Sharp, Carolyn J.

*Prophecy and Ideology in Jeremiah: Struggles for Authority in the Deutero-Jeremianic Prose*

Old Testament Studies


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Carolyn Sharp’s revised Yale dissertation (Robert R. Wilson) begins with discontent over interpretive conflict about source materials in the book of Jeremiah. She rejects the pursuit of the historical Jeremiah because he is irretrievable, and with great force she rejects the assumption of a “monolithic” Deuteronomistic editor. She believes the prose contains complex ideological perspectives not perceivable in synchronic readings. Rather than expressing monotonous and warmed-over Deuteronomic thinking, Jeremianic prose, Sharp claims, divides into sharply divergent “traditionist perspectives.” Though the latter may be the case, Sharp’s manner of ideologically complicating the material is not entirely convincing, and the book is difficult to read.

Sharp begins her study with a fine summary of scholarly debate on redactional matters related to interpretation of the prose sermons, and she clearly summarizes main works and central questions. Yet this opening chapter charges scholars with oversimplification of literary data so repetitively that Sharp’s own thesis appears simply to be the need for complication of readings. Across a variety of texts, subsequent chapters distinguish between two ideological perspectives that Sharp believes to be mutually exclusive points of view, created by two redactors in two separate social settings.
The first ideological tradition emerges from prose texts that promise “inevitable doom” to the people. Central to this viewpoint is Israel’s refusal to heed the prophets, and this disobedience results in unavoidable destruction and exile. This strand of tradition arises in Judah after 597 B.C.E., presumably as an explanation of the disaster.

Sharp terms the second ideological perspective interwoven into this Judean material the “conditional perspective.” It focuses on themes missing from the Judean ideology: the moral failings of the people and the possibility that disaster might be averted. These moral failings cause God to abandon the temple and its cultic authorities and, in the present text, function as a pro-gôlâ ideology that transfers cultic authority from the Jerusalem to Babylon. The pro-gôlâ texts privilege the leaders taken to Babylon and delegitimate power structures in Judah, particularly the temple.

Sharp develops her argument across many texts, devoting a chapter each to the motif of “my servants the prophets,” to Jeremiah’s role as “prophet to the nations,” and to false prophecy in Jeremiah. From there she turns to the ideological functions of prophets in Jeremiah, Kings, and Deut 18. Exegetical study of the phrase “my servants the prophets” that appears in Jer 7; 26; 35; and 44 illustrates Sharp’s approach.

In the temple sermon (Jer 7:1–8:3), for example, she finds a coherent layer of the Judean tradition of inevitable doom. When the people are quoted repeating the phrase “the temple of the lord” (7:4), the sermon indicts them for false trust in temple authorities, not for false confidence in the temple’s inviolability, as interpreters usually claim. Doom results from the people’s refusal to listen to the prophets because they prefer wrong advisors associated with the temple, namely, the false prophets (47). True prophets preach doom, as Jeremiah does here (7:16, 20, 27–28).

Interlaced with this Judean ideology are verses both criticizing the people’s moral failures and appealing to them to amend their ways in order to avert disaster (7:3, 5–7, 9-13a, 14, 17–19, 30–34; 8:1–3). These verses and parts of verses create a conflicting “redactional patch” (48) on the Judean perspective. Among them are references to the temple at Shiloh (7:12–13a and 14). Most interpreters think the allusion to Shiloh promises inevitable destruction to the Jerusalem temple, but Sharp finds, instead, that they threaten divine abandonment of the temple as a preliminary step toward the temple’s fall. The sermon appeals to Shiloh to refer to God’s withdrawal from that place because of the loss of the ark before the Assyrians destroyed it. God’s abandonment of the temple in Jerusalem shows disdain for temple leaders and, thereby, shifts authority from them to cult leaders in Babylon. Sharp bases her interpretation of Shiloh on one study (R. A. Pearce, “Shiloh and Jer VII 12, 14 and 15,” VT 23 [1973]: 105–8) and appears to be imposing an Ezekiel-like perspective on Jeremiah. To speak of the symbol of Shiloh by highlighting one
moment in that temple’s history misunderstands the multilayered nature of symbolic speech and overly specifies it without supporting clues from the text itself.

Sharp judges the two ideological divisions to be “unmistakably different” from each other (79). But why are these two perspectives mutually exclusive? Babylonian exiles would have had as much need as survivors in Judah to explain the fall of the nation, city, and temple. Moreover, people in Judah would surely have had multifaceted interpretations of the disaster that might well include blaming the fall on their own moral failures. Judean and Babylonian survivors alike would need to explain the collapse of the city and the exile of its leaders. That the final form of the text ideologically favors Babylonian exiles is not disputed among scholars, but neither is such an ideology inconsistent with a view of the fall as inevitable.

The exegetical work in this dissertation evokes source criticism of the past that divided passages and even verses into different sources to account for literary and theological tensions and multiplicity of themes. In this case, Sharp’s assignment of pieces of texts to different ideological layers proposes a complex redactional process wherein editors splice pro-gôlâ Deuteronomistic prose into Judean Deuteronomistic prose. The result is a sparse, half-formed perspective in the skeleton Judean verses of inevitable doom that utterly destroys the basic narrative flow of the final form of the text. Only the Babylonian perspective emerges with a fully developed redactional agenda in Sharp’s rereading. Though Sharp can be applauded for her attention to multivocal aspects of Jeremiah’s Deuteronomistic prose, perhaps a Bakhtinian approach with its attention to double-voicing and the dialogic nature of speech would be a more productive tool for studying the tensions in the Deuteronomistic prose of this complex book.