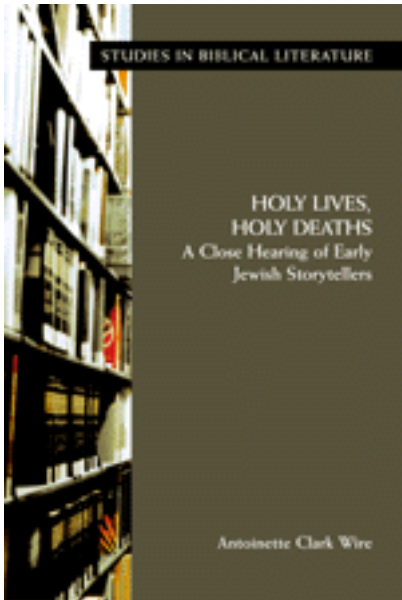


RBL 09/2003



Wire, Antoinette Clark

Holy Lives, Holy Deaths: A Close Hearing of Early Jewish Storytellers

Studies in Biblical Literature 1

Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002. Pp. x + 420. Paper. \$49.95, ISBN 1589830229.

Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus
Wheaton College
Norton, MA 02766

Antoinette Clark Wire has a gift for letting modern readers hear the spoken words muted behind the written biblical texts. She did this before with Paul's Letters to the Corinthians, giving voice to the *Corinthian Women Prophets*, and she has done it again in *Holy Lives, Holy Deaths: A Close Hearing of Early Jewish Storytellers*. This time she has turned her attention to the Jewish storytellers whose stories about the holy lives and deaths of miracle-workers, prophets, and martyrs were retold not only in the Gospel narratives and Acts but in other ancient Jewish literature such as the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmudim, the works of Josephus, and the Pseudepigrapha.

Wire focuses on early Jewish storytelling for three main reasons (20–23). First, speaking as a “world-citizen,” Wire says early Jewish stories can tell us something about how smaller groups, marginal or ethnic minorities, come to terms with broader dominant cultures, such as the Greco-Roman culture of the Roman Empire ruling ancient Israel. Second, from her perspective as a Christian Wire is interested in what early Jewish stories can tell us about how Jesus' earliest Jewish contemporaries understood him. The early Jewish stories provide a “different vantage point for seeing Jesus,” one that “brings up short our tendency to see Jesus over against Judaism.” (22). Finally, as a woman, Wire is intrigued by the likelihood that early Jewish stories may preserve ancient women's voices behind the written works composed almost exclusively by males.

Drawing upon contemporary studies of the oral transmission of stories, especially anthropological studies of the *performance* of storytelling (e.g., John Miles Foley and Dell Hymes), Wire argues not only that stories are important resources for recovering the voices of those nonliterate or otherwise marginal people behind the written texts but also that stories are not just isolated aesthetic objects but texts performed at specific times and places to specific audiences for specific ends. Following the theory of Alan Dundes and Dan Ben Amos's work on Jewish folktales, Wire insists that the meaning of stories comes from the interplay of "text, texture, and context." Wire seeks to recapture the rhetorical, performative dimension of story texts. Her use of anthropological theories of storytelling is analogous to her previous use of the "New Rhetoric" to reconstruct the rhetorical context of Paul's letters in *Corinthian Women Prophets*. However, Wire's application of theories of oral transmission should be distinguished from Werner Kelber's approach in *The Oral and Written Gospel*, in that she feels that the shift from oral to written modes does not involve such a radical hermeneutical transformation. Rather, it is simply the retelling of the story in a different context, what happens to all stories deemed worth remembering; the oral "texture" of stories is not necessarily lost when they are written. The main difference is that written stories represent a more "narrow band of society. . . . Readers and those who might hear books read were part of a small part of society with common characteristics of urban location and economic privilege" (4). Consequently, if one wants to recover the voices of rural or less economically privileged people, they are more likely to be found in oral stories rather than books, though Wire would never say that rich city-dwellers did not tell stories, too. She is merely attempting to cast a wider net by focusing on the stories behind the written texts.

Wire emphasizes the role of genre and comparison to determine the meaning of New Testament stories of Jesus. Wire draws her stories for comparative purposes primarily from rabbinic literature (Talmud and midrash), Josephus's *Antiquities*, the anonymous *Lives of the Prophets*, Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*, and the New Testament Gospels and Acts, as well as other works. Her extensive table of contents, which lists each of the stories, gives their source, and numbers them consecutively, is tremendously helpful, both for getting a convenient snapshot of the texts she deems most relevant and for flipping back and forth when she refers to them in her interpretive chapters. I also like the way her presentation naturalizes the New Testament stories about Jesus in a nontriumphalist manner. She does not single them out or privilege them as any more exceptional than the other stories. Wire technically defines the genre of early Jewish stories she analyzes as "legends," stories that purport to be true accounts of actual historical figures and events, to distinguish them from folktales or fairy tales that are conventionally told and heard as fiction. However, she prefers the term "stories," because "legend" has taken on exactly the opposite connotation in common parlance. It is

important to make this point because she deals with stories that emphasize the wondrous nature of the miracles and prophecies they recount, a cultural perspective that flies in the face of our modern prejudice to rely on “meeting our own needs with the many resources around us” (169–70).

