

ON WRITING A FEMINIST-POSTCOLONIAL COMMENTARY: A CRITICAL EVALUATION*

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A biblical scholar who has gained some standing in the academic guild and has placed some notable publications will probably be invited at some point to write a commentary, especially in German-speaking scholarship. In Europe, the genre “commentary” still enjoys great popularity in spite of the fact that secularism is rising and printed theological literature is in decline. Many larger and smaller commentary series that were initiated in the postwar period have been completed only recently¹ or are currently newly issued.² Moreover, there are two recent large-scale commentary projects in German biblical scholarship³ that programmatically demonstrate an ecumenical breadth (including Judaism) and also invite non-German scholars as authors.⁴ As a German-speaking exegete

* English translation provided by Christl M. Maier and Carolyn Sharp.

1. From a Roman Catholic perspective, there are “Neue Echter Bibel” (NEchtB 1980–), published by Echter-Verlag, Würzburg, and “Neuer Stuttgarter Kommentar: Altes Testament” (NSKAT 1992–), published by Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart.

2. Series with a Protestant background are “Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament” (BKAT 1955–), published by Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn, “Das Alte Testament Deutsch” (ATD 1949–) by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, and “Zürcher Bibelkommentare” (ZBK 1960–) by Theologischer Verlag, Zürich. In these series, the biblical books are currently receiving a complete revision so that effectively “second series” emerge.

3. These are “Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament” (HTKAT 1999–), published by Herder Verlag, Freiburg, initiated by Erich Zenger in the 1990s, and the newly projected “International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament” (IECOT 2012–), published by Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, and initiated by a group of scholars under the auspices of Walter Dietrich and David Carr. The latter will be published simultaneously in German and English; its first volume has appeared recently: Paul Redditt, *Zechariah 9–14* (IECOT; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012).

4. Women as authors have been either non-existent or the proverbial exception that proves the rule.

who published a commentary with a feminist perspective,⁵ serves as co-editor of the IECOT series, and has been commissioned with two more commentaries,⁶ I know both sides of the concept “biblical commentary” as well as the concerns of both editors and authors.

1. *Writing an Old Testament Commentary Today*

The last 150 years have been dominated by two kinds of commentaries determined by their target audience: scholarly commentaries and commentaries for pastoral work, the latter written to provide accessible information for sermons and Bible studies. Both kinds of commentary have, in the main, been given to historical-critical research. Commentaries with a different approach are rare exceptions⁷—in the German-language arena there are hardly any so far.

Although one may think at present that “biblical commentary” as a genre has been generated by historical-critical research, it celebrated its triumphs prior to that, namely in patristic times, when typological, allegorical, and moral interpretations of Scripture had been dominant.

a. *The Commentary Genre: Legitimate and Excessive Claims*

The genre “biblical commentary”⁸ differs from other exegetical publications insofar as these works claim to interpret the Bible, or at least one biblical book, as a whole and simultaneously to comment on each chapter and verse. Even if published in fascicles, commentaries are book projects over against the current scholarly trend, which science imposed on the humanities, to publish short articles in preferably peer-reviewed—journals, which yield much higher scores in a scholar’s evaluation. Commentaries are *per se* going against this trend because they do not aim at producing innovative *solitary observations* in response to highly specific questions but instead offer *comprehensive views*, either on the biblical texts or on research dealing with a whole biblical book. It goes without saying that commentaries may be innovative conceptually.

5. Irmtraud Fischer, *Rut* (2d ed.; HTKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2005).

6. My commentary on Gen 12–36 for the HTKAT series is expected to be released in 2017; another one on Jonah for IECOT will be forthcoming in 2014.

7. See, e.g., “The Forms of the Old Testament Literature” series (FOTL 1983–) and Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *Women’s Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1992; exp. ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

8. See Christl M. Maier’s essay, “After the ‘One-Man Show’: Multi-Authored and Multi-Voiced Commentary Writing,” 72–85, in this volume.

