

Review Article

Jeremiah: An Ancient Voice with a Relevant Message

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Larry R. Helyer *The Life and Witness of Jeremiah. A Prophet for Today*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019. pp. 126. \$20.00. ISBN 978-1-5326-1693-8.

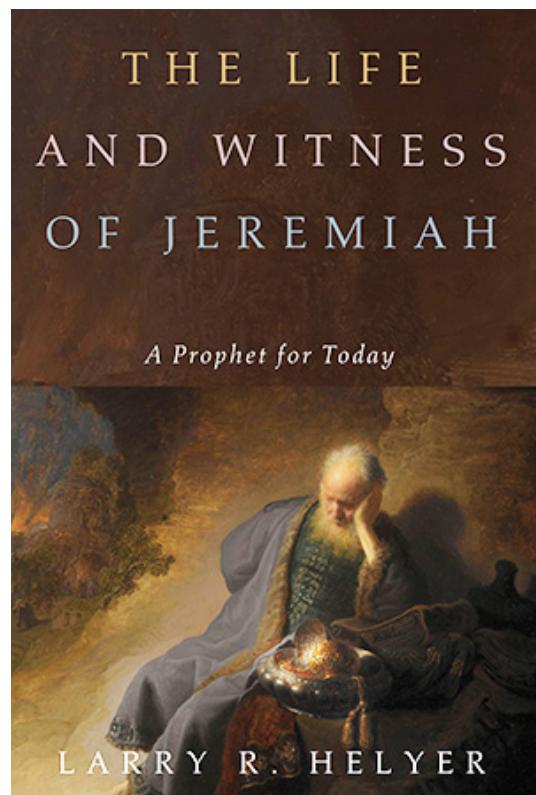
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| Christian Nationalism | God's Providence | Prophecy | Kingdom | Israel | America |

Dr. Larry R. Helyer is Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at Taylor University, in Indiana. He received his doctorate from Fuller Theological Seminary in 1979. Heyler has published several books including *Yesterday, Today, and Forever: The Continuing Relevance of the Old Testament*, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period: A Guide for New Testament Students*, and *Mountaintop Theology* among other works.

In *The Life and Witness of Jeremiah. A Prophet for Today*, Helyer invites the reader on a journey that makes the usual stops through the book of Jeremiah. These are listed in the table of contents: Profile of a Prophet, The Temple sermon, Jeremiah's Symbolic Actions, Jeremiah and the False Prophets, Jeremiah's complaint, and Jeremiah's Vision of the Future. However, the reader needs to understand that, unintentional or not, these chapter titles, as stops in the journey, are significantly misleading, and that is the beauty of this book.

Helyer introduces his work by pointing out the one element that pervades its pages, namely Jeremiah's relevance for the current religious and sociopolitical reality in the United States. He writes, "Jeremiah's urgent appeal, however, if sincerely acted upon, offers an antidote to the



ethical, moral, and spiritual malaise so endemic to our culture." (xi) Although not overtly proposed, *The Life and Witness of Jeremiah* is aimed at those who, physically and culturally, live in United States. The author is clear, however, about this book being conceived and written for readers seeking to understand the

prophet's circumstances and reaction to them.

In Profile of a Prophet (chapter 1), Helyer challenges us to understand Jeremiah by looking beyond what we have learned through years of Sunday School and Sunday sermons, while closely reading the text. Jeremiah is not just another prophet supernaturally called by Yahweh to speak harshly to his people. Jeremiah is of priestly lineage and this sets the stage for his turbulent ministry against the ritualistic hypocrisy of the priestly family. The people Jeremiah wrestled with throughout his life knew him at somewhat at a personal level.

