This slim volume by a preeminent Old Testament theologian offers an engaging entry into the theological complexities of the book of Jeremiah. Brueggemann describes intelligently the major theological motifs and historical issues addressed in Jeremiah. Lingering on the richness of the biblical text, Brueggemann moves with a seasoned grace among numerous biblical themes and metaphors as he illuminates what was at stake for Jeremiah and the Israelite groups that shaped Jeremiah’s legacy.

The first chapter, “Critical Access to the Book of Jeremiah,” provides an introduction that will be valuable to many sorts of readers, including novice exegetes, clergy who need an accessible overview of the themes and literary context of Jeremiah, and theologians who want to work with Jeremiah but do not have time for in-depth technical study. Brueggemann begins with a thumbnail sketch of contributions in the recent interpretation history of Jeremiah, reviewing Mowinckel’s schema of sources and giving a paragraph each to the historicizing work of William Holladay, the ideological-critical position of Robert Carroll, and the literary reading of Louis Stulman. Readers hear only that Holladay’s attribution of most Jeremiah material to the historical prophet is currently “out of fashion” (4, and a gentle way of making the point); students may need more guidance on the hermeneutical issues raised by Holladay’s neo-positivist approach.
Brueggemann says that Stulman sees the prose as a guide to understanding the book of Jeremiah, without hinting at what the resultant understanding might be. (Stulman argues that the book of Jeremiah performs a dismantling and reconstruction of Israel’s theological symbol systems, employing the persona of the suffering prophet to problematize rigid Deuteronomistic boundaries between insider and outsider.) Brueggemann goes deeper when he explores the rootage of Jeremiah in Sinai traditions, Hosea, and Deuteronomy, focusing on diverse expressions of covenantal theology and divine sovereignty. This excellent section showcases Brueggemann’s deft exegetical touch and his unusual gift for illuminating the theological charisms of particular streams of biblical tradition.

The heart of the book is its second chapter, “The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah,” which begins from the assumption that the prophetic imagination links “the rule of YHWH” with the “lived reality” of Israel (43). Brueggemann underlines the tensions between Jeremianic judgment and the Zion ideology promulgated by Isaiah, interprets the lamentations of Jeremiah as revealing both the “travail of the community of Israel” (64) and God’s own anguish, and reads Baruch as a figuration of the scribal practice that became increasingly important to Israel’s identity in the postexilic period. Brueggemann frames the disturbing aspects of violent judgment in Jeremiah by means of the book’s theological claim that “this sovereign God will not be mocked” (79). Persuasive insights can be found on every page of Brueggemann’s lean, elegant writing.

The third chapter, “The Place and Function of the Book of Jeremiah within the Old Testament,” outlines connections between Jeremiah and Deuteronomy, other prophets, the Psalms, Job, Lamentations, Chronicles, Ezra, and Daniel. Brueggemann’s aim is to show ways in which Jeremiah has drawn on ancient teachings and given new impetus to “scribal and apocalyptic tradition and to the ongoing dispute over theodicy” (185). The fourth chapter, only ten pages long, offers a discussion of “The Continuing Influence of the Book of Jeremiah,” reflecting in a few sentences on quotations of Jeremiah in the New Testament, noting Jeremiah’s contribution to the Christian narrative arc from death to resurrection, and considering contemporary biblical theology in light of the Shoah and the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001. Brueggemann values Jeremiah as an important resource for the faithful articulation of experiences of vulnerability, crisis, and loss. With Jeremiah, the believing community can face the dread of “the abyss” and dare to reach for renewal and hope. Brueggemann’s musings here are embryonic but compelling.

An enduring contribution of Brueggemann’s scholarship has been his highlighting of disjunctures and dynamics of contestation within the Hebrew Scriptures. Critique of the historical-critical enterprise, endorsement of postmodern heuristic categories, and insistence on the primacy of biblical rhetoric for interpretation have been hallmarks of his
thought, as is well known to readers of his Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination (1993) and Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy (1997). These defining aspects of Brueggemann’s legacy are complicated in interesting ways in the present book by his continuing reliance on the premises of historical criticism and a traditional notion of the coherent historical subject as speaker. Perhaps because of his generosity toward competing truth claims, Brueggemann tolerates the existence of an aporetic space within his own hermeneutics in which we can observe collisions of subtly historicizing exegesis with uncompromising postmodern methodological claims. Such collisions are marvelously instructive, for his work presents a mise-en-abyme of important methodological debates between historians and literary theorists in recent years. Two examples may serve to illustrate how local dynamics within Brueggemann’s interpretive work mirror, in miniature, some ongoing methodological arguments.