In these ways, the writing of a biblical commentary is always a tightrope walk with regard to method. While no aspect of meticulous exegesis should be left out, it is impossible to comment on every verse within the given page range of a volume. Today, it is no longer sufficient to explore a biblical book through a classical historical-critical approach; authors are expected to be familiar with other methodologies as well, such as narratological or rhetorical criticism and their quite helpful tools. Authors should also be acquainted with the discourse on intertextuality and canonical criticism in order competently to interpret the final form of the text. The commentary series, which I am co-editing and in the context of which the present volume has emerged, pursues an ambitious agenda with regard to methodological and hermeneutical issues. This commentary has to meet the requirements of the historical-critical research tradition while at the same time incorporating synchronic aspects that emerge from reading the Bible as literature as well as from engaging the narrative context of the biblical canon. A volume written in the twenty-first century should therefore also include the contextual perspectives of social history, liberation theology, and gender studies. Moreover, the current trend to explore not only the history of the text's formation but also its later interpretations ought to be reflected in a commentary via mention of certain elements of reception history.⁹ Whereas the approach of *Wirkungsgeschichte* focuses hermeneutically on the effects of readings of the Bible as its object, research on reception history centers on the text's recipients as well as on the social and cultural contexts that generate specific forms of interpretation. Christl Maier's essay in this volume offers an excellent overview of contemporary commentaries that focus on reception history.¹⁰ The IECOT series,¹¹ which by design is bilingual and thus seeks to connect the German-speaking and Anglophone research traditions, delineates an ideal concept. Editors and authors of the single volumes, however, are fully aware that not all aspects mentioned above can be elaborated to the same degree in all volumes. Like most commentaries—whose publishers desire to sell numerous copies—IECOT is designed to be accessible, if not to lay persons, to professionals who need concise information for their preparation of sermons or Bible studies. Therefore, the commentary's scholarly prose has to be leveled out between the often conflicting goals of high legibility and up-to-date academic rigor.

9. See Irmtraud Fischer, "Von der Vorgeschichte zur Nachgeschichte: Schriftauslegung in der Schrift—Intertextualität—Rezeption," *ZAW* 125 (2013): 143–60.

10. Maier, "After the 'One-Man Show,'" 77–79.

11. For more details, see the websites www.iecot.com and www.iekat.de.

The IECOT has the significant advantage that authors provide their own translations, since the series is not bound to any denominational Bible translation like other commentaries in the German-speaking countries.¹² Thus, the authors' new translations can avoid or deconstruct interpretive stereotypes that are attached to specific Bible translations and fail to do justice to the biblical text. This is not only essential for the objective of providing a gender-sensitive Bible translation but also for unveiling the position of marginalized groups or imperial policies and for deconstructing discriminatory language.¹³ The distance from any tradition of denominational Bible translation and the possibility of fresh translations provide an opportunity for authors to choose new hermeneutical approaches that may generate innovative readings relevant to contemporary society. Apart from presenting a bilingual edition of each volume, Kohlhammer's new commentary series also aims at dual authorship. Leaving behind the "one-man show," the commentary on Jeremiah will be the first in German to be authored by women.¹⁴ Although it will maintain a historical-critical approach, the hermeneutics of this commentary will move away from finding the *ipsissima vox* of a charismatic-prophetic individual to an exploration of the manifold voices in the book of Jeremiah.¹⁵ Thereby the commentary clearly rejects a phenomenon that has been reflected rarely (but often caused anti-Jewish sentiments), namely that historical-critical interpretations frequently declare older texts as more authentic or even more valuable than the canonized final text, which sometimes is held to be epigonic.¹⁶

12. The German commentary series "Neue Echter Bibel" (NEchtB) is bound to the so-called "Einheitsübersetzung" which in the Hebrew Bible is a Roman Catholic translation.

13. The objective to do justice to women and marginalized persons is claimed by the recent German translation entitled *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* (ed. U. Bail et al.; 3d ed.; Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2007). For this concern, see also Maier, "After the 'One-Man Show,'" 84–85.

14. Maier ("After the 'One-Man Show'") reflects on what it means for two feminist theologians to write a Jeremiah commentary that includes post-colonial perspectives in a scholarly context and research tradition, which until the last two decades was dominated by male exegetes (the sole exception being Helga Weippert, *Die Prosareden des Jeremiabuches* [BZAW 132; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973]).

15. The authors adopt the concept of different textual voices from Athalya Brenner and Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (BIS 1; Leiden: Brill, 1993). The objective is no longer to focus on the prophet's voice but to look for multiple voices in the text.

16. See Yosefa Raz, "Jeremiah 'Before the Womb': On Fathers, Sons, and the Telos of Redaction in Jeremiah 1," 86–100, in this volume.

b. *Biblical Commentaries Between Postulated “Neutrality” and Declared Advocacy*

Whoever seeks to plant new theses needs to advance them with enthusiasm. It is not feasible to weigh every single phrase because the interpretation presented would lose its verve. The genuine academic tradition, however, requires naming the benefits of other solutions as well as weak points of one’s own propositions. Within the long-established historical-critical research tradition, one may point to two aspects that should be avoided in new commentaries. On the one hand, the history of research covered by a commentary becomes more and more restricted to the last forty or fifty years probably due to the fact that secondary literature has become unmanageable. On the other hand, there seems to be an unchallenged neutrality of approach. Especially in “classic” biblical commentaries, most authors do not worry about expounding the hermeneutical perspectives of their exegesis. Failing to state one’s objectives, however, does not lead to an unbiased “neutral” or “objective” commentary, but demonstrates instead that the author has approached his or her assignment without hermeneutical reflection.

