

Review of Anthony C. Swindell, *Reworking the Bible: The Literary Reception of Fourteen Biblical Stories*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010.

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The well-read author traces the “afterlives” of fourteen biblical “texts” in separate chapters, the titles of some of which indicate wit: “Eden the Place,” “Noah and the Serio-Comical Flood,” “Jacob and Esau and Others,” “Moses Multiplied,” “Joshua in Jericho and Rahab in Rehab,” “Samson Surviving,” “Nebuchadnezzar Rules,” “Susanna and a World of Elders,” “Esther at Large,” “Christ Reborn,” “Salome and the Dance of Time,” “Lazarus Recycled,” “Returning to the Prodigal,” and “In and Out of Hell.” These surveys add to those in Swindell’s previous volume, *How Contemporary Novelists Rewrite Stories from the Bible* (Edwin Mellen, 2009), which treats Cain and Abel, Judas, the Magdalene, the Apocalypse, and others. Reworking surveys over two hundred literary retellings, with occasional forays into music and rarer mentions of film and art. Swindell’s broad scope results in very brief discussions, but he is trying to establish a rubric by which one can process the amazing number of reworkings and to establish as a legitimate scholarly “field.”

His first chapter designates the biblical precursor in question as the pretext and subsequent reworkings as hypertexts. Thereafter, the pretext is foundational (p. 6) and the hypertexts are superstructure. Notions, like those of T. S. Eliot and Jorge Borges, that new texts recreate their precursors are never under consideration (but see p. 316). The pretext is stable and, despite manuscript and language variations, immutable. Nonetheless, Swindell does frequently refer to translations as themselves hypertexts.

The first chapter also announces Swindell’s plan to organize hypertexts using the terminology of Gérard Genette’s *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (University of Nebraska, 1997). While Genette’s complex terminology seemingly covers every possible literary revision, Swindell adds two new categories in his penultimate chapter. That chapter, which follows separate, chronological discussions of the hypertexts of each of the fourteen pretexts, offers the cumulative organization of the hypertexts according to Genette’s terminology.

The resulting taxonomy of hypertexts incorporates (1) plot, scene, and character additions (at various points in the pretext’s story), amplifications, condensations, and excisions; (2) name changes; (3) structure reversals (a shift from comic to tragic or vice versa); (4) genre shifts; (5) transpositions of agency and motivation; (6) changes of focalization (both voice and perspective); (7) gender and number variations; (8) proximization shifts (bringing the pretext closer to the audience in nationality or location); and (9) the placement of a character in a new plot. This reduction and simplification sacrifices a great deal of the Genette-Swindell terminology and specificity, but it gestures at the bewildering variety of possible reworkings. It is this diversity that leads Swindell to his Genettian map of the field.

That the field cannot be easily mastered is evident in five other categories in the penultimate chapter: four different kinds of intertextuality and the notion of spinoffs or fantastic excursions. The intertextualities are biblical, nonbiblical, hypertextual, and variational, the last two of which are Swindell’s own coinages. Biblical intertextuality refers to hypertexts that make use of more than one pretext. Nonbiblical intertextuality notes hypertexts’ combination of pretexts with non-canonical myths, legends, characters, literary patterns, and so forth. Hypertextual intertextuality gestures at

the influence of some of the pretext's hypertexts on other hypertexts. *Paradise Lost*, *Samson Agonistes* and *The Divine Comedy* are examples of such influential hypertexts (also called chronotopes). Variational intertextuality specifies hypertexts that offer multiple and/or conflicting symbolizations or retellings of the pretext (e.g., the variants on Noah's Ark in Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*) or hypertexts that offer "full-scale reversals" of the pretext (e.g., Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* or José Saramago's *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*). These intertextualities raise questions about the possibility of an effective taxonomy, destabilize simple correlation between a pretext and a hypertext, and render the pretext itself mutable. Can, for example, any story retelling the biblical flood not also be seen as having intertextual connections to other flood stories, apocalypses, environmental disasters, and so forth? Further, given intertextuality, are there any grounds for positing a stable pretext?

