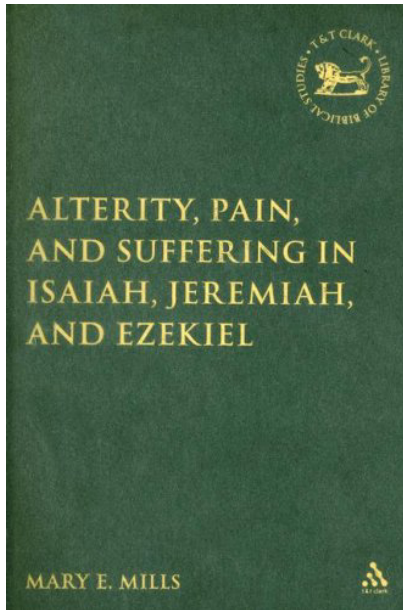


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**Mills, Mary E.**

***Alterity, Pain, and Suffering in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel***

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Hallvard Hagelia  
Ansgar College and Theological Seminary  
Kristiansand, Norway

This is not the book I supposed it was. When seeing the title, I expected an exegesis of actual texts on the theme of pain and suffering in the books of the named prophets. I can hardly say it is that. Here is not much of traditional exegesis. This is rather a phenomenological treatment of the matters mentioned, building on the texts from the named biblical books, with an evident postmodern approach.

The author identifies in her preface (vii) the aim of her book as “to re-examine issues related to the presence of pain, suffering and loss of human experience,” as they emerge from those three prophetic books. Commentators have often prioritized the themes of sin and punishment in explaining the meaning of pain and loss, she argues. “But what if this approach is set aside? What then of pain and loss? Is it possible to give value to negative events in their own right?”

Mills explains her method as using postmodern theory and narrative ethics with readings from the fields of cultural geography, moral philosophy, and social psychology, but also some convergence with interpretations produced by other reading methodologies. Reading the book reveals extensive use of nontheological and nonexegetical sources, while references to general Old Testament scholarship are not very dominant.

Mills claims that the style of writing will generally be in line with Gerard Genette's description of bricolage and Mieke Bal's definition of quotation and that "both sources here refer to a system of operation which is founded on a process of inter-textuality and in which pieces of pre-existing thought systems are interwoven to create a further innovative structure," a proceeding she also links with the genre of midrash (5).

Her book is subdivided into three main parts: introduction, four case studies from Isaiah, Ezekiel (two cases), and Jeremiah, followed by conclusions. The whole book comprises six chapters. Every chapter is introduced with an apt definition of its aim and has a summary and/or conclusion at the end, which makes it relatively easy to follow the thought.

The aim of chapter 1, "World and Body: Constructing a Prophetic Moral Universe" (identical with the book's introduction), is "to delineate the boundaries [of] ... the themes of alterity, pain and suffering," with the intention "to highlight relevant aspects of such contemporary theoretical fields" (1). Basic in Mills's way of thinking is that settings in time and space are ultimately concerned with giving order to the search for identity, which she exemplifies with reference to Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park* and how she sets the events in creating a great country house as the narrative space.

Mills explains the aim of chapter 2, "Other Worlds: The Landscape of Chaos in Isaiah 1–39," as "to situate the topic of narrative setting alongside concepts of spatiality and world-construction, in order to furnish a narrative ethics reading of selected passages of doom and disaster in Isa 1-39," and investigating "the moral universe of a worldview which envisages chaos both as a metaphorical explanation of human experience and as a reality in the political and social life of a community faced with total collapse as the result of foreign invasion" (37).

In chapter 3, "Alterity and Horror: The Morality of the Bizarre in Ezekiel," focus is on the theme of horror. In the conclusion she claims that "the text of Ezekiel operates, then, as a form of verbal icon of social morality. What this endorses is a moral universe of violence, stripping, loss of illusions and the ultimate nakedness of the human condition. When human existence is pared down to its fundamentals the basic instinct of desire for life is revealed—even at the cost of breaking foundational social and religious taboos. This is a monstrous truth, standing over against the order of security of the homely framework of a structured society. But this same desire for the more of existence carries the human being through to a renewal system" (85).

