

# Reviews



**JEREMIAH: THE WORLD, THE WOUND OF GOD**, by Daniel Berrigan. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999. Pp. 195. \$18.00 (paper).

Daniel Berrigan has written a commentary on Jeremiah. Yet what the reader encounters is not what one usually associates with that genre. Berrigan's own words reach across centuries to his kindred soul Jeremiah and help us to connect. While many commentaries seem intent on creating scholarly distance from their biblical text, Berrigan's writing brings us within arm's reach of the prophet. Most will find this encounter too close for comfort, yet that disquietude echoes Jeremiah's reception by his own contemporaries. A sign of faithful commentating? This is no autopsy on a dead letter, but rather a conversation with the living word.

This is not to say that Berrigan has neglected scholarship. He leans upon the other commentators for insight often. Occasionally, he commends them. At other times his word is harsh:

The commentators refer to the text [33: 1-26] as "extremely repetitious" and let it go at that. Reading as they run, running as they read, the commentators here tend perhaps to consider themselves not so much servants of the word as its sedulous critics, even its improvers.

But why not a different tack, considering ourselves as invited to pause, to take the text whole cloth, standing on its own, requiring little of our comment? (141)

Berrigan practices the respect called for above, yet when all the wrestling with the text will not yield a clear direction, he confesses such. Commenting on the early verses of chapter six he writes, "Uncertainty

riles the enemy camp. (Uncertainty also on our part, as to the point of the text!)" (32).

Berrigan, of course, is not so naive as to think that the commentator ever simply steps out of the way and allows the text to speak for itself. Berrigan's own life flows through these pages. The spirituality that has birthed his peace ministry in plowshares surfaces again and again. As his life and fate mirrors that of Jeremiah's warnings unheeded, prison cells enclosing, hope absconding, lonely faithfulness contending, the contemporary import of the texts is resurrected. Berrigan demonstrates that his activism is not spiritually shallow, but is capable of extended conversation out of the sacred writ and holy history. The furrow left from the life Berrigan has lived in his plowshares ministry presents itself straight and deep.

Listening in on the conversation, one is convinced of how radically the world will be understood when read through the ancient text. While many who claim to interpret the world through the text leave little changed, Berrigan's words assault the world's self-contentment. His reading is not vague. Jeremiah speaks again and quite particularly. He bids us to question what reigns as though sacred: Supreme Court, White House, Congress, democratic process, Pentagon. He asks about God's judgment on these bastions of our own empire. His word for the church is no less stringent: "it is the slavish acolyte of nothings, idols, confabulations" (11). He passes through several themes with the prophet over and over: truth telling and the fate of the speaker, the luring of the empire's idols, the unacceptability of war whether offensive or "defensive," our accountability before Yahweh. He bids us to examine the fall as we know it

in our daily lives. And he asks, “Who could dwell in such a world with open eyes, with even half a heart, and be free of anger?” (20). Might we so engage the word that we discover “hearts...focused elsewhere than in the cultural wasteland?” (4).

Yet, Berrigan is not only interested in Jeremiah’s tearing down activity. His pen speaks of horrendous things with poetic precision. But also of God’s yes, of the building up again. We may not be prepared for this word either. But ready or not, it comes and through it God’s grace. Hear the beauty of the promise given through the interweaving of Jeremiah’s verses—Jeremiah 31—and Berrigan’s verse:

Of embrace, of nuptials,  
is My song. I your God, you My very  
own! Age-old love  
new as new dawn.

Imagine, the sword  
sheathed, at rest—  
deserts blooming,  
music welling!

Shouts of joy  
pierce high heaven—  
the remnant, the survivors come!  
Strong, feeble,  
lame, sound of frame,  
women with child,  
the aged, their shaky limbs  
commandeered by hope—  
the long march!

The One who scattered  
far, wide, your goodly grain  
now gathers you, My sheaf.  
My loaf. My love. (128)

And to this, I can but sigh (with Brueggemann), “Finally comes the poet!”

