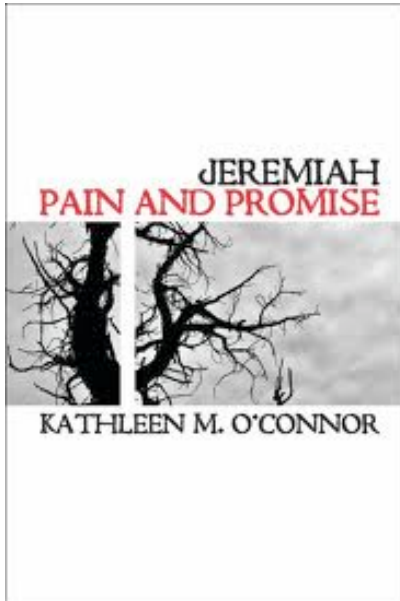


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O'Connor, Kathleen M.

Jeremiah: Pain and Promise

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Kathleen O'Connor is a well-known Jeremiah scholar and Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary. The book of Jeremiah has been the subject of debate for many years, and the volumes of material written on this book are testimony to the ongoing interest in this difficult but intriguing book. The compositional history of Jeremiah is a slippery matter that seems to evade a clear understanding of how and why the book was composed, not to ask the question when. Not only are the compositional matters complicated to grasp, but the very nature of the book is hard to deal with. It reflects an angry God struggling with a disloyal and wicked nation, a violent enemy, and the destruction of people. The book also paints pictures of people suffering, which includes the prophet and even Yahweh. Reading the book of Jeremiah can be an extremely disconcerting experience. Attempting to present a constructive reading of the book of Jeremiah seems to have become impossible, causing a deep sense of frustration and dissatisfaction. In the light of such negative sentiments, this book is a breath of fresh air and a delight to read. This book will not go without criticism, but it relates to real-life experiences and will therefore engage people anew to read and to listen to the text of Jeremiah with fresh attentiveness.

O'Connor feels the need to read the book of Jeremiah in such a way that it has meaning. She suggests a way of understanding the book that will explain the meaning it most probably had for the people who had recently experienced disaster and suffering, but also for people who could over time relate to the pain and suffering reflected in the book. She writes for students, preachers, ministers, clergy, caregivers, and ordinary people. O'Connor repeatedly refers to the book of Jeremiah as a work of literary artistry consisting of various types of literature and stylistic devices. What helped her to get unstuck and moving beyond the imprisonment of conventional academic endeavors of analyzing and interpreting the book of Jeremiah was the knowledge she gained from trauma and disaster studies. These studies not only opened up new perspectives of looking at this complicated and chaotic book but also sensitized her to gain an understanding of the Jeremiah text as a reflection and response to the severe trauma, pain, and suffering caused by the Babylonian invasions. The literature in Jeremiah provides a looking-back experience to the people who underwent the disaster of the Babylonian exile, but also a view forward to hope for the future and new relationship with Yahweh.

In the introductory chapter, "Wounds without Words," O'Connor introduces the reader to her journey of reading Jeremiah and how the reading of trauma and disaster studies opened up new appreciation for the book of Jeremiah. This prophetic book is all about the experience of disaster, violence, pain, and suffering. O'Connor says of Jeremiah, "The book did more than give voice to the afflicted. It was and is a most effective instrument of survival and healing" (5).

In chapter 1 O'Connor invites readers to imagine the possible traumatic experiences people in Judah had during the three invasions of the Babylonian army in 597, 587, and 582 B.C.E. She acknowledges the fact that we know very little when it comes to historical facts about the history of Israel and Judah, but she is convinced that the biblical texts offer testimony "from the inside of events" (16). O'Connor's writing and reflection in this chapter, but also in the book as a whole, shows the tremendous impact the trauma and disaster literature has had on her as a person and on her understanding of the Jeremiah text.

Chapter 2 offers a discussion of disasters and their effects on people. O'Connor discusses matters such as the lingering presence of disaster, the overwhelming effect of disasters, fragmented memories of violence, the breakdown of language, becoming numb, and loss of faith. She writes, "But trauma and disaster studies help name the injuries, point to processes of survival, and set societies onto some new form of life," and "Jeremiah offers readers a process both for coping and for building hope" (27). Chapter 3 is dedicated to the complexity of the book of Jeremiah and the challenges posed to researchers by its structure. O'Connor's concern is more to figure out what the book meant to survivors of

the Babylonian exile and generations to follow. In what ways did the book of Jeremiah help the people to survive? In this regard, O'Connor is convinced trauma and disaster studies can be of great help.

