JEREMIAH: PAIN AND PROMISE, by

Kathleen O’Connor examines Jeremiah from a fresh point of view, employing “insights drawn from contemporary studies of trauma and disaster” (ix). In her teaching experience “students found the prophet’s angry, punishing god nearly unbearable” and concluded “that Jeremiah’s theology blamed the victims, was deeply sexist, and was not useful for their churches today” (1). For O’Connor, “trauma and disaster studies save the book of Jeremiah for me” (137).

Chapter 1 focuses on the historical context of Judah’s last years, a time in which “Babynian assaults drained away the population through deaths in battle, starvation, disease, deportation, and by the creation of internal refugees in the wake of warfare” (15). Lamentations’ portrait of the time includes children starving in the streets, former nobles now unrecognizable amid the walking dead, mothers cannibalizing their children, fathers vanished, women raped, and youth staggering under forced labor.

Chapter 2 introduces the interdisciplinary field of trauma and disaster studies, presenting insights into the effects of trauma and disaster upon those who endure them. Disasters leave people isolated, numbed by violence, reliving memories, shut-off emotionally, and deadened spiritually (22). Memories are fragmented such that “the slightest smell, sound, sight can trigger a return to a universe of violence, fear, and pain” (23). Survivors are “alienated by their inability to speak about their experiences” (24). Unanswerable questions shrivel faith and obscure the presence of God. Trauma and disaster studies offer language to “name injuries,” provide skills for survival, and map the journey to a “new form of life” (27).

Chapter 3 takes up the organization of Jeremiah, or rather the lack thereof. Traditional source criticism posits three types of material (Jeremiah’s oracles, Baruch’s stories about Jeremiah, prose sermons in style of Deuteronomy) gathered, assembled, edited into “an unwieldy book created by a somewhat incompetent committee” (30). O’Connor argues that “rather than being a hindrance to its purposes, the book’s lack of order itself works as a mode of recovery” (30). “The book searches for language, images, and metaphors to tell how Judah collapsed, how the ancient traditions failed, and how to endure through chaos and pain” (33). Jeremiah’s poetic and symbolic language carries “the potential to reinvigorate the nation,” providing “language to enable Judean victims to speak of the disaster” and also “reach through the ages to touch people who have known many kinds of suffering” (33).

11:1–14; 17:19–27), the “little book of consolation” (30–31), and finally endings (45; 50–51; 52). In each case, O’Connor argues that modern trauma and disaster studies shed light on previously difficult matters of interpretation. A few examples will illustrate.

The metaphor of a broken family defends God by placing responsibility for the disaster squarely upon its victims, raising multiple objections—not least that of an angry male deity. At the same time, the metaphor performs several helpful functions—providing words for the disaster, simplifying its causes to make it understandable, offering a way to speak of God when God has utterly failed them. The key is to recognize this blaming speech as but one of many provisional explanations of the disaster in Jeremiah.

The war poems, by virtue of imagery and frequent scene shifts, place the readers “in the thick of battle only briefly and intermittently. Exposure to violence occurs in small doses,” providing space to reflect and language to interpret their horrific memories (53). O’Connor takes up Jeremiah’s language of rape as a special case, “horrendous because it translates military attack into the violation of a woman and because it portrays God as the rapist.” It’s clearly outrageous to make women scapegoats, view sexual assault as suitable punishment, or ascribe such hideous violence to God. Yet, O’Connor suggests, “The fact that God’s
rape of Zion is outrageous, unbearable, and unspeakable is surely the point of the imagery. To be invaded by another country, to be victims of attack, occupation, and dislocation is outrageous, unbearable, and unspeakable” (55). Jeremiah’s image of a violent God is not the answer, but another provisional explanation of the disaster.

The weeping poems portray well the state of shock characteristic of undergoing trauma and disaster. Spirits are numbed, emotions turned off. A first stage of recovery involves telling one’s experience, finding language to name the disaster. These poems serve “to rouse up grief like mourning women whose wailing and weeping makes space for tears, awakens sorrows, and releases buried feelings from benumbed spirits” (68).

