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**Book review:**

**Marcus, David.** *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible.* Brown Judaic Studies, 301. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995.

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of "early rabbinic exegesis," but to compound his problem, the actual early rabbinic source uses a different verb altogether!<sup>19</sup>

In conclusion, *The Midrashic Process* raises and addresses some interesting and fundamental issues. Jacobs provides the reader with some strong and fruitful readings, and any future researchers on these topics would be well advised to take his positions into account. Unfortunately, this book is marred by a number of theoretical and methodological blemishes which the author was well able to avoid.

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19. Genesis Rabbah 5:2, 33 uses the verb  $\text{ךָּרַךְ}$ , as Jacobs himself notes (p. 157, n. 15)?! Interesting enough, this early rabbinic text uses the image of inflated skin bottles to describe God's conflict with the sea. As N. H. Tur-Sinai showed in *The Book of Job* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher, 1957), p. 383, this image (a bag or net) appears in Job 26:13 and the Akkadian *Enuma Elish*. See also Edward Greenstein, "The Snaring of Sea in the Baal Epic," *Maarav* 3 (1983): 195-216.

## BOOK REVIEWS

David Marcus. *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-Prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible*. Brown Judaic Studies 301. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995. xiii, 214 pp.

This work examines four stories in the Hebrew Bible which appear to be "critical of prophets, and which may be called anti-prophetic satires" (p. vii). Under David Marcus's microscope are four biblical narratives: Balaam and his donkey (Numb 21:21-35), the boys and the bald prophet (2 Kgs 2:23-25), the lying prophet (1 Kgs 13), and Jonah.

Marcus defines satire as a story that has a recognizable direct or indirect "object of attack" (p. 9) and that contains an overwhelming abundance of satirical features, including "a mixture of unbelievable elements (absurdities, fantastic situations, grotesqueries, distortions), ironies, ridicule, parody, and rhetorical features" (ibid.).

As to why these texts (and many others) have not been examined as satires previously, Marcus credits the general lack of references to biblical stories in standard textbooks on satire, the humorless reverence for the Bible held by generations of faith groups, and changing social and historical conditions which led later readers to become unaware of the targets of biblical satire.

Marcus's arguments are lucid and convincing, and his examination contains copious insightful philological notes and supporting references to talmudic and medieval commentaries.

In addition to demonstrating the presence of each of the characteristic features of satire, Marcus shows how only satire can explain the more problematic aspects of the four texts. For example, the horrific account of Elisha summoning wild bears to maul forty-two children simply for calling him "baldy" (2 Kgs 2:23-25) cannot be explained simply by saying that God has a severe attitude toward prophet-mockers. Similarly, we cannot understand why the Ninevite cattle fast and don sackcloth (Jonah 3:8) without appealing to the notion of satire.

This work is so well argued that it naturally spurs the question whether other prophetic satires can be found in the Bible. For example, if we employ

Marcus's criteria, we might add the stories about Elijah in 1 Kings 17–18. They contain all of the requisite satirical elements, including irony (e.g., Yahweh brings the rain for which the prophets of Baal prayed [1 Kgs 18:45]), fantastic situations involving animals (e.g., ravens bringing Elijah his breakfast [1 Kgs 17:6]), grotesquerie (e.g., Elijah slaughters four hundred prophets of Baal who have just gashed themselves with flints [1 Kgs 18:40]), vulgarity and ridicule (e.g., Elijah using the word "pissing" while mocking the prophets [1 Kgs 18:27]), distortion (e.g., the Zarephathite widow's unending supply of oil and flour [1 Kgs 17:16]), parody (e.g., Baal's prophets proclaim Yahweh as the only God [1 Kgs 18:39]), and numerous rhetorical features.

There is, however, one problematic aspect of this work: Marcus's assertion that the principal message of these texts (with the possible exception of Numb 21:21–35) is not an ideological one, but solely the negative portrayal of the prophets' behavior (pp. 157–158). The two types of message are not mutually exclusive, for as even Marcus notes, beneath these satires "there lies the unspoken wish of what the proper behavior should be" (p. 170). In addition, it is doubtful that the authors of these stories would have distinguished between ideological and behavioral assessment. Witness, for example, the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11–12), which is at once critical of David's behavior and yet nevertheless still conveys a theological/ideological message: "even the king, if he sins, cannot escape God's punishment." It is difficult to see how the prophetic satires differ in this regard. Moreover, the notion that ideology lies beneath these satires concurs with what Marcus cites as the most frequent form of irony in the Bible, "measure for measure" irony (p. 16). This form of irony, which also obtains in the four stories, is clearly ideological.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the distinction raised by Marcus remains unclear.

One last comment: Though he does not mention it, Marcus's discussion of the Balaam narrative raises the issue of how to understand the Transjordanian Balaam texts from Deir 'Allā. Are they satires too, or the source material for the Bible's satire? One would like to see Marcus's view on this, at least in a footnote.

These minor criticisms aside, this is a fascinating and convincing book. Though I expect that some might want to take the author to task for laughing at the prophets (for which wild she-bears will be summoned!), this reviewer

1. See Gary Rendsburg, "The Mock of Baal in 1 Kings 18:27," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 414–417.

2. On this point see Philip J. Nel, "The Talion Principle in Old Testament Narratives," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 20 (1994): 21–29.

feels that Marcus has uncovered a hitherto-unrecognized sophistication that places at least some of the stories of the Hebrew Bible on a par with the great satires of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

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Herbert J. Levine. *Sing Unto God a New Song: A Contemporary Reading of the Psalms*. Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. xvi, 279 pp.

The Indiana University Press is to be commended on another brilliant study in its Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature series. Herbert J. Levine studies Psalms employing methodologies that recognize both the aesthetic and the ritual nature of these prayer-poems. The psalmists essentially speak and sing to an unseen listener. Levine, therefore, brings the study of orality and speech acts to bear on the psalms and uncovers the conventions of human speech and communication that shaped those creations. And, in order to better understand the relationship to the "Unseen Auditor," Levine takes advantage of findings from the study of anthropology, religion, and religious symbolism and conventions of the ancient Near East.

Among the discerning discussions in this volume is a section entitled "The World of the Psalms: The Perspective of Ritual." Levine here examines how societies define their purity rules, and how they use rituals and ritual language to effect transitions from states of impurity back to purity. The Psalms, argues Levine, are ritual utterances parallel to the ritual sacrifices offered in the Jerusalem Temple and described in Leviticus and Numbers. Both the words and the rites symbolically concretize for worshipers their status as vulnerable creatures dependent on God's grace. Thus, the Psalms accompanied the Temple offerings and drew out the implications of the sacrifices.

Several of the Psalms, for example, feature a "sheep" metaphor for the people of Israel. Levine argues that sacrifice is a dramatization of this metaphor. "Both the metonym and the metaphor of animal sacrifice converge in the people's experience of itself as innocent lamb, dependent on God's protecting love, or utterly vulnerable to its seeming absence. In the act of sacrifice, the people align themselves with God's power over life and death.