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Review of Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009.

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It is a curious thing to consider that within the unfolding drama of the Tanak, one might find sequels of stories that have come before. We may not be surprised to find an inter-textual allusion, some echo of a story from the past, but a sequel? Judy Klitsner's interpretations within the present work are based on this conviction: that within the body of the Tanak we find what she terms "subversive sequels"; parallel texts which draw upon established themes, but then develop them by "taking artful aim at them" (p. 170). In this way, biblical themes, imagery, theological understandings, and so on are under constant revision, even within the text itself.

The methodological difficulty with this approach is found within the gamut of the historical-critical enterprise. A simple argument can be made that the sequence of these stories is artificial; that the provenance of one text as opposed to its "sequel" is near impossible to verify. If a text is a sequel, it would appear necessary to prove its literary dependence on that upon which it plays. However, an appeal to a "literary" approach (p. xxix) clarifies Klitsner's method. Following Alter, Klitsner's interest is not in "excavation", but in the final form of the canonized text, the "coherent whole" which stands on its own, quite apart from questions of authorship, redaction, and location. Her approach is to identify stories that are united by thematic and linguistic parallels, in particular, words and phrases that are common or even insistent to both (p. xxxi). The stories are identified as sequels in that the second of the pair demonstrates some progression which takes its trajectory from the former. This progression reveals something of the development of humanity or of God. This points to the literary nature of the God revealed through the text, a complex and fractious individual, quite different to the immutable, omniscient God constructed by religion.

Klitsner begins by reading the story of Jonah as the sequel to the story of Noah. The similarities between the two are striking: perilous waters, doomed populations, a significant forty day period, and of course, the *yonah*, the name of our second protagonist which doubles as the winged messenger sent out by Noah. This is not all: at the end of their work both sink into a self-induced oblivion, Noah through the agency of alcohol, Jonah by a coma-like slumber. The Noah narrative speaks of God's judgement which is unannounced, excepting of course Noah, a righteous man. Noah in some sense proves his righteousness through his unquestioning obedience to God, despite the apparent lunacy involved. Jonah on the other hand is never described as righteous, the reasons for which are apparent throughout the story. He is ordered to "get up, go, and call". Instead, he gets up and flees, falling into a series of calamities which finally convince him to fulfil his original commission which he only does begrudgingly. Tellingly, the people of Nineveh are spared God's wrath on account of Noah's minimalist, prophetic utterance which issues no word of hope, merely judgement. Their sincere repentance is lost upon Jonah though, who remains embittered by the whole experience. While the people of Nineveh, and indeed the sailors of the boat are able to transform their own situations, Jonah remains unmoved by God's apparent graciousness towards them, and towards himself in light of his own actions throughout this story.

The second pair of stories is the tower of Babel and the story of the Israelite midwives in Egypt. This seems on the surface an unlikely pairing. Nonetheless, Klitsner identifies some unifying factors. Both deal with the building of cities, the materials for building are common to both stories, both contain fear-inducing oracles and both display an unusual emphasis on names (p. 31). The Babel story is in some sense elusive. A group of people seek to build a city and a tower, reaching into the

heavens, in order to “make a name for themselves”. God’s resultant anger sees them scattered across the face of the earth, destroying their plan to be united together. In making a name for themselves, they hope to assume a degree of permanence, perhaps even immortality (p. 35). The importance of “name” in the Bible is significant, as one’s name says something of one’s essence and character. The tower of Babel story, conversely, speaks of the danger of conformity, where individual essence is lost, swept up in the wave of collective identity. This is an affront to God who intervenes and scatters the unnamed builders, forever to remain unknown. Ironically the postlude of the Babel narrative is the genealogy of Shem, whose very name means “name”. In Egypt, the people of Israel are city-builders, using the same mortar and bricks described in the Babel account. Their building though is an imposed regime, designed to steal from them any sense of individual identity. While the Babel builders said “Come let us build”, in Egypt, the “Come let us” is placed in the mouth of the Pharaoh, and is coupled with his plan to demoralise the Israelite people who, following the divine injunction, have apparently multiplied such as to be considered a “swarm”. From the midst of this nameless mass of humanity, two individuals appear, Puah and Shifra. These two “named” women defy the Pharaoh’s orders, refusing to kill off the Israelite baby boys. The command is ironic; the Pharaoh sees no danger from Israelite women, yet it is the subordination of two women which is laying the foundation for Israelite success. Their story highlights the importance of the individual. While the nameless rabble of Babel end in rubble, the story of the midwives in Egypt ushers in the reconstruction of the House of Israel.

A third coupling completes the first section of the book, pitting the story of Melchizedek with that of Jethro. Klitsner’s interest is in how these two foreigners are involved in the shaping of Israel’s two great leaders, Abraham and Moses. Abraham’s story is one of solitude, of *lekh lekha*, of going to himself. His story is one of departures, of a lone seeker. Moses, conversely, begins as an outsider, a boy with no real home, whose journey is not to himself, but to a people. While Abraham required inward focus, Moses’ greatest danger was that same solitude. The foreign priests act as an “agent of discomfort, forcing the patriarch into difficult psychological territory on the road to actualizing [Moses’ and Abraham’s] leadership potential” (p. 91)

The second half of Klitsner’s work is focused on women-centred texts. Eve, Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel are explored. So too are the stories of Deborah, Jael, the un-named wife of Manoah, and Hannah. As such, the characterisation of women is a major concern, using the “quest for fertility ... as a catalyst for woman’s development and as a traceable measure of her successes and failures in relation to God, herself and the world around her” (p. 168). This theme is woven throughout the series of interpretations offered in the second half of the book and provides somewhat of a macro-structure to this section as a whole. The stories here are not presented as sequels, so much as a series, or in cinema parlance, a “franchise”. What we find is that there is no “biblical woman” in that the gamut of biblical women is too broad to be so easily confined.

This book is a formidable achievement. The arguments Klitsner advances in support of her interpretations are convincing and provocative. Each pairing or sequence opens up each story, in at times unexpected ways, pointing the way forward to new interpretive possibilities. Of special note is her coupling of contemporary method and insight with those of classical Jewish writing, a joy and strength throughout this book.