The confessions may “serve as ready-made prayers for victims of trauma and disaster” (82). Jeremiah’s lamentation “gathers in the afflicted, draws them back from social isolation, articulates doubt, and shows how it is possible to cling relentlessly to God in the wreckage of their world” (88).

Jeremiah’s sermons offer three separate rationales for the nation’s fall, each explaining the disaster with confidence and simplicity. From the perspective of trauma and disaster studies, this is appropriate and helpful because “when experienced events cannot be understood, the human mind returns again and again to the event to try to make sense of it in a repetitive and compulsive way” (94).

The “little book of consolation” is commonly ascribed to a later author. The perspective of trauma and disaster studies supports that conclusion. “The vision of hope contained in these hopeful chapters would be meaningless for victims immediately upon the heels of disaster” (107).

Reading O’Connor’s book was not only fascinating from an intellectual point of view, but also an emotional and cathartic experience of reengaging my own experiences of pain and struggle with God. Her exposition of texts is insightful, and her approach offers wisdom for ministering to those in the midst of trauma or disaster.

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Some years ago, I deemed it time to open the Bible at Genesis and read it straight through. I didn’t finish (though I did make it through Leviticus, to 1 Samuel). But what struck me most was the body count. The story of God and God’s people, as told throughout the stories and histories of the Old Testament, contains beautiful stories of God’s faithfulness and redemption, but they are woven in and around a “troubling legacy” that justifies—and is still used to justify—war, colonialism, slavery, violence against women, child abuse, and condemnation of LGBTQs, all of which lead to problematic conceptions of the character of God. In The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament’s Troubling Legacy, Eric A. Seibert acknowledges and confronts the Old Testament’s legacy of violence, and offers ways to constructively read and engage Scripture’s darker stories.

Seibert’s objectives are twofold. First, “reading the Old Testament nonviolently in an effort to overcome the Old Testament’s troubling legacy,” and second, “to offer guidelines for dealing with violent Old Testament texts that sanction, and sometimes even celebrate certain acts of violence…by critiquing the violence in them while still considering how these texts can be used constructively” (3–4).

The Violence of Scripture is organized into three parts. Part one, “Exploring the Old Testa-
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ment’s Troubling Legacy,” identifies examples of violent texts and the dangers of either avoiding them or failing to read them critically. “Virtuous” violence and the danger of religious justification of violent behavior make necessary reading Scripture as a “conversant” rather than “compliant” (54–56). Part two, “Proposing a Way of Reading the Old Testament Nonviolently,” lays out a series of reading techniques, benchmarks for an ethical critique, and then five steps to reading nonviolently. His steps include naming, analyzing, and critiquing violence, then discerning productive ways to engage the texts. Part three is “Applying Nonviolent Reading Strategies to Violent Texts,” where Seibert puts his reading method into practice, looking specifically at Canaanite genocide in Joshua 6–11, texts that justify war, and those that condone violence against women.

At its core, The Violence of Scripture is intended as a guide on how to critically yet constructively read and confront violent texts. It is not intended as a deep theological discussion of problematic relationships between God, suffering, and evil. Seibert cites his exploration of Old Testament portrayals of God in another work, Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009). While theological questions of the nature of God’s character do arise, the primary objective in The Violence of Scripture is a guide on how the text is read, not a theological character analysis of the God of the Old Testament. These conversations occur particularly in Part three, when Seibert uses the historicity of the Canaanite conquest (Joshua 6–11), cultural theological assumptions of ancient Israel, and God’s supposed condoning of war as case studies for his method.

The Violence of Scripture is intended for a broad audience. The writing style is accessible and even conversational at times, and often enters first-person narrative. In this work that scrutinizes Scripture, Seibert points out early and often that critiquing biblical texts may be difficult for readers who uphold Scripture as infallibly authoritative or historically accurate. He calls such attempts to tie biblical authority to historical accuracy as “ultimately, untenable” (160) in the Appendix, “A Brief Word about Biblical Authority.” But Seibert assures his audience that he approaches the text with deep respect, and that this same respect demands critical engagement. Readers unused to or uncertain about critiquing biblical texts may be reassured by Seibert’s assurances that The Violence of Scripture is a faithful study, while those trained to read Scripture with a critical lens may think them unnecessary.

