



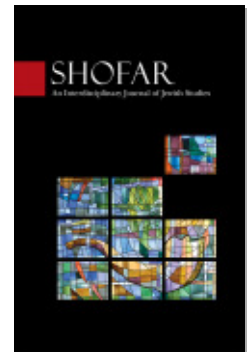
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Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies, Volume 11,
Number 1, Fall 1992, pp. 61-69 (Article)

Published by Purdue University Press



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VIEWPOINT

Afterthoughts on Writing a Bible Commentary¹

by

Jack M. Sasson

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You are urged therefore to read with good will and attention, and to be indulgent in cases where, despite our diligent labor in translating, we may seem to have rendered some phrases imperfectly. For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have the same sense when translated into another language. Not only this work, but even the law itself, the prophecies, and the rest of the books differ not only a little as originally expressed.

From the "Prologue" to *Sirach*

Colleagues,

Please look around you; let your eyes hover over this very room for a moment, and quickly empty it of people. Have you done this? Then let your mind conjure a scene matching the allegory I am about to give you. Don't fret; midway through my talk, I will turn this allegory into a parable. But to leave you with a decidedly personal fable about the choices facing

¹This is the unaltered text of the "Keynote Address" to the National Association of Professors of Hebrew's 1991 International Conference on University Teaching of Hebrew Language and Literature delivered on June 2, 1991, held at Emory University. I am grateful to the NAPH and to Professor Oded Borowski for extending to me many courtesies.

biblical commentators, I will draw a moral as I conclude. Now then, here is the allegory, slightly contorted because I want to be gender sensitive:

Think of a dance floor, with people milling on its edges. The band strikes a musical number and a person begins to dance around and about a partner who stands stationary in the center of the ballroom. Onlookers watch and think they are witnessing a seduction. Comes the next number and a second person draws the same partner toward the floor; but they do the opposite: this time it is the partner who dances around the second person. Onlookers frown and think of narcissism. A final musical number and a third person grabs that identical partner and they pirouette, twirl, and leap: around and at each other. Onlookers are shocked and bothered by the anarchy.

This talk defends a cluster of methods I used when writing a commentary to Jonah. Oddly enough, I began to think of presenting such a defense only after my commentary to Jonah began to sell some six months or so ago. The immediate catalyst to this talk was Oded Borowski's invitation to address you that came just after I mailed a reply to Sib Towner of the Union Theological Seminary in Richmond. Sib had invited Walter Brueggemann, James Limburg, and me to a future SBL symposium to assess the role of theological reflection when writing a commentary.

I was aghast! First I could not figure out how anyone could avoid theological speculation when touching anything biblical. Second, I knew I must have strayed out of my specialty for anyone to place Walter and me on the same platform. I have never read theology and have little control of its speculative repertoire; in fact, as far as my memory could take me back, I could not even recall being a *yešiva babûr*: boys raised in Arab countries rarely were, you know.

I was aghast, but also intrigued enough to search the literature for clues. I discovered that a decade ago protestants hotly debated whether a theological exposition of Scripture compromised a "scientific" or "objective" assessment of its contents by retrojecting what is current on what should remain past. In fact, the issue still surfaces occasionally in such journals as *Interpretation*. Let me backtrack a bit to develop this observation.

The term Bible—Hebrew Scripture for our present purposes—applies to a compendium of different works, belonging to broad ranges of categories, some of them couched in a variety of prose styles, and others in a diversity of poetic idioms. We debate among ourselves how this Bible came to be: how it was shaped, how diverse elements were corsetted within the same book, how traditions were manipulated into their present forms.

Moreover, for every individual who treats the Bible as a product from antiquity—therefore as a major window on the past—there are many more persons who want it to be a moral and spiritual guide. Do not assume that we are contrasting academic versus ecclesiastic circles; the two paradigms, in fact, flourish side by side, with some people alternating opinions, depending on the audience or even on the days of the week.

By way of illustration, look at what is happening in the Bible publishing business. Translation committees headed by sober, respectable, highly honored scholars spawn English editions that purposely take liberty with Hebrew Scripture in order to neutralize its alleged lapses into sexism, racism, patriarchy, xenophobia, and parochialism. For their efforts, however, they are attacked for distorting the messages of the living God. Needless to say, such a translation committee would never dream of so sanitizing other literature from the ancient world such as Gilgamesh, Aqhat, Ullikumi, or the Shipwrecked Sailor.

