

Review of Alissa Jones Nelson, *Power and Responsibility in Biblical Interpretation: Reading the Book of Job with Edward Said*; Bible World; London: Routledge, 2012.

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There has been a great deal of soul-searching of late in the Biblical Studies “guild” and around its edges as to the identity and proper goals of the discipline, if indeed there still exists a single discipline at all. This soul-searching has been prompted by a wide array of factors. One factor has been the proliferation of different methodological approaches in the later decades of the twentieth century and early years of the twenty-first, all accompanied by a concomitant efflorescence of interpretive perspectives and philosophical standpoints. Such newer approaches, perspectives, and standpoints entail different understandings of the respective roles of subjectivity and objectivity in the process of interpreting biblical texts. More recently we have also seen a burgeoning of reception-historical approaches to biblical texts (classical and ancient Near Eastern texts have also benefited from such treatment) which have emerged to challenge the hitherto dominant historical-critical paradigms of the guild. Much of this, though by no means all, has taken place within the privileged and hallowed halls of the Western academy (or at least to a significant degree under its influence) and falls within the purview of what Alissa Jones Nelson terms “academic” or “idea-primary” (1) approaches. These approaches are dominated by readers trained in the languages, methods and ruling questions that have long shaped and determined the character and purpose of the Biblical Studies guild.

Another major shift in the landscape of Biblical Studies has been a de-centring of the field, away from the dominant academic powerhouses of North America and Western Europe, a process which is still very much a work in progress. Overlapping with this shift, and to a large extent a consequence of it, has been the enriching of the world of Biblical Studies by a range of approaches that Nelson terms “vernacular” or “experience-primary” (2), which she contrasts with “academic” or “idea-primary” approaches. Vernacular or experience-primary approaches are practiced by both trained and untrained readers, and, while they certainly overlap with “academic” approaches—this would be particularly the case with some (though by no means all) feminist, queer, and postcolonial approaches, for example—they have begun to thrive on what I called above the “edges” of the guild.

Now none of this is likely to be news to readers of this journal, but these movements in and around the guild are worth noting briefly here because they form the background to Nelson’s monograph, the aim of which is to foster dialogue between academic and vernacular interpretations (and interpreters), a venture Nelson believes to be necessary to the future of biblical interpretation (11). Her proposal is chiefly resourced by her adaptation of Edward Said’s notion of “contrapuntal” reading, which for Nelson offers the most promising possibilities

for “multi-directional interpretive critique” (16) between academic and vernacular, and confessional and non-confessional, approaches to the biblical texts.

Nelson’s book is divided into two parts. The first part lays the theoretical basis for the readings that are offered in the second and begins with an overview of the work of Edward Said and his principal critics, an overview that offers a helpful introduction to his thought particularly for those who are unfamiliar with it (19-52), as well as a brief engagement with the major criticisms that have been laid at Said’s door. Central to this overview is a survey of Said’s understanding of the vocation of the intellectual in society (32-8): being ethically invested and engaged, resistant both to the calcified dogmas that beset much that passes for intellectual life on the one hand and to the quietism that can characterize the academic endeavour on the other. Based on her engagement with Said and his critics, Nelson offers the following statement of her vision of ethically engaged criticism:

[A]ll criticism, secular or religious, is an ethical rather than an anarchic endeavour; in other words, criticism is (or should be) an effort to create a space in which multiple voices challenge the hegemony of authority in order to create a more ethical authority (or, better yet, *authorities*) (51).

