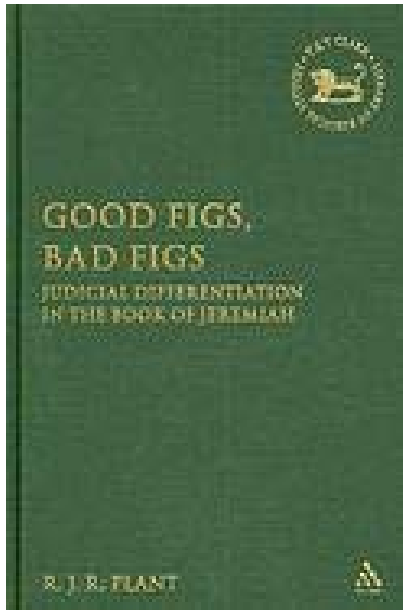


RBL 04/2009



Plant, R. J. R.

Good Figs, Bad Figs: Judicial Differentiation in the Book of Jeremiah

Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 483

London: T&T Clark, 2008. Pp. xv + 224. Cloth. \$140.00.
ISBN 0567026876.

C.A. Strine

Christ Church, Oxford
Oxford, United Kingdom

Readers should be thankful for an author who clearly states his intention. Plant offers that one of his objectives is responding to Richard Dawkins's assertion about "the apparent inability of the biblical god to exercise judgment discriminately" (xi). Wishing to respond thoughtfully, Plant believes, "The book of Jeremiah ... offers a valuable resource for doing so" (xi).

As prelude, Plant offers a chapter on judicial differentiation in the Old Testament, separating the prophetic witness from the Torah and Writings. He observes three manners of distinction in the oracles of judgment: selective; unselective (highlighted by Job, Qoheleth, and 1 Sam 21; 24); and national (a hallmark of Deuteronomy/DtrH). These three categories are Plant's lens through which to analyze other passages. In the prophetic corpus, "the dominant picture that emerges ... is one of 'national' judgment" (23), but this is qualified by many examples of selective judgment where the ethical profile of the people is an important factor. Yet, moral culpability is only one potential factor, for Plant points out, "A somewhat analogous situation arises where YHWH takes up the case of the poor against their oppressors. While the social injustice clearly constitutes violations of the covenant, no *necessary* moral virtue attaches to the victims of injustice" (28). Already Plant highlights the uneven landscape of judicial differentiation.

Finally, before turning to Jeremiah, he evaluates earlier treatments by Pohlmann (*Studien zum Jeremiahbuch* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978]), Seitz (*Theology in Conflict* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989]), and Kilpp (*Niederreißen und Aufbauen* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1990]), who will be frequent discussion partners in the remainder of the book.

Plant groups his material into five sections: Jer 1–20; 21–24; 27–29; 37–45; and 30–31. This is not merely to provide clarity but is based on a “literary cohesion” in each unit that will underpin significant parts of his argument. He suggests that in Jer 1–20 the scope of judgment is plain: the entire land of Judah will experience YHWH’s wrath, which Jer 5:1 encapsulates well. Plant notes that some hope is offered in three restoration promises (3:14–18; 12:14–16; 16:14–15) but underscores that even these positive passages add to the somber view of Jer 1–20 by indicating that the judgment of exile is a precondition for salvation. Still, Jer 1–20 is not entirely monolithic in its presentation of judgment, as Jeremiah escapes the dire predictions. This distinction is especially clear to Plant in Jer 11–20 and also through Jeremiah’s portrayal as a fortified city (Jer 1:18), a direct contrast to the fortified cities of Judah that will fall (4:5; 5:17; 8:14; 34:7).

Concerning Jer 21–24, Plant offers a strong argument for the literary cohesion of these chapters via two points: (1) their propensity for historical annotation and (2) the inclusio formed by 21:1–10 and 24:1–10. Though such literary delimitations are inherently subjective in nature, Plant garners support from Pohlmann and Schmid, and his chiasmic arrangement around 23:1–8 possesses an unforced simplicity. He is measured in his own assessment: “Without claiming that the second half of the unit is a perfect mirror image of the first, the overall pattern is too clear to be fortuitous” (57). He observes in Jer 21:1–10 that “YHWH’s wrath is fundamentally against Jerusalem, rather than any particular group or individual. Accordingly, the fate of the people turns on their relationship to the city” (67). Jeremiah 24:1–10 bifurcates between the *golah* in Babylon and those remaining in Jerusalem. These metaphorical good figs and bad figs lead to the passage’s central theme: “The fact that v. 5 is cast in the form of a simile ... leads us to expect that the exiles (like the figs), will be designated as good; instead, it is the disposition and intention of YHWH that is described this way. Nowhere is this related to the virtues of the *Golah* community.” This indicates, for Plant, that the criteria for judicial differentiation may be entirely a matter of divine prerogative. The center of his chiasm, Jer 23:1–8, promises restoration and a renewed Davidic monarchy: because the failed leadership caused the predicament of judgment, it will be replaced by “a new leader, who will rule wisely and in righteousness” (76). Plant’s detailed exegesis underpins his key interpretive suggestion: due to the silences of 21:1–10 and 24:1–10, and owing to its position at the center of the chiasm, Jer 23:1–8 should have the last word, relativizing 21:1–10 and 24:1–10. “This,” writes Plant, “may (or may not) violate their original intention, but allows us to read Jer