Because in biblical scholarship the agenda is large, complex, and permutating, there is room for a wide assortment of commentators: some who are philologists, and others who merely know grammar; some who are aware of ancient Near Eastern influence, and other who think Israel lived on another planet; some who slice it into chapters and verses and others who endlessly search it for the perfect chiasm. If they are writing for the *Old Testament Library* or the *Word Biblical Commentary*, these commentators are encouraged to find links between biblical and contemporary beliefs and aspirations. Doubleday's *Anchor Bible*, however, selects its contributors from across sectarian lines, asking them to produce scholarly editions that yet appeal to a non-scholarly audience.

I was innocent of all these targeting stratagems when I obtained a contract to do Jonah. A few years earlier I had produced a Ruth commentary that in my opinion was not half as bad as most others; but it went out of print quickly because it did not belong to an established series. Of *Anchor Bible* products, I have always held mixed opinions: Boling's *Judges* and *Josua* I think are clinkers; the three-volume *Psalms* contain *mizmorim leDabood*, but to no one else; I regard Speiser's *Genesis* as the last major monument to Albrightian verities. I like the second of Marvin Pope's three editions of *Job* and prize, but not for the best reasons, his *Song of Songs*. I admire Hillers' *Lamentations*.

I inspected carefully the *Anchor Bible* format. Loosely enforced though it may be, it generally includes three unequal segments: Introduction, Translation, and the Annotations. The Annotations are themselves divided into Notes, textual or explanative, and Comments. Authors differ in how and where they distribute comments on biblical passages; but I observed

that generally they maintain the same perspective and point of view throughout their contributions. I quickly realized that this stance would not do for me since, although I also subdivide a commentary into translation, explication, and interpretation, I use different tools for each of these steps. I know well that multiplying approaches invariably leads to discrepancies and to conflicting conclusions. But I believe that a single perspective sacrifices diversity for consistency. By way of developing these points, I will tell you more about how I work.

Aside from writing on biblical matters, I also contribute to Assyriology, specifically to the study of Mari, a Mid-Euphrates city-state that lived its best and worst moments during the times of Hammurabi of Babylon. These separate pursuits are congenial to the way I operate, and I find much satisfaction in transferring tools and methodologies from one discipline to another. Assyriology has kept me alert to two steps that are needed to understand a tablet plucked from the Mari archives: to translate a Mari text, I am aided by grammar that dissects the Akkadian phrases and lays bare their morphology; I am also served by philology to calibrate shades of meanings for Akkadian words and thereafter to locate English equivalents for them.

To explicate the text, however, I try to penetrate the minds and times of ancient writers, engaging them in dialogue on points of common interest. I try to pose just those questions that can find plausible answers in the archival remains from Mari or from its contemporaneous city-states. I resist the temptation to roam too far from Mari's space and time, fully knowing that cultures in the cuneiform world differed radically in population, background, and institutions. If I go beyond Mari to tackle a juicy literary passage—say, from Gilgamesh, Etana, or Keret—I would then feel free to summon all that I know of world's literature and whatever I control of contemporary analytical tools to help me interpret its message.

I had no reason to shun this methodology when working on Jonah. I therefore sought to be analytical but also paradigmatic when translating the book; restrictive but also selective when elucidating its meaning; comprehensive but also discriminating when locating it within and among literary creations. In order not to abuse your hospitality and your patience, I will comment only on two matters: what Hebrew text of Jonah to translate and why this issue is relevant to explicating the book.

As you know, in Leningrad there is a thousand-year-old vocalized and punctuated version of the Tanakh. Although a slightly older version of this "received," or "Masoretic" text was rescued from my hometown of Aleppo, scholars normally turn to the Leningrad copy when working on Hebrew scripture. Some of the books in the "received" texts contain so many

obtuse passages, however, that their frustrating study has led many friends to accept administrative positions in academia.

Although Jonah is a sweetheart compared to such books, some of its verses nevertheless do give us trouble. To master the difficulties, previous Jonah commentators have had to emend the text, taking more or less desperate measures. Some scholars ignore just the Masoretic vowels; more often, they reshuffle the consonants as well. A few nineteenth-century scholars have reconstructed certain passages so drastically that the resultant text exists nowhere but in their own minds. Commonly, these scholars appeal to Hebrew manuscripts or to non-Hebrew translations when justifying their decisions.