In the next chapters (4–11) O'Connor puts her approach into practice by reading texts grouped together thematically. Chapter 4 offers a discussion of Jer 2:1–4:4 under the title “The Metaphor of a Broken Family.” The key metaphor used in this passage, “divorce,” serves the purpose of retelling the disaster the people of Judah experienced. After analysis of the texts, the discussion covers aspects of “dramatic language” and also “traumatic language.” The focus shifts in chapter 5 to a collection of war poems in Jer 4:5–6:30; 8:16–17; 10:17–22; 13:20–27, discussed under the heading “Fragmented Memories of Trauma.” These poems offer a retelling of events and experiences the people of Judah had with the invasions by the Babylonian enemy. O'Connor refers to the war poems as memory-makers. Two main points offered in the discussion are the language of rape and the language of memory. Chapter 6 engages the weeping poems in the section Jer 8:22–9:11 under the heading “If Only Tears Were Possible.” Of these poems O'Connor says, “I consider the weeping poems as instruments that encourage the expression of grief and make communal space for the renewal of faith” (34). In chapter 7, “Telling a Life,” several texts in Jeremiah are grouped together as biographical stories (see Jer 1; 16:1–6; 20:1–6; 26; 32; 37:11–38:13; 40–43). The discussion shows Jeremiah as a complex literary character who represents his people, stands against them, escapes difficult situations, and embodies the pain, suffering, and loss of his people. Chapter 8, “Survive by Praying,” is dedicated to the so-called confessions in Jer 11:18–12:6; 15:10–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–13, 14–18 and has the heading. The discussion covers aspects such as laments of the suffering community, Jeremiah as emblematic sufferer, language to voice pain, and prayers of resistance. The following chapter is about the sermons we find in Jer 7:1–8:3; 11:1–14; 17:19–27. These sermons concern the temple, the covenant, and the Sabbath and offer three sets of reasons for the disaster the people of Judah experienced. O'Connor regards them as material from a later period, but they form part of a survival strategy nonetheless. Chapter 10, “Rekindling Hope,” concerns Jer 30–31, the Little Book of Consolation. To quote O'Connor, “The Little Book of Comfort or Consolation, with its explicit poetry of hope, new life and reprise of family life ... contains the most beautiful and explicitly hopeful poetry of renewal” (34). Chapter 11, on endings (Jer 45; 50–51; 52), has the heading “Running Out of Strength.” Three endings are referred to in this chapter and are regarded as endings without ending, an indication that “the book refuses to smooth over or wash away the ambiguity and uncertainty of recovery” (123).

Chapter 12 concerns the composition of the book again and has the title “Confusion as Meaning-Making.” According to O'Connor, “Jeremiah’s literary disorder is central to its purposes” (136). She continues to explain that the confusing shape of the book is a

reflection of the turbulent times the people had experienced and the effect it had on them. Readers of the Jeremiah text are confronted with this disarray and textual confusion and are challenged to become meaning-makers themselves if they want to make some sense of the literature. O'Connor acknowledges the many confusing elements in the book and constructively proposes a manner in which we can make sense of the seeming senselessness of the book. She ends the book with an epilogue under the title "A Work of Hope and Resilience." She regards the book of Jeremiah as "an emotion-soaked set of testimonies that plunge into overwhelming catastrophe and transform it, that the nation might not perish but be reborn as God's people" (155). O'Connor concludes her book by saying that trauma and disaster saved the book of Jeremiah for her. This is a strong statement that I can appreciate, since studies of this nature are needed to open up new avenues for dealing with the book of Jeremiah.

This is a well-written book that brings a fresh approach to the stale debates on the book of Jeremiah. The language of the book is outstanding and displays the passion and excitement of the author in having a new understanding of the book of Jeremiah. There is more than enough evidence that O'Connor is well-informed about the problems involved in making sense of the book of Jeremiah. Her approach is therefore not an escape to deny the realism of the complex nature of the book. It offers an honest and intriguing attempt to bring new life to the understanding of the book. This is a study that will please those researchers who are interested in reading the book in search of meaning and relevance. It is a scholarly book equipped with endnotes, a representative bibliography, and an index of scriptural passages. It testifies to a successful exercise in cross-disciplinary research by means of which O'Connor gained knowledge and insights that brought the text of Jeremiah to life. This volume is a welcome addition to the literature on the book of Jeremiah.