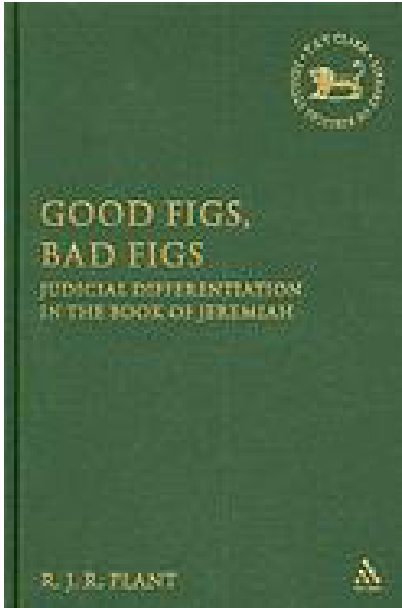


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Plant, R. J. R.

Good Figs, Bad Figs: Judicial Differentiation in the Book of Jeremiah

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So tortuous is the text of Jeremiah that it is not unusual for its disheveled form—often described by such terms as “disjointed” and “confused”—to function as the starting point of a study. Not so long ago such textual ticks were tackled in terms of the many hands that played fast and loose with the poems of an original prophet. But with the shift of interest from authorial (and editorial) intention to the intentions of the text—a move in which the question of agency is effectively sidestepped—critical reading has become more interested in the coherence (or lack thereof) of the whole. Debate now tends to fixate on the presence of a discernible macro-structure rather than on the precise proportion of the final product that can fairly be ascribed to the prophet.

Although R. J. R. Plant confronts the complexities of Jeremiah head on, he begins his study elsewhere, thereby avoiding the need to refer to its disarray in the opening volley. Furthermore, by making clear his belief that the many positions or “voices” represented in the text can be explained in terms of a single author, he also avoids the need to apportion these to redactional layers or even to seek an overarching *Tendenz*. As the subtitle suggests, Plant’s aim is to provide a detailed account of the workings of divine justice (both judgment and salvation) in Jeremiah. This he does without attempting to harmonize, generalize, or (given that the book is more survey than synthesis) even

theologize. A considerable range of distinct, even contradictory “voices” are thereby uncovered and identified.

To give credence to his claim that YHWH’s practice of judgment and salvation is the “fundamental theological problem in the Old Testament” (2), Plant defines the issue in terms of *scope*—divine discrimination in matters of “wrath and favor”—and *rationale*. Beginning with an overview of the topic in the Old Testament as a whole, he ably demonstrates that in the Torah and Writings divine judgment is for the most part *selective*—discriminatory and related to human conduct—whereas in the Prophets, in which whole nations are set up to suffer, it is less so. Exceptions, however, abound—Job declares that YHWH crushes the good and bad alike; Deuteronomy addresses an undifferentiated people—and these are sometimes instructive. When in Habakkuk Judah is brought under scrutiny, for example, the nation is represented as composed of both “the righteous” and “the wicked”; when Judah is presented in relation to another nation such as Babylon, however, such internal distinctions disappear.

Similar discoveries are made in the single book of Jeremiah. Thus while Plant concludes that in Jeremiah as a whole YHWH judges his people selectively (186), he points out that judicial differentiation is by no means uniform. Were it not for the promise of salvation made to Jeremiah himself, for example, judgment against the nation in chapters 1–20 would be wholly indiscriminate. Then again in 21–24 not only does the text differentiate between the leaders and people but between those who remain in Jerusalem and those who surrender to the invader also. These distinctions pertain in chapters 37–45 also, but then they are destabilized by the cases of Ebed-melech and Baruch, both of whom are offered salvation. In 27–29 distinctions are negotiated in terms of the exilic and Jerusalem communities. Add to all this the further complication that “salvation” can range from survival at home to success abroad and that “judgment” can range from exile to death, and the reader soon appreciates why Plant makes little attempt to harmonize or even generalize. That said, although Plant himself proposes topics for further research, I find myself intrigued by the possible theologies one could develop out of a text that—to pick just one example—posits exile as both a judgment and a requisite for salvation.

Plant thus offers a terrifically detailed study of Jeremiah that is far more than a reiteration of its complexities (quite possibly because it makes no attempt to explain them away). The result, to this reader at least, is richness rather than disabling relativity. However, *Good Figs, Bad Figs* does read a little like a work just beginning. The book itself is soundly proofread and nicely produced, but the final thesis feels somewhat unfinished—as if we have been reading the workings-out and not quite reached an adequate answer. But then it seems unreasonable to press this as a fault, since I have been admiring his avoidance of overreduction. I was interested therefore to read that Plant was in part goaded toward this

research by popular atheist Richard Dawkins's suggestion that the biblical God is unable to exercise judgment with discrimination. The picture one takes from Jeremiah is not of an indiscriminate God but one whose workings remain unpredictable, certainly unmechanical; given that Plant characterizes Jeremiah's YHWH as capable of acts of grace, perhaps *asymmetrical* is a suitable word. In this much the book adds to the recent writings of such Jeremiah scholars as Brueggemann and Stulman, who emphasize divine freedom in Jeremiah.

Good Figs, Bad Figs is of interest to anyone working at an advanced level with Jeremiah or the prophets in general, but also to anyone interested in the business of divine justice. There are no lengthy methodological discussions, but the author engages with a number of key scholars such as Koenen, Stulman, and Seitz. Be aware that Plant neither translates nor transliterates his citations from Hebrew.