
Book Review

Joel M. Hoffman, *The Bible Doesn't Say That: 40 Biblical Mistranslations, Misconceptions, and Other Misunderstandings* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), xi + 291 pp., \$25.99 (cloth), ISBN: 978-1-250-05948-2.

Joel Hoffman is a Hebraist amassing an enviable publication record examining the ontogeny of Hebrew and Greek scriptures and rendering subtle shades of textual criticism accessible to laypersons. A believing Jew, his work treads carefully over politically fraught doctrinal terrain with the goal of capturing as broad an audience as possible and to avoid alienating Jewish or Christian believers and non-believers alike. His latest effort addresses the vast gulf between ancient and contemporary exegeses. Forty chapters cover one major example each, illustrating many divergent interpretations of the Bible as it was understood in antiquity and is variously understood today. His chosen examples highlight a propensity for modern readers to assume that familiar interpretations are ancient. He groups misunderstandings into five general causes, not mutually exclusive: (1) ignorance of original context, (2) inadvertent misinterpretation, (3) a 'culture gap' obscuring shades of meaning, (4) mistranslation, and (5) rhetorical misrepresentation.

This is a timely and important effort, given the degree to which tendentious interpretations become popularized in the information age. He is self-consciously even-handed, vigorously critiquing 'pet' interpretations of the left and the right of both fundamentalists and atheists. His skill as a linguist and translator is undeniable. His witty, tactful prose makes this work a page-turner. These traits will broaden the impact of this work.

Yet the book has some notable deficiencies. The absence of footnotes, bibliography, or discussion of critical sources will displease academics. This leaves Hoffman's interpretations as the last word on some topics where the jury is still out, although I agree with Hoffman's opinion in most cases. Occasionally I found it irksome that there was barely more than a passing nod to lively disagreements among experts. Also, Hoffman's conclusions are muddled by attempts to draw in so many different readers. Could fewer examples have been better presented in greater depth? It is unsatisfying that his brief conclusion seems designed to avoid uncomfortable implications. Chapters just superficial enough not to offend anyone leave the reader hungry for more. His discussion of Jewish sources is stronger than that of Christian sources and gives the impression that the inclusion of some Christian material may have been an editorial decision, rather than one rooted in Hoffman's greatest strengths.

Chapter 2, 'Evolution', is emblematic of the book's strengths, showing how the radically distinct accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 are grossly incompatible with a literalist reading and cannot be brought to bear on the question of biological evolution. As Hoffman puts it,

The biggest reason not to take the creation-in-six-days story literally is that the Bible itself contradicts it, not that modern science contradicts it... If the text wasn't meant to be literal (and it wasn't), what is the message of the creation narrative?... Do people rule over the animals? But if we continue to misread the Bible, we won't even be able to ask the right questions, to say nothing of starting to answer them. (p. 23)

Chapter 3, 'Noah's Ark', continues this strong suit, illustrating two distinct Hebrew accounts of the flood narrative (Genesis 6–8) manifestly incompatible with literalist readings. They are better understood as vehicles for idiomatic motifs confusing modern readers. For example, the text tantalizingly hints at the mysterious personas of raven and dove, familiar to folklorists, but whose biblical sketches mystify us today. Here Hoffman's circumspect avoidance of external evidence is lamentable, as direct dependence of both Hebrew accounts upon much older Mesopotamian literature is well established (Hess and Tsumura 1994). Bird helpers who assist in the search for *terra firma* in a primordial deluge are creation motifs with global distribution rooted in prehistory (Leeming 2005: 33, 67, 102, 111, 203). Recognition of this fact can only strengthen Hoffman's conclusions about the deep context of the story, even if it might offend ethnocentrically traditionalist exegetes.

Another relevant example is Chapter 29, 'Keeping Kosher', which ascribes to the Bible an 'animal welfare' ethic. The injunction 'Do not boil a kid [goat] in its mother's milk' is thrice mentioned (twice in Exodus and once in Deuteronomy), as a directive for Hebrew 'first fruits' ceremonies (sacrificial harvest-fertility rites). The reason for this odd prohibition is obscure and has been debated by theologians for centuries. Yet Hoffman glosses over debate in favor of a normative explanation:

This seems like a law about preventing cruelty to animals, as though there is something particularly unkind about cooking a baby goat in the very milk that was supposed to sustain it and give it life. Other commandments...point in the same direction, including the remarkably similar provision in Deuteronomy 22:6-7 that warns a traveler who sees a mother bird with her eggs not to take the mother with the eggs, but first to scare off the mother. (p. 179)

Hoffman may inadvertently project a modern rabbinical interpretation onto the ancient text, stumbling into the culture gap that he assiduously avoids elsewhere. His 'animal welfare' thesis is in doubt. John Spencer (a seventeenth-century British Hebraist) noted several possible explanations, including pity, rejection of gluttony, inversion of pagan rites, and/or prohibition against magic (Assmann 1998: 65–66). The prohibition likely has a narrow social context where the maternal quality of the milk is significant.