Louis Stulman’s essay, “Commentary as Memoir? Reflections on Writing/Reading War and Hegemony in Jeremiah and in Contemporary U.S. Foreign Policy,” critically assesses this aspect of commentary writing. He rightly discusses the self-referentiality of commentary writing by refuting a widespread assumption of historical-critical commentaries—that one could look at biblical texts from outside of history. Any interpretation partakes in a reception history that is inevitably connected with its historical context and the circumstances of its production and its interpretation.¹⁷ Reflecting as clearly as possible one’s own socio-cultural context therefore does not inscribe an (undesirable) subjectivity into the exegetical process but contributes to its objectivity in that a disclosure of one’s own interests marks critical distance from the task. Christl Maier ponders this truth by borrowing terms of narratological criticism: on the one hand, “the commentator becomes the new narrator, the all-knowing controller and focalizer of textual voices”;¹⁸ on the other hand, he or she seeks to become aware of marginalized textual voices as voices of the oppressed, the losers, in order to render them audible.¹⁹

17. See Louis Stulman, “Commentary as Memoir? Reflections on Writing/Reading War and Hegemony in Jeremiah and in Contemporary U.S. Foreign Policy” 57–71 (59–60), in this volume.

18. Maier, “After the ‘One-Man Show,’” 73.

19. Maier (ibid., 81–85) illustrates this concern in reference to the passages about the Queen of Heaven and her devotees (Jer 7; 44).

This nascent IECOT commentary on Jeremiah explicitly announces its objectives through a clear option: it will be a feminist-postcolonial commentary. In order to discuss both the potential and constraints of such a commentary, the authors, Christl Maier and Carolyn Sharp, have invited scholars who share gender awareness and knowledge about postcolonial approaches. If one understands “feminist-postcolonial” according to Musa Dube’s concise definition, this approach enables interpreters to perceive “imperial and patriarchal oppressive structures and ideologies.”²⁰ As the doyen of postcolonial studies, Fernando Segovia, remarks, the “optic” of the postcolonial approach to research starts with realizing “the problematic of domination and subordination.”²¹ Imperial centers of power seek to subdue distant territories, to proclaim their culture as inferior, and to introduce the imperial culture—even against the will of the dominated—as a desirable innovation. Applying these propositions to the book of Jeremiah, this volume demonstrates that the “Sitz im Leben” of most texts is a hybrid-composite identity of Judah as a colonized people and that the book, due to its indistinct structure, may be recognized as trauma literature. Between these two poles of colonization and trauma, the gender research presented in this volume gives direction to the commentary’s work in progress; its authors are aware of being U.S.-American and German middle-class women in academic positions, not members of colonized nations, and thus ethically bound to refuse dynamics of othering.²²

2. *Facets of Contemporary Jeremiah Studies: Feminist Criticism, Postcolonial Analysis, and Trauma Studies*

Positioning itself in the landscape of contemporary Jeremiah studies,²³ this volume develops new grounds for interpreting Jeremiah by focusing on three hermeneutical approaches: feminist and postcolonial perspectives and trauma studies.

20. Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 121.

21. Fernando F. Segovia, “Mapping the Postcolonial Optic in Biblical Criticism: Meaning and Scope,” in *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections* (ed. S. D. Moore and F. F. Segovia; London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 23–78 (65).

22. For this goal of their commentary, see Carolyn J. Sharp, “Buying Land in the Text of Jeremiah: Feminist Commentary, the Kristevan Abject, and Jeremiah 32,” 150–72, in this volume.

23. Maier, “After the ‘One-Man Show,’” 77, 81.

a. *Feminist Research*

(i) *Feminist Research Within the Context of New Approaches*. From its inception, feminist research has been characterized by interdisciplinarity and pluralism as well as inter-denominational and inter-confessional cooperation among theologians. Feminist biblical hermeneutics has been and still is well aware that not only marginalization with regard to gender but also other forms of discrimination are at issue. Whoever seeks liberation—and aims at accomplishing it even against some canonized texts—cannot and must not disregard the multiple forms of oppression and marginalization that continue to cause harm in the contemporary world. As early as the 1980s, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza had argued that domination and discrimination due to gender constitute only one dimension among many forms of oppression.²⁴ Patriarchal societies discriminate with regard to persons positively and negatively based on diverse criteria having to do with gender, age, citizenship status, economic power, and so on. These criteria are employed across a wide variety of androcentric and hierarchical structures, although not all criteria are equally influential in all societies. The chart opposite provides an overview of such criteria in light of socio-historical conditions of ancient Near Eastern cultures.²⁵

In the last forty years, research on these criteria has led to much differentiation: *intersectionality studies* have analyzed the interplay of multiple discriminations. Emerging from the realm of management, *diversity studies* seek to eschew partisanship and to assess persons according to their competence, or rather what is generally assumed to be their competence, in order to maximize the yield for the company; this has the deplorable effect, however, that stereotypes are not deconstructed but

24. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 29.

