Kessler, Martin, ed.

Reading the Book of Jeremiah: A Search for Coherence


Else K. Holt
University of Aarhus
Aarhus, Denmark DK-8500

The present volume is a collection of articles written by scholars from America, England, Ireland, Holland, and Australia, edited and, in the case of the Dutch articles, translated by Martin Kessler. According to the editor’s introduction, it is intended for readers who “do not claim to be biblical experts but who may appreciate some guidance as they read the book of Jeremiah” (xi). The articles are therefore written virtually without footnotes, words in Hebrew, and other technicalities. The volume is provided with a bibliography of titles in English and an index of Scripture.

The collected essays deal—and struggle—with a great variety of problems relating to reading the book of Jeremiah. This prophetic book has been considered extremely confusing—or to quote Smelik, “a complete chaos”—in its composition and message. In the words of Robert P. Carroll in his posthumous article “The Polyphonic Jeremiah,” “One of the most striking features of the Book of Jeremiah is that it is a scroll full of many different and discrete voices” (77). This polyphonic character of the book of Jeremiah is the reason why it has inspired a multiplicity of interpretations, and the tradition of variety in interpretation is explicitly followed in the present volume, with two restrictions: (1) the methods applied are fundamentally literary, not traditionally historical-
critical; (2) in the words of the editor, “it is assumed that the meaning [of the text] is to be found in the text itself and not in novel ideologies, no matter how popular they may be a present” (xii). This means that so-called postmodern questioning strategies such as feministic, neo-Marxist, or postcolonial are not included (but see below).

The volume consists of fourteen essays, of which the first seven deal with the book of Jeremiah as a whole, the next six focus on various segments of the book, and the closing essay (by J. W. Mazurel) discusses “Citations from the Book of Jeremiah in the New Testament.” This is an excellent editorial idea, since the history of influence (Wirkungsgeschichte), also throughout the Bible, is an important part of our hermeneutical ballast.

Some of the essays, primarily in the first group, offer methodological reflections along with their text work. For example C. R. Seitz’s “The Place of the Reader in Jeremiah” serves as a good introduction to a discussion of how to read biblical prophetic books. Seitz outlines two tasks confronting “the Christian readers…: interpreting the Old Testament *per se* and the Old *in novo receptum,*” and his focus is on the question: “Does this book have a particular reader orientation that we are meant to identify and then orient ourselves around? Our goal shall be to determine *how consciously we as readers and hearers of this work of scriptural witness are actually anticipated by the literature itself*” (67, emphasis original). Against the backdrop of an superbly clear (and short) presentation of the intentions of classical historical-critical (Protestant) scholarship, Seitz reads the book of Jeremiah in its final shape, but with a sidelong glance to its prehistory “with the hope that by understanding this shaping, clues might be given about how readers might appropriate the message of the book” (70). Seitz’s literary studies, thus, are also theological.

Of great interest is also Klaas A. D. Smelik’s “An Approach to the Book of Jeremiah,” in which he discusses how to read a book with so many “surprises and inconsistencies” in the presentation of its message and main person. Smelik offers two keys to making the book more accessible. The first key is to use the clues given by the redactors in the narrative of the writing of the scroll in Jer 36, which brings Smelik to comprehend Mowinckel’s classical theory of four sources in the book of Jeremiah and to ask questions regarding how to determine which material is “authentic” and which is not. The second key, the one recommended by Smelik, is to look at the composition of Jeremiah to find the theological message of the biblical writers. Chapters 1; 25; 26; 36; 46; and 50–51 are considered key chapters that envelop the four essential parts of the book and point to its inner discussion between doom and salvation, pro- and anti-Babylonian messages, and a picture of Jeremiah as a traitor or a faithful prophet of YHWH. This internal discussion is the biblical writers’ way of committing complex questions to the reader, not “with a
nuanced argument, but by putting texts side by side so that different aspects of the problem were treated separately and in their own way” (10).

Smelik’s article points to two interesting characteristics in this collection: an awareness of composition and inner discussion as a key to “Jeremian” theology and a focus on the oracles against Babylon, Jer 50–51. These oracles have received growing attention over the last few years, after having been neglected by most scholars for decades mostly because of their unpleasant and revengeful tenor. The editor, Martin Kessler, in his contribution with the revealing title “The Scaffolding of the Book of Jeremiah” treats the two concerns together. Kessler argues that the book of Jeremiah has a “scaffolding composed of three ‘columns’, on which the entire frame rests.” Chapter 1 defines the nature of the prophetic office and the “global” authority of God. Chapter 25 stands in the middle, summarizing the prophetic message before it and the fate of Babylon following. Finally, chapters 50–51 describe the punishment of Babylon but with the “significant addition” of promises of deliverance to Judah, not contained in the other oracles in the collection.