It is plausible that it is an inversion of Gentile fertility rites. The common Lebanese lamb dish *laban ummu*, 'the milk of its mother' indicates regional popularity of milk/meat dishes and suggests possible oppositional dietary practices as part of an interethnic counterculture (Fischer 1976; Assmann 1998: 233). Evidence for an animal

welfare ethic attached to Hebrew doctrine is lacking (Nash 2009). Hoffman's supporting example might also have a simpler explanation: spare the hen and ensure the supply of eggs! This is not to deny contemporary animal advocates access to a wider interpretive range within the Bible, but these views may be just as modern as the others that Hoffman dismantles.

Chapter 30, 'The Rapture', challenges the biblical basis for a contemporary eschatology often hostile toward environmentalism. The Rapture is fatalistic escapism predicated on God's immanent annihilation of sinful earth, bringing salvation to a few faithful Christians. Some defenders of this eschatology are contemptuous toward ecology, crowing that 'God will sacrifice billions if not trillions of the creatures on this planet to judge mankind' (Holdridge 2016: 42). Hoffman does not condemn those who espouse such views, but he helpfully elucidates the conflated nature of their doctrines, forged in a hodgepodge of disparate texts.

Chapter 34, 'Prosperity', examines another theological trend that runs contrary to the spirit of environmental justice. In recent decades, televangelists have been successful at promoting a Christian ideology of acquisitive materialism, envisioning wealth as a consequence of faith. Calvinism also may regard wealth as an indication of God's favor, but greed itself is frowned upon and mitigated by ascetic self-denial. Yet prosperity gospel proponents rarely preach any such restraint on materialistic impulses. Parishioners may be expected to give generously to their pastors and wait for God to compensate them in what amounts to a spiritual confidence scheme. The rise of the prosperity gospel is also notable in parts of the developing world affected by anthropogenic environmental decline, and thus serves to justify spiritually the worst excesses of industrial capitalism (Machado 2010). Hoffman's work is valuable here, demonstrating that the edifice of the prosperity gospel is built on rhetorical misrepresentation. One egregious example is the obscure clause in 3 John 1.2, which is the source of the word 'prosperity' at the center of the movement. The mundane Greek salutation *eudousthai* ('go well') at the opening of the epistle has been misconstrued as a doctrinal injunction to 'prosper' (that is, 'get rich'), based on the imperfect King James translation. Many other verses run contrary to the notion that faith breeds wealth (see Matthew 19.21 and James 5.3 for example).

Chapters on marriage, divorce, gender, sexuality, and abortion deftly tiptoe around hot-button culture war issues. A common theme is that different biblical authors had different audiences; the lack of a single purpose results in interpretive ambiguity. The Bible can be used as a cipher to buttress many discrepant arguments. Hoffman's expertise is well utilized when he explores nuances of gender and power in Hebrew, for example in the fascinating character of Samson's mother in Judges 13.6. Yet his discussion of the New Testament is too dependent on normative readings. He misses opportunities to probe deeper ambiguities. He holistically characterizes the New Testament (and Pauline Epistles) as a monolith imposing strict gender hierarchy, in contrast to more variable Hebrew gender roles (pp. 243-44). He does not hint at the impassioned debates among specialists about the various editions of the epistles and the degree to which patriarchal redactors and forgers (like 'Pseudo-Paul') may have obscured the egalitarian thrust of the original letters. Some Pauline verses appear to subjugate women, but others do just the opposite (such as 1 Corinthians 7.14). The Epistles likely include multiple discordant authors, rather than a single harmonious narrative (see Odell-Scott 2000).

The dust jacket says this book 'explores what the Bible meant before it was misinterpreted over the last two thousand years'. Yet it must be said that discrepant readings are not merely products of later confusion. Ambiguity and disputation have been present in the text since the beginning. Ultimately this book is successful because it reveals that multiple interpretations are possible and that they do not need to perfectly harmonize to remain useful. Great art is rooted in a particular context and is then subjected to continuous reimagining. Hoffman is correct that the Bible need not have the same significance to every generation.

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