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**JOSHUA: A COMMENTARY**, by Richard Nelson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997. Pp. xviii + 310. \$40.00 (cloth).

Richard Nelson is one of the premier interpreters of the historical books of the Old Testament. His books include a major work on the authorship and editing of the Deuteronomistic history, an introduction to the historical books, and a commentary on 1-2 Kings. In this welcome work, Nelson turns his attention to the Book of Joshua. Nelson’s commentary replaces Alberto Soggin’s commentary in the Old Testament Library series. It is a masterful work of historical-critical scholarship, combined with thoughtful examination of the literary features of the text. This is a very careful piece of work, and deserves careful reading.

According to Nelson, “Joshua is fundamentally a theological and literary work. Hardly any of the material it preserves is of the sort that can be directly used for historical reconstruction” of the emergence of the Israelite tribes in the land (2-3). “Joshua’s true historical value consists in what it reveals about the social and ideological world of those who told these stories, collected and redacted them, and then read the resulting literary product” (4). According to Nelson, the purpose of the Book of Joshua was to create and support the identity of the people of Israel, and to give them the courage to face their challenges as the Lord’s people.

In the commentary sections of the book, Nelson provides a translation of each text, thorough textual notes that most lay and clergy readers will find to be too technical, and then explanation and commentary on each passage. The commentary itself is written in a dense style. Nelson does not connect all of the dots for his readers. Rather, he presents a great deal of information and leaves to them the task of chasing down their own conclusions. This makes Nelson’s commentary a working commentary for the reader: in order to get the most out of

this book, readers will need to have their Bibles open and spend time tracking down and sifting through the many cross-references that Nelson provides, and spend time coming to their own conclusions about theological and interpretive matters to which Nelson only alludes. But this is a strength of the commentary. Nelson wrote less than he might have, but the reader can get more out of his work because of this.

No commentary can be all things to all people, and there are things one might have wished were different about this commentary. I would have wished Nelson had delved more deeply into theological matters. In the introduction he briefly treats the topics of "Land," "Conquest," "The Enemy," "The Ban," and "Obedience," as well as the figure of Joshua. It would have been a welcome addition to the commentary if Nelson had used the sections where he commented on texts to flesh out and enrich his introductory comments. But this commentary is a gem, and it will richly reward those who work through it.

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**THE THEOLOGY OF THE FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS**, by Victor Paul Furnish. New York: Cambridge, 1999. Pp. 167. \$54.95 (cloth). \$16.00 (paper).

Those interested in Paul's letters for the window they offer on his theology have traditionally paid more attention to Romans or Galatians than to the Corinthian correspondence. Yet if theology, like politics, is always local, then 1 Corinthians has much to offer in terms of Pauline theology. In this book, Victor Paul Furnish offers a brief commentary on 1 Corinthians, focusing on those parts of the letter in which Paul makes extended theological arguments to support the advice he gives the church.

The slim volume is organized much like a commentary. The first chapter includes

historical background about Corinth and Paul's visits there, as well as a synopsis of such introductory issues as the modern debate over how many letters Paul wrote to the Corinthians, and which of the letters (or their fragments) are contained in the New Testament. Furnish names "three special points of reference" (18) for Paul the theologian. They are scripture (that is, the Septuagint), traditional materials (such as the words of institution and other material that Paul received and handed on), and "Paul's own sense of apostolic vocation" (18-19). These three function for Paul, and presumably for his audience too, as warrants to authorize his theological arguments.

