

**BOOK REVIEW OF *OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY –
THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH***

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

In *Old Testament Theology – The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, Brueggemann writes as a contributor to a series that serves as a companion to *New Testament Theology* series that is edited by James D.G. Dunn. As with the *New Testament Theology* series, this series is designed to address the “present hermeneutical climate, an ethos change in the study of religion, and diversities of interdisciplinary studies in the Old Testament.”² For Brueggemann’s part, he takes up the theological content of Jeremiah.

Summary and Critique of the Book

This book is essentially divided up into four sections of study that can be summarized as the text, theology, function, and significance of the book of Jeremiah. In the first section, Brueggemann addresses the critical elements of the study of Jeremiah. In particular, his focus

¹ All of this material is based on a synthesis of selection from his curriculum vitae, which is

² Pg. xiii

is on three-source theories of the content of Jeremiah in its final form. In many ways, this material is a summary of a great deal of the material that is found in his book, *Like Fire in the Bones*.

In the second section, Brueggemann argues extensively and convincingly that the theology of Jeremiah is primarily focused on God and his sovereignty. In his conclusion of this section, Brueggemann writes

The task of the Jeremian tradition, from the initial summons of the prophet to the derivative traditions that constitute the book, is to articulate and enact the reality of YHWH in a complex, disputatious world crisis that shattered established public order and that jeopardized the community of Israel. The variegated attempts of the tradition to maintain the connection of YHWH and crisis require imagination in both utterance and reading. In the end, however, all of this rich variety comes to fruition in a single conviction. The future is held firmly in the hands of a sovereign God who practices fidelity; the future is held firmly in the hands of a faithful God who practices sovereignty.³

One of the most significant characteristics of this section is how Brueggemann moves from the historical-critical issues in the first section into a rather “unhindered” theology of the book of Jeremiah. While some theologians allow the critical issues to dictate their theology wholly, Brueggemann demonstrates his ability to allow the content in its final form to be the basis of his theological statements without continually positing the effects of source criticism on the work of theology. This makes the material much more readable and accessible.

In the third section, Brueggemann attempts to demonstrate the relationship of the book of Jeremiah to the rest of the Old Testament. Specifically, he is concerned to see how other material has shaped and been shaped by the content of Jeremiah. Interestingly enough, he concludes that “the book of Jeremiah stands pivotally at the center of the Old Testament and occupies a primary position vis-à-vis the decisive crisis of the Old Testament faith.”⁴ Though he does not address it, this type of statement regarding the centrality of Jeremiah

³ Pgs. 132-133

⁴ Pg. 184

would seem at least on the surface to be out of step with the more critical, biblical-theological methods of historical-critical Old Testament scholars like Barr and others. To state that Jeremiah is at the “pivotal center of the Old Testament” at least to some degree admits a unity and thematic coherence.

In the fourth and final section, Brueggemann briefly addresses the place of Jeremiah in contemporary times with an emphasis on the “crisis” perspective that he claims to see in Jeremian literature. Though some good points are made in this section, Brueggemann’s postmodern hermeneutics and applications do very little to actually respect the biblical author’s intentions. Instead of drawing on the hope giving promises of the New Covenant in the book of Jeremiah, which are also clearly articulated in the New Testament, the attention really ends up on the exemplary nature of the Jeremian material as opposed to its actual fulfillment in Christ as the mediator of the New Covenant blessings, which are promised to the covenant people.

Recommendation

Old Testament Theology – The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah is a helpful secondary resource for those studying the book of Jeremiah on a critical level, but there is very little that this book actually adds to the discussion when one considers the richness of theological content in many of the commentaries that are available on Jeremiah. If one possesses a few of the better critical commentaries on Jeremiah, then this book can be easily ignored.