25. I used and explained this chart in several of my studies, most recently in Irmtraud Fischer, "Inklusion und Exklusion: Biblische Perspektiven," in "...dass alle eins seien": *Im Spannungsfeld von Inklusion und Exklusion* (ed. A. Pithan et al.; Forum für Heil- und Religionspädagogik 7; Münster: Comenius-Institut, 2013), 9–23; Irmtraud Fischer, Jorunn Økland, Mercedes Navarro Puerto and Adriana Valerio, "Frauen, Bibel und Rezeptionsgeschichte: Ein internationales Projekt der Theologie und Genderforschung," in *Tora* (ed. I. Fischer et al.; Die Bibel und die Frauen: Eine exegetisch-kulturgeschichtliche Enzyklopädie 1/1; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2010), 9–35 (17). Unfortunately, the English version of this essay ("Introduction: Women, Bible, and Reception History: An International Project in Theology and Gender Research," in *Torah* [ed. Jorunn Økland; The Bible and Women: An Encyclopedia of Exegesis and Cultural History 1/1; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011], 1–30; [9–10]), presents only a shortened chart and includes a serious translational error ("ecumenical" instead of "economical"!).

rather intensified.²⁶ *Aging Studies* attend primarily to the criterion "age" and its interdependency with other criteria as it is especially significant whether a person belongs to a propertied family of the country or is an aging welfare recipient in a foreign country. *Queer studies* focus on the social constructions of sexual and gender identities, engaging in critical analysis of binary mal/female models of sex, heterosexuality, and other sexual and gender normativities; they challenge heterosexuality as a postulated sexual norm. *Postcolonial studies* highlight the criterion "ethnicity" with its various constructs of strangeness. A common feature of all these distinctions is that they point to a *multi-dimensional reality* as well as to the fact that *social differences are constructs*. All of these criteria, too, are constructs of an actual society; they are ascribed to human beings, appropriated in the process of socialization, and associated with a dichotomous, positive/negative evaluation.

CRITERION	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
<i>Status of Citizen in the ANE</i>	free	not free (slave)
<i>Gender</i>	masculine	feminine, queer
<i>Age in ANE: free</i>	old	young
<i>Age in ANE: slave</i>	young	old
<i>Economical status</i>	rich	poor
<i>Psycho physical status</i>	healthy	sick, disabled
<i>Ethnicity</i>	indigenous	foreign
<i>Religion/ideology</i>	dominant	foreign/deviant

Following Judith Butler, one may describe this process, which is applied not only to "sex/gender" but to all these criteria, as "doing."²⁷ If this basic framework serves as a starting point for feminist research, the critical inquiries that Carolyn Sharp addresses to second-wave feminism can be put aside.²⁸ With regard to the European research context, her reproach that second-wave feminism was interested only in the reconstruction of women's life or history and in a positive connotation of femaleness and therefore has not overcome a categorical dualistic essentialism applies only to the so-called feminism of difference, but not to

26. For example, the reason for employing female managers at a higher rate is not gender equity but the viewpoint that women allegedly contribute "other" skills to the company through their femaleness (which is often stereotypically used and not defined).

27. Cf. the highly influential study by Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

28. Sharp, "Buying Land," 150–52.

that feminism which has taken up the cause of equality and liberation in regard of all differences and has always considered “gender” as a fluid social construct. With these premises in mind, one may easily follow Sharp’s call for “transgression,” that is, a “privileging of creative interventions, ancient and contemporary, that resist or reframe destructive social norms.”²⁹

(ii) *Feminist Studies on Jeremiah*. Being aware that feminist research on the conspicuously androcentric book of Jeremiah could not analyze only passages that explicitly address “women’s issues,”³⁰ Carolyn Sharp defines her objective as follows:

And so feminist inquiry into Jeremiah must continue to interrogate ideologies of subjugation in the text and in its reception history, decline the ways in which gender, economic class, sexuality, ethnic identity, and able-bodiedness may be essentialized within the text and in scholarship, and provide readings of the text—critical and constructive—that further the work of justice and *shalom*.³¹

Based on historical-critical methods and including newer methodologies of biblical interpretation, a commentary is about to emerge that approaches not only the texts in the book of Jeremiah but also their reception history from a postcolonial-feminist perspective.

Even if postcolonial and queer theories may not be fully subsumed under a feminist analysis, the commentary’s authors deliberately argue for this connection because all of these perspectives question differences and their rationale in a given society. Sharp is motivated by a socio-political engagement that seeks to change unjust structures and to establish justice and *shalom* by destabilizing ideologies of oppression and by overcoming the ubiquitous essentialism visible in the criteria mentioned above.

