



O'CONNOR. Kathleen M. *Jeremiah Pain and Promise*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011. 179 p.

Anderson Yan¹

Kathleen M. O'Connor lives in the USA, where she did most of her theological studies. She holds a B.A. and a M.A. from Catholic institutions (College of New Rochelle), (Province College) and a Ph.D. from a Presbyterian institution (Princeton Seminary). O'Connor (O'C) is the William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of OT, Emerita at Columbia Theological Seminary and has extensive international experience teaching in local churches and theological colleges. She is also an active member of SBL (Society of Biblical Literature) and the Catholic Biblical Association of America (CBAA) with a wide range of academic and popular publications. Her former role as Co-Chair of SBL regarding the composition of the book of Jeremiah (Jer) and extensive list of publications on the same topic put her in the position of one of the leading scholars in Jeremiah studies (JS).

¹ Anderson Yan holds a MDiv and MTh in Biblical Theology (STSC) and served in the Chinese, Japanese and Korean churches in São Paulo before moving to the UK. Then, he did his PGCert in Theology of Transformation (LST) and his MA in Biblical Studies (Heythrop College, University of London) and served at Abbey Road Baptist Church in London. Anderson is currently doing a PhD in Old Testament at King's College London and he works as distance learning tutor at Foundation University Amsterdam and Graduate Teaching Assistant at King's College London. E-mail: anderson.yan@kcl.ac.uk.

Like many other areas, JS have well established approaches. Whilst in America the focus has been mainly situating the biblical text to particular historical events (e.g., Holladay) in Europe the emphasis has been on the redaction of the book. McKane and Carroll were the main representatives in the UK. Whereas the former worked on the growth of the book the latter focused on the literary Jeremiah. O'C was significantly influenced by Brueggemann's work (whose approach seems to be more theological) and has worked in close connection with Stulman and Diamond †.

The book has two main purposes: (1) the aim of the Henry Luce III Fellowship (2004-5) (p. xi), and (2), O'C's goals (p. ix). The Fellowship's goal was to provide applications of the prophetic books to the theme of suffering while O'C's one was to present hermeneutical reflections informed by psychological insights of modern trauma and disaster studies (p. ix). In terms of the latter, in the preface O'C states her intention of writing this book for: "a wide audience, for students of the prophet, preachers and ministers, clergy, caregivers, and for anyone who has experienced loss, displacement, and brokenness" (p. ix).

The fact that the book is addressed to a broad heterogeneous public does not mean that the work is less academic. On the contrary, the structure of the book shows awareness of the organisation of Jer, its content and genres. O'C contextualises these elements in light of contemporary tragedies, which evoke the theme of theodicy, providing a fresh contribution to JS. However, I fear that scholars more committed to the classical historical critical model in biblical studies will still be resistant to innovative approaches. In this sense, O'C's ambition of reaching a wide audience is a difficult task to be accomplished, but not less admirable. This is because, as with a minority of scholars, she makes the complex text of Jer accessible.

O'C's book is divided into an introduction followed by twelve chaps. and an epilogue. The introduction is based on a reader response approach applying modern trauma and disaster studies (pp. 1-2) to the interpretation of Jer. She defines trauma as "the impact of violence upon individuals", which distorts their perceptions of their memory (p. 3). In some cases, the traumatic experience leads to silence, isolation as a mechanism of self-protection and a loss of faith (pp. 3-4). In chap. 1 O'C creatively contextualises the historical background of Jer, using stories from four imaginary families as a means to expose the readers to the historical setting of the disaster of the sixth century B.C.E. (p. 7-11).

