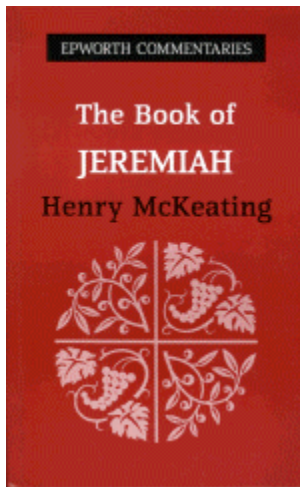


RBL 11/06/2000



McKeating, Henry

The Book of Jeremiah

Epworth Commentaries

Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1999. Pp. vii + 231,
Paperback, £9.95, ISBN 0716205262.

Lisbeth Fried
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48109

The author sticks closely to the original aim of the Epworth Commentary series. This series is designed specifically for preachers. In writing the commentary, McKeating devised the following checklist (p. 1-2):

1. "The preacher needs to have obvious difficulties explained, and information offered on matters with which he/she may be unfamiliar."
2. "The preacher needs background information about the events and circumstances of the period, and about the society in which the prophet was operating."
3. "The preacher is likely to need help in seeing the book of Jeremiah as a whole; i.e., in perceiving its structure and in picking out the broad issues with which the prophet deals. A particular problem is that the book of Jeremiah is not organized chronologically. Most readers appreciate assistance in establishing the order in which things happen."
4. "The preacher may appreciate help in seeing connections, both within the book, and between the book and other parts of scripture."
5. "The preacher is likely to appreciate other 'leads' which will provoke thought."
6. "In all this, the preacher is likely to be asking, in relation to any particular passage in the book: What is this passage about? To whom is it addressed? And what is it trying to say to this people in that situation?"
7. "But having looked at all that, the preacher will want to know: What do I make of it? What am I to tell my congregation about it? How do I explore it with them?"

How, if at all, does the text relate to me, to them, and to our own situation here and now?"

McKeating achieves his modest goal to make clear the plain meaning of the text. He tells the reader who is speaking and to whom; he explains the historical background of episodes, persons, place names, and customs. Most helpful is a chronological chart (p. 8-9) that lists relevant world events during the prophet's lifetime. McKeating brings together the various parts of the book of Jeremiah; he relates sections which are widely separated in the book, but which belong together chronologically. This enables the reader to grasp the structure of the book as a whole. The tremendous increase in the reader's confidence that she understands both the book and Jeremiah is the major contribution of the commentary. The Epworth Commentary series uses the text of the Revised English Bible, and McKeating points out difficulties in translation. He also compares the Hebrew to the Greek bible when the passage is missing or placed differently in the Greek. Philological discussion is kept to a minimum, as is discussion of previous scholarship. The book is well-written and extremely readable.

In addition to clarifying the plain meaning, McKeating tries to explain the intrusions in the text that may stem from a deuteronomic redactor. In his commentary on 11:1-14, for example, he points out the unmistakable deuteronomic language. He invites the doubtful reader to compare the passage to Deut. 4:20, 7:8, 8:18, 26:8-9, and 31:20. To explain these intrusions, McKeating considers first the possibility that Jeremiah took over the theology and interpretation of the Deuteronomists. He next posits that a deuteronomic school edited the Jeremiah material and refocused it according to its own views. For McKeating, both these alternatives flounder on the reform of Josiah. This reform—so important to the Deuteronomists—is not mentioned in the book of Jeremiah. He concludes that deuteronomic influence is light, and a real Jeremiah may be found beneath the deuteronomic strata.

The political thrust of Jeremiah's message was that "the rise of Babylon to world domination was inevitable and irresistible. ... for a small nation like Judah, the sensible position was to accept the realities and not incite Babylonian hostility" (p. 14-15). This is where Jeremiah differs from his deuteronomic editors. To McKeating, Jeremiah's second message is in agreement with his editors: "the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem has come upon the people because of its sin." McKeating does not emphasize that these two messages contradict. His most important statement is in his introduction: "The prophet's thesis, and that of his editors, is that Judah's failure on the ethical and religious fronts was what ultimately led to disaster by provoking divine punishment. ... The prophet's thesis implies a very simplistic understanding of history. The idea that God punishes ... nations which do not meet his moral standards and religious requirements is one not well borne out by the study of history in general" (p. 15). I would have liked to see this point repeated throughout the commentary rather than restricted to the introduction.