Jeremiah's call and commission is arranged by Yahweh's Preordination (compared to the Apostle Paul in his prenatal call, personal divine revelation, and preaching mission in Galatians 1:15-16), Jeremiah's Protest details how the prophet admits feeling completely inadequate for the job, Yahweh's Provision explains how God assures the prophet of divine guidance and strength, Yahweh's Proclamation is one of judgement and destruction, but also of comfort and restoration, and Yahweh's Program details how Jeremiah's work would develop effectively. (3-6). A brief historical context is also provided by describing the *national* (emphasis mine) situation under kings Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah, ending with the prophet's possible exile and death in Egypt.

Especial attention is given to Jeremiah's temple sermon (chapter 2). He explains the purpose of this chapter, "1) to understand why Jeremiah's message elicited such anger, and 2) to discuss its theological significance for our day." (19). The importance of this sermon is understood by the fact that it is narrated twice (Jeremiah 7 and 26), however, the second time, Helyer points out, focuses on the audience reaction. Although we do not know the sermon's occasion, Helyer proposes that it was during

a time of introspection and self-examination (whether during a time of pilgrimage or a publicly-announced fast) that Jeremiah found the opportunity to initiate a call to repentance after Israel's failure to keep the Sinai covenant (21). The author explains, "His main point is unmistakable: the actions and deeds of the audience are irreconcilable with the meaning of the temple as the dwelling place of the 'Lord of hosts, the God of Israel.'" (23) The audience's extreme reaction to such poignant message ("You must die!" Jeremiah 26:11) leads the reader to Jesus' anger, in the temple's courtyard, expressed by tossing tables and casting out the moneychangers (Mark 11:7) while alluding to Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. Jesus' actions provoked the religious leaders to look "for a way to kill him." (Mark 11:8) (30).

Carefully finding the significance of this event for the reality of the United States today. Helyer says, "Just because 'In God We Trust' is printed in our currency and stamped on our coins does not confirm our status as a new covenant people of God." (32) However, he follows that with a statement that somewhat may be understood as supporting what he pushes against; "God's providence rules the world, and in his providence, God has singularly blessed this nation. For this we give thanks. Nevertheless, we have experienced his stern judgement for injustice and oppression." (35) He explains that Christian nationalism, as he would later label it, finds its roots in "Puritan interpretation of America as the new covenant people of God." (34) Embracing such interpretation Christian America has fallen into a flawed theological construct that has led to a "subtle fusion of the kingdom of God and the United States of America. God and country have become indivisible and inseparable." (35) Being a true American is being a true

Christian, therefore, anything that challenges or jeopardizes Christian values endangers American identity.

By following this thought process Christian America found in Donald Trump an opportunity to regain favor with the Lord. The slogan “Make America Great Again” was heard by American evangelicals as “Make America Christian Again.” Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, stood for everything that had eroded Christian/American values. (36) Helyer admits that he may have touched a “raw nerve” among fellow evangelicals (38) through this chapter but makes no apologies.

The description of Jeremiah’s symbolic actions, in chapter 3, seeks to go beyond the usual description paired with the biblical narrative. The author explains that prophetic symbolic actions could be placed in two categories: “spontaneous and planned.” Jeremiah, Helyer explains, “ensures that his grim message, appalling to his listeners, remains fixed in their consciousness.” (41). These sign-acts are listed as follows: The Linen Belt: Airing Out Dirty Laundry, which exposes Judah’s moral and spiritual condition leading to its ruin and shame (44); Jeremiah’s Celibacy: A Preview of Tragedy serves, not so much as a warning but as a show-and-tell of what is to come. His withdrawal from normal social life serves as picture of the consequences of disloyalty to God. (46); The Potter and the Clay aims at how “Yahweh appeals to Israel (the clay) to repent and reform their ways. If Israel repents, God will reshape the destiny awaiting them.” (48); Wearing a Yoke is described with careful detail as the most dramatic of Jeremiah’s sign-acts, describing the future bondage of the people of God (50); Finally, Buying a Field shows God’s promise of restoration and blessing after destruction and ruin. (54)



Top : ‘Jeremiah’ from *The Sistine Chapel ceiling (Volta della Cappella Sistina)*, Michelangelo Buonarroti 1508-1512