Why they do this is a complex story, even though the reason that they normally give is that they wish to arrive at a “better” or “more original” version of the text. But when scholars turn to a Qumran manuscript to retrieve a better reading, they are preferring to commit themselves to a text which they believe influenced Jews and Christians of the Roman period. Similarly, when they extract better readings from Greek, Latin, or Aramaic translations, scholars are also hoping to work on a Hebrew original from the Hellenistic period, presumably from the time the Hebrew text was jelling into a final form. And so forth back in time, to the point that Ancient Near Eastern data from before the Exile are used to recapture the thoughts of Judah and Israel, when globs of Scripture were being penned down. Some scholars, mostly American, even strive for the moment when Scripture was being created or inspired, by using rules the German Romantics first enunciated to recapture the pristine form of a Hebrew text. On the one hand, narratives are shown to betray vestiges of their oral circulation, but also to be intricately symmetrical. Poetry, on the other hand, is deprived of its prose particles, trimmed into proportional balance, and forced into metrical regularity.

I am not normally against having documents that eavesdrop on Hebrew kings, prophets, and God; but I think that the whole enterprise is no less quixotic and elusive than questing after the Holy Grail. Short of discovering a cache of pre-Exilic Scripture copies from Judah or from Israel, however, I deem one reconstruction to be as good as another, which also means that not to reconstruct could be the most trustworthy course of all.

I therefore stick with the Masoretic text, punctuation, vowels, consonants, warts, and all. I do so because when I work with Scripture, I want that text to stay put; I want to keep it to the words it is carrying, even when some of them defy my understanding. In fact, I hold to this conviction when I work on any primary document, Hebrew or otherwise. And if

I were competent enough to treat the Septuagint's Joshua, I would certainly not raid the Hebrew text, the Vulgate, or the Targum, just to improve on what the Greek version says. I keep Jonah whole, in each one of its versions, and thus hope to better learn how the same story adapts to each culture it serves.

You now have all the clues for my allegory. Let me give you its key in the form of supplementary comments: the "partner" is the biblical text. When the first person plays satellite to it, that person become my ideal translator. The second person, who swivels the text before a stationary eye, is a theologian or, if you wish, the dogmatic interpreter, for no new information is likely to alter their attitudes or positions. The third person is the literary theorist who views an ever-changing text with a kaleidoscopic eye. What about the onlookers? The onlookers are all those who lecture you about methodologies; in this case, I fear, people like me.

I must still dispense a moral to this tale. So please bear with me for eight more minutes as I lightly illustrate the benefits accruing when we resist modifying the base text of Jonah.

Argument 1. By inspecting the allotment of narrative in a fixed rather than a composite text, we recover major interpretations of Jonah.

Please recall that chapter and verse divisions in our Bible come to us from the Middle Ages. The Masoretes themselves placed the consonants *pe*—for *petubab*—and *samekb*—for *setumab*—when they opened and closed narrative units. It so happens that the Masoretic division of units matches the spacing we have in Qumran and therefore confirms a two-millennia-old exegesis of Jonah that divides its movements along three sections:

Block A. From Chapter 1, verse 1 through 2:10. In this section Jonah rebels with his feet but ends up voicing his submission. These verses also contain triplets of descents downward, inexorably taking Jonah to Sheol's very gullet: Jonah goes down to Yaffa, to a ship, to its hold; sinks into the sea, into a fish, into its belly; expresses fear, despair, but finally hope.

Block B. From 2:11 through 4:3. This block begins with God renewing Jonah's life and ends with Jonah asking him to end it.

Block C. From 4:4, in which God comforts his sulking prophet, to the story's end, where God gives hope to future sinners.

Please reflect on how distant is this exegesis from what is currently discussed in Jonah literature where the medieval chapter division controls expositions of the tale.

I have another illustration to place under this category. If you are into counting words, you will notice that the soliloquies of Chapter 4 assigned to Jonah and to God each contain 39 words. Between these soliloquies, two paired discourses are found: Jonah and God ask a question of three words each, then enter into dialogue of five words each. This symmetry is too developed to be accidental, betraying a written rather than an orally delivered origin for the last chapter. If so, we are invited to look for esoteric meaning behind a folk-like confrontation. I refer you to my commentary for diverse speculations, but I want it noted here that this harmony in word allocation disappears when Jonah is studied from a composite.

