This beautifully written and theologically powerful commentary helps its audience navigate the literary complexities of the book of Jeremiah while arguing for a coherent theological purpose to the book. Stulman is one of the more creative Jeremiah scholars in the guild today, and his work has consistently demonstrated an ability to marry an unusually graceful literary sensibility with a scholarly appreciation of the subtleties and complications of the book of Jeremiah. Stulman reads Jeremiah as a two-part prophetic response to the cultural chaos of exilic Judah. He argues that the book musters a number of overarching symmetries and theological reversals to facilitate its rhetorical movement from the dismantling of traditional Israelite symbol systems (Jer 1–25) to the articulation of a revitalized theology that emphasizes restoration and the enduring nature of God’s covenant with Israel (Jer 26–52).

Stulman rightly recognizes that many voices are preserved in the “long and complicated literary development” of the traditions in Jeremiah (46). He speaks of a “surplus of settings and audiences” constituting a “great cloud of witnesses” (9), a veritable “collage of voices in the book” (176). Stulman uses the metaphor of a “symbolic tapestry” to describe the ways in which Jeremiah’s many traditions are interwoven into a unified picture of the sociotheological landscape of sixth-century Judah. He is interested in ways
in which the prose material may have been intended to function to frame, govern, and clarify the more elliptical poetic material. Stulman tends to speak as if the biblical text transparently performed these semantic operations by itself apart from the vested interests of authors and readers, a hermeneutical position that may bemuse historical critics and poststructuralist readers alike. But once one grants the validity of his approach heuristically, his discussions of relationships between prose and poetry and structuring elements in collections such as Jer 26–36 and 36–45 can be appreciated as intelligent and accessible.

Stulman is committed to a thesis of narrative movement—plot—read structurally. In his schema, the book of Jeremiah moves from images of judgment and destruction to images of hope and rebuilding. For legitimation of this plot trajectory, Stulman returns again and again to the verbs in the commissioning of Jeremiah, “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer 1:10), reading those verbs as signaling an unfolding theological sequence in the literary structure of Jeremiah rather than, say, as simultaneous possibilities for the prophet’s agency in particular historical circumstances. Of particular interest is a thought-provoking chart intended to show that specific judgments in Jer 1–25 are reversed in the Book of Consolation (260–61). In keeping with this larger narrative arc, Stulman argues that the rhetoric of wholesale slaughter and destruction in the first part of Jeremiah was intended to be “instrumental,” a catalyst for Judah’s repentance (21). His proposal here stands over against scholarship that takes more at face value the traditions in Jeremiah that threaten death and destruction as punitive divine responses to sin.

The vulnerabilities of this excellent commentary are few. Offered below in the spirit of collegial dialogue will be one general observation about reading practices followed by two queries. The observation has to do with the way in which what interpreters say may be deconstructed by what they do hermeneutically. Multivocality is not an accident of diachronic processes but constitutive of the witness of the Jeremiah traditions; indeed, few books of the Bible are as self-conscious about preserving conflicting viewpoints as is Jeremiah. Stulman recognizes this, but despite his acknowledgement of “many hands” having been at work in the production of Jeremiah (46 and passim), he continues to speak of “the interpretive community of Jeremiah” as if it were a monolithic group that created the “intentional literary organization and purposeful design” (13) he sees in the book. Such diction unfortunately goes rather far toward unraveling the acknowledgements of multivocality that Stulman makes elsewhere. Further, Stulman’s reading of a movement from judgment to salvation as the theological plot of the book drastically oversimplifies; his own concession in this regard (“clearly overly simplistic” [19]) does not change that. Radiant hope exists in Jeremiah, to be sure, but does it dominate the second half of the book? One might argue that the Book of Consolation is buried deep within the book, not
as its theological center (pace Stulman, who follows R. E. Clements here) but as a small collection of muted eschatological voices whose lyrical expressions of hope for a unified Judah and Israel are strictly controlled—perhaps even irreparably ironized—by the vituperative partisan politics of the prose material on either side. One might object that the treatment of Jehoiachin at Evil-merodach’s table (Jer 52:31–34), far from being the glimmer of hope that Stulman and others have suggested, may be a final political thrust by the accommodationist party intended to show that flourishing will be possible only when Judeans submit to Babylon’s hegemony and resign themselves to their leaders’ eating, as it were, from Babylon’s hand. Those final verses could be even be read as a devastating satirical sketch showing the pathetic domestication of Judah’s last monarch as the end result of the (misguided) policy of accommodation. My point is not simply that multiple readings are possible. It is that the movement from judgment to hope so visible in the final forms of Amos and Micah, for example, is much more ambiguous in Jeremiah.

Two queries may now be raised in response to Stulman’s elegant and nuanced exegesis. The first concerns how the interpreter is to evaluate biblical theological claims garbed in rhetorics of shaming, torture, and killing when preparing a commentary directed to today’s church. Stulman has generally done a commendable job of grappling with ethical and theological problems raised by the biblical text. One may be permitted to regret, then, those occasional instances in which he obscures or romanticizes the problematic nature of biblical passages and themes. Three examples follow.

