

# Reviews



**JEREMIAH**, by Terence E. Fretheim. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002. Pp. 684. \$65.00.

Readers of *Word & World* have known forever that Terry Fretheim is an acute, reliable, generative reader of Old Testament texts with a sure critical grounding and an alert theological sensibility. And so it will be no surprise that Fretheim's uncommon gifts are once again on exhibit in this magisterial commentary, to the delight and benefit of his readers. Readers of the journal, however, may not be familiar with the new Smyth & Helwys commentary series in which this volume is one of the earlier publications. The series from the newly organized press is a most ambitious one that has recruited recognized and reliable scholars to provide critical grounding in the biblical text, but then to focus upon "connections" (a technical term in the series) that will be of use to teachers and preachers in the church and of benefit to a church that is willing to study. The push toward "connections," as intended by the series and in the hands of Fretheim, is no popularization or trivialization but a move beyond the usual historical questions to show the ways in which the text still speaks, in the matrix of faith, to contemporary readers.

The series is further enhanced by the imaginative use of "boxes" (another technical term in the series) that permits the commentator to employ a series of insets to cite other authors, make extrabiblical connections, present representations in the history of religious art, or quote other materials. The result is an impressive, elegant commentary of the size and proportion of the Hermeneia series but—unlike the Hermeneia series—fully accessible to readers who are not overburdened with technical capacity. It goes without saying that Fretheim has made splendid use of the inventive format

of the series so that his "connections" are rich and suggestive and the "boxes" offered provide contact with Berrigan and Bonhoeffer and a host of others from Fretheim's rich reservoir of resources. The format of the series is peculiarly suited to Fretheim's sensibilities and gifts, so that the commentary shows Fretheim, an exquisite theological interpreter, at his most exquisite.

Fretheim is, of course, on the front edge of critical study. A major shift has occurred in Jeremiah studies so that the "final form of the book" is taken to be addressed to the generation of exiles sometime after the period of the person Jeremiah. One consequence of this shift in perspective is that all the interpretive energy is no longer given to the earlier part of the book, to the materials that were commonly regarded as "authentic" from Jeremiah.

Now proportionate attention is given to the latter part of the book, that is undoubtedly later and that takes a big interpretive step beyond the horizon of the historical Jeremiah. Fretheim takes full account of this new perspective and, consequently, attends to the theological resources in the book that have long been underappreciated.

In the end, Fretheim is a theologian, and he attends finally to the character of God as given in the textual tradition. He is fully informed by the defining work of Abraham Heschel on pathos, and draws upon his own earlier important work on divine suffering. Out of that background, he pays attention to the pathos, power, and wrath of God that receive their most acute articulation in the tradition of Jeremiah. The commentary is especially suggestive concerning the "lamentations of Jeremiah" that bespeak the prophet's own pathos that is deeply congruent with God's own pathos in regard to the destiny of beloved Israel. In reading the text with Yahweh as a genuine character in the plot of the book, the commentary provides

uncommon resources for the church in a technological society that wants to silence pathos and censor any “underneathness” that may be present in either God or in humankind. A technological society, perhaps like the ancient dominant society in Jerusalem, wants to silence anything that would disrupt autonomous well-being. Fretheim shows the ways in which the rhetorical strategies of the book were theologically subversive in the sixth century and suggests the ways in which these strategies continue to be subversive in our contemporary context that has all too much in common with that ancient time.

This commentary is a “must” for any serious Bible student. Its publication will of course enhance the series. Beyond that, this commentary will be a durable marker in our new learning of ways in which to be critical and theologically contemporary at the same time. Fretheim and Smyth & Helwys are to be congratulated on this publication. It pleases me to observe that I have been one of Terry’s conversation partners in his preparation of the commentary, even if often a foil for his own alternative judgment. Fretheim has been among my most important conversation partners for a very long time. It is now a delight on my part to commend his book and to congratulate him for an uncommon piece of research that shows how the best “guild work” and the best “church work” readily converge when there are ample portions of learning, imagination, and discipline.