At the same time, he has clearly done significant academic research into supporting and opposing views. Endnote citations and suggestions for further reading are plentiful, and a lengthy bibliography supports his discussions. In fact, if any portions of Violence are difficult to read, it’s because the frequency of citations is often distracting.

The value of The Violence of Scripture is twofold. First, it honestly and earnestly calls out the “troubling legacy” of the Old Testament’s violence that is often “Sunday-schooled” into acceptable ideas, ignored, or—at worst—used to justify violence. Second, Seibert gives the reader new perspectives with which to read and discuss texts. Even if critical questioning isn’t new to readers, reading with the perspectives of the “invisible” victims, children, and those marginalized in and by these stories are helpful ideas. This book does not solve the “problem” of God and violence. But it does give the reader useful tools with which to critically read and discuss problematic texts. Seibert’s final chapter is a plea to leaders to actively preach and teach these texts in “an ethically responsible manner,” rather than “shying away,” since real-world consequences of irresponsible reading are at stake (155). I’m hoping to use Seibert’s method in a Violence and Scripture series at my congregation this Lent. I expect it to yield fruitful con-
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versation, which is the least I think these texts demand. The texts that comprise the “troubling legacy” of the Old Testament are here to stay. We might as well confront them head-on.

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Recent biblical scholarship has primarily been based on historical criticism. In academic circles, other interpretive methods often get little serious attention, while in practical theology or ministry settings, historical criticism may not get the airtime it deserves. A division has emerged between serious scholarly readings of Scripture and unscholarly faith-based readings. In Practicing Theological Interpretation, Joel B. Green seeks to bridge this gap. His thesis is twofold. First, a serious theological reading of the Bible need not employ the historical-critical method—it is possible to think about Scripture critically while still considering it theologically. Second, in faith communities, theological interpretation is necessary in order to faithfully and appropriately use the writings in the Bible. Green believes that it is time to reassess the typical training of biblical scholars that has lately become “at best agnostic and at worst antithetical to theological interpretation” (8).

Green describes theological interpretation as “identified especially by its self-consciously ecclesial location” (2). He considers, in each of the four chapters respectively, the relationship between theological biblical study and growth in the Christian faith, the influence of the historical-critical method in the development of theology, the mutual influence of biblical study and the Rule of Faith, and the example of John Wesley as a serious scholar who read the Bible critically and theologically.

This book is based on a series of three lectures that Green delivered at Nazarene Theological Seminary in 2010. The fourth chapter was added for the published collection. Green’s writing style is fluid, as would be expected of a speech, and flows easily from one idea into the next. The topics in each chapter complement each other, but could stand independent of one another, which makes this book a good option for classroom reading with discussion after each chapter.

Chapter 1 identifies the division between serious historical-critical study of the Scriptures and serious theological interpretation. In academia, the words of the Bible are considered “historical artifacts; they evidence what once was spoken” (15). For Christian communities, the words of the Bible are still relevant today and can be used to discern God’s will for us. Green uses the extended example of the book of James to describe a model reader of the Scriptures, in distinction from the actual historical reader or the implied reader of the text. He spends more than twenty pages in detailed study of James, which need not be recounted here. The conclusion of chapter 1 is that every text is read within a context, but the context of Scripture need not be its historical context. Reading the Bible implies a shared theological context with readers of other times and places, and the present-day reader must make himself a model, one who takes the words seriously, albeit from a different historical and cultural context than the original audience.

Chapter 2 defines three historical-critical methods that are either opposed to or necessary for theological interpretation. Green concludes: “the Historical-Critical Paradigm cannot be correlated with theological concerns apart from the historical attempt to describe early Christian religion” (47). Green rejects historical criticism when it reconstructs past events in order to retell a past story, or dissects
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biblical texts in order to determine the process from composition to canonization. Theological interpretation only needs historical criticism to reconstruct historical context, "such as the ancient economy, the struggles of peasants, the social status of slaves, or the role of purity in ancient Israel" (45). Acts 6:1–7 is used as example, in which the early church neglects some of its widows. Green takes an apparently historical problem and describes persuasively how theology lies at its root. He claims that the interpretive dichotomy is not between history and theology, but between some historical studies and theological study. Yet the overall tone of this chapter seems to deny that historical facts can ever be used to strengthen faith. At times, Green seems to reject historical methods that could be helpful to at least some modern readers.