Wire subdivides the genre of stories into four main types and organizes her book accordingly. The four types of early Jewish stories are stories of prophecies at birth, stories of wondrous provision, stories of prophets’ signs, and stories of martyrdom and vindication. In parts 1–4 of her book Wire gives examples of each type, providing English translations and commentary for each story. Bringing these stories together in this way is itself a significant contribution. Generally she presents the stories chronologically (according to their subjects, not when they were written), that is, stories about biblical figures, then contemporary figures. The one time Wire breaks form is in the part 2, stories of wondrous provision. There she subdivides the stories into those that emphasize “The Need,” “The Need Voiced,” and “The Need Met.” I think this break from her pattern is telling, since it is these stories in particular that best support her case that the stories come from Jewish women or other socioeconomically less privileged groups. Wire concludes each of the four parts with a chapter on “the telling” of each type of story, in which she hypothesizes about the performances of these stories, based on analyses of their textures and contexts, to use Dundes’s terminology, that is, their oral stylistic features and any other hints about the social context of their performance. Stories that focus on domestic versus public venues, birth and child-rearing, women as clever and active protagonists, and “little guys” getting the best of “the establishment” express points of view of marginal, antiestablishment types. However, stories may be retold or rewritten to legitimate dominant social institutions. As I said before, Wire cautions against overexaggerating the polarity between different tellings of the same story or telling versus writing the story. The voice of the storyteller still can be heard, if one pays attention to aspects of the text and texture, such as narrative sequence, common subject matter, repetitions, dialogue, and fast-paced causality implied in words such as “immediately.” In these “telling” chapters, Wire reiterates her point that each of these stories is told and retold in specific times and places to specific audiences to make specific points reflecting the interests of the storytellers and their audiences.

Wire sees general patterns in these stories that are obviously relevant to the story of Jesus. Thus her choice of stories of prophecies at birth, wondrous provision, prophets’ signs, and martyrdom and vindication to subcategorize early Jewish stories does not seem coincidental. The Gospels and Acts are full of such stories. Wire even addresses the prickly problem of the origins of the Gospel genre when she suggests that the “seed of gospel writing is the story of the prophet’s sign, the account of what a prophet has announced or enacted that is not yet fulfilled but is still pending” (389).

One does not have to accept this conclusion to appreciate the contributions of Wire's comparative study of early Jewish stories. Wire assembles familiar and unfamiliar stories in a rich array of the possibilities available to the early Jewish storytellers, including those who first told stories about Jesus and pointed out common patterns and themes. By juxtaposing less familiar stories such as the story of Seila, Jephthah's daughter, from Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*, Ezekiel in *Lives of Prophets*, and the talmudic stories of "Imma Hilkiyah's Clouds" and "The [Golden] Table Leg" of Hanina's dream to the more familiar ones, such as the Gospel miracles, prophetic sign stories, Jesus and the five disciples in *b. Sanh.* 43a, or Honi the Circle-Drawer, Wire contextualizes the latter so as to have us look at them in new ways. Just by asking the questions about who told these stories to whom, and making some plausible suggestions, Wire invites us to imagine the contexts where Jewish women might have told these stories to their neighbors and where their husbands and rabbis might have picked them up and retold them to serve their purposes. I especially like Wire's apt characterization of the process of telling stories as "holiness enacted in Jewish storytelling." The early Jewish storytellers call attention to the presence of God in the events they recount; that is, holiness is enacted, in both the subjects and *performance* of their stories.

Despite this, I am sure some of Wire's readers will criticize her for too easily abstracting the oral forms of stories from their written contexts or for reading in too much to infer women storytellers from the data of the stories. I would have liked to have seen Jeffrey Rubenstein's excellent study *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) in Wire's bibliography. He discusses the redaction and function of stories in the literary context of talmudic *sugya*s and might have had some bearing on Wire's analysis. Jewish stories often have an exegetical function, to explicate a scriptural verse or rabbinic tradition, and while that exegetical setting may often be secondary to the original performance of the story, it may not always be. For example, if one takes the exegetical applications away from the story of Jesus' five disciples in *b. Sanh.* 43a, there really is not much of a story left. And would rural Jewish women be telling that kind of story, or male students in an urban Bet Midrash? Perhaps Wire does read in more than the texts themselves support in order to reconstruct the setting and purposes for which they were performed. That is why her comparative analogies to native American storytelling and other anthropological descriptive accounts of performance are so important at least as models to visualize the possibilities she suggests for the performance of the Jewish stories. I think the strongest, most persuasive application of Wire's method of analysis occurs in chapter 8, "Telling Early Jewish Wondrous Provision Stories," where she pays close attention to their specific textual features, narrative sequence, and needs-focus. There she concludes:

The structure of these [wondrous provision] stories, seen in its sequence from a need to a voice to the need being met, reflects storytellers who are imbedded in the extreme physical needs of Jewish village life in this period. With their stories they challenge distraught father, resigned spouses, or cynical neighbors to hope for what seems beyond hope. Most stories tell about a local figure who has voiced the need or stimulated others to speak so that the need is met, and the storyteller shapes and extends this person's impact. Because the places and times where the story happens are not cultic or social gatherings but the daily rhythms of home and work life whenever there is need, the telling perhaps also appears as people work or walk. The short and pointed story shows that you can expect to be safe and fed and well because you are related to the [O]ne with full resources and readiness to give. (178)

Even if at times her arguments are more suggestive than compelling, in *Holy Lives, Holy Deaths* Wire succeeds admirably at what she describes on her web page as her hopes for her scholarship: "I hope to help others find in the texts not only the authors' voices but also the voices that spoke before them and the voices with which they are in dialogue. The Bible's authority is that of a symphony rather than a single instrument."