Essentialism is a crucial component in many ideologies of oppression and must be addressed vigorously, for it allows oppressors, colonizers, and antagonists to limit and dehumanize those against whom they are working.³²

29. Ibid., 155.

30. See Carolyn J. Sharp, “Mapping Jeremiah as/in a Feminist Landscape: Negotiating Ancient and Contemporary Terrains,” 38–56 (39) in this volume: “as a feminist, I have always rejected the notion that a text can be meaningful for me only if it talks about ‘women’s issues’.”

31. Ibid., 45.

32. Ibid., 44.

Sharp argues explicitly against historical research in the sense of a history of institutions and pleads for what is known in German scholarship as socio-historical turn, namely, to consider not only the upper class of any society but all individuals. Thereby, and justifiably so, a compensational history that attends to “special topics”³³ becomes, in fact, obsolete because no group will any longer be “special” or even “normal.” Based on this line of argumentation, the objectives of queer studies can be included, as Sharp defines:

Queer theory inquires into ways in which social constructions reinforce certain ideas of what is normative or “natural,” including but not limited to notions of sexuality, sexual identity, and gender identity.³⁴

Her interpretation of the exemplary passage Jer 30:5–22 reveals the benefit of this approach: although at first sight, the book of Jeremiah has a clear androcentric imprint it can also be traversed as a “queer landscape.”

Thus, Jeremiah’s rhetoric of gender fluidity marks the body of “Israel” as hybrid and genderqueer, and Jer 30 becomes a place of queer freedom within the dominant gender discourse of a brutal honor- and shame-based society. Here a breach has been made—an incurable wound, we may say—in the androcentrism of the book of Jeremiah.³⁵

L. Juliana Claassens’s essay about the metaphorization of war’s inevitable adversity through the image of a woman in labor demonstrates how one may connect the perspectives of gender, queer, postcolonial, and trauma studies and render them fruitful for actual texts.³⁶ If in some Jeremiah passages the connotation of rape is included, this metaphor envisions the situation of a people inferior in military terms and exposed

33. Ibid., 45.

34. Ibid., 46.

35. Ibid., 50.

36. L. Juliana Claassens, “‘Like a Woman in Labor’: Gender, Postcolonial, Queer, and Trauma Perspectives on the Book of Jeremiah,” 117–32, in this volume, following Jeremy Punt, “Queer Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Biblical Interpretation: A Preliminary Exploration of Some Intersections,” in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (ed. T. J. Hornsby and K. Stone; SBLSS 67; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 321–41. Punt lists several similarities between the different theories: “epistemological and hermeneutical considerations; notions of difference; center and margins, or marginality and exclusion; agency; mimicry, and its avoidance; and prophetic vision for inclusivity or a new world” (329).

to a raping and pillaging band of soldiers. The addressees of this message are, according to Claassens, primarily men who, through this metaphor, are forced into a “gender reversal,” in other words, to identify with a female figure and thus to breach the ascription of gender.³⁷ Claassens’s queer reading may lead to the conclusion that it is possible to trace here a process of “undoing gender”—yet only if one emphasizes that the recipients of the message are primarily men. I would like to suggest that such a reading runs the risk of defining the implied recipient or reader of Jeremiah’s message in terms that are more androcentric than necessary with regard to ancient Israel: gender then is inscribed as *salient* where it probably was *silent*.³⁸ A parallel to the figure of the woman in labor, which depicts exclusively female biology, may be seen in the warrior figure, which in the ancient Near East is mainly assigned to a man (both metaphors are used jointly in the context of a divine speech; cf. Isa 42: 13–14).³⁹ The interpretive assumption that female metaphors serve to address situations of women’s life and a female audience only and that a queer reading would thus enable to the breaking up of gender roles therefore runs the risk of inscribing gender stereotypes into texts that originally did not reflect them.

Another aspect relevant to divine imagery in Jeremiah, about which feminist scholars of the last two decades have raised awareness, is discussed in Else K. Holt’s essay, “‘The Stain of Your Guilt Is Still Before Me’ (Jeremiah 2:22): (Feminist) Approaches to Jeremiah 2 and the Problem of Normativity.” The metaphors and terminology in the book of Jeremiah are not only shaped by violence, but also visualize traces of sexual and sexualized violence and even excesses that may be called pornographic. The effects of passages such as Jer 2, in which God violently acts upon the people personified as female, cannot be ameliorated by referring to texts that depict YHWH as salutary actor. The feature that particularly men are threatened with the horrible fate of violent rape

37. See Claassens, “Woman in Labor,” 125–27.

38. For this distinction, see Hanne Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender: The Interpretation of Gendered God-language in the Hebrew Bible, Exemplified in Isaiah 42, 46, and 49* (FAT II/32; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008). Not in all gendered metaphors is gender salient; in metaphors in which other aspects dominate, gender is silent.