Chapter 3 addresses the question, “What is the status of the Rule of Faith in and for theological interpretation of the Bible?” (72). This chapter assumes a well-educated reader, as Green does not clearly define “Rule of Faith” and does not include the texts of the ecumenical creeds in the book, though he admits that most Christians today are unfamiliar with some of these, such as the Athanasian Creed. Using as example a biblical v. creedal understanding of mind-body dualism, Green discusses how Scripture and doctrine can be used to interpret one another. In logical though complicated reasoning, Green describes how theological biblical interpretation may disagree with church doctrine, as the mind-body dualism argument exemplifies, but the interpretation is ultimately not in contrast with the theology upon which the doctrine is based.

The last chapter makes the argument that theologians do read the Bible critically, even if they do not utilize historical criticism. Theological interpretation can be objective or detached, as can academic interpretation, yet theologians cannot read Scripture neutrally, as though the texts had no bearing on life. John Wesley is presented as example, and Green uses his arguments on predestination and interpretation of 1 Peter to show the deep and complex reasoning that went into Wesley’s interpretation. The conclusion of this chapter is that “Wesley’s theological interpretation, and our own, need not be ‘uncritical’” (121).

Overall, Green’s book makes a clear case for theological readings of the Bible, which may be more important to the church than historical-critical readings. Occasionally he pushes the distinction too far, but that is forgivable considering how deeply rooted the division is that he is trying to overcome. This book is a good read for church leaders who want new ideas on keeping the Bible relevant for their communities today.

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Many of us recognize the familiar notification—ding!—announcing an e-mail arrival. Some might find the “ding” an annoyance, or some might even welcome the interruption. When it dings on my computer, I am anxious because the odds are that it is another of the over 600 emails I have received from one particular member of our congregation. She writes repetitively and caustically, “How can this loving God you preach be real while my son writhes in agony on the floor day after day? How can this God who is powerful stand by while my other son is born autistic at the hands of a negligent doctor? How could this God look away when my father did what he did to me? How can God be loving and yet stand silently by while my children suffer?”

I suspect her diligent determination for an answer is rare, but so are her daily trials with two health-challenged children. Many of our
famous discussions for clear understanding. I once watched an FBI agent transform a very grainy convenience-store-camera video to a high-resolution picture, resulting in the arrest of a murderer. This book acts as the agent transforming a nagging, grainy philosophical picture into clear theological reflection.

My experience is that my members are afraid to launch into the discussion, and pastors as well shy away. Most of us weren’t taught in seminary how to address the evil chess match of theodicy, and our parishioners tend to latch onto the simple clichés such as, “they’re in a better place now,” giving little comfort to the child standing beside the grave of his mother. Long defines theodicy as the four premises:

1. If God exists.
2. God is all-powerful.
3. A loving God.
4. There is innocent suffering.
In a sentence, the philosophical argument demands you must eliminate number one if four exists, or eliminate two or three to accept one and four together. I will resist my engineering-education impulse to draw a logic diagram.

Long constructs pastoral care as the foundation of his discussion, cemented by biblical interpretation and systematic theology. All the disciplines of seminary education frame his questions and answers. And, most importantly, people are clamoring for this conversation inside and outside of the Christian faith. Like a good play, Long presents thoughtful reflections and discussions by giants of the faith and contemporary characters, from Harold Kushner to Dostoevsky. You won’t be cheated in the research behind the subject. This broad spectrum provides a rainbow of thoughts so that we know he is not setting straw opponents on fire, but offering multifaceted explanations to the age-old problem set forth in Job.

