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Hill, John

Friend or Foe: The Figure of Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah MT

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This Ph.D. dissertation, utilizing a synchronic literary methodology, focuses on the multi-faceted figure of Babylon in the Hebrew canonical book of Jeremiah. While not criticizing historical-critical approaches, Hill considers the Jeremian references to Babylon with a view to understanding how Babylon functions in the final form of the book. He views Babylon as an extended organizing metaphor for Jeremiah MT. Through this lens he discerns two important features of this major prophetic book: a theology of unended exile and a de-centered understanding of Judah and its place in the world.

After briefly reviewing diachronic and synchronic Jeremiah research, Hill opts for a synchronic approach because of its interpretive possibilities. Relying on Ricoeur's understanding of metaphor as existing beyond the level of individual descriptions such as "God is Father," Hill first focuses on the superscription of Jeremiah (1:1-3), the figure of the prophet (1:10), and the "threat from the north" (1:13-16) to showcase his conceptualization of metaphor. The following four major sections of the monograph consider the use of the figure Babylon in Jeremiah 2-24 MT, Jeremiah 25 MT, Jeremiah 27 and 29 MT, and Jeremiah 50-51 MT. Hill concludes with reflections on the significance of the synchronic reading, the complex representation of Babylon that emerges from such a reading, and perhaps most interesting what Hill calls the function of Jeremiah MT by which he means the two theological perspectives described above.

In Jeremiah 2-24 MT Judah is primarily presented negatively as under God's judgment while Babylon is depicted positively, especially through the metonymic figure of its king

who to varying degrees is identified with YHWH. Babylon stands for Judah's landlessness, exile, and death, which are brought about by YHWH using Babylon as a divine instrument.

Jeremiah 25 MT is a turning point. In this chapter Babylon is first depicted, much as it is in the preceding chapters, as God's ally. However, here Babylon is also seen as the opponent of YHWH. At the beginning of the chapter Babylon is represented by its king Nebuchadnezzar who is even called "my servant" (25:9). In Jer 25:24-24, however, a shift occurs. Babylon will be punished with the same punishment as Judah. Both are opponents of God. Jer 25:25-29 continues this negative portrayal, but here is presented as a mysterious figure, standing apart from the other nations.

Babylon is characterized in Jeremiah 27 and 29 MT as a nation like Judah, standing under God's judgment. In the former case Babylon is symbolized by its king who is portrayed as having the same dominion over creation as the first human in Genesis 2 and who has the same standing and relationship to YHWH as the kings of Judah. However, the demise of Nebuchadnezzar's domination is predicted. In Jeremiah 29 Babylon is presented explicitly as a city and implicitly as a land. It is a place where the Jews are told to settle down. They can live here, away from their homeland. At the same time its ultimate downfall points to the restoration of Judah.

Although one might expect that in the final chapters of Jeremiah MT that comprise oracles against Babylon, the tone with respect to Babylon would be consistently negative, this is not the case. Babylon is presented as an enemy of YHWH and Judah, but also as a nation similar to Judah, both of which stand under God's judgment.

Hill's synchronic reading of the figure of Babylon in Jeremiah MT contributes to the understanding of the theology of the book. It reveals that, unlike Ezekiel, for example, with its templ-centered theology, the Jeremiah book tends to equalize nations and lands. In some ways Judah is like Babylon and Babylon like Judah, both nations who have sinned against God. Judah is not the center of the world. Jews can live in Babylon away from Jerusalem and the temple, not just in the sense of surviving, but even thriving. Hill's reading also reveals a tension between the perspective that the exile has not ended and the hope for restoration, a tension that is left unresolved. Unlike most other prophetic books that move from judgment to hope, the final form of the book of Jeremiah suggests that in some senses the exile is an ongoing reality. Another contribution of Hill's reading is that it highlights the use of masculine and feminine imagery for Babylon. In texts where Babylon is represented as strong and powerful, the imagery is typically masculine, e.g. as a lion, a pharaoh, a dragon, a war club, and Nebuchadnezzar. In passages where Babylon's demise is to the fore, however, the imagery is usually feminine. This is particularly the case in Jeremiah 50-51. Here Babylon is depicted as a nurturing, yet vulnerable land and mother (mother earth), as a daughter and wife, and as an arrogant woman. Finally and

more generally, a synchronic reading provides a different way of looking at the discrepancies and tensions in the text. Where the source-critical, historical-critical, and redactional methodologies have viewed these as indicative of the compositional history, the synchronic method views some of these at least as opening up interpretive possibilities.

One minor problem in this very useful work is that at times Hill pushes the definition of metaphor a bit further than seems good or necessary. For example, he suggests that the figure of the prophet Jeremiah is a metaphor for YHWH (pp. 40ff) because of the close identification of the prophet with God. It is interesting that when dealing with a similar identification of Nebuchadrezzar with YHWH, he qualifies his statement: "The MT's representation of a metaphorical association, *or at least a close association* (italics mine) between Yhwh and Nebuchadrezzar is not found in the LXX" (p. 196).

Is Babylon *Friend or Foe*? The answer is both/and, whether the relationship is between Babylon and YHWH or Babylon and Judah. Hill's nuanced reading of the figure of Babylon in Jeremiah MT is a significant contribution to Jeremiah studies. It is among a new generation of readings that stand on the foundation of historical-critical, source-critical, and redaction methodological approaches, but push beyond toward a greater appreciation of the theological content of Jeremiah in its final Jewish canonical form.