CHRISTIANITY, WILD TURKEY, AND SYPHILIS

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This volume is that thoroughly unexpected thing, a compellingly readable, astoundingly well constellated grouping of highly individual essays. Delivered with tremendous verve and theoretical fluency, the collection lifts biblical history out of antiquarianism and lore and places it at the edge of literary critical debate. Which of the collected essays belongs to which genre—New Historicism, cultural materialism, ideological criticism, feminism, or postcolonial theory—will be a debated issue, perhaps, and I shall give my own answer here. The necessary taxonomical question should not, however, be allowed to obscure the enormous learning and coherency of purpose that infuse all of these articles. Those peering anxiously from within the citadel of establishment biblical scholarship may well feel, upon reading this volume, like besieged residents of Sarajevo, Kabul, or Kinshasa. And yet this good-humoredly contentious collection manages to be passionate without stridency, philosophical without pedantry, and richly playful without frivolity. With Attic symmetry, the volume relates to biblical studies in just the same way that the anecdote relates to a master narrative. Pungent and off-beat stories are freely quoted in this collection whenever an all-comprehending explanation by Josephus, Crossan, or Henry Kissinger begins to look too convenient or pat—and this volume, after the fashion of those anecdotes, breaks in upon and threatens to disrupt the prevailing happy consensus.

The volume is not beyond criticism, of course. Whether it is Carroll, Washington, or Marsh impugning the ethical character of the Bible and the vile uses to which scripture has been put; Sherwood tunneling through several historical slabs and demonstrating that each substrate has colored the story of Jonah and the "Whale," infusing the fable with the minerals and ideological acids (statism, anti-Semitism, Darwinism) proper to its particular moment (16th-century England; 18th-century Germany; 19th-century England); or Moore and Graham deconstructing Crossan's historical Jesus; all the contributions seem to be slightly out of
sync with their own fundamental premises. The Graham/Moore piece completes the curve of this volume and introduces an opposite incoherency of its own. Four of these authors assert truth claims while professing, in principle, to doubt the availability of truth. Thus, if you read the volume straight through, you move from a Hegelian totalizing history that is rendered incoherent by its Nietzschean subtext, all the way to Graham/Moore’s Nietzschean anarchism, which is rendered incoherent by resonant harmonies and symmetries that encase it. Ever the keen bookmaker, editor Moore has wagered correctly, I believe, that slightly hobbling inconsistencies will only enhance the volume’s overall success.

To move beyond a bare taxonomy and pursue the more complicated questions, one must move beyond the surface features of NH—condensed in every handbook and defined at length in the introduction and several of the essays. One should draw a fundamental distinction. On one hand, a pre-New Historicist Hegelian urge toward totality remains alive in most of the essays—all except Graham/Moore. Butler: “To affirm the Hegelian notion of history as dialectical appropriation of the past thought and action which recapitulates and realizes that past in the future is to affirm the historical actor—and the historian of that action—as a grand narrator. . . .”¹ I do not mean to impute personal arrogance to the essayists, only intellectual overconfidence. To a (w)oman (excepting Graham/Moore), the contributors believe that they can clearly perceive the way origins lead to ends. They believe that a logic of synthesis and contradiction rationally governs evolutionary historical change.² The essayists adopt, silently, the position of a unified subject who can see and hold the whole of the past in a Hegelian embrace of a total history. On the other hand, a countervailing drive toward Nietzschean post-Hegelian genealogy operates unconsciously and as an unacknowledged sub-text through these essays.


² Consider Sherwood, arguably the most experimental and playful of the four: “the ‘authority’ of the Bible . . . evolves in a particular way” ("Rocking the Boat," p. 388): “Ever evolving, ever committed to survival, the biblical text shapes itself in response to cultural anxiety” (p. 396). She consistently implies that the Spirit of the Age determines the going reading of Jonah (a Hegelian habit widely denounced as “expressive causality theory”).