In chap. 2 O'C explores the theme of suffering, which she considers significantly relevant to contemporary pastoral work. O'C uses an intertextual approach with the aid of Lam, Eze and Second-Isa to reflect on disaster and

trauma to interpret Jer (p. 19-20). She dedicates a considerable amount of attention explaining each stage in trauma and disaster studies regarding Jer. Similar applications of psychological theories in biblical studies have also been successfully demonstrated in the book of Lamentations (e.g., Joyce (1993) which applies psychological insights regarding the process of grief; Linafelt (1998) draws a parallel between Lamentations and the Holocaust and explores the inability to mourn in the face of such a tragedy). O'C argues that the effects of disaster leads one to silence as a self-defence mechanism; fractured memories repetitively echoing the traumatic experience; the loss of ability of verbal expression because of the pain; loss of sensitivity; and finally, the loss of faith (p. 20-26). O'C considers these as "bearing burdens"- trauma and disaster studies can help by labelling the wounds and rehabilitating the injured one back to a normal life (p. 26-27).

In chap. 3 O'C attempts to explain the chaotic structure of Jer in the light of traumatic experiences of the survivors, who attempt to find meaning of what was lost and the vocabulary to verbally express the traumatic experience. She refers to the work of her colleague, Stulman (1998) to present microstructures in Jer (p. 30-33).

In chap. 4 O'C explores the metaphor of the broken family based on Jer 2:1-4:4, which is taken from Hosea 1-3. She relies on readers' interpretations to find the untold stories, which she considers as part of the search for the meaning of the disaster (p. 35-34). O'C argues that the use of public liturgical language in the hopeful insertions suggest action of repentance (pp. 39-42). For her, this family illustration provides a pedagogical move from disaster to hope, which reasons theological themes, such as theodicy and human responsibility (p. 42-43). In chap. 5 O'C analyses the fragmented traumatic memories based on the war poems in Jer 4:5-6:30; 8:16-17; 10:17-22; 13:20-27. She explores the language of sexual violence through a feminist perspective and argues that it is necessary to interpret the trauma because it gives the survivors the chance of creating a narrative of their experience (p. 47-48). She clearly takes the mythological perspective (advocated by Staerk's article (1933) on Habakkuk, but also partially modified in Child's article (1984) on 'The enemy from the North') regarding these poems (p. 49). In chap. 6 O'C examines the weeping poems from Jer 8:22-9:11. She contrasts the mourning rite in ancient Israelite with modern culture and argues that in a stage in which victims of war become insensitive to death cause by the horrors of war (p. 59-60) is a necessary process of re-humanisation in which the victims learn to face pain and mourn the loss (p. 60, 67-68). In chap. 7 O'C explores the biographical tradition based on Jer 1; 16:1-9; 20:1-6; 26; 32; 37:11-38:13; 40-43. She takes Polk's (1984) approach and considers Jeremiah as "a literary portrait

with theological intentions” (p. 70) and argues that Jeremiah’s life also functions as preaching (p. 70-1, 9). In chap. 8 O’C examines the laments tradition based on Jer 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-13, 14-18, which parallels with the psalms of lament as observed before by Baumgartner (1988) (p. 81-82). O’C builds from her previous work on Jer (O’Connor 1988) and borrows the idea of “dark night of the soul” to elaborate psychological insights in the absence of God in Jeremiah’s lament (p. 84-85). In chap. 9 O’C takes the sermon tradition based on Jer 7:1-8:3; 11:1-14; 17:19-27. She focuses on human responsibility and argues that the language used in the sermons is more direct than the other sections of the book (p. 93-4, 102). O’C observes the fact that the sermons have a simplifying tendency as a strategy to inform the audience quickly about the events without complex information (p. 94). She also points out that the sermons use provocative language, which require a response from the audience (p. 98). In chap. 10 O’C examines the booklet of consolation based on Jer 30-31. She argues that the new covenant is within the context of the breaking of the old one, but also presents some new aspects, such as the transformative and egalitarian features (p. 110-12). O’C argues that imagination functions as a means of comfort, promising the reconstruction of the city, a new identity with social implications and stability (p. 104-7). In chap. 11 O’C observes the unique aspect in Jer, which is the absence of a proper ending based on Jer 45; 50-51; 52. For her, this absence creates the effect of suspense regarding the future (p. 115-116, 122-123). She defines the three endings as (1) the continuity of the word (Jeremiah 45:1-6); (2) the affirmation of God’s justice in the oracles against the nations (Jeremiah 50-51) and (3) ambiguity (Jeremiah 52) (p. 116-122). In the last chap. O’C briefly exposes the theories regarding the composition of Jer and gives an impression of dissatisfaction with them (p. 125-126). She attempts to relate the chaotic structure of Jer to trauma and disaster studies, providing many contemporary examples (p. 126-128).

