

BOOK REVIEW OF *LIKE FIRE IN THE BONES*

A Book Review

Submitted to Dr. R. Dennis Cole

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Author Information¹

Walter Brueggemann is professor emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary, where he served for approximately eighteen years in the Old Testament department. Brueggemann received a B.D. in Old Testament from Eden Theological Seminary in 1958 and received a Th.D. in Old Testament from Union Theological Seminary in 1961. In addition to the theological degrees, he also completed a Ph.D. in education in 1974 from St. Louis University. He has held many prestigious lectureships around the world, received multiple honorary degrees and written several theological works of critical acclaim. Many consider him to be a "postmodern" scholar that has helped to further the use of rhetorical criticism in Old Testament studies. Among these notable facts, he is also an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ denomination.

Purpose of the Book

Like Fire in the Bones: Listening for the Prophetic Word in Jeremiah represents an editorial attempt on the part of Patrick Miller to bring together several articles written by Brueggemann regarding both the prophet Jeremiah and the book that bears his name. The nature of the compilation make it difficult to ascertain a narrow purpose behind the book's composition since most of the articles do not bear any substantial flow between themselves. However, Miller seems to suggest that one of the things that the reader will learn is a "great deal about the contemporary interpretation of the book of Jeremiah."² This statement is broad enough to encompass the nature of the book and will be considered the purpose for which these essays were brought together into one volume.

¹ All of this material is based on a synthesis of selection from his curriculum vitae, which is posted on the Columbia Theological Seminary website.

² Pg. x

Summary and Critique of the Book

The book is essentially broken up into three major sections with five chapters per section. The first section of the book begins by considering a "portrait" of Jeremiah as a prophet. The examination of "Jeremiah, the person" as opposed to "Jeremiah, the book" is an admitted difficulty for the historical-critical approach of much of modern Old Testament scholarship. Brueggemann rightly notes this difficulty when he refers to the "minimalist view" on Jeremiah.³ Instead of spending a lot of time dealing with such a view, Brueggemann proposes his view of Jeremiah as the appointed prophet of YHWH. In the second chapter, the author's focus moves from the historical Jeremiah to the book of Jeremiah. As with the other chapter, he starts off with a few brief comments regarding the "three-source" hypotheses for the content that fills the book of Jeremiah. From here, the author moves on to meditate on nature of the book and concludes with a striking comment about its readability, where he says, "Once we face that unreadable God who acts in freedom and faithfulness, then the abyss becomes readable and the book of Jeremiah as a script for performing the abyss makes sense of an odd and compelling kind."⁴ In chapter three, Brueggemann passes a pretty harsh but charitable judgment on four different critical commentaries on the book of Jeremiah. In chapter four, the reader is exposed to the first formal examples of Brueggemann's theological work. In this particular chapter, the author considers how the book of Jeremiah speaks of the YHWH's work of creation. It is at this point that Brueggemann makes one of the most powerful statements in the entire book. He says, "It is unmistakable that YHWH the creator is the subject of every verb. Heaven and earth, like Israel, are always on the receiving end of that activity, always the object acted upon."⁵ This statement is a very keen insight into the theological understanding of the author(s) of the book of Jeremiah for which Brueggemann

³ Pg. 3

⁴ Pg. 28

⁵ Pg. 54

should be admired since such an observation is driven by the text of the literature as opposed to the pre-understanding of the interpreter. In the final chapter of the first section, the author suggests that whatever future approaches are taken Jeremiah studies, one must not divorce the rigor of academic scholarship from the experience of life. Commenting on this enterprise, the author says, "Our work is to move, I propose, through and beyond syllabus, when syllabus is well done, to canon, to a normalizing voice that refuses to be 'readable' precisely because readability produces domestication."⁶

Section two begins with what could be considered the best chapter in the whole book. In this chapter, entitled "The Prophetic Word of God and History," Brueggemann attempts to steer a middle ground between "modernity" and "supernaturalism" in regards to YHWH's activity among humanity. Throughout the chapter, the author traces the concept of the "prophetic word" throughout the life of the people of Israel. At the close of the chapter, Brueggemann provides a definition for the "prophetic word" that he had just traced throughout Israel's history, saying "Prophetic speech (that is, the way God's word impinges upon human history) is concrete talk in particular circumstances where the great purpose of God for the human enterprise come down to particulars of hurt and healing, of despair and hope."⁷ In chapter seven, the author considers the different ways that "ending" can and should be understand throughout the book of Jeremiah as it is used to describe not only the "ending" of God's people, but also the "ending" of their enemies. Chapter eight, addresses the "chronological development" of the book of Jeremiah in light of readings that would appear to be from two different time periods, namely, pre-587 and post-587. On this particular point, it would seem like the redactional theories and three-source hypothesis are not very comfortable allowing the prophetic literature to actually function in a "forth-telling" manner, but would rather assume that any information that speak of "post-587" events must have been

⁶ Pg. 71

⁷ Pg. 85

written after the events instead of actually representing true prophecy. In chapter nine, Brueggemann takes a brief look at the exile and discusses it in a more syntopical manner rather than focusing strictly on Jeremiah literature. In the conclusion to the second section, the author briefly comments on the text of scripture and its significance in the covenant community both historical and present.

In the three and final section, the author takes up the intensely practical matter of the continuation of prophetic ministry in the present while using Jeremiah as an example. These chapters are the most practical of the whole book and provide a closing application for the material in the proceeding sections. However, it is in this section that there would appear to be more of departure from the what the "text meant" to what the "text means."

Brueggemann's background in sociological study comes through when he focuses on the societal work of the prophet while in at least some respects failing to honor the intention of the original author in its historical-grammatical context. An example of this presupposition can be found on page 153, where he writes, "Prophetic faith is aimed, in the first instance, at reconstruction of social reality. It believes that the world of social transaction is redeemable and subject to change. It affirms, moreover, that human agents can make a difference in the shape of that world." This observation seems somewhat ironic since other prophetic material would surely seem to suggest otherwise. One has to look no further than Isaiah's commission in Isaiah 6:8-13, which clearly states that YHWH is not primarily concerned with the prophet acting as a reformist, but instead as an obedient servant irrespective of the people's response to his message. Unfortunately, then, for all the helpful insight the Brueggemann supplies in the first ten chapters, the five final chapters do very little to enrich the reader due to the fact that there is a departure from the "text of scripture" in regards to application and practical wisdom.

Recommendation

For the sake of full disclosure, the reviewer is not very familiar with the work of Walter Brueggemann. Therefore, the recommendation that follows is based essentially on the content of this one particular book. There is no doubt that Brueggemann is a scholar. His works appears to be very well documented and well-reasoned. Furthermore, he would probably be one of the first to admit that all scholarly work is to one degree or another filtered through the theological presuppositions of the interpreter. With the said, the reviewer found the book to be very enjoyable at certain parts, but also very committed to a critical method that is more closely related to the rationalistic approaches of modernity that Brueggemann would probably like to admit. Unfortunately, the reviewer is not aware of many other books that attempt to engage on the same scholarly level as this book while still maintaining evangelical commitments to the text of scriptures. Hence, this book is worth reading by those who are discerning and willing to work through difficult concepts, but it is not recommended to the unskilled or undiscerning.