At two points in the introduction, Furnish speaks of the theological differences that appear to exist between Paul and his congregation. 1 Corinthians is not just a series of pastoral directives written in response to a letter from the Corinthians and/or a report from Chloe's people about difficulties in the Corinthians' common life. 1 Corinthians is one side of a theological debate that Furnish sketches this way:

Summarized formally, in terms of traditional theological categories, the prevailing Corinthian interpretation of the gospel had departed from Paul's own interpretation of it in four critical respects: christologically, by taking little or no account of Jesus' death; soteriologically, by misconstruing the meaning of one's freedom in Christ; eschatologically, by failing to appreciate the apostle's dialectical understanding of salvation, as both "already" and "not yet"; and ecclesiologically, by neglecting the corporate dimension of life in Christ (12).

Furnish mentions these theological themes again at the end of the introduction, regrettably in order to reject them as tools for organizing his *Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians*. Because Paul's thinking "did not proceed according to formal categories" of christology, soteriology, eschatology, and ecclesiology, Furnish chooses to organize his theology of this letter by trac-

ing Paul's argument chapter-by-chapter through the letter. This decision has the effect of obscuring Furnish's insights into the theological differences between Paul and the Corinthians.

The titles of the book's middle chapters suggest broad themes in theology and ethics:

Knowing God, belonging to Christ  
Belonging to Christ in an unbelieving  
society  
Belonging to Christ in a believing  
community  
Hoping in God, the "all in all"

These chapter titles offer a different method of organization than that based on loci of systematic theology, yet they still point to theological themes. What does it mean to belong to Christ? How does hoping in God relate to knowing God? The theological questions suggested by Furnish's chapter titles are at the heart of Paul's thought. Unfortunately, clarity on these questions is sacrificed as Furnish takes pains to comment on nearly every pericope in the letter, in the order in which each appears. The theological forest is constantly in danger of being lost for the exegetical trees.

Throughout the book, Furnish avoids using material in other parts of the Pauline corpus to shed light on material in 1 Corinthians. He advises students of Pauline theology to "take care not to import ideas and themes that surface in other Pauline letters, as if the apostle's thinking always started at the same place, followed the same course, and arrived at the same conclusions" (xv). Of course, the heuristic device of reading any Pauline letter as if it were the only one extant has its limits. In his last chapter, Furnish devotes a few pages to remarks on 1 Corinthians in the context of the Pauline corpus. He also comments briefly on 1 Corinthians in the context of the rest of the New Testament and its use at various points in the history of the church.

*The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians* does not plow new ground in the

study of this letter. It does offer a careful exposition of 1 Corinthians with perhaps more attention to theological themes than one generally finds in commentaries of this length. The footnotes direct readers to many of the best recent contributions to literature on 1 Corinthians in English, and the annotated bibliography of commentaries is a useful tool for those deciding which 1 Corinthians commentary to buy.

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**BEYOND MAINTENANCE TO MISSION:  
A THEOLOGY OF THE CONGREGATION**, by Craig L. Nesson. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999. 134 pp. \$14.00.

In *Beyond Maintenance to Mission*, Craig Nesson has offered Lutherans a book that has been needed for some time now. Nesson offers a response to the question of what a congregation is for. His response explores eight components of congregational life (worship, teaching ministry, fellowship, stewardship, evangelism, making global connections, building ecumenical bridges, and social ministry) which revolve around two central loci (identity and mission). Neither of these loci nor the components is to be separated from one another. Indeed there is a dynamic interconnection between them: the focus on identity does not differ from the focus on mission. "Instead, the focus on identity must be viewed as integral to and serving the larger focus on congregational mission" (9). The better part of Nesson's book deals with each of the eight components of congregational life.