O’C’s aim of reaching a wide audience might be a bit ambitious and to some extent hard to achieve as it is impossible to please everyone. There are different audiences for different tastes in literature and there is a polarised gap in biblical studies between those adept to historical critical approaches and others who are more reader oriented, applying methods from other disciplines. Sometimes, alien concepts are directly imported to biblical texts without any criticism, but this does not seem to be O’C’s case as her competence in mastering Jeremiah’s text is attested through her extensive work on Jeremiah. Unlike some writers, who quickly apply modern concepts to the ancient text without criticism, she also has included the precaution of exposing the meaning of the text first without simply importing modern concepts directly to the text. Instead, O’C self-consciously

works on the application of these concepts to biblical texts (p. 5).

It is difficult to find the balance between the application of other disciplines in biblical studies without imposing external elements and structures on the text. Sometimes recurrent themes (e.g., human responsibility) keep reoccurring, which makes the reading a bit repetitive. Although trauma and disaster studies can be illuminating in JS, not all texts in Jeremiah flow well with this psychological explanation because of its diverse nature.

However, multidisciplinary exchanges should not be seen as negative to biblical studies. O'C is not a pioneer in promoting interchangeable conversations between biblical and other disciplines, as others have also explored these exchanges (e.g., Overholt (1996) employs cultural anthropology to illuminate the understanding of Old Testament texts). More specifically, in terms of the use of psychological approaches in biblical studies, Kille (2001), has also presented benefits from multidisciplinary interchanges. This of course does not exclude O'C's merit of freshly contributing by applying trauma and disaster studies to her area of expertise, which despite resistance among the adepts of the classical historical critical approaches seems to promote advances in biblical studies. This multidisciplinary approach does not mean returning to the pre-critical period in biblical studies, but critical cooperation between different disciplines mutually provides insights.

REFERENCES

- BAUMGARTNER, Walter. **Jeremiah's Poems of Lament**. Transl. by David E. Orton. Sheffield, UK: Almond Press, 1988.
- CHILDS, Brevard S. The Enemy from the North and Chaos Tradition. In: **A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies**. Ed. by Leo G. Perdue. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1984, p. 151-161.
- JOYCE, Paul M. Lamentation and the Grief Process: A Psychological Reading. In: **Biblical Interpretation**. Leiden, v. 1, 1993, p. 304-320.
- KILLE, D. Andrew. **Psychological Biblical Criticism**. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001.
- LINAFELT, Tod. The Impossibility of Mourning: Lamentations after the Holocaust. In: **God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann**. Ed. by Tod Linafelt. Minneapolis, MN, 1998, p. 279-289.
- O'CONNOR, Kathleen M. **The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 12-25**. (SBL Dissertation Series). Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988.
- OVERHOLT, Thomas W. **Cultural Anthropology and the Old Testament**. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996.
- POLK'S, Timothy. **The Prophetic Persona: Jeremiah and the Language of the Self**. (JSOT Supp 32). Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1984.

STAERK, W. Zu Habakuk 1:5-11. Geschichte oder Mythos. In: **Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft**. Berlin; New York, v. LI, 1933, p. 1-28.

STULMAN, Louis. **Order Amid Chaos: Jeremiah as Symbolic Tapestry**. Biblical Seminar. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998.