Bottom : Horace Vernet, ‘Jeremiah on the ruins of Jerusalem,’ (1844)

Jeremiah's mission involved much more than delivering a message to the people of God, it exposed and rebuked the false prophets of his time (chapter 4) Helyer makes a significant point here, one which serves the overall argument of his book; "These prophets, whom Jeremiah does not hesitate to call 'false prophets,' emphasized patriotic nationalism and downplayed the ethical and moral demands of the Sinai covenant." (58) Jeremiah does not hesitate to indict these false prophets; this is described by dissecting Jeremiah 23. Context is also provided by the author to understand how and why the prophet is so sure in calling out those who claimed but did not speak on Yahweh's behalf. Helyer explains the tests for a true prophet provided in the book of Deuteronomy. The empirical test (Deuteronomy 18) which exposes a prophet claiming to speak for God and his prophecy not materializing, and the theological test (Deuteronomy 13) which exposes a false prophet by his/her very own proclamations to follow other gods. (63) Jeremiah's confrontation with Hananiah is described in this chapter as an example of the prophet's difficult task of exposing false prophecy and those who practiced it. Although Helyer's work is on the prophet Jeremiah's life and witness, he finds a way to balance each chapter with some reference to the New Testament. In this chapter he dedicates almost half of its contents on the New Testament and false prophecy.

In chapter 5 the author dives into Jeremiah's laments, where the prophet accuses God of unjust actions. The prophet finds, in the present work, two complaining companions, namely Jonah and Job, whom also raised accusations against what they saw as Yahweh's injustice (78). All of Jeremiah's five complaints are studied with careful detail throughout this chapter. However, Helyer's poignant description of

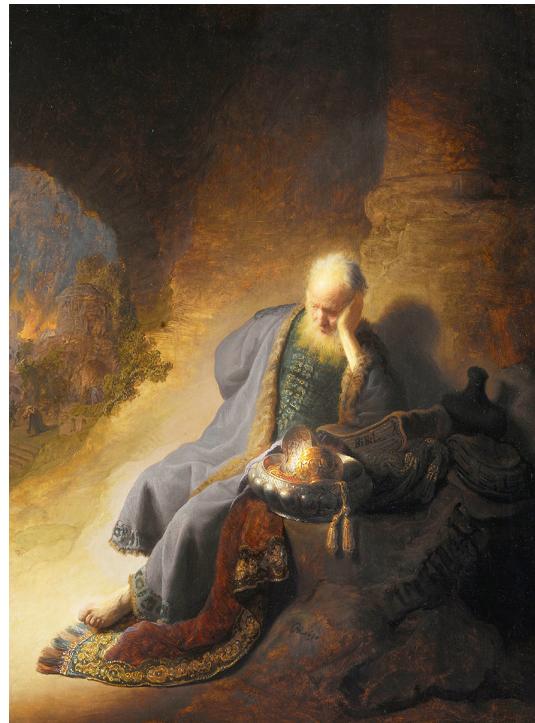
their significance to American Christianity in the twenty-first century is worth noting. He complains (no pun intended) that the gospel message being proclaimed from many of our megachurches sugarcoats the core message to follow Jesus by taking up one's cross. He writes, "One does not hear much about the struggles of Jeremiah. It's almost as if to acknowledge such would be an admission of defeat." (97) He goes on to indict, just as Jeremiah did (I wonder if he realized it when writing this book), pastors and teachers for failing to communicate the "full counsel of God" which they were charged to proclaim. In a very deep and sensitive statement Helyer says, "The dark night of the soul, the bitter disappointments of life, the anger and resentment that flood into our hearts, and even the attempted (and, tragically, sometimes successful) suicides that occur among those who confess Jesus as Lord, represent a much more prevalent reality than most are willing to admit." (97)