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**INTRODUCING THE NEW TESTAMENT: ITS LITERATURE AND THEOLOGY**, by Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001. Pp. 624. \$35.00 (cloth).

This is a wonderful book. It would serve well as a general introduction for those unfamiliar with New Testament writings, for a

good review of the questions, problems, and milieu of the New Testament writings, and as an aid to those who would delve more deeply into these writings.

This book is loaded with a large number and a significant variety of study aids. There are eleven maps that cover the times from Alexander’s empire to the “churches of 1 Peter and Revelation.” Excellent, brief bibliographies conclude each chapter and footnotes are conveniently placed at the bottom of the page.

In addition to the notes, some citations of primary texts, as well as carefully developed charts, lists, and diagrams are placed in boxes within the text. These boxed items enhance the material on the pages on which they are found. They are brief, but by the inclusion of citations for texts allow for further investigation by the reader. Among these items, for example, are selections from Josephus on the “Fourth Philosophy” (35), a section from Philostratus’s *Apollo-nius of Tyana* (134), a drawing of the floor plan of Herod’s temple (141), and a few lines from Virgil’s *Georgics* (254). These examples only suggest the wealth of texts that are brought to bear in the understanding of the New Testament milieu. Readers will find material from Greek and Roman authors, intertestamental Jewish literature, later Christian literature, and brief descriptions prepared by the authors.

This book also includes pictures of quite a lot of artistic work from across the millennia. Again a few examples can only suggest the variety and abundance of inclusions: the floor mosaic from the sixth-century C.E. synagogue at Beit Alpha; a picture of the Forum in Rome; two portrayals of the baptism of Christ, one by el Greco and another by Elimo Philipp Njau. The consistent effort made to set early Christianity and its literature in the larger world also shapes the inclusion of examples of how Christianity interacted with the world in various places and times throughout its history. Finally, the book has both a good clear index and table of contents.

The introduction focuses on three main questions: (1) In what milieus did the writ-

ings we have come to call the New Testament arise? (2) What are these writings? (This question is concerned with both genre and the organization of the writings.) (3) How did these writings, “each with its own historical and literary integrity,” come to be gathered together?

The interest in milieu is addressed directly in the first two chapters that attend to basic information about the multiple worlds, geographic, political, and social (including theological), of the early Christian writings. The authors are clear about reading these texts as part of a world where the “threads” of Hellenism and Judaism had long since come to be woven together, though in diverse ways depending on place and time. Good, albeit brief, attention is given to some of the social-scientific categories, e.g., honor and shame, as well as patronage, that have informed New Testament understanding.

The authors take seriously the character of the New Testament as historical, written Scripture. That is, they consider it essential to study New Testament writings as historical documents, as literary documents, and as the particular documents of Christian communities. As Scripture, New Testament writings must be interpreted in relation to the Scriptures of Judaism and also with an eye toward the interpretive work of the church through the ages. With these four characteristics of Scripture to consider, the authors refuse to privilege one method of interpretation.

Yet, as they work at the second question, “What are these writings?” Achtemeier, Green, and Meye Thompson wrestle with issues of genre and internal or rhetorical organization. In a very helpful section, “Reading New Testament Narrative,” the authors suggest some of the nuances of their own convictions about “understanding” in regard to reading the gospel narratives. What biblical narratives provide is access neither to the ancient author(s) or audience(s) but to a kind of reader presumed by the text. The texts are to be read closely, as historical

literary documents whose narrative decisions convey a world and meaning.

That this world and meaning have been gathered together as a faithful rendering of God’s relationship with humankind and creation is part of what the “canon” of Scripture means. In a final, concise, and clear chapter, the authors speak of the formation of the New Testament out of the many writings that emerged in the early Christian years. They note both internal and external forces that contributed to the creation of the canon, but state finally that “the canon represents the collective experience and understanding of the Christian community during the formative centuries of its existence” (608).

This last line of their book indicates how seriously the authors take the theological and confessional existence of communities who not only generated, but used and cherished these writings as Scripture. It is also true that they take seriously the communities this book might serve. Their work is clear and informative, carefully presented and thoughtful in the kinds of positions that they take, such that readers are always invited to consider, reflect, and make their own judgments. It is neither condescending nor overly technical. I highly recommend this book for its respect for scholarship, faith, ancient communities and their writings, and the contemporary reader’s hope for learning.

