that that rhetoric does not come with the 'comfort' that Nahum's name might suggest. I concur with the positions that O'Brien takes in this book and have experienced similar concerns about the role of the text in interpretation. I think the semiotics of Umberto Eco (1990 p. 50) who in his book, *The Limits of Interpretation*, speaks about the 'intention of the work' can make an important contribution to understanding the role of the text. O'Brien's book is an excellent example of a study that advances biblical study by changing the focal point from the intentions of authors, as do complex redactional histories, to the text as constructed with an intention to communicate – even though a text like Nahum is a disturbing read. O'Brien's work exemplifies the view that a text's intention does not equate to a definitive or singular meaning. I recommend it highly as fresh commentary on Nahum in an innovative series.

REFERENCES

- Eco, Umberto. *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; 1990.
- Exum, J. Cheryl, 'The ethics of biblical violence against women'. In: Rogerson, John W.; Davies, Margaret; Carroll, R.; Daniel, M., editors. *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series; 207. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press; 1995, pp. 248-271.