

# Reviews



**JEREMIAH: PAIN AND PROMISE**, by Kathleen M. O'Connor. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011. Pp. 194. \$49.00 (paper).

Kathleen O'Connor examines Jeremiah from a fresh point of view, employing "insights drawn from contemporary studies of trauma and disaster" (ix). In her teaching experience "students found the prophet's angry, punishing god nearly unbearable" and concluded "that Jeremiah's theology blamed the victims, was deeply sexist, and was not useful for their churches today" (1). For O'Connor, "trauma and disaster studies save the book of Jeremiah for me" (137).

Chapter 1 focuses on the historical context of Judah's last years, a time in which "Babylonian assaults drained away the population through deaths in battle, starvation, disease, deportation, and by the creation of internal refugees in the wake of warfare" (15). Lamentations' portrait of the time includes children starving in the streets, former nobles now unrecognizable amid the walking dead, mothers cannibalizing their children, fathers vanished, women raped, and youth staggering under forced labor.

Chapter 2 introduces the interdisciplinary field of trauma and disaster studies, presenting insights into the effects of trauma and disaster upon those who endure them. Disasters leave people isolated, numbed by violence, reliving memories, shut-off emotionally, and deadened spiritually (22). Memories are fragmented such that "the slightest smell, sound, sight can trigger a return to a universe of violence, fear, and pain" (23). Survivors are

"alienated by their inability to speak about their experiences" (24). Unanswerable questions shrivel faith and obscure the presence of God. Trauma and disaster studies offer language to "name injuries," provide skills for survival, and map the journey to a "new form of life" (27).

Chapter 3 takes up the organization of Jeremiah, or rather the lack thereof. Traditional source criticism posits three types of material (Jeremiah's oracles, Baruch's stories about Jeremiah, prose sermons in style of Deuteronomy) gathered, assembled, edited into "an unwieldy book created by a somewhat incompetent committee" (30). O'Connor argues that "rather than being a hindrance to its purposes, the book's lack of order itself works as a mode of recovery" (30). "The book searches for language, images, and metaphors to tell how Judah collapsed, how the ancient traditions failed, and how to endure through chaos and pain" (33). Jeremiah's poetic and symbolic language carries "the potential to reinvigorate the nation," providing "language to enable Judean victims to speak of the disaster" and also "reach through the ages to touch people who have known many kinds of suffering" (33).

In chapters 4–11, O'Connor presents her analysis of major sections and types of material within Jeremiah: the metaphor of a broken family (2:1–4:4), war poems (4:5–6:30; 8:16–17; 10:17–22; 13:20–27), weeping poems (8:22–9:11), biographical stories (1; 16:1–9; 20:1–6; 26; 32; 37:11–38:13; 40–43), prayers of complaint (11:18–12:6; 15:1–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–13, 14–18), sermons (7:1–8:3;

**THE 20TH ANNUAL  
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Towards the 500th Anniversary  
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**MARTIN JUNGE**



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General Secretary of the  
Lutheran World Federation*

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LECTURE AND RECEPTION

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11:1–14; 17:19–27), the “little book of consolation” (30–31), and finally endings (45; 50–51; 52). In each case, O’Connor argues that modern trauma and disaster studies shed light on previously difficult matters of interpretation. A few examples will illustrate.

The metaphor of a broken family defends God by placing responsibility for the disaster squarely upon its victims, raising multiple objections—not least that of an angry male deity. At the same time, the metaphor performs several helpful functions—providing words for the disaster, simplifying its causes to make it understandable, offering a way to speak of God when God has utterly failed them. The key is to recognize this blaming speech as but one of

many provisional explanations of the disaster in Jeremiah.

The war poems, by virtue of imagery and frequent scene shifts, place the readers “in the thick of battle only briefly and intermittently. Exposure to violence occurs in small doses,” providing space to reflect and language to interpret their horrific memories (53). O’Connor takes up Jeremiah’s language of rape as a special case, “horrendous because it translates military attack into the violation of a woman and because it portrays God as the rapist.” It’s clearly outrageous to make women scapegoats, view sexual assault as suitable punishment, or ascribe such hideous violence to God. Yet, O’Connor suggests, “The fact that God’s

rape of Zion is outrageous, unbearable, and unspeakable is surely the point of the imagery. To be invaded by another country, to be victims of attack, occupation, and dislocation is outrageous, unbearable, and unspeakable” (55). Jeremiah’s image of a violent God is not *the* answer, but another provisional explanation of the disaster.

The weeping poems portray well the state of shock characteristic of undergoing trauma and disaster. Spirits are numbed, emotions turned off. A first stage of recovery involves telling one’s experience, finding language to name the disaster. These poems serve “to rouse up grief like mourning women whose wailing and weeping makes space for tears, awakens sorrows, and releases buried feelings from benumbed spirits” (68).

The confessions may “serve as ready-made prayers for victims of trauma and disaster” (82). Jeremiah’s lamentation “gathers in the afflicted, draws them back from social isolation, articulates doubt, and shows how it is possible to cling relentlessly to God in the wreckage of their world” (88).

Jeremiah’s sermons offer three separate rationales for the nation’s fall, each explaining the disaster with confidence and simplicity. From the perspective of trauma and disaster studies, this is appropriate and helpful because “when experienced events cannot be understood, the human mind returns again and again to the event to try to make sense of it in a repetitive and compulsive way” (94).

The “little book of consolation” is commonly ascribed to a later author. The perspective of trauma and disaster studies supports that conclusion. “The vision of hope contained in these hopeful chapters would be meaningless for victims immediately upon the heels of disaster” (107).

Reading O’Connor’s book was not only fascinating from an intellectual point of view, but also an emotional and cathartic experience of reengaging my own experiences of pain and struggle with God. Her exposition of texts is in-

sightful, and her approach offers wisdom for ministering to those in the midst of trauma or disaster.

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**THE VIOLENCE OF SCRIPTURE:  
OVERCOMING THE OLD TESTA-  
MENT’S TROUBLING LEGACY**, by  
Eric A. Seibert. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012.  
Pp. 220. \$23.00 (paper).

Some years ago, I deemed it time to open the Bible at Genesis and read it straight through. I didn’t finish (though I *did* make it through Leviticus, to 1 Samuel). But what struck me most was the body count. The story of God and God’s people, as told throughout the stories and histories of the Old Testament, contains beautiful stories of God’s faithfulness and redemption, but they are woven in and around a “troubling legacy” that justifies—and is still used to justify—war, colonialism, slavery, violence against women, child abuse, and condemnation of LGBTQs, all of which lead to problematic conceptions of the character of God. In *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament’s Troubling Legacy*, Eric A. Seibert acknowledges and confronts the Old Testament’s legacy of violence, and offers ways to constructively read and engage Scripture’s darker stories.

Seibert’s objectives are twofold. First, “reading the Old Testament *nonviolently* in an effort to overcome the Old Testament’s troubling legacy,” and second, “to offer guidelines for dealing with violent Old Testament texts that sanction, and sometimes even celebrate certain acts of violence. . . by critiquing the violence in them while still considering how these texts can be used constructively” (3–4).

*The Violence of Scripture* is organized into three parts. Part one, “Exploring the Old Testa-