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**DIVINE BECOMING: RETHINKING JESUS AND INCARNATION**, by Charlene P. E. Burns. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000. Pp. 224. \$18.00 (paper).

This volume is well subtitled. Charlene Burns appeals to “a growing consensus that the christological enterprise as traditionally undertaken is bankrupt” (viii). Believing that the problem with two-nature thinking lies in the privileging of philosophy, she offers an explication drawing on the social sciences. Her proposal is an important contribution to

theological anthropology that she employs in a provocative christological suggestion as to how God was present in Jesus.

The challenge of intelligibility is paired here with a second concern that one might term justice. Burns is interested in the claims of other religions, which make it difficult to claim exclusive ownership of salvation, and she is troubled by “Christianity’s complicity in the devastation of the environment” (9). She seeks to address both intelligibility and justice concerns by formulating a “broadened and deepened ontological understanding of incarnation” (9). Burns seeks an understanding of Christ that is “thoroughly and ontologically incarnational” (10). She finds inadequate so-called “functional” christologies (which remind her of a Melanchthonian emphasis on knowing Christ’s benefits). So, how are we to proceed? It will not strike Christian readers as surprising to be invited to think about the incarnation in relational terms. One may pause somewhat over a note insisting that “the Gospel clearly portrays divine *relational* (not substantial) unity with Jesus” (165, note 32; emphasis hers). But a more startling telos is in view, for she will argue that all humanity is understood to possess the capacity for incarnation and that “God continually incarnates the divine in and through humanity” (8).

Burns clearly represents the familiar contemporary tendency to do Christology “from below.” But Burns fills out the emphasis on the humanity of Jesus by turning to resources that will not be familiar to many readers. Following helpful chapters on “A Short History of Christology” and “The Empathic, Relational God,” the reader receives a fascinating chapter on “The Empathic, Relational Human.” The self is to be understood as a “dynamic relational process.” In this process “there is an innate human tendency toward some sort of shared rhythm of life” (103). Drawing particularly on the work of Daniel Stern (*The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology*), Burns develops an understanding of “partici-

pation” distinguishing and connecting “four interrelated domains: entrainment, affect attunement, sympathy, and empathy” (103). This process moves from innate biological responses to the environment (“entrainment”) to a conscious and linguistic sharing of the lifeworld of another (“empathy”).

This rich but highly compressed presentation is expanded in a discussion of “cosmic sympathy,” “an underlying rhythm of creation, into synch with which all of life moves” (106). Here we have the chameleon’s camouflage, seasonal migrations patterns of birds, the biological clock, the capacity for altruism in nature evident in bats drinking excess blood to feed others, and cross-species altruism between whales and swimmers. Moreover, human beings have a capacity for “vertical” transcendence, “participation in the divine” (113). Finally, in barely more than a page, Burns writes of the compassionate (*rethem* meaning in the singular, womb; in the plural, compassion) God who “entrains the world through womb-love” (114).

Thus is the stage set for viewing the incarnation as participation. God is “constitutively present in the world as possibility” (134; cf. Maximus the Confessor: God present in the *logoi* of God’s intentions). “Jesus was somehow so open to the entraining rhythms of the divine” that he “experienced resurrection into God” (141). This is a “promise and possibility for us all” (141), for Jesus “illuminates the path toward deification” (140). The book closes with a chapter discussing “creating compassionate community” (drawing heavily on Buddhist thought) and sketching in outline a theodicy featuring sin as self-absorption.

The dizzying sweep and pace of Burns’s argument demands and deserves the reader’s close attention. In this brief review I will ask only two questions. First, where does the argument get us? Happily, Burns does not try to get us to a God in Jesus who is other than the omnipresent Creator God. But what of the relationship with God? The distinctiveness of Jesus lies in his human response that was “somehow” so open that

“more so than any other human, his inner world was attuned to the grace that is loose in the world” (140). This is to be understood “as an ontological event, but not inevitably as an ontologically unique event” (7). “For the Christian...Jesus was uniquely—but not necessarily exclusively—capable of participation with both God and humankind” (143). The affirmation of the humanity of Jesus seems not to require an elevation of that nature, for Burns asserts that “precisely because of his humanity, Jesus’ ability to transcend vertically into God was not always free of contamination” (126).