39. See Irmtraud Fischer, “Isaiah: The Book of Female Metaphors,” in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature* (ed. L. Schottroff and M.-T. Wacker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 303–18 (306).

contributes to distancing the contemporary reader from the text.⁴⁰ Yet it cannot be ignored that such texts, which depict female sexuality as both nymphomaniacal and extremely vulnerable, have a considerably more depressing reception history for women than for men. The history of interpretation as well as the history of religious praxis reveals that such representations of female sexual desire and suffering exert a long-term influence on the malleable constructions of sexuality.⁴¹ Because Holt sees the Bible’s authority not as permanent but as dialogic, she draws the following conclusion with regard to the perception of the canon: “In other words: as a text, written by humans for humans about God, the Bible is as fallible as any other book.”⁴² Yet, in following Kathleen O’Connor’s statement that not the biblical text but its interpretation can be perceived as “conversation,” Holt contradicts not only Luther but perhaps also herself.

In her essay “Buying Land in the Text of Jeremiah: Feminist Commentary, the Kristevan Abject, and Jeremiah 32,” Carolyn Sharp provides another example of feminist interpretation that points to the problem of *male-coding* in all its dimensions. While the prophet and God are coded as male, the disloyal and sinful community is depicted as female: “The...social body of Judah is [feminized]”;⁴³ interpretations have often deepened this dichotomy. In the same perspective, Stuart Macwilliam analyzes gender performativity and thus the problematic construct of Jeremiah’s masculinity.⁴⁴ As in Jer 20:7 the Hebrew root פתה has often been translated with the verb “to seduce” that carries a sexual connotation, or else with “to assault” that connotes violence, Jeremiah would confess here that he has been sexually overwhelmed by a stronger man.⁴⁵ The (positive) marriage metaphor used to denote the relationship between the prophet and his God in other passages (e.g.

40. Angela Bauer has referred to the notion that in Jeremiah female metaphors are primarily addressing a male audience; see her *Gender in the Book of Jeremiah: A Feminist Literary Reading* (New York: Lang, 1999), 160–61.

41. I explored such gender-specific effects of female metaphors in the book of Isaiah in Fischer, “Isaiah”; Claassens (“Woman in Labor”) also emphasizes them.

42. Else K. Holt, “‘The Stain of Your Guilt is Still Before Me’ (Jeremiah 2:22): (Feminist) Approaches to Jeremiah 2 and the Problem of Normativity,” 101–16 (113) in this volume.

43. Sharp, “Buying Land,” 150.

44. Stuart Macwilliam, “The Prophet and His Patsy: Gender Performativity in Jeremiah,” 173–88, in this volume.

45. For the following see also *ibid.*, 173–76.

Jer 15:16) and the interdiction to marry (16:2) thus point to continuous damage of the book's stereotypes of masculinity, which also includes the figure of Baruch: "Baruch is to Jeremiah as Jeremiah is to YHWH."⁴⁶ Macwilliam further points to constructs of masculinity of other great prophetic figures, for example Elijah, who "performs his masculinity very well indeed."⁴⁷ The framework of queer theory offers completely new insights insofar as Macwilliam assembles particular observations of traditional commentaries and reinterprets them with regard to gender performativity.

James E. Harding's contribution, "The Silent Goddess and the Gendering of Divine Speech in Jeremiah 44," explores the problem of the representation of the goddess in Jer 44.⁴⁸ The goddess is called "Queen of Heaven," yet her identity remains cryptic; she is characterized from different perspectives, as Harding clear-sightedly argues, but is not herself granted direct speech. The text does not explicitly state whether the veneration of the Queen of Heaven was considered irreconcilable with the cult for Israel's god. At least, Jer 7 and 44 see the people's dedication to this goddess as a reason for Judah's breakdown and characterize Jeremiah as a true prophet in Mosaic succession, since his oracles of doom come true. A male prophet announces the message of a god represented as male to primarily female devotees of a female god. The gender coding of this message thus causes a marginalization of "the female" and a centralization of "the male" on different levels at the same time.

In my own research, I have tried to understand prophecy in its twofold canonical shape from the perspective of the Torah and its idea of Mosaic succession.⁴⁹ Therefore, I read Yosefa Raz's essay, "Jeremiah 'Before the Womb': On Fathers, Sons, and the Telos of Redaction in Jeremiah 1,"⁵⁰ with great interest and much consent. Starting from the call narrative, Raz deconstructs the romantic image of the prophet and seeks to understand Jeremiah in line with the Deuteronomic law on prophets as a true prophet in Mosaic succession.

46. Ibid., 187.

47. Ibid., 179.

48. See James E. Harding, "The Silent Goddess and the Gendering of Divine Speech in Jeremiah 44," 208–23, in this volume. He assumes that the goddess can be identified with YHWH's consort Asherah (210, 218).

49. See e.g., Irmtraud Fischer, *Gotteskünderinnen: Zu einer geschlechterfairen Deutung des Phänomens der Prophetie und der Prophetinnen in der Hebräischen Bibel* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 32–62.

