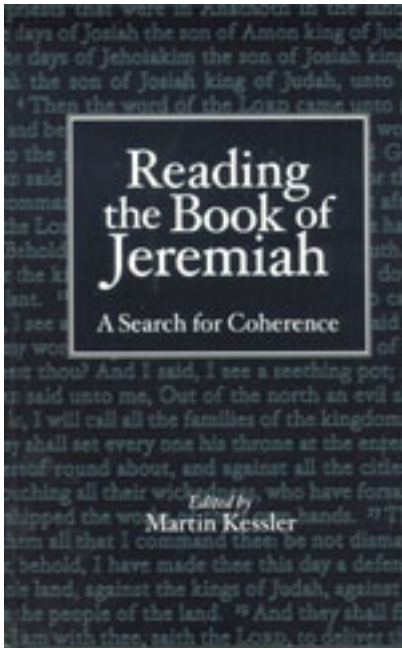


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Kessler, Martin, ed.

Reading the Book of Jeremiah: A Search for Coherence

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This nicely produced volume contains fourteen essays by thirteen authors dealing with various aspects of reading and appreciating the book of Jeremiah as a total work. Approximately half of the authors, including the editor of the volume, are representative of a certain school within Dutch biblical scholarship that emphasizes structural and rhetorical analysis of complete textual units and books. While formally speaking this approach does not eschew redactional analysis altogether, it does tend to sidestep it in favor of “final-form” analysis, the guiding assumption being that the text in its final form has its own autonomy and “coherence,” reflecting the messages that its ultimate producers sought to express. Indeed the editor readily admits in his introduction (xiii):

Many typical critical questions are deliberately sidestepped in this book. Perhaps enough adrenaline has been used in sustained attempts to unravel the type of critical questions that never seem to find answers. ... We would rather proceed with more certainty (namely, with the text we have!) and with less speculation. Thus, we are more concerned with the form that the last “editing” or “writing” of the book has assumed. The final editors or authors have put their (kerygmatic) stamp on the book as a whole.

Even though the dominant approach in this volume is what has come to be known in the field as “synchronic” (versus “diachronic”) analysis, it in fact displays a wide range of exegetical postures. One needs only to compare the contribution of Van der Wal, who gives mere lip service, if that, to the redactional problems in Jeremiah and assumes that “the book in its present form is a carefully considered, coherent composition” (13), to that of Carroll, whose thesis regarding the “polyphonic” nature of the book of Jeremiah appears to run counter to the very notion of coherence (Kessler’s disclaimer on page xii notwithstanding). Even among those contributors who aim toward demonstrating coherence, there is a clear divide between those who view the coherence more in ideational terms (e.g., Clements, Brueggemann, and Seitz) and those who view it in more detailed literary terms as well (e.g., Van der Wal, Smelik, and Kessler).

In this reviewer’s estimation, the former group is on firmer ground exegetically speaking, whereas the latter group’s proposals, while not without some merit, become more speculative and inaccurate the more they enter into wider, all-embracing structural models for the book of Jeremiah or parts therein. Thus, focusing for the moment on the latter group, Smelik’s and Kessler’s highlighting of chapters 50–51 as closing the circle on the “cup of wrath” theme first sounded in chapter 25 (see 9, 63) is clearly in line with the editorial agenda of the present form of the book of Jeremiah. Yet Van der Wal’s formal division of the book into two parts, with Jer 23 and 51 forming the conclusions of each part (18–19) is highly problematic. The parallels that Van der Wal finds between the conclusions of chapters 23 and 51 are probably no more than lexical (i.e., they do not appear to carry ideational significance at the canonical level), whereas the oft-noted correspondences between chapters 1 and 24 more likely point to an enveloping structure of the same major unit rather than to parallel opening structures of two separate units.

Another overstepped attempt at “macro”-type structural analysis is Stulman’s treatment of the unit divisions between chapters 7 and 21 (47). Stulman makes much of the literary proximity between various texts that he labels as “prose sermons” and Jeremiah’s laments. Yet texts such as 11:1–17 and 16:1–15 can hardly be construed as “prose sermons” in their totality. Moreover, some of Stulman’s titles for the various prose sections (such as “the dismantling of election understandings” for 18:1–12) seem patently artificial and designed to impose a hypothetical symmetrical structure on the larger textual block. In the text just cited, for example, one would have expected to find basic “election” vocabulary, such as *בחר*, *ידע*, or *עם סגלה*, for Stulman’s title to have real exegetical force.