Perhaps this full-bodied emphasis on the participating humanity of Jesus would be welcomed more readily if a fuller discussion of God’s agency were in place. Despite the book’s title, there is very little discussion of what happens “by and for” God in the event of Jesus. We do read of “the gift of God’s own self” (138), but that is as an “offer” “made eternally” (138). Burns writes that Jesus’ acceptance “must have effected a change in the ontological reality” (134), but this is “not so much a question of Jesus’ being ontologically unique prior to the full acceptance of the reality of God” (134). I would be glad for a development of the statement that in the human life of Jesus “the self-fruit of God found completion” (142). Blocking the way to such further explications of the “Godward” side of Jesus is Burns’s insistence “on an approach that approximates negative theology with regard to God’s self” (128). God, though “immanent,” “remains ultimately unknowable” (138; cf. 136). We know this: “The universe is united through divine participation, a truth most clearly revealed through the incarnation of God” (114). Does this get us far enough in rethinking Jesus?

Secondly, one may ask *how* she gets here. Early on she distinguishes her work from “natural theology” or an attempt at “synthesis” (18). This will be, more modestly, she observes, “a theology of nature” (18). The remarkable fifth chapter closes with two pages tellingly titled “Drawing Near to a

Theological Anthropology.” As she turns in the next chapter to the application of the non-theological material she candidly notes she “must assemble a bridge to span the gap that remains between psychological theory and the theology of incarnation” (116). Her use of Rahner’s theology of the symbol seems stretched to provide a structure that will support the traffic flowing from her exciting psychological analysis over the terrain of theological anthropology to the christological telos. A more substantial structure would also prove helpful for movement back the other way in showing (in a next book?) how this “more-than-functional” Christology does “work,” soteriologically.

I very much hope that Burns and others will take up such tasks, responding to this book’s engaging invitation to rethinking.

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**KNOWING THE TRIUNE GOD: THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT IN THE PRACTICES OF THE CHURCH**, ed. by James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001. Pp. 283. \$29.00 (paper).

Taken together, these essays examine the knowledge of God made possible by the distinctive practices of the church. The diverse essays give expression to an amalgam of ecumenical theology, narrative, and virtue ethics. The controlling claim of most of these essays is that of “practice.” Due to the varied topics, some essays will be of more interest than others, but the volume overall will be of use to interested pastors, laity, and teachers. Further, it is exemplary of a present trend in theology.

Reinhard Hütter has the first essay on ecclesiology. In it he argues that the churchly location of theology should be its controlling feature. He claims that by situating it there he can overcome the problems besetting theology both in modernity and after Karl Barth. Communally centered practices address individualism, for instance. Mod-

ernity's problem is that a subject-centered understanding of reality amounts to the end of the church. Likewise, an understanding of the Spirit's work can supplement what Hütter takes to be Barth's pneumatological deficit. The Spirit works through concrete practices in the church that are not only something that one does but also what one suffers. Theology, in Hütter's view, should be a "suffering of divine things," echoing the title of his book-length version of this essay.

Yeago's chapter on the Bible continues some of Hütter's claims. Contemporary Christians are often unsure of the historical-critical method and its adequacy to the church's mission, yet they cannot turn back the clock. Yeago's essay is one possible answer to those concerns. He argues that hearing the Bible in liturgical contexts sheds proper light on its interpretation. He develops forms of the inspiration and clarity of the Bible in an ecclesial context. These, like Hütter's churchly practices, are part of the Spirit's work in the world. It is good to note his revision of these matters, especially in his assertion that the clarity of the Bible resides ultimately in the church's office of preaching. He concludes that the best way to learn this interpretation is to spend time apprenticed to the great preachers of the church. This is a suggestion well worth taking.

