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Judy Klitsner’s Subversive Sequels in the Bible is a closely reasoned, tightly argued challenging and provocative study of biblical texts. Klitsner’s book earned the 2009 National Jewish Book Award in the category of Scholarship. Judy Klitsner, a senior faculty member at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, is a disciple of the renowned biblical scholar of the twentieth century, Nehama Leibowitz.

This work is a treasure of brilliant analyses and textual connections. The arguments are complex and require the reader to sit with a TANAKH and follow her line of reasoning. Klitsner knows her Bible and demonstrates her familiarity with both the traditional commentators that one finds in a Rabbinic Bible (Miqra’ot Gedolot) as well as more modern commentators and exegetes. Klitsner makes a credible case for the argument that at many points in the Bible, the text itself is not only telling its particular story, but is consciously reacting to an earlier narrative. Often she refers to the repetition of key words, what Martin Buber termed guiding words – leitwort, which repeat themselves in the sequels. She also notes puns and themes that either repeat or contrast with the earlier narratives. She explains that by studying what she calls the subversive sequel the result “adds a dimension of exegesis that is inaccessible through close readings and ordinary intertextual comparisons alone… [for] the subversive sequel measures the dynamic movement that takes place between one story and another” (p. xxiii).

For example, in her first chapter Klitsner examines the Noah narrative and suggests that the biblical prophesy of Jonah is, in addition to its straightforward message, also a rewrite of the Flood episode. After proposing new insights into Noah’s psyche, Klitsner analyzes the “more difficult story of Jonah by identifying it as a subversive reworking of the earlier story, noting the many ways it questions and overturns the assumptions and conclusions of the Noah narrative” (p. xxv). She points out that in “the Noah narrative, humanity’s annihilation was neither negotiable nor avoidable; God and His [sic] prophet were united in viewing death as inevitable. The inverted details of the Book of Jonah will lead us away from destruction as a narrative necessity” (p. 10). She notes that the word hamas (destruction/injustice) “weaves its way in a contrasting manner throughout both stories. In Noah’s narrative, the fate of the people is sealed because of injustice, hamas that people inflict on each other… (Genesis 6:13). In the Book of Jonah, the evil decree is reversed because the people turn back from the hamas that they were practicing…(Jonah 3:7, 8, 10)” (emphases in original, p. 11).

The book itself, of nearly two hundred pages, divides into six chapters, with two major themes, individuality, and gender. The first three sections center on the struggle for individuality, wherein she considers the issues of individual and community; Israelite and non-Israelite; and
then between the individual and God. The next three sections consider gender relations, and God’s involvement in its evolution.

Klitsner suggests that the “subversive sequel reveals development not only of its human protagonists, but of God as well” (p. xxiii). She understands that this position will be controversial for a more traditionally based readership. Yet, she notes correctly, that the idea of a dynamic and changing God is well grounded in Jewish tradition.

It is neither the idea of a developing dynamic in terms of human growth, nor a developing dynamic in the role or understanding of God, which disturbs this reviewer. Rather it is Klitsner’s unfortunate decision to “refer to God in this book in the traditional form, as ‘He,’ [which she explains is done]… in order to avoid stylistic awkwardness and not to attribute masculine gender to God” (p. ix). Klitsner self-describes as “a 21st-century reader who is both profoundly influenced by tradition and deeply affected by a modern feminist and universal ethos” (p. 172). As someone who is sensitive to women’s issues, I experience these male references to God as off-putting and detracting from her overall arguments. They are particularly irritating because Klitsner acknowledges that the Jewish Publication Society some years earlier published *The Contemporary Torah* which is a “gender-sensitive translation of the Bible, in which, whenever necessary, masculine forms are replaced with more neutral terms” (p. ix). By using masculine language for God, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible* therefore, ironically, undermines its own call for a dynamic development in our human understanding of the Deity.

For someone who states she is affected by a feminist ethos, at times Klitsner appears unsympathetic to or critical of the acts of biblical women. In the sixth chapter, “The Tent, the Field, and the Battlefield: Rebekah and Other Mothers,” she initially compares and contrast the figures of Sarah and Rebekah. “Taken together, these stories will reveal movement toward a deepening of the male-female relationship and toward an empowerment of the female figure before man [sic] and God” (p. 135). Yet, she both characterizes Rebekah as a “Patriarch” – which at best is a left-handed compliment – and she portrays her as an increasingly marginalized character. These descriptions are in marked contrast to the more positive views of women found in the recently published *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, Tamar Cohn Eskenazi, Andrea L. Weiss, eds., (URJ/Women of Reform Judaism, 2008).

*Subversive Sequels in the Bible* is Klitsner’s first published book. This might explain the sense of awkwardness, or defensiveness, which manifests itself in her need to give thanks to the many persons who offered her insights. She also goes out of her way to show that the notion of presenting materials with multiple meanings is not some kind of radical revisionist thinking, which would deny the sacredness of the biblical text. In that sense, the book is overloaded with footnotes, which detract from the flow of the work.

Those criticisms aside, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other* is an important work. It contains helpful additions for the reader: a Bibliography, a list of Classical Jewish Sources (commentaries, exegeses), an Index of Subjects, and an Index of Biblical and Rabbinic Sources.