In chapter 4, "Narrative Ethics: Body and Pain in the Book of Ezekiel," Mills deals with the topic of characterization and embodiment. In the conclusion she argues that "Ezekiel's treatment of pain can be located within this framework as a form of cultural critique

which constructs a fresh social identity by linking several embodiment sites in a spatial network, allowing for causation, agency and consequence in the creation of pain—a pain formed from fear and dread in the face of political change and military defeat” (109).

In chapter 5, “Narrative Ethics, Prophetic Pathos and Jeremiah’s Confessions,” Mills’s purpose is to use a narrative approach to morality in a study of Jeremiah’s confessions. She reads both Ezekiel and Jeremiah as representative individuals set apart from the community, with Jeremiah often at odds with his own social group. In the conclusion, she claims that “the religious convictions are those of the Yahwistic religion of the book of Jeremiah and what matters is how the followers of that religion approach these traditions. It is, indeed, the audience of the text who need to change their viewpoint with regard to the nature of God. ... Jeremiah is a character who gives shape to the problems of the group as a whole. The use of narrative investigation to arrive at this concept of moral meaning allows an ethics of uncertainty to merge. It emphasises the moral as Other, as different from ‘our’ expectations of what a moral universe should be like” (134).

In the concluding chapter 6, “A Prophetic Moral Universe,” Mills summarizes the aim of the book. Her focus is on the concept of pain, its reality and its symbolic functions. “Pain is taken in its broadest sense as made up from the sufferings of living bodies and landscapes, their distortion and demise, and includes other categories such as disabilities, loss and fragmentation” (137). She concludes, finally, with Theodor Adorno, that “anything we can call morality today merges into questions of the organisation of the world,” adding as her last say: “Here are the two borders of the prophetic moral universe dealt with in this study—the transcendent nature of pain and its inevitable locus in physical events within the world of human society” (159).

The book has more than eight pages of bibliography, an index of biblical references, and an index of authors. A dominant part of the book is extensive footnotes.

My attitude to the book as I read it was initially somewhat reluctant. What is this all about? What is the author’s intention? The exposition seemed rather abstract and phenomenological. The exegesis seemed rather superficial, not a close reading. I realized that here is no text criticism and no verse-by-verse exposition. Mills skips traditional exegesis, turning directly into the more subtle aspects of the texts. She will “view” the text (5) or “gaze” at it (see 12) rather than read it. Her emphasis is on reading world and body synchronically according to a spatial model. Let me not claim that historical reading of the texts is neglected. She is not disinterested in “what happened,” such as, for example, Walter Brueggemann, but traditional historical exegesis is not her method. On the other hand, Brueggemann is one of the Old Testament scholars she refers to, not just because he has written extensively on the prophets she reads in this book, especially Jeremiah, but

because she and Brueggemann often think along the same postmodern lines, not least in her understanding of the land theology.

Is this kind of postmodern Bible reading really valid? Of course! But I will still argue that the basis for all biblical theology should be detailed exegesis, a close and expository reading of the texts. On this basis, a more subtle application could be excerpted. Mills will probably say that this close reading has already been done; it was her homework, before this book was written. Nevertheless, this is a book bridging in a postmodern way exegesis, ethics, and philosophy of religion. Here is much material for further work and investigation into life's difficult questions—alterity, pain and suffering—questions that someday will catch up with all of us.

The book is very well written, in fluent language that nonetheless demands close attention by the reader, at least readers not so accustomed to its rather philosophical or phenomenological language. This is a deep dive, a rather underneath-the-actual-text analysis. Already the first word of the title, “alterity,” is not found in, for example, *The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language* (2003), but linked with pain and suffering, the idea soon emerges.