The Life and Witness of Jeremiah's final chapter deals with Jeremiah's Vision of the Future. Here the focus is on the prophet's hopeful view of God's people's future. The author proposes two "horizons" in Jeremiah's view. On the one hand, there is the returning of the exiles to Judah, and on the other the "regathering" of Israel from the nations of the earth. (100). The leading themes of this hopeful side of the book of Jeremiah, according to Helyer, are 1) regathering of Israel to the ancestral homeland, 2) restoration of national life, 3) renewal of spiritual life, and 4) reign of a Davidic king. He adds, "The central idea that actualizes these saving events is the institution of a new covenant. This is the single most important concept Jeremiah claims." (101) Nevertheless, he recognizes that as direct as the prophet's message is to his people, the people of God, the eschatological messages are very

inclusive, at times involving Judah's neighbors. Although several of these oracles are oracles of judgement, others promise restoration of other nations such as Egypt and Ammon.

Helyer makes a bold and uncompromising statement with regards to the regathering of Israel to the ancestral land, he writes, "I hold that the OT prophecies about the regathering and return should be taken literally" (112) While not dismissing the New Testament spiritualizing of Old Testament passages and seeing the benefit of this, he asserts that doing so to the concept of exile, regathering, and return would be stretching the language "to the breaking point." However, he warns against siding with any particular agenda. He rejects the idea of taking sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict asserting that it is "not our calling." (115) Nevertheless, he argues that the regather and return of the people of God has already happened and we have been witnesses to the fulfillment of this prophecy. On the other hand, he believes that the repentance and rebirth of God's people remains unfulfilled. Helyer ends his book (chapter 7) with a brief warning against a spiritually bankrupt nationalism, pointing to Jeremiah's powerful sermon. Helyer considers this condition a "clear and present danger. He writes "Christian nationalism threatens to sidetrack us from our primary task. Jeremiah believed what Jesus later proclaimed, 'My kingdom is not of this world.'" (124)

It is hard to believe that such a short book (126 pages) would require such a lengthy review. The reality is that after the reader is done with it, he/she will understand why. Helyer is able to pack, very tightly, information that could very well occupy double the space he dedicates to it. However, the reader will not feel rushed or "cheated" since the author takes good care on presenting all the information in a concise



Rembrandt van Rijn,
Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem,
c. 1630

and effective manner. Also, although the preface claims that the book is not aimed at the specialist but rather to "the reader who wants a better understanding of what made this prophet tick—and what ticked him off!" (xi), the reader needs to proceed with caution since the author, at times, has no other choice but to take a more technical approach to the study of the book of Jeremiah. However, he does so by transitioning from casual language to technical language and back to casual language almost effortlessly.

Finally, Helyer is very clear in his proposed argument which he carries through without losing track of it. His goal is to invite the reader on a journey that will uncover the relevance of Jeremiah's message to twenty-first century United States of America. Very critical of Christian nationalism, Helyer positions Jeremiah's sermons and prophetic actions

oppose the U.S. by repeatedly warning against the common thread that runs through, from the time of the prophet's ministry to our day. The ritualistic hypocrisy that warranted such harsh words from Yahweh through Jeremiah, peaks its head out in our own end of the chronological timeline. Today an alarming number of American evangelical churches suffer from the same watered-down, ear-pleasing message that the false prophets of Jeremiah's time poison the people of Judah with. This message becomes uncomfortably linked to the politics of our day when we realize that the job of the prophets was to provide advice and word from God in political matters.

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Esteban Miranda received a Bachelor in Christian Ministry from the International Faculty of Theology in 2012, where he received the "Outstanding Thesis Award" for his work on "The Appropriate Conduct of the Southern Californian Missionary to Latin America." In 2016 he received a Master of Arts in Theology and Ministry, with emphasis in Biblical Languages, from Fuller Theological Seminary. Currently he is pursuing a Theology Master, with focus in Old Testament Ethics, under the mentorship of Doctor John Goldingay, also at Fuller Theological Seminary. Esteban has taught Old Testament Introduction at Trinity School for Ministry and International Faculty of Theology, where he has also taught courses on the Pentateuch and Christian Education.

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