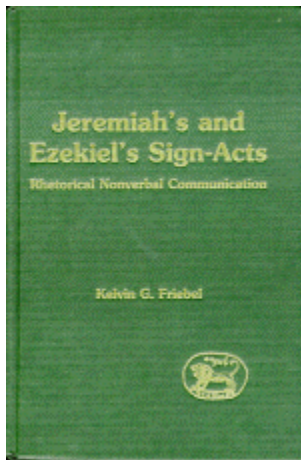


RBL 07/10/2000



**Friebel, Kelvin J.**

***Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts: Rhetorical and Nonverbal Communication***

JSOTSup 283

Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999. Pp. 535, Cloth, \$90, ISBN 1850759197.

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This study analyzes the sign-acts of Jeremiah and Ezekiel as examples of nonverbal communication, specifically, as acts of rhetoric or persuasion. Friebel's "rhetorical method" of analysis follows that of Edwin Black in isolating: 1) the rhetorical situation, 2) the rhetorical strategies employed, and 3) the effect on the audience, as evidenced by audience response. The study limits itself to the actions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, first because these two prophets are taken to share approximately the same historical context and thus the same rhetorical situation, and second, because their combined sign-acts account for all but seven of the biblical actions Friebel credits as genuine sign-acts. On that basis Friebel takes Jeremiah and Ezekiel to be paradigmatic exemplars of the biblical prophetic sign-act.

Friebel begins with a chapter treating general questions such as the definition of the sign-act, its intent (whether, for example, it is primarily performed as a means of communicating with an audience or as a form of sympathetic magic), and the problem of whether the sign-acts were ever actually performed as described in the text. Friebel next discusses each of Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's sign-acts according to the three-step model described above. The analysis of "rhetorical strategies" is divided into discussion, first, of the "meaning" of the act, and how that meaning is communicated, and second, of the "rhetorical process," which is further subdivided according to the audience's attention to, and their comprehension, acceptance, and retention of the prophet's message. This analysis of individual sign-acts makes up the bulk of the book (pp. 79-369). Finally, Friebel provides a synthesis of the sign-acts according to the types of nonverbal

communication they employ (e.g., the use of props, various bodily movements), and concludes by summarizing and comparing the nonverbal communicative techniques of Jeremiah and of Ezekiel.

The study is of mixed quality. The goal of analyzing sign-acts as rhetorical tools is well-conceived, but Friebel creates problems for himself by purporting to analyze "the rhetoric of the performed sign-acts" themselves, as distinct from, indeed as distinguished from "the rhetoric of their literary descriptions" (p. 12). The difficulty, of course, is that apart from "their literary descriptions" no sign-acts exist for analysis. The ultimately quixotic attempt to analyze the "actions" (which are not available for inspection) as opposed to the text (which is) causes considerable mischief. The first problem is circular argumentation. In adjudicating the question of whether the sign-acts were ever actually performed, for example, Friebel offers as evidence of their performance the fact that "the text intends the reader to understand the acts as actually occurring" (p.22); it seems that if an event is depicted with effective realism it is therefore likely to have occurred. Literary reports of audience reactions (though sparse) are similarly accepted as evidence that the sign-acts were performed in historical time and space. Indeed, he argues, "if the actions were not performed but only verbally communicated . . . , the study of their rhetorical function could not focus on the acts themselves but only on the literary narratives" (p. 20). Friebel seems unaware that his study must of necessity focus on the literary narratives, whether the prophetic actions were performed, were "verbally communicated," or were simply made up. Ironically, the "actual events" are equally unavailable whether they took place or not.

Friebel's attempt to analyze the sign-acts as *acts* distinct from the narrative, and his lack of any non-literary data on these acts leads him to formulate somewhat insipid (and ultimately unsupported) conclusions regarding individual sign-acts, particularly in his discussions of audience reaction. His rhetorical model calls for analysis of audience reaction as part of the rhetorical "event," and rather than admitting that the texts give almost no indication of audience reaction, Friebel posits scenarios that at best represent only possible audience reactions. Following Jeremiah's breaking of the pot, for example, "every time the audience members, even inadvertently, broke a vessel . . . an occasion was created for the remembrance of Jeremiah's deliberate action" (p. 124). So also, after Ezekiel had eaten his unclean meal(s), "when the exiles themselves partook of food in their own homes, they would have been consciously reminded" of the sign-act and its implications (p. 252).

Friebel's methodological problems do not negate some quite impressive aspects of the book. First, Friebel integrates a wealth of scholarly discussion into his analysis of individual sign-acts. He engages the central critical questions involved in the interpretation of all of Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's sign-acts, thereby providing a comprehensive resource for scholars interested in any of these diverse texts or in the phenomenon (whether historical or literary) of the prophetic sign-act. Several carefully

argued excurses set out Friebel's own solutions to interpretive cruxes. The treatment of "Israel" in Ezekiel is especially strong, demonstrating that throughout Ezekiel (including the sign-act of lying first on the left side and then on the right), "Israel" does not refer to the northern kingdom in contrast to the south, but to a state and people comprised of north and south together. Even Friebel's work of isolating and systematically describing the various prophetic actions is useful, as it allows the reader to see the differences and commonalities in the actions depicted. And his final chapter includes insightful comparisons of the two prophets' rhetorical strategies. Jeremiah's tendency, for example, to employ a single, figurative (symbolic) object in a relatively unified action (smashing a pot) is contrasted with Ezekiel's use of both figurative and overtly representational objects in complex and often convoluted actions (lying on his left side and eating siege rations while setting his face against a model of Jerusalem). Despite the methodological problems, the book succeeds in elucidating the dynamics of Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's sign-acts and their rhetorical force. The study provides an excellent view of current research, and will surely provide a base for further research, either social-anthropological or explicitly literary.