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Review: The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah

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He argues that these models were developed much later and in a context foreign to that of the Roman Empire (p. 140). He argues that NT scholars should resist using the results of "modern sociology" until their findings can be validated through a type of "painstaking field work" that is all but impossible when dealing with ancient cultures. He concludes that those who employ these methods are engaging in "the sociological fallacy" (p. 128). Judge, however, employs the resources of "cultural-anthropology" to explain Paul's engagement with the economic realities of the Roman Empire (pp. 166–67). His rejection of social-scientific theories as an explanatory device may not be as absolute as he presents in his writing. Scholer does, however, balance the discussion in the introduction by providing a summary of these issues and a bibliography for further research (pp. xvii–xx). David Horrell (cf. p. xviii) has argued that the imposition of models on ancient data is only one approach that may be employed within social-scientific criticism. One may engage in historical and textual work as practiced by Judge and then allow themes to emerge that may then be correlated with the findings from the social sciences. This inter-disciplinary work provides the conceptual resources that assist scholars in their efforts to address the concerns of contemporary society. This critique aside, this book is recommended for those interested in the social history of the earliest Christ-movement in its Greco-Roman context.

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The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah. By Walter Brueggemann. Old Testament Theology, eds. Brent A. Strawn and Patrick D. Miller. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 213 pp., $18.99, paper.

This work introduces a new series from Cambridge University Press on the theological message of individual books of the Old Testament. Walter Brueggemann is William Marcellus McPheeters Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary and is one of the most prolific OT scholars of our time. His earlier works include *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (1998), extensive writings on the prophetic literature, and his magnum opus *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (1997). The present work was released almost simultaneously with his collection of essays on the book of Jeremiah, *Like Fire in the Bones: Listening for the Prophetic Word in Jeremiah* (Fortress, 2006).

Brueggemann's theology of Jeremiah derives from a view of the book as a complex and "multivoiced effort to make theological sense" of the Babylonian exile and its implications for the future of Israel as Yahweh's covenant people (p. 7). More than the words of a single prophet, the book reflects a stream of tradition emerging from the ministry of Jeremiah the prophet. The theological message of the book is not uniform, but rather is the product of an ongoing discussion between several competing theological voices that seek to interpret the Babylonian exile and chart the course for Israel's future. The book of Jeremiah contains two primary waves of reflection. The first wave occurs before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC and reflects on the impending loss of the city. The second wave arises from the community of the deported and makes clear that loss and destruction is not the final word for God's people. This stream of tradition continues into the Persian period of the sixth century and ultimately "offers a powerful statement of hope that would have been impossible for the person of Jeremiah himself" (p. 9). In the aftermath of exile, the presence of competing theological voices is due in large part to the varying perspectives of the three Jewish communities in Judah, Egypt, and Babylon. In the Jeremiah tradition,

the viewpoint of the Babylonian community prevails, and the exiles in Babylon are viewed as the objects of Yahweh's future salvation and the "true heirs and carriers of covenantal faith" (p. 71).

Despite the variety and tension within the book, there is an organic coherence to Jeremiah built upon the dual themes of judgment and restoration. Brueggemann's emphasis on some type of synchronic unity in the midst of diversity is reflective of the paradigm shift that has occurred in Jeremiah studies. Historical-critical scholarship on the book of Jeremiah has reached an impasse and has had limited success in helping to make sense of the book as a literary entity. While reflecting many of the perspectives of this earlier historical-criticism, Brueggemann's approach reflects a healthy attempt to move beyond the issues of sources and historical reconstruction and to focus more on the text of Jeremiah itself.

Brueggemann presents the sovereignty of Yahweh over the Babylonian crisis and the fall of Jerusalem and Judah as the central theological message in the book of Jeremiah. Yahweh's rule is reflected in "the lived reality of history" (p. 43). This assertion of the sovereignty of God trumps both the arrogance of Babylonian political-military might and the presumption of Judah's covenant infidelity. Babylon and its gods are no rival to Yahweh, because it is Yahweh who raises up Babylon and chooses Nebuchadnezzar as his servant to carry out judgment on Judah (cf. Jer 27:4–6) and it is Yahweh who will ultimately bring about the downfall of Babylon (cf. Jer 25:12–14; 50–51).

