A lot of commentaries on the book of Jeremiah have been published since Robert P. Carroll’s groundbreaking volume in the Old Testament Library series in 1986. Several of them have been historically or “historically” oriented, but not a few take the avenue of more theological orientation, and thus an orientation toward literary studies as well.

This very fine commentary belongs to the latter group. Louis Stulman, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Findlay, Ohio, presents in his one-volume commentary an up-to-date critical and theological reading of the book of Jeremiah, based on the understanding of the composition of Jeremiah, which he presented in his 1999 monograph, Order amid Chaos: Jeremiah as a Symbolic Tapestry.

In the foreword (xiii) the general editor of the series presents the commentaries in the Abingdon series as “books of the Old Testament for the use of theological students and pastors.” Exactly at this level, Stulman’s book is excellent, offering a “fountain of living water” in the wilderness of too historically conservative or too evangelical commentaries.

Stulman’s governing approach to Jeremiah and the book that bears his name is that the man and the words of the book are one, so to speak. Jeremiah the prophet is not primarily to be understood as the author of the book but as a part of its message, or rather, as
Stulman himself puts it: “even larger than the message itself” (16). Message and prophet become one, and the two “become an authoritative witness to God” (17). On the other hand, on a historical level the reader of the book of Jeremiah should distinguish between Jeremiah the prophet and Jeremiah the book, since they represent separate stages in its tradition. Jeremiah the prophet presumably had his career in the years 609–587 B.C.E., while Jeremiah the book took shape after the fall of Jerusalem and thus reflects societal conditions very different from those of Jeremiah the prophet. Stulman does not deny or ignore the historicity of the historical Jeremiah. He just recognizes the theological importance of the posthistorical-Jeremiah material in the book of Jeremiah.

Thus, the message of Jeremiah was presented in the chaotic, and formative, world of postdisaster early Judaism, and already from the outset Stulman introduces notions and concepts from disaster studies in his reading. Disaster studies are a branch of sociological studies that gain more and more space in Old Testament studies these years, not least thanks to Daniel Smith-Christopher’s introduction to this approach, for example in his biblical theology of exile. Stulman understands the book of Jeremiah as a “penetrating response to the multifaceted configurations of evil and the apparent silence of God.” The book of Jeremiah is “survival literature,” literature that treats fundamental and probing questions about ultimate reality (1–2).

On this background it comes natural that Stulman, like Walther Brueggemann, for example, presents the composition of the book as a display of the core phrase in Jeremiah that God not only plucks up and breaks down but also builds and plants (Jer 1:10). This central message is displayed in the book’s composition, a two-part drama that “reenacts the death of Judah’s preexilic world and the emergence of a new world order” (15). Nonetheless, the reader will not find one coherent theology in Jeremiah, since the book represents “a miscellaneous collection of theological claims rather than a unified perspective” (20). The last part of the introduction thus presents different topics, collected under the heading “Theology and Ethics”: “Divine Judgment,” “God’s Suffering Love,” “God’s Gratuitous Love,” “The Word of God,” “God’s Sovereignty,” “Theodicy in the Light of National Tragedy,” and “Jeremiah as a Model of Faithful Living.”

The commentary proper follows the literary units of the book and thus is divided into two parts: “Dismantling Judah’s Social and Symbolic Worlds” (chs. 1–25), and “The Emergence of Hope out of Shattered Worlds” (chs. 26–52). Here again Stulman unfolds the basic thoughts of his 1999 monograph and underscores the redemptive character of the book of Jeremiah. The aim of this prophetic book is less the explanation of the catastrophe or a theodicy; rather, the book is supposed to heal the wounds of the battered people through identification with its prophetic main character. Exactly at this point the
present reviewer is not totally convinced by Stulman. With this attitude he seems to overemphasize the redemptive voices of the book at the expense of the voices of horror.

The commentary on each literary unit follows a uniform pattern. After a short introduction Stulman offers a “Literary Analysis,” where he unfolds the themes of the unit and their setting in the composition and in their intertextuality. Then follows an “Exegetical Analysis,” where Stulman goes into exegetical questions and details verse by verse but with a sound sense of distinguishing important information and problems from the unimportant. Again, the author keeps his eyes firmly on intertextuality and points to illuminating parallels outside the book of Jeremiah. Each commentary ends with a “Theological and Ethical Analysis” in which he draws on the exegetical results to make sound and wissenschaftliche Old Testament theology.

However, the reader will have no doubts that this is a commentary with a mission. Time and again in these paragraphs Stulman accentuates a theology of reconciliation that points to Christian virtues. To mention just a few examples, the theological and ethical analysis of chapter 1 ends with some considerations on power structures, where the portrait of Jeremiah as a weak and conflicted prophet is strongly emphasized. God sends “a weak and conflicted prophet to help the people of Judah through their turbulent times,” Stulman writes (45, emphasis original), and he concludes: “Human frailty leaves an indelible mark on the book” (45).

Similarly, at the end of chapter 25, one of the most unpleasant and violent chapters in the book of Jeremiah, where the ultimate doom on the peoples of the world in common and on Judah in particular is foreseen, Stulman first gives emphasis to the completion of the dismantling and ruining of the religious and secular institutions of Judah. But then he continues with some more general theological considerations on the basis of the experiences conveyed by Jeremiah (228–31). “[E]mbedded in the process of dismantling is the conviction that when denials are broken and false hopes are dispelled, fresh expressions of faith are possible…. even at this moment of the prophetic drama, we know that the end of the known world is not the end of God” (231). Of course, the words of the book of Jeremiah are addressed to the people of Judah, but the character of generalization in the commentary makes it clear that the implicit addressee is the modern reader as well.

In sum, Stulman’s approach is loyal to the message of the book of Jeremiah. In Stulman’s work we find neither an ideological-critical attitude nor a historicist or deconstructivist distance to the text, but rather an empathic reading of a book of utter theological importance. This does not mean that Stulman should be deemed a naïve reader; on the
contrary, he is a skilled and open-minded scholar who opens the text to the interested reader.

With all in all 357 pages for a full commentary on the fifty-two chapters of the book of Jeremiah, the treatment of the text must necessarily be brief. The format of the series does not allow space for comments on the Hebrew text and text-critical considerations. This makes the commentary less useful in European universities where students are still expected to read Hebrew, even on an undergraduate level. Likewise, this reviewer would have liked to meet a little more considerations on historical and religio-historical methodologies and matters even in a commentary governed by literary methodology. However, these desiderata should not make anybody refrain from using Stulman’s commentary in class, since text-critical comments and historical details can be presented to the students in other ways.

The volume ends with at select bibliography both on works cited in the text and on commentaries on Jeremiah, which get a few words of presentation, very useful to the reader who is at the beginning of his or her Jeremiah studies.

All in all, not only Louis Stulman and Abingdon Press but also the community of Old Testament scholarship should be congratulated on the happy occasion of the release of this fine commentary. It must be highly recommended both for use in undergraduate classrooms and for the scholar or pastor who wants to wrestle with the theologies of the challenging book of Jeremiah.