First, he says that the “primal hopes of the Jeremian tradition are covenantal” and that monarchical restoration passages within Jeremiah (e.g. 23:4–6, 30:21) are likely “quite tangential to the primary trajectories of the Jeremian tradition” (129). That point is required for Brueggemann’s broader assertion that Jeremiah is “representative of a theology grounded in hostility to the Davidic establishment” (30). His interpretation relies on a sharp distinction between village and urban loyalties: Jeremiah criticizes “the dominant practices of the urban establishment” (28), in sympathy with “the village perspective … deeply resentful of affluent urban life” and “highly suspicious of the political, economic, and theological pretensions of the urban establishment” (29). Brueggemann’s attention to class issues is most welcome, although the dramatic distinction he finds may be a bit overdrawn, given that the three celebrated allies of Jeremiah in the book are Ahikam the Shaphanide, Baruch the scribe, and Ebed-melech the court eunuch, all card-carrying members of the “urban establishment.” But on what basis other than historical criticism might one designate the covenantal material in Jeremiah “primal,” a chronological word that implies that other material was added later? And on what basis might the tangential character of the monarchical material be discerned? Some have argued that the restoration of Jehoiachin to the table of Evil-merodach in Jer 52:31–34 is intended as a sign of hope for the Judean monarchy. While I am not persuaded of that (I think the tableau of Jehoiachin elevated above other captives yet still dependent on food from the Babylonian conqueror’s hand is meant to ironize the kind of shalom Judah gets when its leaders “submit to Babylon and live”), nevertheless one could argue that interest in the rejuvenation of the monarchy enjoys the last word in the otherwise bleak finale of Jeremiah.

Now, if the monarchical passages are deemed tangential because they are few and scattered, well, the same could be said about hopeful passages more generally in Jeremiah. While
Brueggemann concedes that promise material reflects only “some of the interests and voices that appear in Jeremiah” (128, emphasis added), earlier he claims, “In the end … it is not divine indignation but divine fidelity to Israel that wins the day” (117–18, emphasis original). For Brueggemann, notes of forgiveness in Jer 31 and 33 constitute “a remarkable development toward a theology of grace” (143). But the vast majority of Jeremiah texts pronounce horrific judgment against Judah’s leaders, the whole people, and specific groups in Judah and in Egypt. The narrative trajectory of the book moves toward utter devastation. Against the objection that the oracles against the nations (OAN), positioned at the end of the book in the MT version, may constitute a word of hope for Judah, one might argue that if the oracle against Babylon is taken seriously—“the land of Babylon will be a desolation, without inhabitant” (51:29); “Come out of her, my people! Save your lives, each of you, from the fierce anger of the LORD!” (51:45)—then the well-established Judean diaspora community that remained there for generations is also to be obliterated. Thus, how hope “wins the day” in the final form of Jeremiah is not entirely clear.

One could conceivably argue for a concentric structure privileging the Book of Consolation at roughly the middle of the book, as Jörg Jeremias and others have argued with Amos, where the divine imperative to “seek Me and live” (Amos 5:4; cf. 5:6, 14) does leap out at the beleaguered implied audience. But with Jeremiah, there are far less compelling literary-structural and ideological-critical grounds for claiming that hope is the most important word. Instead, Jeremiah honors multiple voices in conflictual situations that simply cannot be “solved.” Brueggemann’s methodological framework would ratify that conclusion—he has long worked to honor contradiction and “countertestimony” in biblical texts—but his exegesis here belies it. Brueggemann says the most fruitful approach to prophetic literature is one that does not “focus on historical context but rather on the rhetorical inventiveness” of the prophets as they perform connections between theology and public life (77). Yet Brueggemann relies at numerous points on the conceptual assumptions of historical criticism, although they are veiled in his eloquent diction (as with “primal” and “tangential” rather than “original” and “redactional”). Here, then, a major unresolved issue percolates beneath Brueggemann’s hermeneutics, as it does also in the guild.

