
The book of Jeremiah is one of the most challenging in Scripture due to its enigmatic arrangement, wide historical context, and challenging material. Rabbi Dr. Binyamin Lau does us an incredible service in taking the book of Jeremiah and rearranging the chapters into sections that parallel the prophet’s life and placing the prophet’s words in the surrounding historical context. Set within this broader context we see the struggle of the prophet as he moves from soaring hope for the reunification of Israel and Judah through disillusionment with the nationalistic struggles of Judah and eventually into the despair of the Babylonian exile. Rather than producing a commentary on each chapter of Jeremiah, Rabbi Lau offers a narrative using the text of Jeremiah, the recorded memory of the events in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles in conversation with other historical sources and other prophets active at various points in Jeremiah’s long career, as well as the rabbinic tradition of interpretation. The end result is a coherent and tragic account of a disparaged and disgraced prophet who tried desperately to eliminate the social injustices and corruption of his people and to save the temple from its impending doom.

The introduction of the work argues that in our context the prophet might be understood as a public intellectual who must summon all of their intellectual powers and persuasive skills to convince their audience of the truth of their words. Lau argues that prophecy does not depend upon being accepted, and among the prophets only Jonah was able to fulfill his mission by convincing the people of Nineveh to see the error of their ways (xiv–xv). Yet the prophet must love the people enough to pay the personal price of prophetic vision, and even be willing to be declared an enemy of the people. Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry, as the narrative will tell, will come at a high personal cost.

The book is divided between the three primary kings of Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry: Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah. Part I sets the stage with the story leading up to Josiah by dealing with his predecessors. Briefly touching on the conflict between Samaria and Judah, in the context of the Assyrian domination of the Trans-Euphrates region, we see a picture of a divided people where savage wars between the nations of Judah and Israel overshadow the blood ties that once united them (3). During the miraculous salvation of Jerusalem, in the time of Isaiah and King Hezekiah, we see the entry of Babylonia into the Judean world with Merodoch-Baladan’s delegation to Hezekiah. When Hezekiah’s son, Manasseh, ascended to the throne in 697 B.C.E., he attempted to put the nation of Judah back on its feet but could not resist the lure of Assyrian culture and began to forfeit the cultural and religious heritage of Judah. It is within this context, after the brief reign by Amon, that Josiah becomes king in 640 B.C.E. and the story of Jeremiah’s prophetic career begins.

Jeremiah’s prophetic calling occurs in the thirteenth year of Josiah’s reign, or 626 B.C.E., a time of tremendous regional change. King Josiah has begun to cleanse and purify Jerusalem from Assyrian culture and worship and is also sending envoys to Samaria in an attempt to reunite Judah and Israel. This grand dream
can only be understood within the horizon of the crumbling of the Assyrian empire, which is waging a war of attrition on its northern border (10). Jeremiah’s ministry begins by prophesying the unification of Israel and Judah, appealing to their shared ancestor Jacob. Jeremiah is captured by this vision and is convinced that God’s promise to rebuild will soon be realized. Yet, as Jeremiah begins to yearn for this change, he recognizes a discrepancy between the king’s attempted reforms and the other local leadership, who still continue to represent the sinful generation of Manasseh, yet Jeremiah believes that God is about to get rid of these shepherds and gather the scattered flock from Samaria. Jeremiah’s most optimistic words go out to the cities of Samaria, but in Judah and particularly in his own homeland of Benjamin Jeremiah witnesses a people “engrossed in their own land and wealth, wrapped up in everyday life, and awash in paganism” (33). Throughout the remainder of Josiah’s reign, Jeremiah will become increasingly distraught over the superficiality of these reforms among the leaders, priests, and the people. “Jeremiah sees behind this façade and recognizes the falsity and the hypocrisy, the thin veneer of piety serving as a fig leaf for corruption and warped social values” (49). When Josiah dies in 609 B.C.E., Jeremiah’s observation of the shallowness of the reforms of Josiah bear their unfortunate fruit as the new king sets the nation on a very different course.