This review will comment on only two of the chapters because each of Nesson's chapters is, in many ways, a gem (my favorites were those on stewardship and evangelism). Each of the chapters is likely to give cause for celebration among some and consternation among others. Here, I would like to comment briefly on Nesson's chapter on worship since this chapter will bring into

sharp relief the division of opinion that any of the chapters may cause. Nesson rightly argues that the starting point for his theology of the congregation is “the worship life of the congregation” (8). There are few who will argue with that. Even those who actively employ “church growth” techniques will concur. Nesson’s apology for the historic liturgy, however, may be another matter:

Especially at a time when the church is on retreat at several fronts, the temptation is strong to jettison the ballast of ancient liturgy in favor of what appear to be more accessible and attractive forms. This is not to argue against occasional experimentation in ritual. But [my] approach advocates instead for a fresh understanding of the historic liturgy as the single most important key for renewing congregational life and mission. (10, cf. 36)

Nesson’s theology of worship, seen apart from his insistence on the historic liturgy (which seems to imply a *Lutheran Book of Worship* style or one like it), is illuminating and will be helpful to all those who take worship seriously. He tells us that in worship “we engage in pretending the kingdom of God,” that “our God is at work by the power of the Spirit to create that very kingdom in our lives and relationships” (35). Imagination and play are at the center of worship. Worship is like a game in that we forget our burdens and ourselves and are taken up—even if only in an anticipatory way—into the kingdom of God. Furthermore Nesson reminds us that in worship God is the actor, not we: “worship is not so much what we do but what God does in Word and Sacrament” (40).

The following chapter on education will likely occasion much less controversy. Here Nesson points out that the church can no longer assume that any western society “is a direct expression of Christian values” (46). The significance of this is that “mission is not merely a task undertaken in distant places by trained missionaries, but rather something that is an imperative close to home” (46). The era of Christen-

dom that was initiated during the reign of Constantine and prevailed until the twentieth century is over. It can no longer be assumed that people know the basic stories and doctrines of the Christian faith. Children and church members must “*learn* the Christian story” (49). The stories and indeed the entire biblical narrative needs to be taught in our Sunday Schools. Next, people need to be taught “to *think* through the story” (49), to honestly and “critically examine the truth of the Christian faith” (50). Finally people must be engaged “in the endless task of *living* the faith” (50). People of faith “demonstrate a powerful congruity between what they profess and how they live” (50–51). It is here that Nesson appeals to the idea of lifting up Christians who have lived exemplary lives. The saints of the church are a valuable resource in that they provide models for those who seek to overcome the gap between their lives and their faith. Saints are found not just in history but closer to home, thus Nesson advocates for mentoring programs which bring the mature believer and the newcomer together.

*Beyond Maintenance to Mission* is not a “how-to” book. Nesson makes some suggestions, but his goal is to provide a theology of the congregation, of congregational ministry. To that end he has succeeded. This is a book that ought to be read by all seminarians. It would be a useful text for an intern and internship supervisor to read together or perhaps in seminary following internship. But *Beyond Maintenance to Mission* should also be read by all those who lead in congregations. Even those who would disagree with Nesson, for example, on his insistence on the historic liturgy, will profit by his reflections on the nature of worship. Every chapter has important ideas that may vex some while stimulating others. It will, in any case, stimulate useful theological reflection on one’s ministry and give some roadsigns for future direction.

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**UNION WITH CHRIST: THE NEW FINNISH INTERPRETATION OF LUTHER**, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson. Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998. Pp. 182. \$21.00.

Originally the great cry of an evangelical movement, “justification by faith alone,” has become the doctrine above all doctrines in the Lutheran church. Yet even as our tradition assists us in achieving clarity in teaching and preaching, we also seem jaded by the repetition of this sixteenth-century motto. The distinctive nature of the claim has been domesticated by a plodding sense of catechization and a cumbersome interpretative framework. Nonetheless, if we trust that the church is always in the process of reformation, then we may look forward to renewal in the understanding of this core doctrine.

Finnish efforts to open a new perspective on our touchstone began in the early 1970s, when the archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland authorized the theological faculty at the University of Helsinki to open ecumenical dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church. Previous attempts at ecumenical agreement between other branches of the two communions had been only marginally successful. The stumbling block lay in the perception that the Lutheran emphasis on justification was incompatible with the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*, the process of divinization of the human.