As noted above, the most fruitful contributions to this volume concentrate less on elaborate formal structural patterns and more on the overall flow of ideas that emerge from a reading of the whole book of Jeremiah. In this respect, Seitz’s essay entitled “The

Place of the Reader in Jeremiah” is a stellar piece of original and sensitive reading, shedding fascinating light on the dynamic relationship between the themes of judgment and remnant throughout Jeremiah. Seitz notes how the most explicit overtures to repentance in the book are mostly concentrated precisely in the first six chapters (e.g., 3:11–14, 22; 4:1–4; 5:1; 6:16–16). Thereafter, throughout the chapters into which Jeremiah’s laments and the divine prohibitions against his intercession are interspersed (chs. 7–20), one finds a tone of bleak despair, alongside passages expressing a clear theodicy (e.g., 9:11–13; 16:10–11). This section of the book allows the reader (situated in the exilic period and beyond) to reflect upon the consequences of the older generations’ refusal to seize the opportunity for repentance when it was still available. This does not mean, however, that all was doomed, for in chapters 21–45 the reader is presented with examples of individuals whose exemplary loyalty to the prophet merited them divine favor, culminating with Ebed-melech the Cushite and Baruch ben Neriah. In addition, the reader is made aware that God’s judgment has been decreed for a limited period of time only (seventy years), thus paving the way for future hope and restoration. The strength of Seitz’s presentation, as he himself argues, is that his interpretive model does not purport to impose a rigid, overall unity on the book, nor does it intend to suppress or preclude the presence of additional editorial intentions that may have been at play at earlier stages of the book’s literary development, that is, before it achieved its final form.

Another essay in this direction, though tracing a much more limited ideational trajectory, is that of Becking, who argues for the conceptual coherence of Jer 30–31. However, while Becking makes a good case, it is not clear what relevance his treatment has to the theme of the book of Jeremiah’s coherence as a whole. At most, Becking has demonstrated that conceptual coherence can be found in at least one of the book’s subsections.

Whatever one’s view is of the various exegetical approaches in these collected essays, there are many poignant literary insights peppered throughout the volume from which Jeremiah students can profit. Thus, for example, Stulman notes correctly how the so-called “confessions” (or laments) of Jeremiah function, at least for the reader, as theodicies. In Stulman’s words, “Jeremiah’s innocent suffering at the hands of community members reveals Judah’s unmitigated guilt” (49). To this I would add that the increasingly violent and despairing tone of the laments serves to vindicate Yahweh’s prohibitions of prophetic intercession on behalf of the people that are interspersed at various points both before and through the first few “confession” texts (see 7:16; 11:14; 14:11; 15:1; cf. 18:20b). In relating to the final “confession” (53), Stulman also points to the interesting recurrence of the term “womb” in Jeremiah’s death wish (20:17, 18), which echoes back to his prophetic calling, described as originating from the womb (1:5).

Kessler explains the dynamics of the key passage 25:1–14 in terms of the theme of “sending” (61). Yahweh had previously sent prophets, including Jeremiah himself, to forewarn the people (25:4). But since Yahweh’s message went unheeded, he would now send for the armies of the north, led by Nebuchadnezzar, to act as agents of punishment (25:9).

Hill invokes the creation tradition imagery alluded to in 27:5–6 in order to suggest that Nebuchadnezzar is being portrayed as a new Adam, with a divine mandate to exercise his authority over the created world (156).

While all the above insights and others certainly make this volume worthwhile, in the final analysis it suffers from the general tendency (unfortunately not unique to the Dutch school described at the outset) to treat final-form issues as if they could be conveniently divorced from redactional-critical issues. This tendency is unwarranted, for unless one assumes unitary authorship, the final producers of the book of Jeremiah stand at the end of a dynamic exegetical process, which means *ipso facto* that their final shaping of the book reflects a conscious interaction with the work of the tradents who preceded them. One would wish to know more about the nature of this interaction, since ultimately one cannot expect to gain a full appreciation of the book’s final form without giving due attention to its literary development, however speculative the reconstruction of that process might be.