Argument 2. By keeping to the Masoretic vocalization and punctuation, I recover how one community intoned the text and choreographed it for dramatic effects.

The onomatopoeic *hiššeba lebiššaber*, said about a personified ship in 1:3, is startlingly dramatic, because we recognize that it metonymically refers to sailors who panic when hit by a sudden tempest. Think how sluggish the scene would become if we shop around the versions for a verb that more logically addresses the sailors. Moreover, to say that “the ship itself expected to crack up” injects us into the fabulous, where some of the best moments of the Jonah story are soon to unfold.

Here is another brief example in the same category. To punctuate 3:6 about the Ninevite king, the Masoretes inserted a particularly dense series of disjunctive accents, capturing, as if with a camera, four distinct movements of the king as he prepares, bodily and spiritually, to decree national penitence. But by slowing our reading, the Masoretes have also given us time to recognize that the king’s remorse in no way diminishes his authority to impose his will on others. Think of the sermons we can make out of that observation!

Argument 3. By not relying on textual improvements, I do not stifle Jonab’s plot elements.

The Septuagint tells us that Jonah snored as he lay in the ship’s belly. It thus comically explains why the helmsman was forced to arouse him to prayers. Some scholars consider this reading to be as good as what the Hebrew has in 1:5. If they think so, then they miss an important clue. In Hebrew, Jonah is said to be *nirdam*. The *nīpbal* of *rādam* is pretty technical when it concerns prophets: alerted by unusual or sudden natural phenomena—for example, a storm—prophets become *nirdamīm*, that is, they “fall into a trance,” to ready themselves for God’s words. Once this

is recognized, then anything he tells the sailors, even to drop him into the sea, is a test of their response to God. In my commentary, I use this observation to discuss a political allegory broadly favored in antiquity, the "Ship of State."

In chapter 3, there is a more striking example of a plot element that is suppressed when we rely on the versions. Jonah enters Nineveh declaring, *'ôd 'arba'im yôm weninevêb nebpâket*, "Forty more days and Nineveh overturns." *Nebpâket* can allude to the destruction of Nineveh, "turn upside down," but also to Nineveh's repentance, "turn around." Puns of this sort, like Delphic oracles, do not easily translate, and the versions adopted one meaning or the other. It is doubly unjust, therefore, for modern commentators to impoverish the Hebrew by citing the versions for illumination. In fact, the pun proves protean because when Nineveh repents, God does not need to give Jonah a message of weal to supersede the message of doom he had him carry into the city. Jonah therefore sulks, setting us up for the great confrontation that ends the story.

Argument 4: Finally, by keeping to one basic text of Jonah, I play it counterpoint to the other Jonah versions from antiquity.

I illustrate by referring to Chapter 3, where the Ninevites respond to Jonah's dire warning. The Masoretic punctuation of 3:9 forces us to quote the king as saying, "He who knows will turn back; then God himself will draw away from his anger, so that we may not perish." The king is therefore hoping that the discerning few will repent and thus convince God to stay the planned destruction. If grammar and comparative Hebrew phraseology—see *mî yōdea'* clauses in 2 Sam 12:22 and Joel 2:14—are made to control the translation of the Hebrew, however, the king would be beseeching, "Who can tell? God himself may consider a change of mind and draw away from his anger, so that we may not perish." This time the king speaks on behalf of the multitudes as a leader, and his change of heart becomes paradigmatic for that of his folk. The Greek version of the passage, however, truncates the king's role and places the whole statement in the mouth of the Ninevites. For the Septuagint, only a concerted effort by the entire community could distance God's anger.

Diverse versions of Jonah, therefore, promote separate notions on how Nineveh hoped to avoid disaster. They rely on three different avenues for redemption and salvation, each of which, however, is clearly charted in the Tanakh. They are incompatible with each other; but had we been searching for the "original" version in Jonah, this theological interplay across the ages would have disappeared from our vision. I suspect that it is because Jonah gave me many opportunities to evaluate theological adap-

tations among the versions as well as across biblical books that my friend Sib Towner mistook me for a kindred hat.

Is there a moral to what you have just heard? In fact, there are four. One: learn how to dance; two: pick a partner who knows your dancing style; three: choose carefully among dance halls; four: don't be concerned with onlookers; they always include wallflowers.