21–24, not as privileging the 597 exiles to the exclusion of all others (so Pohlmann), but rather as offering hope to the entire *Diaspora*—minus their leaders.”

Chapters 27–29 primarily contrast the 597 exiles and those remaining in Judah. Plant sees this polarity emphasized by the diversity of promises to the two groups: “While the reference to remaining in and working the land of 27:11 may allude to the creation account of Gen 2:15, the injunctions of 29:5–6 go much further in both commanding and promising prosperity.... It is clear, then, that Jeremiah’s message of hope to the remnant in Judah (chs. 27–28) is by no means analogous to his message of hope to the exiles in Babylon (ch. 29)” (129–30). This qualitative difference in salvation is yet another way in which differentiation can occur.

Plant’s reading of Jer 37–45 involves two “remnants.” First, Jer 38–39 divide between those who, with Zedekiah, resist the Babylonian siege and those who flee Jerusalem and surrender. Jeremiah 42–45 present a second division, where the remnant living in Judah is faced with the choice to stay or flee to Egypt. Both groups, considered to be exiles in their own land, are now eligible for YHWH’s salvation. Plant notes that these chapters contrast with Jer 24 and 29 by highlighting human agency and offering each “remnant” a choice that will determine whether they receive judgment or salvation. This notion is enhanced in 39:15–18 and 45:1–5, where Ebed-Melech and Baruch are offered salvation for obedience to YHWH.

Chapters 30–31, the so-called Book of Consolation, “is distinctive for its promise that both Israel and Judah will share in YHWH’s salvation” (179). Diametrically opposed to the comprehensive judgment of Jer 1–20, this change of perspective begs for explanation. Plant observes that repentance by the people is ruled out: “In no way, however, is repentance the catalyst for salvation.... To this extent, chs. 30–31 share common ground with chs. 24 and 29, where YHWH’s redemptive intention towards the exiles precedes their own actions” (183). He concludes, “In a manner akin to chs. 24 and 29, chs. 30–31 celebrate the prospect of comprehensive salvation, while leaving room for a different future” (185).

Plant’s notion of “room for a different future” returns to the issue of agency. How do the actions of any individual/group relate to the experience of judgment or salvation? Plant believes that in the numerous “antithetical judgment oracles” (186–87) a “diversity of rationales” (187–88) for differentiating between outcomes is manifest. One prominent schema in Jeremiah is for divine initiative, of entirely internal motivation, to precede a renewed demand for human obedience. Although this may exclude human agency from determining who is initially selected, it does not lack human agency entirely. “Even if human piety is not the *basis* for salvation,” writes Plant, “YHWH’s judicial actions may still

take account of the *relative guilt or innocence* of the parties concerned” (188). His assessment has many points of connection to Joyce’s analysis of Ezekiel (*Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989]) and underscores the prevalent role this theocentric viewpoint had in the exilic period.

This monograph is detailed and thought-provoking, and it offers something for everyone from the philologist (detailed analysis of the MT and LXX variants) to the systematic theologian. The exegesis of individual passages is of a high quality throughout, and Plant’s interaction with a broad array of interpreters makes his arguments more persuasive and the book a useful way into Jeremiah studies. Plant also demonstrates acumen at a literary level via his creative proposals on the literary arrangement of the book.

What Plant lacks is an eye toward the historical situation that generated these complex viewpoints and textual arrangements. Perhaps one should not find fault here, as he did not set out to do this type of work. However, the question seems to linger over the whole book, especially since Plant’s thesis is often tied to the arrangement of texts. Given Jeremiah’s undeniably complex process of formation, the brief bits of discussion left me wanting and with unanswered questions. Regardless of this absence, scholars of varied interests will benefit from Plant’s work, and his diligent efforts are a welcome contribution to the study of Jeremiah and prophecy in general.