50. See Raz, "Jeremiah 'Before the Womb'," 86–100, in this volume.

b. *Postcolonial Criticism*

In her introductory essay, "Challenges and Opportunities for Feminist and Postcolonial Biblical Criticism," Judith E. McKinlay launches a hermeneutical discussion that seeks to identify power structures and their effects on oppressors as well as on the oppressed. She further aims at assessing the implications of a "politicized hermeneutic of suspicion,"⁵¹ applying this hermeneutic to texts and especially to the socio-historical and geopolitical situation in the book of Jeremiah. The essay's rather loose structure and a constant alteration between theory and its application to both Jeremiah texts and today's colonized indigenous ethnic groups of her Australian context turn the essay into an innovative and exciting, albeit somewhat arduous introduction that culminates in pleading typical for contextual theologies—for an awareness of the limitations and shortcomings in one's own research.

In contrast, Sharp defines postcolonial studies not only in terms of an exertion of centralized power but also in terms of various resistant patterns of reaction by the subjugated, reactions that often are except in the case of an open revolt—not recognized as resistance:

Postcolonial criticism refuses the claims, overt predations, and oppressive gestures of empire: namely, cultural discourses and pragmatic actions (military, social, political) that seek to establish the "naturalness" and beneficence of imperial rule over against the supposed primitive, immoral, benighted, or ineffective character of indigenous colonized persons and native cultures. Under pressure of colonialism, colonized subjects—subalterns—deploy a variety of strategies to survive, that is, to resist the colonizing distortions, commodifications, and threatened erasure of their indigenous culture and the deformation of their own subjectivity and agency. Those surviving under colonialism use tactics of assimilation, mimicry, parody, and strategic silence as well as outright resistance.⁵²

In her essay, "God's Cruelty and Jeremiah's Treason: Jer 21:1–10 in Postcolonial Perspective," Christl Maier combines the traditional methodology of redaction criticism with a postcolonial reading and thus provides an ostensive example of new insights that this projected commentary may offer. In this passage, YHWH's oracle (21:7) announces that not only Nebuchadnezzar but also he himself will fight against the city and therefore all inhabitants are doomed. Another prediction in 21:8–10, however, discloses the view that those who surrender to the Chaldeans

51. Judith McKinlay, "Challenges and Opportunities for Feminist and Postcolonial Biblical Criticism," 19–37 (19), in this volume; cf. also eadem, "Rahab: A Hero/ine?," *BibInt* 7 (1999): 44–57.

52. Sharp, "Mapping Jeremiah," 45.

will survive the siege. In pointing to intertextual links, Maier concludes that the passage is obviously a florilegium and further argues that the postulated dating of the passage effects its interpretation. If these words are dated prior to Jerusalem's fall, they attest to an unpatriotic position and a sarcastic image of God; if they are formulated *post festum*, they reflect the ambivalent voice of those who survived the conquest and surrendered to the Babylonians.⁵³ Given this interpretation, the text is part of a particular Judean narration that after 586 B.C.E. strengthens the identity- and community-building of the colonized. In attributing to YHWH a will to destroy the people and the land, this narration asserts that the world has not slipped from God's hands and the imperial enemy is not omnipotent. Although this interpretation is not new—it is rather well-known as Deuteronomistic theology—this postcolonial hermeneutics against the background of trauma studies illustrates that these arguments concern not some odd ancient Near Eastern patterns but approved general coping strategies of colonized and traumatized people:

While this text tells a nation's story, it offers surprising insights into the ways people are able to survive traumatic events and to live under imperialist regimes—even if this means that at first sight God seems to be cruel and Jeremiah a traitor.⁵⁴

In his essay “‘Exoticizing the Otter’: The Curious Case of the Rechabites in Jeremiah 35,” Steed Vernyl Davidson explores strategies of othering with regard to ethnically foreign groups, which in German-speaking biblical studies had their prime time in the context of so-called orientalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁵⁵ Taking the characterization of the Rechabites in Jer 35 as an example “the essay subverts the exoticist codes by presenting the Rechabites in an alternative power relationship.”⁵⁶ In most instances, exoticizing evaluates foreigners from the perspective of the dominant imperial culture in order to domesticate and control an embarrassing strangeness. In the case of the Rechabites in the book of Jeremiah, the situation is different insofar as Judah as a colonized people applies exoticist codes not to the imperial power, but to a neighboring people that obviously does without any hierarchical social structure and scrupulously follows its forefather's instructions. Davidson

53. See Christl M. Maier, “God's Cruelty and Jeremiah's Treason: Jeremiah 21:1–10 in Postcolonial Perspective,” 133–49, in this volume.

54. *Ibid.*, 149.

55. Steed Vernyl Davidson, “‘Exoticizing the Otter’: The Curious Case of the Rechabites in Jeremiah 35,” 189–207, in this volume.

