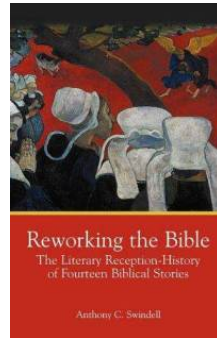***Reworking the Bible: The Literary Reception-History of Fourteen Biblical Stories*, by Anthony C. Swindell**

Bible in the Modern World 30 | Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010 | xi + 342 pages | ISBN: 978-1-907534-01-0 (hardback) £55.00

"This book sets out to explore the literary reception-history of fourteen biblical stories in the light of recent approaches to the question of the rewriting of literary texts" (1). With this statement, Anthony C. Swindell begins his presentation of over two hundred literary allusions and recreations of Eden, Noah, Jacob and Esau, Moses, Joshua and Rahab, Samson, Nebuchadnezzar, Susanna and the Elders, Esther, Christ, Salome, Lazarus, the Prodigal Son, and the Descent into Hell. Knowledge of the biblical texts is assumed and the reworkings are explored for their own merit rather than as a commentary on the biblical stories.

Before discussing the reworkings, the first chapter, "Literary Reworkings in Perspective," introduces relevant terminology, taken almost exclusively from Gerard Genette's *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (University of Nebraska Press, 1997 [1982]). Swindell uses Genette's "hypertext" for the reworking and "pretext" for the biblical story, instead of Genette's

"hypotext" (2). Other appropriated terms include "metatext," "proleptic," "analeptic," as well as Bakhtin's "chronotope" (2–4). In the chapter, there is also a discussion of "sacred aura," which the author claims is inherited by hypertexts like Milton's *Paradise Lost* but not by defiant reworkings, including "sacrilegious texts of religious parody" (5). His argument highlights the subjectivity of the concept of sacred aura and tensions between the reader, text, and author. Subjectivity is present for all readers, which for Swindell means thinking of "the Bible as a source of continuing wisdom about the human situation"; wisdom that may be nuanced or refocused by modern criticism with the study of hypertexts adding an "extra dimension" (9).

Each of chapters 2–15 discusses the hypertexts of one of the pretexts, with the hypertexts appearing in broadly chronological order within each chapter. Rather than review the vast volume of information Swindell offers, I focus on the third chapter, "Noah and the Serio-Comical Flood" as a representative example (38–63). Although seemingly discussing hypertexts of "Noah's flood" (38), the description of chapter 3's pretext as "Genesis 6–9" conflates the Nephilim (6:1–4) and the curse of Canaan (9:20–29) with the flood story. While the flood narrative can include all of these, the three elements are treated differently between reworkings, but this is not made clear.

The first hypertexts of "Noah's flood" are the "Early Variants," including *4 Maccabees*, *1 Enoch*, *Jubilees*, and material from Qumran. The Middle English *Cursor Mundi* works as a transition to the "Medieval Noah," which focuses on English mystery plays. Swindell notes the flexibility of the reworkings with regard to the speaking parts, the narrative devices, motifs, and interpretation of elements such as Noah's sacrifice. After a diversion into Chaucer, Swindell progresses to the seventeenth century including Michael Drayton's 1630 poem *Noahs Floud* and Edward Ecclestone's 1679 play, *Noah's Flood or the Great Deluge*. Swindell notes that the play "reflects the concerns of its era, recovering from the English Civil War and much preoccupied with issues of public order and propriety" (47–48). This analysis is not expanded upon, leaving the reader to return to the lengthy description of the play in order to draw out her own interpretations.

The chronological approach continues with the nineteenth century and Charles Dickens's allusions to the flood in *Bleak House* (1852), *Little Dorrit* (1857), and *Great Expectations* (1861). The discussion of Machado de Assis's short story of 1878, "In the Ark: Three Unpublished Chapters of Genesis" provides an example of how Swindell uses more of Genette's terminology. Assis's story is written in a series of "verses," in which the brothers discuss

who will own what land after they disembark the ark. When they disagree a fight breaks out. It is a humorous story because despite predicting that the ark will land on "a mountain" the brothers are fighting over hypothetical space. Without explaining why, Swindell describes the reworking as an "aprocryphal elliptical and proleptical expansion of the pretext" (49). This seems to be because "Chapter A begins as the Flood is receding and Noah and his family are preparing to disembark from the Ark" (49). While the reworking could be considered an elliptical continuation because it fills an elliptical gap in the flood story, it is not a proleptic continuation or expansion because it does not continue beyond Gen 9. Rather it is, as Swindell later describes, a scene accentuation and segmentary expansion (290). He also classifies the hypertext as a "murderous continuation" because the extension largely negates "the hopeful tone of the pretext" (49; cf. Genette, *Palimpsests*, 196–200). This classification, however, requires an agreement that the pretext has a hopeful tone. If the flood narrative includes the curse of Canaan, as Swindell implies elsewhere, then the flood narrative is not entirely hopeful and de Assis's reworking is not a clear negation of the pretext.

