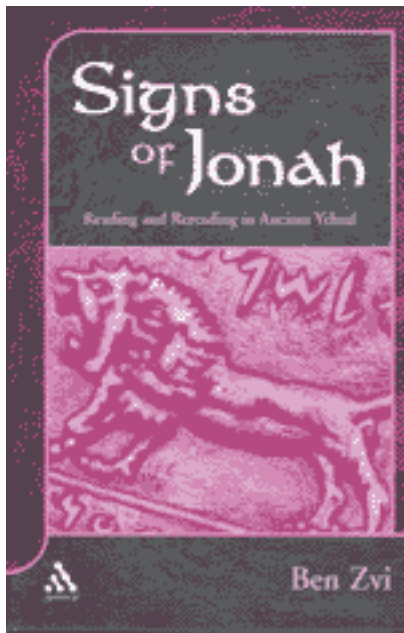


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**Ben Zvi, Ehud**

*The Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud*

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In this fascinating study of Jonah, Ben Zvi develops a literary-historical method based on the sociology of ancient literary production. Assuming the same postmonarchic dating and Yehudite setting as most scholars, his introduction situates the book within the world of writers and readers from that time and place (ch. 1). In the main body he reads the text in light of this context, showing that this intensifies rather than resolves its main ambiguities (chs. 2–6). Then he returns to Yehudite writers and readers, asking what more we can learn about them and their world from a polysemous text such as Jonah (ch. 7). Finally, Ben Zvi outlines a theoretical basis for the diverse interpretations of Jonah produced over many centuries, attempting to account for this diversity in terms of how the variable concerns of subsequent readers have interacted with the multiple possibilities within the text itself (ch. 8).

According to Ben Zvi, the Yehudite literati were a small and relatively privileged group, closely related to the imperially designated ruling group. Since full literacy was largely limited to them, they were the main writers and readers of their society. They produced literary works as a function of their social role, which was to advise the ruling group and to contribute toward the socialization of the population at large. To inform their performance of this social role, they studiously pored over the documents they

themselves had written. Their part in the socialization process was to read and interpret these same documents to groups periodically assembled to hear their message. Hence Ben Zvi's emphasis on "rereading" as a formative factor in the production of (proto-) canonical literature such as Jonah. The authoritative status of such a text was directly related to its being produced for continual consultation by the literati in the performance of their social role. Ideologically, this role was defined in terms of mediating "the word of YHWH" to Yehud, a community constituted on the one hand by imperial recognition and on the other hand by the establishment of YHWH's sole legitimate temple in Jerusalem.

Although the category of Jonah's readers implicitly extends to include the audience to which it was read, its production would have primarily been by and for the small group of writers and readers that made up the literati of Yehud. To read Jonah in terms of their world, Ben Zvi relates prominent features of the text to various aspects of their common knowledge: their assumptions about their own history, previously existing texts, social customs and literary conventions, and so forth. For example, although the story says that Nineveh repented and was spared, both writers and readers would have known that Nineveh had actually been destroyed and that this was widely regarded as divine retribution for the city's inveterate wickedness. This complicates the interpretation of Jonah's dismay when his announcement of Nineveh's downfall does not materialize. Jonah cannot simply represent rejection of YHWH as "a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment" (4:2 NJPS). Juxtaposed with the reality of Nineveh's fate well known to the readers of the story, the case of Jonah calls attention to the fact that Yahweh is also known as a God of justice who executes judgment—and these two facets of YHWH's character are not necessarily mutually exclusive (see Exod 34:6–7). This illustrates an aspect of prophetic literature in general, and of Jonah in particular, that Ben Zvi calls "multivocality." He sees this as a hallmark of the theological discourse of Yehud's literati.

To much the same end, Ben Zvi also discusses the intertextual connection with Jonah son of Amittai in 2 Kgs 14:23–29, Jonah's characterization in terms of the stock motif of the runaway servant/slave, and this book's overt play upon the conventions typical of other prophetic books. After showing that these pose for readers ambiguities similar to those posed by the disparity between Nineveh's two fates, he concludes that the story reflects the Yehudite literati's own sense of their ambiguous position as mediators of "the word of YHWH" to their community. They recognize that their knowledge of authoritative texts does not guarantee correct theological knowledge (109) and that, given the incompatibility of theological statements in different texts, their claims about the divine can only be contingent and less than categorical (114). In the final analysis, Jonah is a self-critique of any claim on the part of the Yehudite literati to absolute truth as well as a

commendation of theological discourse in the form of “both-and” and “yes, but” statements.

In conclusion, Ben Zvi maintains that interpreting Jonah in relation to its producers not only sheds new light on both it and them but also helps to explain the plurality of interpretations that this story has generated from age to age. This plurality is partly the result of ambiguities that are built into the text itself and partly the result of ambiguities that emerge when readers bring varying assumptions to their interaction with the text. Ben Zvi more specifically identifies three factors that impose limitations on the potentially infinite range of interpretations:

These three factors are (a) *the horizon of pertinence* claimed by the text, and as perceived by a most substantial number of interpretive communities in history; (b) *basic global, semantic contents* (or macrostructures) that can be attributed to either the narrative of the book or selected sections thereof, which include already clear limits on the number and nature of the characters and accordingly, on the possible permutations of their relationships; and (c) *the degree of perceived coherence or integration between the global content of a selected section of the narrative (or the book as a whole) and central meta-narratives* of the interpretive community. (131)

This dense language comes alive when it is illustrated with specific examples from the history of interpretation. Ben Zvi has a limited aim here, which is to show the possibility of, and to give a minimal theoretical basis for, a connection between the rereading that informed Jonah’s production and the rereading that has characterized the history of its interpretation. The results suggest that this is indeed a plausible possibility.

This work has implications far beyond the study of Jonah itself. It calls into question the way modern scholarship has generally imagined the production of the Old Testament corpus. We have thought in terms of opposing “schools” or “parties,” each producing its own ideologically consistent documents, some of which subsequently happened to become recognized as canonical scripture. Ben Zvi alternatively imagines a single small group of literati who produce ideologically “multivocal” documents to be canonical scripture. The history of interpretation has been defined in terms of a kind of misreading that was not corrected until modern times. Ben Zvi alternatively imagines continuity between the production of prophetic books and their earliest interpreters, so that patristic and rabbinic interpreters are seen to be reading these texts in much the same way as their first readers, that is, in the way these texts were written to be read. Ben Zvi’s view will win out only if it eventually makes better sense of the entire corpus, but at least in the case of Jonah his approach proves pretty persuasive.

In my view, most of what Ben Zvi does with Jonah is pragmatically probable. The most debatable aspect of his analysis is the theoretical basis he gives for it. He works with the imaginary constructs of implied author and intended readers, abandoning the concept of the text as communication between an actual writer and real readers. Taking the part of devil's advocate, I would ask whether these constructs are not the postmodern scholar's mythic means of looking over the shoulder, as it were, of ancient writers and readers, thus maintaining in a postmodern vein the same tyrannical control over the text's interpretation that modern scholars maintained by the myth of the scientifically objective observer. Would Ben Zvi's literary-historical project be compromised in any significant way by more realistically thinking of the text as communication between an actual writer and us contemporary readers—recognizing that the text is in fact the product of an actual writer and that we have no evidence whatever of how the first readers experienced the text? Such questions, obviously beyond the scope of this review, exemplify the many interesting prospects opened up by Ben Zvi's innovative approach to literary history.