Enter Said’s idea of “contrapuntal reading” which Nelson adapts so that it can function effectively as an approach to biblical hermeneutics. This is a matter of creating a “space” in which relationships can be built between critics of putatively dominant and marginal positions without reproducing and reinforcing such a hierarchy. A dialogue can thus take place in which the position of the dominant can be critiqued without leading to either the myopic defence of existing disciplinary boundaries on the part of the dominant on the one hand, or the unquestioning acceptance of all viewpoints without the necessary critical analysis on the other (61-70). In addressing the methodological challenges of adapting contrapuntal reading to biblical hermeneutics (74-9), Nelson raises the important point that, while the concept of contrapuntal reading as developed by Said entails dialogue between *primary* texts, in the case of biblical hermeneutics there is, to all intents and purposes, a single primary text—the Bible—but a wide variety of *secondary* appropriations of, and engagements with, this primary text. It is chiefly between these *secondary* texts that contrapuntal reading might take place. In addition to this basic adaptation, we also need to take account of the ideology and contrapuntality of the biblical texts themselves (the absence of Zuckerman, 1991 from Nelson’s book, is thus perhaps regrettable), as well as their tradition-historical developmental complexity (here one might also think of the work of Itumeleng Mosala on Micah, among many others).

The final section of part one surveys existing works that have attempted to bridge the gap between academic and vernacular approaches to biblical hermeneutics. Nelson surveys and critiques key interventions by Kwok Pui-Lan, Elsa Tamez, Gerald West, Justin Ukpong, Fernando Segovia, and R.S. Sugirtharajah. In some cases (Tamez, Sugirtharajah), she is tracing critical developments within their *oeuvres* over time. At times her critique is trenchant, for example where she charges Kwok’s application of a dialogic approach with being

“closer to cacophony than contrapuntality” (92), and West as still operating within “the vernacular ghetto” (101) rather than offering genuine pathways to overcoming the *de facto* segregation of interpretive communities. Several of these scholars (Tamez, West, Ukpong) are criticised for failing adequately to address the segregation between academic and vernacular interpretive communities. Segovia is criticised for failing to show how *biblical texts themselves* offer resources for supporting his shift to “intercultural criticism” which, in Nelson’s view, is the most likely way that “idea-primary academic readers who do not necessarily agree with Segovia’s analysis of the place of subjectivity and self-determination in the field of biblical hermeneutics” are going to be won over (112-13, a similar criticism of Sugirtharajah appearing on pp. 116-17). Perhaps so, but does this not itself risk bolstering the hegemony of idea-primary academic approaches?

Part two draws a number of academic and vernacular readings into a controlled dialogue. Chapter four examines the issue of suffering in Job by bringing the works of Gerhard von Rad and Gustavo Gutiérrez on Job (esp. Job 38:1-41:26) into dialogue against the background of their respective broader *oeuvres* (125-65) and in conversation with additional works by Clines, Tamez, and Enrique Dussel (146-156). The ambiguities of the Hebrew text of Job 42:6¹ are reflected in the tension between Gutiérrez’s protesting Job (repenting *of* dust and ashes) on the one hand, and von Rad’s accepting Job (repenting *in* dust and ashes) on the other. Nelson, to some extent following William Morrow, rightly recognizes a feedback loop between scholars’ interpretations of Job 42:6 and their apprehension of the book overall (145) and their insistence that one should not be too adamant at having arrived at *the* correct interpretation of a verse that is irreducibly ambiguous (144 n. 123; cf. her treatment of Job 19:25-7 on pp. 189-90).

Nelson weighs the strengths and weaknesses of the scholars with whom she engages with skill and clarity. What sets her treatment apart from the run-of-the-mill *Forschungsberichte* that populate the early chapters of most “idea-primary” monographs is that it is not geared towards assessing each interpretation against the criterion, for example, of the extent to which it contributes to the reconstruction of the likeliest original meaning of the text. Instead, it is oriented towards assessing whether the divergences between the interpretations in question can be accounted for by positing a division between the “interpretation” and the “application” of the biblical texts (156-61). More succinctly, are Gutiérrez, Tamez, and Dussel allowing *application* to be the arbiter of validity in biblical interpretation, with von Rad and Clines allowing what Barton calls the *plain sense* of the text to be the arbiter instead? Is this, indeed, a misleading opposition? (159-61) Nelson believes so, but I cannot help thinking—after all, I was trained as an historical critic in English universities (with Barton’s books open on my desk)—that she makes this move based on too firm an insistence on the inherent and unavoidable subjectivity of all interpretation, including Barton’s chastened biblical criticism.