Jeremiah preached during the reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. Zedekiah reigned after Babylon's first conquest of Jerusalem in 597. At that time, the king and the temple vessels of YHWH (as a symbol of the Judaeen god) were taken. In the ancient Near East when a city was conquered, the conquerors routinely destroyed the temple and took the image of the god captive. The traditional theological response held that the destruction of temples and the removal of the gods implied the gods' anger against the people. The people had sinned against the god. The god called down the attack and even sided with the attackers. This is also the theology of Jeremiah and the Deuteronomists. It is a theology that enables peoples to continue to believe in their god and to believe their god controls their temple and their city. McKeating alludes to the ubiquity of this theology in his introduction, but does not emphasize it. To do so would deprive Jeremiah of his uniqueness, but would better enable the reader to place Jeremiah and the Deuteronomists in their social and theological context.

McKeating's discussion of Chapters 7 and 26 illustrate his method. He correctly points out that Chapter 7 and 26 are presentations of a single incident from two different points of view. Neither chapter is from the view of the prophet himself. This illustrates how later tradition uses a single incident to relate different theological messages. These two chapters record Jeremiah's prophecy at the temple court in Jerusalem at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign. It would have been helpful to point the reader to 2 Kgs 24:1, a statement of the political circumstances at the time. Jeremiah's message here is that the temple will become like Shiloh (that is, a ruin) if the people do not 'amend their ways' (7:3). McKeating appropriately summarizes the contemporary ideology of Judaeans that their temple and city were safe. He points out this ideology may have stemmed from Jerusalem's miraculous deliverance during Sennacherib's attack 100 years before. He states that although it may be an intrusion of the Deuteronomist, the phrase "to amend your ways" means to "deal fairly" (7:5-10). Yet, if vss. 5-10 are Deuteronomic, as McKeating states, what was Jeremiah's own message—a message that nearly cost his life (Jeremiah 26)?

Besides the impact of the deuteronomic redaction, McKeating stresses a second theme that runs through the book: the issue of false prophecy. From hindsight, Jeremiah was correct. Had the people succumbed to Babylon, the city and temple would not have been destroyed. Yet, how was it possible for the people to know this? Other prophets told her otherwise, that the city and temple were safe. Why should they believe Jeremiah and not the others? McKeating deals with this theme most especially in his commentary on 44:15. He cites the complaint of the Judaeans who fled to Pathros in Egypt: While they were worshipping the Queen of Heaven, all was well. As soon as they stopped worshipping her (presumably at the time of Josiah's reform) there were two deportations, and the city and the temple were destroyed. McKeating says it is salutary to remember that the events of history are nearly always capable of several interpretations. Conclusions that seem compelling to the believer may look completely otherwise to the unbeliever. Often the only real way to tell the false from the true prophet is to wait.

This commentary is well-suited to the needs of preachers and their parishioners and I recommend the book to them. The reader is assumed to identify with the prophet and to experience the prophet's rejection and doubt. I suggest only that the preacher who uses this book remind his parishioners that the theology of Jeremiah and the Deuteronomists was ubiquitous. It is an attempt to leave the god in control of events, but at the same time clear him of blame. The reader should not infer from it that this people was any different, or more sinful, than any people anywhere. No matter how good or how pious they would be, to seek independence from Babylon incurred destruction.

Besides the impact of the deuteronomic redaction, McKeating stresses a second theme that runs through the book: the issue of false prophecy. From hindsight, Jeremiah was correct. Had the people succumbed to Babylon, the city and temple would not have been destroyed. Yet, how was it possible for the people to know this? Other prophets told her otherwise, that the city and temple were safe. Why should they believe Jeremiah and not the others? McKeating deals with this theme most especially in his commentary on 44:15. He cites the complaint of the Judaeans who fled to Pathros in Egypt: While they were worshipping the Queen of Heaven, all was well. As soon as they stopped worshipping her (presumably at the time of Josiah's reform) there were two deportations, and the city and the temple were destroyed. McKeating says it is salutary to remember that the events of history are nearly always capable of several interpretations. Conclusions that seem compelling to the believer may look completely otherwise to the unbeliever. Often the only real way to tell the false from the true prophet is to wait.