First, missing in Stulman’s work is any sustained attention to issues of gender and sexuality in Jeremiah. Stulman argues that the broken-marriage metaphor (under which he subsumes the figuring of Judah as sexually licentious woman and shameless nymphomaniac) is “privileged” in the book of Jeremiah to the extent that “all subsequent God-talk is rooted in this initial metaphor” (61). If that is the case, then surely the heavily gendered nature of this prophetic diction, with its reflexive phallocentrism mis-shaping the imaginations of countless generations of readers, deserves more explicit ethical and theological engagement. Feminist and womanist interpreters have worked for decades now to elucidate the significance of images of body, sex, and gender in the prophetic corpus. Passing over their contributions in silence constitutes a disservice to the church, whose readers struggle mightily with these difficult metaphors.

A characteristic example of romanticizing comes in Stulman’s amelioration of the judgment language in Jer 6. He writes, “The text’s rhetoric of war, its invective against Judah, may seem to contradict God’s core character of compassion and love. However, whenever the poor are exploited and their rights are deprived … God’s towering indignation comes to the fore … [and] takes decisive action on behalf of Jerusalem’s
oppressed” (83). Some readers may find it difficult to read God’s obliteration of every single Judean in the city as an action that somehow champions the poor and rescues them from oppression. Jeremiah’s pointed indictment of the poor themselves in 5:4, along with the broad scope of divine wrath generally (“Pour it out on the children in the street” [6:11]; “parents and children, neighbor and friend shall perish” [6:21]), would suggest that this merciless rhetoric of death is not best understood as a robust advocacy for social justice.

Another example may be seen in Stulman’s claim that “The metaphor of exile transformed scattered and isolated families into a community unified by the memory of communal pain and displacement” (7). In the prose sermons, a dominant voice vilifies certain Judean groups so as to privilege the authority of the Diaspora group in Babylon. In rhetoric that draws dramatic and unforgiving lines between insiders and outsiders within the Judean community, these traditionists dictate the appropriate posture toward Babylon’s military aggression (namely, collaborationist submission) and the appropriate attitude toward exile in Babylon, that is, pliant assimilatory support of the Babylonian infrastructure as a means to guarantee security for the Diaspora community. The astute reader of Jer 24, 27–29, and 42–44 will see that the terror and destabilization of exile yielded internecine strife, betrayal, and ferocious polemics about the comparative worth of various Judean groups. While the trope of exile may indeed have brought some families together, this particular symbol is performed in the Deutero-Jeremianic prose primarily through political scapegoating and brutally divisive judgments about community identity. In this regard, consider also Stulman’s rehabilitation of the vicious invective of Jer 24:1–10, a passage in which Judeans living in Judah and Egypt, portrayed with derision as rotting figs, are to be hunted down by God until every one of them is ruthlessly exterminated. Stulman writes, “While these assurances fail to do justice to the hardships of the remnant in the land and those who fled to Egypt, they eventually transcend sectarian interests and become paradigmatic for survivors everywhere. These hopeful overtures claim that dispersion to the uttermost places cannot separate the faithful from the love and presence of God” (221). Some readers may wonder how this passage could ever “transcend sectarian interests” without becoming completely unrecognizable. The church must never forget the power of scriptural rhetoric to disenfranchise and dismember as well as to “build and to plant,” and accessible commentaries such as those in the Abingdon series should serve as key resources for the church in this endeavor.

A second query has to do with whether Stulman’s careful distinction between political and theological issues does justice to the seamless way in which the political is represented in terms of the theological in Jeremiah. Stulman avers that internecine political disputes may have shaped the text diachronically but are not determinative for theological interpretation of the book. Of Jer 24:1–10 he writes, “While partisan politics
likely lie beneath the surface of the text, the present form of the text is governed by theological concerns” (220). Of Jer 43:1–7, “While intense geopolitical rivalries are certainly at work, the narrative is not interested in these forces per se.... the story collapses a whole complex of factors into one all-embracing theological contention” (337). These and similar claims read directly against the grain of the biblical text’s overt and transparent articulation of concrete theopolitical interests. The clashing theologies present in the book of Jeremiah are deeply and definitively colored by the political stances of their proponents. Theology is not separable from the joys and struggles of embodied living, whether in ancient testimony or in our own theological work and confessional practices. Here, then, a deeper sympathy with the methodological aims of ideological criticism and a closer engagement with postcolonial analysis would likely yield theological interpretations of Jeremiah rather different from those of Stulman.

The above queries should serve only to illustrate the way in which Stulman’s lucid work invites theological reflection on the politics of ancient and contemporary witness and scriptural notions of identity. Stulman’s fine commentary is highly intelligent and offers numerous moments of almost breathtaking interpretive clarity. It will richly repay the attention of every pastor and scholar interested in Jeremiah.