Nelson engages in chapter five with academic, psychological perspectives on the book of Job from North American and European contexts in dialogue with vernacular voices from sub-Saharan Africa that come to the book from the

¹ Job 42:6 is surveyed on pp. 144-46, though omitting Ellen van Wolde’s important work (1994; 1997), perhaps so as not to render the discussion inaccessible to those without Hebrew (144 n. 123).

perspective of suffering caused by HIV/AIDS (166-200). She begins with Dan Merkur and Gerald West as representative examples of each before broadening the conversation to incorporate other psychological approaches (e.g. Arlin Roy; Jack Kahn; Michael Corey; Jaco Hamman; Carl Gustav Jung; James Reynierse) and vernacular (e.g. Sarojini Nadar; Madipoane Masenya). Nelson finds commonalities between Merkur and West in that both see the book of Job as tracing a process of personal transformation that eventually yields some form of acceptance of suffering. Whereas Job 42:6 was a key verse for adjudicating divergent perspectives in the previous chapter, here it is Job 42:7-8 that take that role in the case of Merkur and West (173-4; cf. also the works of Nam and Pyeon, 206-09), and Job 19:25-7 in the case of Jung and Hamman (189-190).

Despite finding commonalities between the two kinds of approach, Nelson also identifies key points of tension. For example, HIV/AIDS sufferers in sub-Saharan Africa are frequently confronted with a degree of social stigma and retributive religious judgment that complicates any attempt to apply a neat progression through stages of grief to their engagement with Job (176). Similarly, the belief that Job actually encounters God in Job 38-41, rather than a construction of his own psyche, is most important for the kinds of reader with whom West is engaging (190-94). Furthermore, psychological approaches, which focus on the internal development of the individual sufferer, offer little that could help to address the pressing question of *why* God permits someone to be infected by HIV in the first place (194-6). And then the book of Job *itself* is found wanting as an adequate resource for those suffering from AIDS; for how can a work in which the sufferer does not die, indeed in some sense is restored, really provide for those facing almost certain death (200)?

In the final chapter Nelson shifts her focus to “Asian” interpretations of Job, seeking to correct any perception of her work thus far as reifying a false correspondence between “First World” and “academic” approaches on the one hand and “Third World” and “vernacular” approaches on the other (201). She is immediately confronted by the daunting task of surveying “Asian” hermeneutics, which, unsurprisingly, turns out to be an exceedingly rich and multi-faceted variety of contributions. My concern here was (and remains) whether the descriptor “Asian” is too broad to be of much analytical use, implicitly buying into a “Western” construction of Asia as constituting a single, discrete entity, somehow encompassing *dalit* readings from India and historical-critical exegeses of Job by scholars who happen to be Korean as if they represented the same kind of thing. Nelson is not unaware of this obvious problem, and in any case the former would, for her, be an example of “vernacular” approaches and the latter of “academic” approaches, though this leaves open the issue of who it is that perceives both of these alike as a single, *Asian* kind of thing.

Nelson begins by offering an overview of what counts as an “Asian” interpretive context, recognizing the existence of a vast multiplicity of contexts rather than reducing them to a Procrustean bed that would be of no interpretive use (202-5). I am not, though, entirely convinced that the problem has been removed. After all, it was not at all clear from her engagement with their work that there is anything distinctively “Asian” about the approaches taken by Duck-Woo Nam and Yohan Pyeon beyond the accident of their personal backgrounds

(Nelson *almost* admits this on 220-1). In one sense, of course, this does not matter, but in another sense it does, because it raises the question of why exactly their work belongs in *this* part of *this* monograph rather than with von Rad and Clines, say, in chapter four. They seem to fall into the implicit category of “academic” approaches “by scholars who happen to be Asian” which feels at best rather contrived, but at worst could be seen as the unintentional erection of a ghetto wall: while certainly unintentional, this seems nonetheless problematic.