Solvitur ambulando is the Latin phrase “it is solved by walking along.” Long offers this most insightful response to Monday-morning quarterbacks—or to Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu—pundits and experts in the game they refuse to play. On the sidelines and in front of the TV, they spout the last analytic word and leave Job to fret on his own. We have met those folks in our lives, too, who know what is best for us, and if we just ate fish oil every day we wouldn’t have had that heart attack! I found this to be the most profound reflection in the book, because often the first reaction when suffering arrives in our backyard is to move. We don’t like it and want easy answers so it will just go away. Long gets it right, integrating this concept into pastoral care, the spiritual faith life, and theological reflection on theodicy as a process or journey.

In the end, Long understates the importance of his work—this “little” book, as he calls it, might lack the physical thickness of some scholarship; however, its depth and significance weigh heavily for contemporary philosophy.

He accomplishes two major things: clarity of answers to the theodicy question, and answers to the title, “What Shall We Say?” For a Lutheran pastor, there is not much more to be said! Very seldom have I read a book twice. I think the last time I did this was The Hammer of God, Bo Giertz’s wonderful story of pastors. I will read Long again. Even if there is currently no curriculum for it, I will somehow integrate his book into sermons and forums. People do want to know “What Shall We Say?”

David Mesaros
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estant pastor who has served congregations in the United States and in Latin America. He is currently the associate dean for the Hispanic Center and associate professor in Hispanic studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, and has written extensively about this topic. Though his analyses of the topic are a very useful element of the study, it is his personal narratives, woven into the book, that are the most compelling and enlightening.

There are four major areas of analysis in this book: the origins and history of Latina Protestantism, the history and current status of relations between Latina and Euro-American Protestants in the United States, the relations between Latina Protestants and the larger Latino community in America, and an analysis of the current situation among Latino Protestants through study of a number of major surveys of Latino religiosity.

Latina Protestantism goes back about 150 years, with its origins in mission work begun among Latinas in Texas and the Southwest by mainline Protestant groups, notably the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. About 100 years ago, American Protestants began separate mission work in various countries in Latin America, spurred on later by a new mission emphasis by the newly formed Pentecostal denominations. The success of these efforts has varied by region, with a small but solid historical Latino Protestant presence in the Southwest, major Latino Protestant populations in Puerto Rico and Guatemala, and scattered groups elsewhere in Latin America.

Some Latina Protestants are connected with Euro-American Protestant denominations, either through individual membership or through ethnic congregations, but all Latina Protestants are in some way affected by relationships with the larger American Protestant community. The history and nature of these relations have been complicated and vary by group. The support of the larger Protestant community has been very important for Latino Protestants, but they have often also struggled to find their place in this larger community, and a hearing for their own voices and experiences. One very helpful element of the book is its listing of the Latina presence in the major American denominations, most notably the Assemblies of God.

Martínez calls Latino Protestants “a minority within a minority,” referring to their relations with the larger Latino community in the United States. Relations in this area have been very difficult historically, with Latina Catholics and their leaders seeing the Latina Protestants as “selling out” to Euro-Americans. Latino Protestants have struggled to find a voice that is both Latino and Protestant, one that will be respected by their larger ethnic community. But he also points out the rich interchange between Latino Protestants and Roman Catholics: some Protestants finding an appreciation of traditional Latino religiosity, and many Catholics influenced by Evangelical and Pentecostal forms of religion. There are also many regional differences within Latina Protestantism, depending on countries of origin and theological convictions.

Latino Protestantism is growing among American Latinos and, as can be expected, is undergoing challenges and changes. Latino Protestant congregations tend to be homegrown and small, and struggle to survive and to find appropriate pastoral leadership. The issue of language is a constant source of discussion, especially over the merits of monolingual and bilingual ministries. Continuing transnational contacts between Latino Protestants in the United States and in Latin America refresh the Latino congregations, but also fuel some of these conflicts. Martínez lays out a portrait of a growing Latino Protestantism in the United States, but one that is hardly monolithic or internally cohesive.

One important element of this book for non-Latino readers is the demonstration of this complexity and growth. Martínez is especially good at weaving the disparate elements of this subject, and showing how in ministry to
and with Latinas there is not a simple or a “one size fits all” approach. Rather, there is a rich mosaic of Latino Protestantisms in the United States, some wishing to keep the ethnic parishes alive, while others seek closer ties with Euro-American Protestant groups. Understanding the needs and dynamics of this growing segment of American Christianity is vital, which is why this book is so valuable.