The approach of the Finnish scholars was to align justification with Luther’s understanding of the indwelling of Christ in the believer. Lead researcher Tuomo Mannermaa turned to sources such as Luther’s 1514 Christmas sermon (“Just as the word of God became flesh, so it is certainly also necessary that the flesh may become word. In other words: God becomes man so that man may become God.”) and a passage from the 1535 Galatians commentary (drawn together as “*in ipsa fide Christus adest*”—in faith itself, Christ is present) to demonstrate that the reformer asserted a real participation of the believer in God. The

power and beauty of Luther’s claim, however, has remained buried beneath several layers of German history and philosophy.

As members of the research team began to proceed with the excavation, they found that the most troublesome accumulations were related to the legacy of Immanuel Kant. His spell over most German Protestant theologians of the last two centuries engendered a split between the reality of God “in God’s self” and the effects that God had upon humankind. Christians may be confident that in their daily lives they exist beneath the influence of a transcendent God, but they were disallowed any framework for a genuine communion with the divine. Such limits on the nature and structure of being would hinder the efforts of Karl Holl and the Luther renaissance in the early twentieth century. Finnish researchers Risto Saarinen and Sammeli Juntunen demonstrate that a far more intriguing metaphysics was at play in the thought of Martin Luther, a principle that was distinct from the Aristotelianism that informs Roman Catholic teachings on grace and “neo-Kantianism” that plagues modern Luther research. The Finns point towards some form of “real-ontic” union between Christ and the believer, even as their hypothesis seems to explode any possible philosophical categories.

The historical controversies of the *Formula of Concord* also needed to be circumvented. Simo Peura proposes that the squabbles of different German factions caused a shift towards forensic justification at the expense of effective justification (i.e., sanctification). He reasons that Luther’s understanding of the graciousness of God included both a favorable attitude toward the sinner and the gift of the indwelling Christ. Faith is not only trust in God’s mercy, but also a structure that is formed by a living Savior. The carpenter from Nazareth, so it seems, builds a home with a roof for protection from above, walls for defense from the outside, and a floor for support from below. The righteousness of faith need

not be understood in the Roman Catholic manner of being “formed by love,” but can be translated into the sense of being “formed by Christ”—however mysterious such a presence may be.

As one works through the collection of seminar presentations, scholarly responses, and article reprints in this volume, one can be alternately fascinated and frustrated. The Finns challenge one to let the real Martin Luther stand up, freed from one’s interpretative presuppositions and customs. Within the weight of Lutheranism, one must continually ask, “What is truly Lutheran?” Yet even as the Finns raise this question, their answers seem constrained by ecumenical goals. The external impulse towards doctrinal renewal has not spurred a broad enough investigation into the sources to satisfy more critical eyes.

Nevertheless, this book is valuable for the introduction of English-speaking Lutherans to the world of Finnish Luther interpretation. The reader ought not to be deterred by the challenges of working with the numerous Latin phrases in the text, keeping track of the various players and their teams, or dealing with the infelicities of editorial omissions and additions. The Finnish work on justification and *theosis* opens much more theological intrigue than mere dispute over sanctification. One can quickly form questions regarding the parallels between the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s supper and in the believer, the understanding of what it means to be “little Christs,” and the way that the thought of Martin Luther may or may not apply to modern spirituality. The reflective pastor will be able to recognize new angles for preaching and teaching that run counter to traditional conceptions. The Finns deserve praise for their efforts to provide a new entry point into the magnificent corpus of Luther’s work.

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**MY CONVERSATIONS WITH MARTIN LUTHER**, by Timothy F. Lull. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1999. 160 pages. \$6.99.

*My Conversations With Martin Luther*, in which the author relates what he learned “about God, faith, marriage, sexuality, war, spirituality, church life, the future, ecumenism, politics, heaven, and other things, too,” represents the fulfillment of a fantasy shared by many: the opportunity for a *tête-à-tête* with one of history’s most towering figures. In this book, the reader will find not only one, but five such encounters. But wait. Did these conversations really take place? Timothy Lull, president of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, and editor of *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), wisely suggests in his preface that readers put away such questions. Instead, he advises, “follow what Dr. Luther has to say.” Indeed, over the course of five conversations spanning ten years, Luther has much to say. And, as it turns out, so does Lull.