Nelson draws together a large collection of works, including works by authors whose identities are in various ways hybrid and including some whose educational backgrounds are predominantly European or North American, though she focuses on relatively few interpretations of the book of Job itself. She categorizes a series of themes she perceives to be characteristic of Asian approaches to Job (the mystery of the divine, the purpose of pain, the nature of the created order, and the idea of the re-inscription of old traditions), and draws “academic” (e.g. Nam and Pyeon) and “vernacular” (e.g. Ekman P.C. Tam, read alongside Kazoh Kitamori’s *Theology of the Pain of God*) authors on Job into controlled dialogue. Of particular value here are summaries and critiques of a number of readings of Job which engage with Job alongside literary and religious traditions beyond Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (e.g. the work of K.B. Sitaramayya, which draws on Hindu traditions). Many of these will, unfortunately, be unfamiliar to academic readers in the metropolitan power-houses of the Western academy. An obvious and key value in reading “Asian contexts as social texts to be juxtaposed with biblical texts” (225), in this case Job, is opening up the interpretation of the book of Job to questions and possibilities that are rarely on the table in other contexts. As a consequence, for example, suffering can, when viewed in a certain light, be seen as a blessing that augments Job’s spiritual development rather than a curse to be endured (209-13), and order and chaos can be seen as complementary aspects of an integral reality rather than as binary opposites in conflict (213-15).

It is not always clear where Nelson sees the boundary between academic and vernacular in this chapter; “vernacular” seems here to be conflated with “experiential,” as if an interpretation that takes cognizance of experience and the lived context of the sufferer in the text is ipso facto “vernacular,” regardless of the context of the interpreter in question. I am not sure how much analytical value the category of “vernacular” has in that case, and I very much fear that chapter six comes off least successfully of the three in part two of Nelson’s book. Nelson’s engagement with the sources *in itself* is a fine intellectual effort, illuminating both the book of Job and the viewpoints of its interpreters, and for these reasons it may be commended, but this chapter is not as successful as the others in enacting *contrapuntal* hermeneutics as Nelson had initially conceived it in conversation with Said.

Nelson concludes with a sketch of the possibilities of her approach for biblical interpretation and for pedagogical praxis. In the former case, her conclusions do not extend beyond what she has essentially argued in the earlier chapters: that a contrapuntal approach “offers multiple opportunities for mutual correction and mutual enrichment” (231) where current centre(s) and margins are dismantled in the name of a more egalitarian, ethically aware and engaged

approach to the task(s) of biblical hermeneutics. Nelson goes on to offer four (actually three) suggestions for pedagogical development. First, “the pedagogical structure of courses in biblical interpretation must be adapted to contemporary contexts,” that is, to “changing global realities and the contexts in which students learn” (231). In particular, the regnant epistemological paradigm(s) of the dominant culture are not to be taken for granted but integrated with the epistemological paradigms of the particular cultures in which teaching takes place (231-2). Second, rather than considering vernacular readings to be optional extras in courses where more entrenched approaches native to the *metropoleis* hold sway, the content of courses in biblical interpretation needs to be re-evaluated, leading to changes in current curricula (232-3), but, third, without calcifying into “a new pedagogical canon” (233-4). Any new curriculum is to be always reforming, an implicit challenge to the calcifying tendencies of universities and colleges as institutions. Nelson’s final “suggestion” is rather a series of open questions about the impact such developments might make on students’ perceptions of the biblical texts and their interpretation (234).