Yahweh also remains free to judge his own people Judah when they arrogantly defy him and refuse to live by his commands. Jeremiah's warnings of Judah's impending destruction brought him into conflict with prophets, kings, and royal officials who blindly trusted in the inviolability of Zion and wrongly calculated that God was on call to deliver them from their enemies (cf. Jer 6:13–15; 7:4; 21:3–7). Brueggemann argues that Jeremiah's opponents based their confidence in Yahweh's protection of Zion on Isaiah's earlier promises of the deliverance of Jerusalem from Assyria, whereas Jeremiah asserted that Yahweh's anger over Judah's increasing wickedness rendered these earlier promises invalid.

Yahweh's sovereignty involves both judgment and salvation, and it is Jeremiah's dual message of "plucking up/tearing down" and "building/planting" that effects Yahweh's destruction and restoration. Brueggemann highlights five key themes or motifs in discussing Yahweh's work of judgment on Jerusalem. Yahweh is a scorned spouse who must punish his unfaithful partner. Yahweh is a provoked and punishing sovereign who sends military troops against Jerusalem. Yahweh is the creator of order, and Israel destroys itself by going against the grain of deed and consequence built into creation itself. Yahweh is a God of life and death and also a God who is angry and unrestrained—disobedience unleashes God's anger against his people and results in the horrible scenes of death depicted in Jeremiah's preaching (cf. Jer 7:32–33; 9:22). Brueggemann is especially effective in demonstrating how prophetic rhetoric serves to promote prophetic ideology. The powerful images of judgment that predominate in Jeremiah's poetic oracles enable the reader to grasp the jeopardy of disobedience to God's commands and to enter into the sheer terror of divine judgment. On the other hand, the prose tradition of Jeremiah makes an equally important contribution by specifying Babylon as the human agent of this terrifying judgment and demonstrating how Yahweh's control of events stands over the claims of Babylonian autonomy.

The judgment that fell first on Israel will ultimately fall on Babylon and all nations, and Jeremiah 25, standing at the center of the book, reflects this sequencing of judgment—Judah (vv. 8–11), Babylon (vv. 12–14), and all nations (vv. 15–26).

The turning of the tables for Israel and Babylon is also represented in the Jeremiah tradition in that prophetic messages anticipating the judgment of Jerusalem are reapplied with reference to the destruction of Babylon (cf. Jer 6:22–23 with 50:41–46).

After the dismantling by judgment, Jeremiah promises that Yahweh will act as sovereign to bring about Israel's restoration. Brueggemann notes something of a tension in the message of hope found in Jeremiah. In the prose tradition, restoration is conditioned upon Israel's return to Yahweh (cf. 29:12–13; 42:9–17), while the poetic tradition found in the Book of Comfort in Jeremiah 30–31 includes oracles not reflecting this conditionality (cf. 30:12–17; 31:31–34). In promising a new covenant with Israel, Yahweh offers forgiveness without a call for repentance, indicating that "the future for Israel depends on the sure resolve of YHWH to begin again, here even without preconditions" (p. 127). However, this tension is muted somewhat by the fact that Yahweh's work of grace will bring about the obedience that he required from Israel all along (cf. 31:33). In the theology of Jeremiah, the permanence of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel depends upon Yahweh's passionate and "abiding love" (31:3) that renders him "incapable of not having a relationship with Israel" (p. 127).

The final two chapters of the book examine the message of Jeremiah from the perspective of the larger context of Scripture. Just as Brueggemann understands the book of Jeremiah to reflect the dialogue of divergent viewpoints, he sees the formation of the Hebrew Bible as a "traditioning process" involving the interplay of "competing voices" (p. 134). In this process Jeremiah played a pivotal role. The book of Jeremiah was receptive to Israel's earlier theological traditions as a means of explaining Israel's relationship to God and the reasons why God acted in judgment, but was also "generative" for the scribal and apocalyptic traditions of the post-exilic period that offered hope for Israel's future.