J. G. Amesz (“A God of Vengeance? Comparing YHWH’s Dealings with Judah and Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah”) and Klaas A. D. Smelik in his second contribution (“The Function of Jeremiah 50 and 51 in the Book of Jeremiah”) both work along the same lines of interest, and Walter Brueggemann examines the role of Babylon in six Old Testament texts, including two from the book of Jeremiah. In this reprint of a fourteen-year-old essay, Brueggemann makes what he calls “a subversive rereading of the empire.” He argues that the Old Testament’s underscoring of God’s mercy and his demand for mercy also from mighty Babylon (even though it has served as his tool of punishment) offers to the modern reader of the Bible a theological spillover, a call for mercy toward the weak of the earth, not “evoked simply by willful, imaginative interpreters but … also rooted in the metaphors and images themselves, which reach out in relentless sense making” (133). This “spillover” must affect us, Brueggemann declares, “as we are bound to read [the text] on the horizon of China’s Tienamen Square and Berlin’s wall, of Panama’s canal and South Africa’s changing situation, of Kuwait’s lure of oil” (133–34). Brueggemann’s essay thus breaks the methodological boundaries of the volume mentioned above: its approach might not be fully postmodern but at least to the present reviewer it looks more theologically prescriptive than descriptive.

Brueggemann’s contribution touches on an editorial problem in this volume, namely, the use of material published previously. Brueggemann’s essay is from 1991, and the last quotation above shows how dependent any text is on its historical context. Smelik’s article on Jer 50–51 was published in Dutch as early as 1987 and shows that literary-theological readings are not the invention of the 1990s, but at the same time it seems a bit
overtaken by later works on the same issue. Also Stulman’s “Jeremiah the Prophet: Astride Two Worlds” has been published before, and even if especially Stulman’s hermeneutical considerations are stimulating, there exist newer and fuller versions of his analyses in print. A presentation of his considerations on the composition of Jeremiah beyond the publishing of his Abingdon commentary would have been even more inspiring.

On the other hand, it could be argued that such presentations on larger works are useful to the intended readership. John Hill’s “‘Your Exile Will be Long’: The Book of Jeremiah and the Unended Exile” deals with the many-faced portrait of Nebuchadnezzar in Jeremiah as an important vehicle for the theological proclamation to the postexilic community of “its paradoxical situation of living in the promised land while at the same time understanding itself as still in exile” (160). A longer, more technical and, it should be added, very fulfilling treatment of the themes in this contribution is in Hill’s Friend or Foe? The Figure of Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah MT (Brill, 1999), which is warmly recommended to the schooled reader. In addition, Bob Becking’s “Divine Reliability and the Conceptual Coherence of the Book of Consolation (Jeremiah 30–31)” presents insights that have been thoroughly treated in another volume, Becking’s very technical and intellectually challenging collection of articles on Jer 30–31, Between Fear and Freedom (Brill 2004). Becking treats the question of literary and conceptual coherence in the Book of Consolation, pointing to the importance of so-called macro-syntactical indicators in the text for understanding its dynamics and discussion. Like the article by Hill, Becking’s is a very useful sample or foretaste of the larger collection, which can serve as an introduction to the literary reading competence of its author.

Space does not allow me to comment on all the contributions in this volume. Instead, I shall finish my review with a few subjective and personal remarks. Reading the Book of Jeremiah seems to me to be one among many in recent years of the “scholars-unite-each-to-write-an-article-on-a-supposedly-common-subject” type within the “scholars-teach-lay-persons” subtype. Its common discourse is the well known “historical-critical-studies-are-out-literary-studies-are-in.” That is all very fine, but one might question the imminent need for another fourteen articles beginning with the same argument pro literary readings and contra historical criticism. Literary readings of all kinds (in his book mentioned above, Becking compares the discipline “Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible” with a mall with a variety of shops [1]) are very influential these days and by no means seriously threatened by historical-critical orthodoxy. Old Testament scholarship, I think, has reached a stage where we do not need the litany on the “good” literary readings over against the “wicked” historical-critical.
As for the intended readership, I have my serious doubts about its existence in the real world. The articles in this volume are not easily read by nonspecialists who, in my opinion, will need a lot of guidance from a specialist. That means that they will not meet the requirement of an audience from outside the academic world. Moreover, one might question their usefulness for graduate students who want to be acquainted with the book of Jeremiah, since they are virtually without the scholarly apparatus that enables the reader to go further with his or her studies.

However, these critical remarks should not be taken as a critique of this collection or the essays per se but rather as a call to the scholarly world to reconsider publishing projects. What we need—or at least what I personally feel the need for in my teaching and studies—is publications focusing on coherent themes, books that are books, not just articles wrapped together, volumes that are the result of proper cooperation, collective thinking, and mutual inspiration in a group of passionate experts, playing together in the field of Old Testament studies.