The concept behind this book is creative and ambitious, drawing into its web a variety of voices, which have not been brought into conversation before. It thus makes an important contribution to the process of soul-searching within the guild around the identity, purpose, and future of Biblical Studies, and does so in a way that necessarily calls the boundaries of the guild into question. Nelson’s book as a whole needs to be read by adherents of positions such as those held by the scholars to whom Nelson responds at the outset (the book is framed as a response to works by John Barton, John Collins, and David Clines), but chapters four-to-six (the contrapuntal readings around the interpretation of Job) could well form the basis for much wider conversations beyond the guild as it is currently constituted.

This should lead to some positive effects. One might hope to see less in the way of patronising defences of the boundaries of the guild against advocates—I use the term deliberately, but advisedly—of feminist, queer, postcolonial, and liberation approaches (among many others), as well as more in the way of genuine, non-hierarchical dialogue between practitioners of a variety of approaches to the biblical texts from a range of different contexts. Yet the question still remains whether there is such a thing as a disciplinary “core” to Biblical Studies, a matter, I venture to suggest, that is not simply the closeted navel-gazing of the Euro-American academy. This may not be a pressing question for all of those engaged in what Nelson terms “pragmatic” biblical interpretation (i.e., “wherein the goal is to interpret the text with an eye to its relevance in the contemporary world” [69]), but it most certainly is in the context of colleges and universities where Biblical Studies as a discipline is under institutional threat, where being able to identify both the importance and the points of difference of Biblical Studies as a discipline is arguably more critical than identifying and defending its—arguably transitory—“relevance.” In light of this, however, I cannot help wondering whether, by offering her insights in the context of an *academic monograph* Nelson has already placed her contribution to the conversation *within the guild*, adding one more brilliant contribution to the library of “idea-primary” approaches to biblical hermeneutics. I sincerely hope not, as Nelson’s critical juxtaposition of such a stimulating variety of voices is much too valuable to be consigned to an intellectual game within the ivory tower of the academy.

I do, admittedly, regret there is not more solid engagement with the Hebrew text of Job, a poetic masterpiece that is very close to my heart, and I must confess that it is as a scholar interested in *Job* that I decided to tackle Nelson's book in this review, not as an expert on Said or on contextual hermeneutics (which I am not). Nelson does acknowledge this omission, which according to her is due to a desire to reach out across the divide between academic and vernacular readers (13), some of whom may be less than fluent in classical Hebrew and its intricacies. I wonder, though, whether this concession is entirely disconnected from her implicit criticism of the elitism of some forms of scholarship (cf. 233-4) which I think is only partially justified, for it seems to me that a high degree of technical expertise in Hebrew (and related languages and dialects), which can only be the outcome of lengthy and difficult training, *is* necessary to make real sense of a work of the richness of the book of Job (how, for example, can one make anything much of Janus parallelism in translation?), and there is no reason to suppose that this has to be regarded as inextricably caught up in the ideological sins of the Euro-American academy.

To criticize Nelson too strongly for her lack of engagement with the intricacies of Joban poetry—with the exceptions of Job 19:25-27 and 42:6—would, however, be to commit the cardinal sin of the reviewer, namely to lament that she has not written a different book, the book I think should have been written, or that I might like to have written myself. I am not going to do this. Instead, I am going to commend a most thought-provoking book for the contribution it should make to an important conversation around the biblical texts and their afterlives, a conversation that has been going on for some time, yet in respect of which too many scholars remain ignorant or uninterested. It is one that should be read by all biblical scholars (if they can spare the time), especially those who have made the effort to wrestle with the nature and purpose of the guild to which they profess allegiance. It is, moreover, of general scholarly interest, rather than of boutique interest to those whose work is focused primarily on Job (though they, too, will find much to ponder). But it would be nice to think—in spite of the ambitious price-tag of Nelson's book—that many more interested parties outside the ivory tower of the guild would be able to engage, too. The challenge with which Nelson leaves those of us who are involved in teaching the biblical texts and their interpretation is how more of us can enable this to happen.

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