The chapter continues with the opening years of the twentieth century, specifically W.B. Yeats's play *The Player Queen* (1922) and André Obey's play *Noah* (1929). Swindell progresses through the interwar years with a discussion of C. Day-Lewis's drama *Noah and the Waters* (1936) and H.G. Wells's *All Aboard for Ararat* (1940). The former "was written at the height of the author's enthusiasm for the Communist Party" (51). This is a typical example of the wealth of information in the book opening interesting avenues for further exploration.

The following nine pages (53–61) take the reader through to 2009 (Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*), covering about thirteen reworkings, each treated individually. One of these is Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1985). It is given the subheading "Mrs Noah Again" because it "restores Mrs Noah to prominence" (56). Except, there is no Mrs Noah, rather she is called Mrs Noyes and her husband is Dr Noyes. The novel gives a "hard-bitten account of Mrs Noah's relentless struggle to mitigate the brutal outworking of Dr Noye's worship" (56). The description fails to convey that Mrs Noah and Dr Noyes are married and that Dr Noyes is the novel's Noah. Swindell's summary does not do justice to the novel as a complex reworking of the flood story. This hypertext includes Dr Noyes (Noah) raping his daughter-in-law Emma with a unicorn horn while it is still attached to a living unicorn. Emma is the wife of the blue-skinned Japeth, whom she mar-

ried when she was eleven. Findley's novel also includes the character "Jaweh" and a cross-dressing "Lucifer" who disguises himself as "Lucy" and marries Ham. All of these elements of the reworking are ignored.

The chapter concludes with a Summary of the retellings discussed. It ends with a paragraph noting how the flood is "obviously related to concerns about the stability of the cognitive and emotional world(s) which the many authors and their readers share, since the sea is such a universal symbol of jeopardy" (62–63).

Following the fourteen chapters on specific biblical narratives, there are two further chapters which return to a theoretical discussion. Chapter 16, "Narrative Upheavals (Categories and Classifications)," sorts the hypertexts according to Genette's classifications. Titles, character names, parody, amplification, transfocalization and a range of other concepts are utilized; although it would have been helpful if Swindell had explained how he understood Genette's terminology and justified his classification of the reworkings. Swindell creates an additional classification: "fantastic excursions." These hypertexts "expand upon the pretext in ways which transgress the spatio-temporal limits which are observed by most of the other works considered in this study" (296). It is a valuable idea and worthy of expanding. It offers a way for hypertexts with a fantastic setting or tone to have a sacred aura because these reworkings "take the reader to some transcendent space" (301).

The final chapter (17), "Towards Diegetic Outer Space," acts as a conclusion summarizing the diegetic content and chronotopes of the pretext's hypertexts. The use of narratological terminology throughout the book demonstrates the complexities in dealing with reworkings of biblical narratives. Swindell is not always clear or consistent in his use of terminology, which can hinder understanding of his interpretations. However, his use of "hypertext" and "pretext" is used with greater consistency and therefore clarity.

The "literary reworkings" were selected by Swindell because, he claims, "they represent significant departures from or developments of the original material. The emphasis is on exceptional variants, on quirkiness, and on texts generated at moments of great cultural change or upheaval" (2). It is not always clear, however, why reworkings were selected under these criteria. Furthermore, while the variety of material discussed is impressive (including novels, short stories, children's books, plays, opera, and films), it may have been more effective if a more focused selection had been made thereby leaving extra space for in-depth discussion.

The book could have been more closely edited. Jeanette Winterson has

been renamed Genette Winterson (112). Michael Drayton's *Noahs Floud* (43) is also named *Noah's Floud* (44) and *Noahs Floude* (304). In the Introduction, chapters 16 and 17 are referred to as 15 and 16 (10). Also, it would be helpful to have a subject index so the reader could look specifically for modes, genres, and themes. This would make it easier to work with the greatest strength of the book: the diversity of material it covers.

Reworking the Bible offers a mid-way option between short entries in encyclopedias and dictionaries, and book-length discussions of single biblical narratives. The broad scope of the literature discussed makes it a useful reference guide likely to offer something new to most readers. It could be a useful addition to teaching the Bible and Literature for diverse audiences. Anthony C. Swindell's book is especially useful for the non-specialist interested in how the Bible has been appropriated in society and how literature is influenced by the Bible. Finally, researchers in (literary) reception history could use the work to further their exploration of academic approaches and terminology.

Emma England
Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis
University of Amsterdam