The way in which the language of "practices" brings together such activities as "knowing" and "praying" is brought out in an excellent essay by Anne N. Williams. She shows that Augustine's treatise on the Trinity cannot be divided between Trinitarian speculation and adoration. This is no small task since Augustine's work has been harshly criticized throughout the modern period and his use of the vestiges of the Trinity in creation has many dissenters. Both spirituality and theology belong together, keeping theology focused on the "word of the cross" and spirituality concerned with the Triune God, not some stratospheric fancy. "Theology understood as contemplation is therefore the consummate discipline, the discipline shaped by paradise because it belongs most essentially to paradise" (146).

These essays are all committed to ecumenical reconciliation, but James J. Buckley's essay aims to account not only for the disunity of the church but also the imperative for recovery of its unity. He aims for a "relocating of [the] ecumenical movement in the midst of the work of the Spirit on the practices and teachings of the Church" (207). Finding agreement and convergence is not enough. The churches are not in a situation where one more signed agreement will bring about the *una sancta*. There are "pained divisions" that need to be healed. The Spirit provides for remembering history forgotten, subverted, and dismissed for the sake of rapprochement.

Susan Wood and L. Gregory Jones both focus on the particulars of the liturgy and the catechumenate. Jones works with the most specific consideration of "practice" because he aims to supplement the work of Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre with a close consideration of the practices that form Christians most, namely those of preparation for baptism. He tells the story of the catechumenate under Augustine's supervision. The many aspects of preparing to be baptized amount to a full schooling in Christian character, requiring renunciations and adherences of the baptized alike (171). Wood's essay approaches the liturgy as a whole and does well in considering it a school of the senses where the preaching of God may approach in all of its ways. She develops aspects of Michael Polanyi's thesis concerning "tacit knowledge." One comes to know something by dwelling in the matter, and for knowing God, the liturgy as a whole functions as a way for involving the whole person in the life of the Triune God (111).

David S. Cunningham makes an argument difficult for those in the shadow of Karl Barth, namely, to interpret the world as giving knowledge of God. He considers the vestiges of the Trinity in creation, the longstanding tradition of finding analogies to God's triune life, such as that of the lover, beloved, and their love. Barth objected to the vestiges because they are too easily dirtied by human speech and hands. Cunningham claims that

once one is in relationship with the Triune God, one may learn from what one knows to see things in creation as vestiges.

The last two essays are not as “churchy” as the rest, but proceed along the same trajectory. Eugene Rogers’s essay shows how the stranger brings knowledge of God. It is a fine conclusion to this volume. He develops an understanding of the other out of God’s own self-differentiation in the Triune Life. God is “other” to himself as Father, Son, and Spirit. It is because God intends otherness for blessing that the church may find the possibility for love in the stranger, the one from outside (271). The stranger can come from outside to inside because God does just the same in the incarnation. God ceases simply to be “wholly other” than the world by coming near to us.

Bruce Marshall’s essay focuses on the difficult problem of how the God of Israel is the Triune God. Following the task of avoiding supersessionist answers, he argues that God is identified in different ways in the Old and New Testaments, ways which cannot be reduced to each other—therefore one cannot play Yahweh off of Father, Son, and Spirit, and vice-versa. Such a claim is not so simple, and Marshall accounts for the differences by considering the different ways God is identified without shattering the unity of God’s identity.

This collection of essays does well in bringing out a number of varied problems and is made stronger due to the complementary tasks each author undertakes. Many will find it valuable to set this book in a larger conversation about the church and the work of the Spirit. Such a larger context will permit the reader to consider the language of practice and its use in ecumenical theology and see the value of these essays.

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**GOD OUR TEACHER: THEOLOGICAL BASICS IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION**, by Robert W. Pazmiño. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001. Pp. 202. \$17.99 (paper).

Spiders spin their webs using at least two kinds of threads: some are the strong anchor threads that shape the web and provide structure, and the others are the fragile sticky threads that weave around the anchor lines to catch insects and other things that venture near. Pazmiño has done something similar in this book, creating a structure built from anchoring points in various grids of theological doctrine, and then weaving upon it numerous ideas cited from other sources in Christian education to fill it in.

