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A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming

Walter Brueggemann

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998

502 pages, \$32.00 softcover

This hefty volume is a combined edition of Brueggemann's original two-volume work, published until recently as part of the *International Theological Commentary* series. The only new material is the introduction, which surveys the current state of Jeremiah studies.

One of Brueggemann's strengths as a scholar is his skill at finding connections between divergent orientations in Old Testament studies, as is evident in this work on Jeremiah. At the outset, Brueggemann admits that each recent approach—whether history-oriented (Holladay), ideologically-motivated (Carroll), or canonical (Childs)—goes its own distinctive direction. However, for Brueggemann, “the cumulative effect...[of each approach] is more important” in that it serves “to loosen the grip of historical-critical methods on Jeremiah studies”.

While distancing himself from historical-critical methods, Brueggemann is nevertheless committed to a distinctive approach. He advocates a perspective that leads “inside” the text—to follow where the text itself seems to point, “without premature judgments grounded in past interpretive commitments”. He thus engages in scholarly differentiation from the text, allowing the text to speak for itself.

On the first page of the commentary, Brueggemann announces the main theme which drives the narrative and poetry in Jeremiah. Most of the Jeremiah tradition moves toward exile and is governed by the judgment of YHWH; only a small portion of the tradition envisions hope and homecoming. For Brueggemann, 587 B.C.E. (the beginning of the Babylonian exile) is the dominant and shaping event of not only Jeremiah, but the whole Old Testament as well. “587” is thereafter treated as a metaphor for exile and disruption.

Brueggemann employs sociological analysis as a useful tool to decipher meaning in the text: “The biblical text is understood...as located in, reflective of, and concerned for a particular social context that is determinative of its shape and focus.” Therefore, he pays attention to the ways in which reality is constructed by the poetry. He resists seeking a historical placement of the text, but rather seeks a placement of the text within various social voices or dynamic forces. It follows that Brueggemann handles the literature not as “descriptive” of what is, or a “prediction” of what will be, rather as “evocation” and “constructive” of another life world. In other words, the text functions as

an “imaginative construct”.

In his treatment of Jeremiah, Brueggemann focuses on the power of language to propose an imaginative world that is an alternative to the one that seems to be at hand. There is a marked distinction in Brueggemann’s commentary between the world that is, and the world that can be. The role of the poetry in Jeremiah, indeed in the entire Old Testament, is to construct a reality through language that is in opposition to the dominant ideology-of-the-day. The text, concludes Brueggemann, must be heard and read “as a critique of the [dominant] ideology, and as a practice of alternative imagination”.

A reading from cover to cover of any commentary is probably not a common practice among preachers and pastors. However, such a reading for the purposes of this review uncovered recurring theological weavings. First, Brueggemann submits to a Deuteronomistic reading of the text—one that regards Israel’s life beginning in YHWH’s act of mercy and fidelity. The Deuteronomistic covenant tradition of faith emphasizes repeatedly the importance of Israel’s proper response to YHWH, a response of obedient listening. Not listening invites YHWH’s judgment.

The second theological theme serves as a tension to the first. YHWH will not be contained in the tradition of covenant because God wills relationship with Israel, despite Israel’s disobedience. “God is...more complex, free, and less controllable than a simple scheme of retribution would suggest.” God’s pathos, while disrupting the claims of the Deuteronomistic pattern of obligation and sanction, results in a “subtle rhetoric” that is full of ambiguity, passion, and incongruity. Clearly, the text hails YHWH’s sovereignty and YHWH’s freedom. The coming and going of Jerusalem occurs not according to its own capacity for life and survival, but according to the sovereign inclinations of YHWH.

Finally, Brueggemann highlights the theological tradition in Jeremiah that is opposed to the “royal-temple ideology”. This dominant ideology insists that Jerusalem is immune from judgment. Once again, the Jeremiah tradition defends the centrality of covenant obligation to which no one—including Jerusalem—is immune.

It is not difficult in this commentary to make the exegetical leap to relevance. Brueggemann allows the text to speak in a post-modern world. What the text meant, he asserts, has incredible power to mean now. Any structure of domination which seeks autonomy and self-service, and which does not listen to the prophetic voice authorized by YHWH (Brueggemann cites the American military, technological, consumer-oriented establishment as an example thereof), is subject to critique by the prophetic text. Conversely, when people today grieve endings and loss, God’s resilient

power for newness is at work in such displacements. Brueggemann is, in either case, careful not to mold the text to fit any particular contemporary situation. Instead, he insists, "our situation needs to be *submitted* to the text for a fresh discernment. In every generation this text subverts all our old readings of reality and forces us to a new, dangerous, obedient reading."

Brueggemann divides the 52 chapters of Jeremiah into 15 sections, each of which is accorded a summarizing title (e.g., "The Baruch document" 36:1-45:5; "Oracles against the Nations" 46:1-51:64, "Judgment and Hope" 21:1-25:38, etc.). The format lends itself well to research on specific pericopes not always defined by the traditional versing. Moreover, much of what Brueggemann has to say is repeated in many of the sections. One need not read the entire volume in order to retrieve critical elements of Brueggemann's theology. Each of the sections is subdivided into manageable pericopes that usually move inductively from word studies, examination of grammatical nuances, images, and metaphors, to generalizing comments and conclusions, which tie in with the larger theological themes Brueggemann weaves throughout his commentary.

This edition lacks a subject index, and is not edited for post-1990 European political reality. Brueggemann refers often to the Soviet Union as an example of "Empire". In his illustration of the prophet calling Israel to submit to Babylon, he cites as an example the Cold War rhetoric: "Better red than dead." Moreover, Brueggemann does not cite any works published later than the early 1990s. Despite these drawbacks, Brueggemann's work is a refreshing contribution to biblical interpretation, one that frees the biblical text to speak for itself and embraces the ambiguity and incongruity contained within.

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Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel

Lester L. Grabbe

Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995

xviii + 261 pages, \$20.00 US Paperback

This book by Lester L. Grabbe, Head of the Department of Theology and Professor of Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism at the University of Hull in Great Britain, is an example of the kind of sociology of ancient Israel being written