Indeed, the author is aware of the risks inherent in this undertaking. He recognizes that Luther research is susceptible to the same phenomenon that plagues Jesus research: that the results often say more about the one investigating than about the one being investigated. Moreover, Lull cites Heiko Obermann—who likes his Luther paranoid in respect to the devil and firmly periodized in the Middle Ages—as one who warns about the dangers of resurrecting Luther into modern times (145). With the foregoing caveats perhaps in mind, Lull lets the reader know that he took careful notes of his conversations with Luther, though he admits that he may have been “filtering things just slightly” (7).

So what does Luther say in these conversations? It turns out that, among other things, the man from Mansfeld has enjoyed reading Shakespeare (19), that he probably shouldn’t have burned the Papal Bull (76), and, most importantly, that he has completely reevaluated his harsh judgments

concerning the Jews (120). On the other hand, Luther refuses to give advice concerning the solutions to modern Lutheran conundrums such as homosexuality and ecumenism (46-51). As for the pressing question regarding whether or not he actually posted the 95 Theses on the church door, Luther's not saying (86).

The reader will also appreciate knowing what Luther has been up to these past 450-plus years. According to Lull's engaging narrative, Luther, instead of resting in peace, has spent a fair amount of time confronting the consequences of his earthly sins. Brother Martin has been busy learning what the scriptures *really* say, enduring centuries of post-mortem "remedial bible study" in a small group with Henry VIII and Leo X (42). Significantly, in order to help him better understand his anachronistic complicity in the policies of the Third Reich (41, 117), Luther has spent the latter half of this century making visits to former concentration camps under the tutelage of a well-known pastor who died in one of those camps (116).

In fact, it is difficult to avoid the impression that, unbeknownst to Luther, he is not in heaven at all but, rather, in Limbo! For additional evidence that Lull's Luther is anywhere but in heaven, one need look no further than the fact that Sigmund Freud is also there, still weighing in with his views on human sexuality (52). The fact that Luther appears to be in purgatory, rather than in the New Jerusalem, is, of course, clever and (it is hoped) intentional irony, as is Luther's statement, "I just hate all these folks who are so correct that they can judge people from a great distance and after many centuries" (123).

For lurking in the background here is the specter of the old Shirer myth as well as the question: Is it fitting for scholars to make Luther answerable for events which occurred centuries after he died? In *My Conversations*, Lull acknowledges that his own response to Luther's anti-Judaic writings comes in light of the horrible events of this

century, and he is careful not to present himself as Luther's accuser. Instead, in a fine twist, it is Luther who, as a result of the forced penance he encounters in the hereafter, ends up accusing himself.

In fact, the "certain sad aspects of his career" appear heavy on Luther's mind, receiving mention in three of the five conversations. In the final encounter, the circumstances and purported consequences of *On the Jews and Their Lies* are most forcibly addressed by the penitent Brother Martin. For good measure, Lull throws in as an appendix the 1994 *Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community*, a document which altogether avoids the Dickensian device of having Luther confront a future partly of his own making. Lull's stated purpose in writing *My Conversations*—to encourage the reader in her or his own conversations with Luther—is worthy of respect. Still, Lull does not escape inviting the reader into a conversation with Lull.

All told, there is much to chew on in the pages of this compact book. Readers will enjoy the imaginative format, the often humorous encounters with an expansive Luther, the review of the events and issues that defined the reformer's life, the chapter devoted solely to Katherine von Bora, and the appendix touting other resources for further investigation. Less enjoyable are the dozens of typographical errors—on page 17, Luther is referred to as Martin Luther King!—that plague the initial printing; readers may want to be certain to purchase the second printing.

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