Pazmiño creates a vast assortment of lists for thinking about Christian education in relation to Christian theological doctrines. The book is organized, for instance, as an exploration of a set of prepositions: God *for* us, God *despite* us, God *with* us, God *in* us, God *through* us, and God *beyond* us. Each of these chapters invites readers into a consideration of the relationship with God implied by the preposition and then turns to some aspect of Christian education. Thus “God *for* us” is Pazmiño’s discussion of the themes raised by trinitarian formulations and their impact on the relational nature of teaching. “God *despite* us” is his category for thinking about sin and salvation as connected to Christian teaching.

More interesting to me because it differs from current formulations is Pazmiño’s “five-task model” of Christian education as encompassing community formation, service, advocacy, proclamation, and worship. This particular set of tasks is very similar to those Maria Harris laid out in her groundbreaking book *Fashion Me a People* (Westminster John Knox, 1989). Yet Harris specified the five tasks as: *koinonia*, *diakonia*, *kerygma*, *leiturgia*, and *didache*.

I believe these two authors are actually making a very similar argument, but their contexts shape the manner in which they make it. Harris is centered within the

Catholic context and thus sees teaching/learning as an essential component of all the curricula of Christian community. This is, on some basic level, the same point that Pazmiño makes throughout his book. In his words: “my formulation of these tasks identifies *propheteia* or advocacy as an additional task, with *didache* involving the connective linkage across the five tasks rather than a separate task of the church” (23). Harris writes, in a similar vein: “understanding education in the church as an interplay of all the forms of ministry also supports our *prophetic* vocation” (45).

Yet in her context Harris is lifting up a somewhat ignored element present in each curriculum—justice—and trying to show how it is an essential dynamic across all of them. Pazmiño, on the other hand, names advocacy as one of the five tasks of Christian education and then weaves teaching throughout the whole of his consideration of theology. As a lay Roman Catholic I can only wonder if perhaps he might feel a need to assert that teaching and learning occurs in all aspects of theology—thus his desire to see it as implied in all five of his tasks—while justice is so rarely on the radar screen that he needs to lift it up as one particular, pointed task within Christian education.

All of Pazmiño’s grids are helpful for “seeing” anew the interconnections between Christian theology and Christian education. He argues for example that there are five principles implied by Jesus’ own teaching ministry: “that he was authoritative, that he was not authoritarian, that he encouraged people to think, that he lived what he taught, and that he loved those he taught” (73). These five invite people into a particular perspective upon their own engagement in Christian education.

In another list, Pazmiño offers seven invitations for educational practice in the church: “return to the relational bonds revealed in the Trinity; revisit the common commitments that shape our lives; reaffirm the ‘common good’ in the societal and global context, and form a public theology; reconsider the place of conscience in the

search for wisdom; reinvest in the prophetic calling in pursuing God’s politics in the world; re-appropriate the joy of celebration in corporate worship and public festival; and recognize the continual demand for renewal, reformation, and revolution that God intends until the consummation” (164-165). Here again, he is providing a framework upon which to weave the myriad elements of Christian education.

These are only a few of the grids he uses. But as I suggested earlier, this book is not only about grids, but also about interconnections, and that is where it is a fascinating read. On the one hand Pazmiño clearly wants to work within a particular kind of framework for Christian education—that of referring to and calling upon previously established authority, most often biblically or theologically—yet on the other hand the range of “authorities” he cites spans a rich spectrum that runs from evangelical Christian frameworks to the feminist concerns of Carol Lakey Hess. If there is a gap in this weaving, it is that of the broader educational literatures, which he pretty much ignores. Still, within each chapter there are voluminous references to other work in Christian education that will allow any reader to trace an interesting path to further reading if a particular perspective resonates with them.

No one book can possibly take on themes this large and adequately explore them. But this book will be very useful for those who are looking for ways to hook specific theological doctrines to a frame of reference that wants to embed Christian education in this kind of authority structure. This book may perhaps be best used as a tool for spinning that kind of web of faith.

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