In his treatment of the place of Jeremiah within the HB, Brueggemann focuses particularly on the Deuteronomic features of the book. Though largely unconcerned with the source-critical issues that characterized earlier approaches to Jeremiah, Brueggemann follows the critical consensus in understanding Jeremiah to reflect a Deuteronomic view of the covenant with its emphasis on cursing and blessing (cf. Jer 11:1–17). Brueggemann believes that the events surrounding the fall of Judah led to the softening of the Deuteronomic tradition that is reflected in Jeremiah's call for repentance and offer of forgiveness. However, in light of the persistent sinfulness of Israel and graciousness of Yahweh that are chronicled throughout the OT, it seems rather difficult to believe that this emphasis had not emerged within the Deuteronomic tradition at a much earlier time.

Breuggemann explores a number of interesting connections between Jeremiah and other portions of the HB, including the marital imagery of Hosea, the message of repentance in Jonah, and the shared genre of lament in Psalms and Jeremiah's Confessions. Job and Jeremiah share the common experience of a righteous sufferer despairing of life (cf. Job 3:21–26; Jer 20:14–18), leading Brueggemann to the rather extreme suggestion of the possibility that "the historical vocation of Jeremiah gives rise in Israel to the fictional character of Job, or that Job is the character of Jeremiah writ large and in extremis" (p. 168).

In the chapter that follows, Brueggemann discusses the connections between Jeremiah and the NT and seeks to set forth the abiding theological significance of the book of Jeremiah. Perhaps because of the focus of this work on OT theological issues, this chapter only provides a summary discussion. The chapter reflects Brueggemann's conviction that biblical theology is a prescriptive as well as

descriptive discipline. He suggests that Jeremiah's message of judgment and salvation with respect to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC enables contemporary readers to "face the abyss of disruption and ponder the possibility of post-abyss futures" (p. 188) with a confidence in God's sovereign and compassionate involvement. He sees Jeremiah's message of judgment and salvation as precursor to "the Friday-Sunday dramatic narrative of the church" (p. 191), providing hope for those who wait for God's deliverance in the midst of crisis. Other topics that could have been included in this discussion would be the prophet Jeremiah as a model of ministry, his laments as a model for Christian prayer, or the distinctions between true and false prophecy.

Brueggemann briefly discusses references to the prophet Jeremiah and quotations from Jeremiah that are found in the NT to show the continuing influence of the book in the early church, including Jesus' quotation of Jer 7:11 when cleansing the temple and the extended quotation in Heb 8:8–12 of the new covenant promise from Jer 31:31–34. Brueggemann argues that the "supersessionist" perspective of the writer of Hebrews on the new covenant passage in Jeremiah is not a valid reading of the original text which promises instead the continuing validity of the Mosaic law, but he fails to discuss more broadly how Jeremiah's new covenant theology has influenced the message of the NT. This seems to be a rather glaring omission.

This book is recommended for its clear and concise discussion of the major theological themes in the book of Jeremiah and its exploration of Jeremiah's contribution to the theological message of the Bible as a whole. Evangelical readers will profit from Brueggemann's insights even if they do not share his postmodern epistemology, his views on the historicity of the text, or his critical perspectives on the formation of Jeremiah. Evangelical readers will likely see greater unity in places where Brueggemann perceives divergent perspectives. This work could serve as a graduate or undergraduate textbook for a course in Jeremiah or the theology of the prophets and would also provide a helpful synthesis of Jeremiah's theological message for the pastor or teacher. For other recent works reflecting the shift in Jeremiah studies to the more synchronic and holistic approach evidenced in Brueggemann's approach, one should also consult *Reading Jeremiah: The Search for Coherence* (edited by Martin Kessler, 2004), Louis Stulman's *Order Amid Chaos: Jeremiah as Symbolic Tapestry* (1998), and the three-volume commentary on Jeremiah by Jack Lundbom in the Anchor Bible series (1999–2004). J. Gordon McConville's earlier *Judgment and Promise: The Message of Jeremiah* (1993) provides a helpful analysis of the theological message of Jeremiah from a more evangelical perspective.

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