
Mills’ book, an expansion of several papers consisting of case studies on Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, engages a prodigious range of theory in order to give the concept and reality of pain its due. At the outset of her work, Mills laments the dearth of inquiry into “the raw edge of suffering” (vii) within the prophetic material and states a desire to pursue “moral vision within pain-filled narratives, exploring the possibilities of narrative ethics” (viii) within her chosen texts. In essence, material from the three prophets helps her to struggle with a more sophisticated version of a very old question: “What is the moral of the story?”

The first section of her book is simply the first chapter, in which she assigns meaning to the terms she will use extensively in her analyses, and introduces readers to the critical theory she will later draw upon. Unfortunately there is little cohesion within the chapter. She uses a dizzying array of scholars from Aristotle to Zukin to refer to her methodology, yet does little to help the reader grasp the ways in which she sees these theorists in conversation with one another. Impediments to her organization of theories into a cogent framework are her reliance on the passive voice and lack of delineation and explanation of theory. For example, she writes, “The style of writing will generally be in line with Gerard Genette’s description of bricolage and Mieke Bal’s definition of quotation. Both sources here refer to a system of operation which is founded on a process of inter-textuality and in which pieces of pre-existing thought systems are interwoven to create a further and innovative structure—in this case a tool for biblical exegesis. Such a proceeding links also with the genre of Midrash, where gaps in narrative meaning and possible answers are inter-texted. In this exercise a key tool is that of imagination. This, in turn, is linked with the use of metaphorical language” (5). Mills’ stated concerns are lucid—she seeks a narrative ethics that unmasks a “prophetic moral vision” which “focus[es] on the abiding impact of pain and on the need to forefront this matter, giving pain its own space, without swiftly redefining the issue as one of sin and punishment” (33)—and her premise is promising, yet her use of theory unfortunately seems to stymie perspicuous presentation.

The next four chapters consist of “case studies”—passages from the prophetic texts that Mills has chosen to further her discussion. In Chapter 2, “Other Worlds: The Landscape of Chaos in Isaiah 1-39,” her stated intent is “to situate the topic of narrative setting alongside concepts of spatiality and world-construction, in order to furnish a narrative ethics reading of selected passages of doom and disaster found in Isa. 1-39” (37). She begins with an examination of place in the text, allowing for setting to be defined in Isaiah geographically and metaphorically, so that she accounts for both physical reality and symbolic constructions of the world. As a conditional gift from God (for it requires a certain behavior within it), she sees land as a liminal space between God and God’s people, a “sacred space” (40-41). Next, she delves into theories of magical realism, fantasy, and the “uncanny”—an unnecessary detour in which readers can, in my view, easily find ourselves lost (41-43).
Continuing through the maze of Mills’ argument, she sees the fantastic representations of setting in Isaiah to acknowledge a plethora of different worlds without landing in one specific place. This serves to illustrate “a message in which chaos is more authentic than order” (44) and to allow space for the reader as stranger to inhabit this alternate reality. The nature images within the text, for her, operate as political commentary, sounding off symbolic chords for the cacophony of injustice that is Israelite society and acting as the narrative in which she hears moral content. Furthermore, because God has weakened the land and created chaos within it, “a possible moral perspective, from a spatial approach is a focus not on God-as-creator but on God-as-disorderer, as the one who stirs up the socio-political scene” (54).

Reading the prophetic God as a revolutionary or a destabilizer of hierarchical and oppressive orders is not a new phenomenon, but she sees the prophetic story as one of chaos and suffering—these images themselves become the narrative—which, in her interpretation, forces a reading in which pain is center. Why or how pain must be viewed as central, however, is somewhat opaque, and her argument only goes as far as the “possible” alluded to above.

Chapters 3 (“Alterity and Horror: The Morality of the Bizarre in Ezekiel”), 4 (“Narrating Ethics: Body and Pain in the Book of Ezekiel”), and 5 (“Narrative Ethics, Prophetic Pathos and Jeremiah’s Confessions”) feel similarly strained. Mills casts her theoretical net far and wide, providing readers with synopses of more postmodern theorists than fish in the sea and leaving readers starved for cogent and succinct analysis of and/or with these theories.

In these chapters Ezekiel’s fragmented and monstrous body becomes liminal space and incarnates moral knowing “through the liminality of abjection” (84). Ezekiel himself is tasked with embodying the suffering of his people as his “body is transformed into the space of the voice of God, and, although there is some affirmation in this voice, overall it is a space not of pleasure and joy but of pain and loss” (100). Jeremiah, as well, “not only carries forward the theme of divine anger but is also himself shaped by being the embodiment of that wrath” (119). Painfully absent from her analyses, however, is any awareness that Ezekiel and Jeremiah as respected prophets have gendered male bodies that can hold the lamentations of the Israelites safely, while the metaphorical land as whoring woman in Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah is utterly terrorized and ultimately vanquished.

She concludes, in her sixth chapter and final section, by revisiting her initial goal to front pain, questioning “what sort of moral vision can be drawn from the experience of suffering and loss” (137). By conceptualizing pain in three ways—as “Absurd,” “Atrocity,” and “Political”—Mills completes a précis on pain as difference or “pain-as-otherness breaking in” (158). Not only does pain force us to re-evaluate our worlds, in her estimation, but it also “constantly crosses borders: social, intellectual, theological”; in this way, pain “shares ground with the God of the Old Testament and thus can occupy the space of that which is holy and transcendent” (159).

Mills fills readers up with valuable theoretical information; any who would like access to critical thinkers often overlooked by biblical scholars will appreciate her