A second example: Brueggemann rightly reminds us that the book of Jeremiah constitutes a turbulent dialogue of “many voices over time that do not readily cohere” (2), but his own language suggests that he would rather exegete a unified text than a dialogic one. Brueggemann speaks often of “the Jeremiah tradition” as if it were a living, breathing, decision-making entity that has staked out a particular position in the history of emergent Judaism. His methodological position on multivocality should require exegesis that probes the tensions and conflicts among Jeremiah traditions (plural) shaped by different groups of traditionists who cherished divergent and sometimes mutually antagonistic
goals. Instead, in Brueggemann’s language, “the Jeremiah tradition” becomes an author in its own right. The speaking subject, whether “Israel” or “the Jeremiah tradition,” is never truly decentered or destabilized in Brueggemann’s exegesis. Rather, it is metaphorized in such a way that its speech may be seen to be multifaceted but its larger purpose remains fundamentally unified and coherent.

In keeping with this heuristic, Brueggemann downplays the bitter divisions evident in the latter half of Jeremiah, affirming the accommodationist theopolitical position of the pro-Babylon group as essentially the only noteworthy view in Jeremiah (107). He even goes so far as to assert that the book of Jeremiah is “completely unembarrassed that the prophet is readily allied with the enemy” (106). Here a dash of the ideological criticism for which Robert Carroll was noted (and which Brueggemann largely eschews, 27–28) might be salutary. The book of Jeremiah is intensely concerned to defend the “submit to Babylon” platform, something we can see in many passages but particularly in the awkward MT addition at 29:16–19, which excoriates opponents of the accommodationist position with extraordinary vitriol, and in Jer 44, where the feverish effort to discredit Judean refugees in Egypt yields a caricature of determined apostates that borders on the ludicrous. The book of Jeremiah labors hard to show Jeremiah as sympathetic to the accommodationist platform, but its overcompensatory apologetics may be met with some skepticism by readers who view Jer 35’s commendation of the seminomadic Rechabites as a counterpoint to 29:5–7 (“build houses and live in them … seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile”), a rebuke that names as disobedient the choice to assimilate in diaspora. Judeans clearly were not of a single mind on this issue, and neither was the book of Jeremiah. Here, too, while Brueggemann’s conceptual framework honors multivocality, his exegesis subdues it in favor of an aestheticized unitary subject, “Jeremiah,” whose monologic speech mutes the significance of internecine conflict within the book.

These and other instances of methodological collision within Brueggemann’s work are instructive because they point to two crucial issues with which the guild has not yet come to terms: first, how to theorize the intersections of historical situatedness and rhetorical invention without succumbing to the Scylla of historical positivism or the Charybdis of formalist aestheticism; second, how to read the polyphonic and problematized speaking subjects in ancient Israel’s self-narration (David, say, or Isaiah or Qoheleth) in a way that serves exegetical interests well. Brueggemann has officially taken sides in the debate, embracing a radical rhetorical criticism and inhabiting a posture of disinterest toward historical-critical techniques. But his work continues to host some fascinating hermeneutical contradictions, I suspect because he can surrender neither his postmodern methodological convictions nor his historically grounded exegetical intuitions.
This is an intriguing moment in the drama of biblical scholarship: historical critics continue steadfastly to ply their trade despite the stage-whispers of postmodernists that their endeavors are methodologically naïve and rife with epistemological tautologies. We continue to discover new aporias in the interfaces between historical and literary criticism. Brueggemann’s writings are essential here, along with those of a few others (required reading: Timothy K. Beal on Esther and Chip Dobbs-Allsopp on Lamentations). Brueggemann may not have found his way out of the thicket of the interpretive dilemma, but there is no biblical theologian more skilled at inviting readers to join him in the thorns. His treatment of Jeremiah offers much of value for sustained theological reflection on the legacy of the prophet. I recommend this book highly for undergraduates and seminarians, clergy, and scholars who would like the guidance of a true master as they wrestle with the book of Jeremiah.