56. *Ibid.*, 191.

plausibly underlines that the biblical text's out-of-context description of the Rechabites leads to their exoticizing in interpretation insofar as it underscores the thesis that they are a marginalized group in society. In breaking this exoticist code, however, one may realize that this people, through its refusal of sedentism, succeeds in establishing—seemingly subversive—relations to the imperial power, because as a fluid social group they can escape territorial control.⁵⁷

c. *Trauma Studies as Key to a New Perspective on Jeremiah*

Applying trauma studies to the book of Jeremiah, as most notably Kathleen O'Connor has shown, in my view enables an explanation—as no other hermeneutical approach can do—of the lack of structure and the erratic alteration of topics in this biblical book. Louis Stulman's dictum “the chaos *is* the message”⁵⁸ rightly puts this in a nutshell. Based on Albert Hourani's thesis that being defeated digs deeper into the collective memory than being victorious, Stulman reads the book of Jeremiah as survival and disaster literature, as “communal meditation on the horror of war.”⁵⁹ For traumatized persons, remembrance and commemoration play a central role in the gradual rehabilitation of their experience through verbalizing and re-coding. Liberation theology in the 1970s named this key function of re-interpretive, actualizing remembrance a “dangerous memory.”⁶⁰ Traumatized, colonized, or marginalized persons come to terms with their history by naming injustice, by freeing victims from silence and oblivion, and by naming the offenders and stigmatizing them permanently. According to Stulman, Jeremiah's “language of violence” can be explained by assuming that this prophetic book emerged as “*literature of the losers*.”⁶¹ As Stephan Wyss had argued as early as the 1980s,⁶² “the mighty speech” of the powerless, which laughs at massive

57. Cf. *ibid.*, 201–2.

58. Stulman, “Commentary as Memoir?,” 68 (his emphasis).

59. *Ibid.*, 62.

60. The expression was coined by the German liberation theologian Johann Baptist Metz. Cf. his essays “Dogma als gefährliche Erinnerung” and “Gefährliche Erinnerung der Freiheit Jesu Christi,” both published in *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft: Studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1977), 77–86 and 176–80; *idem* (in cooperation with Johann Reikerstorfer), *Memoria Passionis: Ein provozierendes Gedächtnis in pluralistischer Gesellschaft* (Freiburg: Herder, 2006).

61. Stulman, “Commentary as Memoir?,” 70 (his emphasis).

62. Stephan Wyss, *Fluchen: Ohnmächtige und mächtige Rede der Ohnmacht: Ein philosophisch-theologischer Essay zu einer Blütenlese* (Fribourg: Exodus, 1984).

claims to power, belongs to the coping strategies of the defeated and subordinated who are able to fight injustice only by words and to leave revenge to God.⁶³ If the image of the woman in labor in Jer 31:7–9 is used in relation to especially needy persons, it may “serve as an example of resistance that shows how the colonized within the dominant power survived by imagining an alternative reality.”⁶⁴

The application of trauma studies to the book of Jeremiah delineates the context of many oracles of Jeremiah: a freezing and falling silent of traumatized people. Sharp prolifically appropriates the psychological phenomenon of abjection discussed by Julia Kristeva in her exegesis, arguing that narrating their abjection permanently preserves the memory of the abjected. She sees Jeremiah’s act of buying land in Anathoth (Jer 32) as resistance against the imminent expropriation of the land by the imperial power.⁶⁵ The book of Jeremiah retains the entitlement to the land and gives a voice to those who lost their land. Yet, it also spells the abjection at all three levels of the prophetic process of communication because the risk of abjection may strike everybody: the people abjected as covenant partner because of its sinful behavior, the prophet whose message does not prove himself to be a true prophet, and even YHWH who, through his people’s defeat, may himself suffer ill repute as a powerless deity.

3. *The Project of a Feminist Postcolonial Commentary to Jeremiah*

Because such an ambitious commentary will not be able to satisfy all demands, genuine preliminary considerations with regard to hermeneutics and methods are required. In this volume, both authors of the Jeremiah commentary in the IECOT series present a thorough reflection on their approach. Readers may look forward to an unconventional commentary that includes many new perspectives, both in detail and in the overall view. In conclusion, I would thus underline Louis Stulman’s dictum:

In fact, the integration of trauma, postcolonial, and feminist perspectives—with their focus on pain, power, and the periphery respectively—might present a promising interdisciplinary matrix for Jeremiah commentary writing in the next decade.⁶⁶

Apart from the function to prepare a classical biblical commentary, the volume at hand is not only a treasure trove for new perspectives on Jeremiah studies but also for new approaches to biblical texts as a whole. Rarely have I said with utter conviction after reading such a book: “I have, indeed, learned a lot!”

63. This last aspect is emphasized by Claassens, “Woman in Labor,” 129.

64. *Ibid.*, 131.

65. Sharp, “Buying Land.”

66. Stulman, “Commentary as Memoir?,” 71.