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When many people think about youth ministry, the first thing that comes to mind is not profound and intense reflection. Kendra Creasy Dean gives some of the blame for this to youth ministers: “As a species, youth ministers have quick triggers; we notice a need and we respond speedily with the best of intentions but often with minimal reflection, theological or otherwise” (15). This book points to a new turn in youth ministry where “theological reflection is becoming the norm…instead of the exception” (15).

The book has five essays written by Dean and ten by Root. The first half defines the importance of theology for youth ministry; the second fleshes out ways theology can be enacted. The perspectives of the two authors complement each other, with Root unflinchingly laying out a theology of the cross and Dean celebrating youth ministry as “the church’s ‘research and development’ department” (17). The titles of the chapters offer a solid sense of the book’s breadth: The New Rhetoric of Youth Ministry; God Is a Minister; Youth Ministry as an Integrative Theological
In “The New Rhetoric of Youth Ministry,” Dean notes that conversations about youth are often grounded in despair. Aging congregations bemoan youths’ lack of commitment to the church even as they slash the budgets funding youth ministry. In spite of this, Dean insists there are signs of hope: practical theology has grounded itself in local wisdom, the Lilly endowment has funded quality youth ministry programs among institutions of higher learning, and youth themselves have discovered the importance of spirituality. All this has led to redefining ministry relationally and contextually. Three shifts come of this commitment: (1) A move from socialization of youth for churchly behavior toward the formation of disciples for the sake of the world; (2) A move into pop culture to locate its rips and tears so that within and/or against it an inspiring narrative of Christ may be proclaimed; (3) A move away from programmatics and toward shaping a community of spiritual practice. This expanded vision promises to be transformative for the whole church.

In Root’s chapter on “Walking into the Crisis of Reality,” he maps out a theological method for ministry that begins with the crisis of reality, that is, the place where God’s intervention in our lives breaks us open. The crisis reveals our finitude and the reality of death, as well as the threat that our lives are meaningless; this dilemma is often articulated in contemporary art and the sciences. These voices need to be heard. He then listens to Scripture and tradition to hear the witness of the faithful who have gone before us regarding what God is up to in the world. Finally, we engage in ministry out of that dialog. For “ministry is confrontation with the crisis of reality and with God already there; participating in ministry therefore is participation with God where God can be found, in the crisis of reality in people’s lives” (emphasis his, 95).

Root’s chapter on “Doubt and Confirmation” proposes a radically new way of doing confirmation. Root tells the story of a young woman who told him she was kicked out of confirmation for asking troubling questions. This chapter contains what Root wishes he had said to her in that moment about what confirmation might look like if the church sought out and encouraged questions instead of stifling them. He asks, What if we allowed the very real doubts that youth have to be our curriculum? What if we envisioned the confirmation mentors as those who dare to walk into those doubts as companions of the youth? Root grounds this approach in the early Reformation movement and the via negativa. This theological approach formulates faith through direct engagement with oppositional realities that are often ignored in order to safeguard certainty. In this model, confirmation becomes a community of shared doubting whose participants honestly face the brokenness they know too well, and therein discover trust created by the living God who embraces us when we have more questions than answers. If we dared this experiment, Root imagines that young women and men might remember their years in confirmation as a time of excitement when they learned to love each other and to faithfully ask big questions of a God worth loving.

This book has much to commend itself. It both offers fresh approaches to issues the church has thought about often, and addresses new areas about which the church has not
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thought enough. It has great practical advice for nurturing the theological turn, such as Root’s invitation to choose one contemporary theologian and read everything that he or she has to offer, so that you are in constant conversation with one thinker’s reflection. In addition, true to their proposal that theology is a local conversation, each chapter ends with reflection starters to keep the dialog going in small groups. Having read this book and absorbed the depth and vision the authors present, I find myself hopeful. If this book accurately documents and contributes to the “theological turn in youth ministry,” then faithfulness is our future. And if youth ministry is the research and development department of the church, then this product is ready to launch for the sake of the world.

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