These questions do not mean that Swindell's taxonomy does not have a heuristic benefit. They do mean that the taxonomy does not master the field and that the taxonomy does not provide any kind of objective, repeatable methodology. Swindell's classifications are instead artistic, interpretative, and intriguing. His final category—fantastic spinoffs—is avowedly interpretative. This category designates hypertexts that use the pretext as a platform for spatio-temporal or psychological expansions. Swindell seems to have notable aesthetic and intellectual moments in the history of hypertexts in mind (see also his discussion of chronotopes). Instead of simply classifying, here Swindell admits that other readers may think differently and specifically invites readers to think for themselves about what hypertexts constitute fantastic spinoffs of particular pretexts.

Clearly, Swindell does not want to close down interpretation. He closes his penultimate chapter with the claim that his classifications play a role in "the grand project of resisting the closure of the pretext to interpretation" (p. 300). Further, this phrasing segues toward another, very brief attempt to interpret hypertexts globally. Here, Swindell suggests that one might profitably think about and classify hypertexts that have a quarrel with a pretext and those that do not as well as hypertexts that treat the pretext as an ancient myth and those that project it into the present (pp. 300-01). Like his "fantastic spinoff" category, this approach is more open and more interesting than the application of Genette's taxonomy.

The implication that one can close the interpretation of the pretexts, or that of the hypertexts for that matter, points again to his agenda, which attempts to entice biblical critics into the study of afterlives and to gain scholarly approbation for such endeavors (p. 10). It is this quest for approbation, which entices everyone working in biblical studies, that explains the taxonomic method as well as the claim that most of the hypertexts contain specific indications that they are reworkings of the pretexts in question (pp. 4-5). That one simply interprets the hypertexts so, without tangible connections, would be too risky.

In addition to classifying, Swindell also discusses hypertexts in terms of their diegetic content (what the texts are "about" specifically and abstractly) and according to Bakhtin's notion of chronotopes (a work's genre, world, and literary significance). While he summarizes the diegetic context of each group of hypertexts at the end of each content chapter, his last chapter reviews this material by concentrating on the distance of the hypertext's diegetic content from that of the pretext and from that of the cultural world of the hypertext's original readers. While this final chapter also names chronotopes among each group of hypertexts (compare his discussion of hypertextual intertextuality and fantastic spinoffs in chap. 16), his interest lies in the hypertexts' ability to "mobilize the pretext in a quest for transcendence over the metanarratives of their time" (p. 316; compare pp. 7-9). Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, Langston Hughes' "On the Road," and Margaret Atwood's *The Flood Year* are among his examples. For Swindell, such works provide a diegetic outerspace "from which it is possible to gaze back at the home-planet [realms where biblical stories are normally told]." How that space truly differs from the modern, academic space he seeks to inhabit is not quite clear.

Swindell also claims in closing that each cluster of hypertexts “add[s] up to ‘Eden’ or ‘Susanna’ or ‘Lazarus’” (p. 316), but the outer space and home planet analogy privileges the pretext’s foundational and determinative quality (yet again). His last sentence claims that the hypertexts are spaces where the “original biblical pretext reconstitutes itself for future cultures” (p. 317). The phrasing of the subject is rather theological. One might make similar inferences from his notion that even refutations and murderous continuations of the pretext actually revitalize the immortal pretext (pp. 300-01).

Despite these quibbles, I highly recommend Swindell’s book for anyone interested in the afterlives of any of the biblical texts he discusses. I have found both this and his previous volume (2009) quite helpful. Swindell positions his own work as an attempt to fill in the lacuna left by works like Klaus Koch’s *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition*. Given the nature of previous generations of biblical scholarship, that appraisal is understandable and admirable. But, if Koch engendered Swindell, it will be interesting to see what works like those of Swindell engender. Perhaps they will be more playful and more “contaminated” intertextually (see p. 293). Perhaps Swindell himself will unleash his wit, evident in his chapter titles, on notions like “pretext.”



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