Part II deals with the reign of Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.E.) and his pro-Egyptian regime. This is a time where Egypt experiences a renewal of power and influence. Egypt lays a heavy tariff on Judah, which Jehoiakim passes on to the people of the land. “Jehoiakim strikes a winning combination: economic reliance on Egypt, spiritual and national reliance on the Temple, and a general atmosphere of compliance with the leader. What can go wrong?” (78). Jeremiah’s prophecy rails against all of these items, stating that reliance on Egypt will lead to their demise, that the temple is like the tabernacle at Shiloh that was destroyed by God after it was corrupted by the high priest’s sons, and the king and his loyalists will fall into the hands of Babylon. Jeremiah finds himself struggling against the leaders of his nation, the priests, and other prophets, and is viewed as a traitor to the very people he is attempting to save. Jeremiah finds himself caught between the message of impending doom he feels compelled to pronounce and the persecution this pronouncement brings. The nation’s ability to rely on Egypt falters in 605, when Nebuchadnezzar begins his conquest, and Judah becomes subservient for three years, but in 601 when Egypt enjoys a brief resurgence Judah again sides with Egypt and rebels against Babylon. Jeremiah is able to see Babylon as the instrument of the Lord’s judgment and yet he still holds a single thread of hope that the people will repent and the terrible coming destruction of the Babylonians will be averted. Yet, in 597 when Nebuchadnezzar in a brief campaign recaptures the rebellious cities of Judah, the reign of Jehoiakim and the three-month reign of his successor Jeconiah come to an end, and the time between the two exiles begins under Zedekiah, who was Josiah’s youngest son, after he swore loyalty to Babylon.

Lau continues to tell the story of Jeremiah and the people of Judah in the time leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the final deportation of the Judean people as a punishment for the breaching of their treaty with Babylon. King Zedekiah finds himself surrounded by those who have seized power in the leadership vacuum left by the Babylonians’ taking most of the previous leaders into exile in 597 B.C.E. When Babylon returns to the north in 594, Judah finds itself becoming a part of an Egypt-led alliance. To the consternation of many of the leaders in the land as well as many other prophets, in particular Hananiah, Jeremiah continues to proclaim that the nation is to serve the King of Babylon and live, and he passionately pleads for the city to turn from its course and avoid the destruction that is com-
The Journey of Modern Theology
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In this major revision and expansion of the classic 20th-Century Theology (1992), coauthored with Stanley J. Grenz, Roger Olson tells the full story of modern theology from Descartes to Caputo, from the Kantian revolution to postmodernism, now recast in terms of how theologians have accommodated or rejected modernity.

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ing. Yet again the prophet’s words will fall on
deaf ears. Even though King Zedekiah has
some sympathy for Jeremiah and his proph-
ey, the king finds himself powerless in the
face of those who are leading the nation on a
path of confrontation once again with Baby-
lon. Even after Jeremiah’s words come true
with the destruction of Jerusalem and the tem-
ple in 586 B.C.E., the people still refuse to pay at-
tention to the prophet who for decades has
tried to save the city and temple from this fate.

Jeremiah’s story is one of bitter disappoint-
ment. Throughout the prophetic story of Jere-
miah, Lau illuminates parallels with modern-
day Jerusalem. “The streets of Jerusalem still
throng with false prophets who earnestly
claim, ‘the tradition of our forefathers is in our
hands; the Third Temple shall not be de-
sroyed!’ Once again they seek to lull us into a
sense of false security, to make us forget the
great responsibility we shoulder: to be worthy
of this national home, the Jewish state” (225).
It is also easy to make connections between the
political and religious movements in modern-
day Israel and similar political and religious
rhetoric in the United States. This is an insight-
ful journey into the world of the prophet that il-
luminates not only Jeremiah but the world of
the Hebrew Scriptures.

Neil White
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THE HEBREW PROPHETS AND
THEIR SOCIAL WORLD, 2nd edition,
by Victor H. Matthews. Grand Rapids: Baker

Victor Matthews recently produced a sec-
ond edition of his popular 2001 work on the so-
cial world of the Hebrew prophets. This book
meets a twofold need. The stated purpose of
the book is to introduce readers to the back-
ground of the ancient world of the prophets. In
the process, Matthews introduces the reader to
each Old Testament prophetic book.

In the brief introduction, Matthews de-
scribes the first of these needs: “one of the
greatest challenges for modern readers is to
become acquainted with social and historical
forces that played such an important role in
the lives of the prophets and their audiences”
(x). This need is met explicitly in each chapter,
while the second need is met through organiz-
ing the book around the OT prophetic books.
Matthews explains how the geographic, eco-
nomic, and social contexts and the literary im-
agery of each prophetic book contribute to the
ancient message, which in turn reveals the
modern message for communities of faith to-
day.

The practical purpose and organization
combine to make this book of great value for
pastor and biblical student alike. Prophetic lit-
erature is one of the more misunderstood and
wrongly utilized of all biblical genres. The
prophets are too often pillaged for proof texts
that connect with newspaper headlines or to
defend a particular end-times schema, when
in fact they were not written for these pur-
poses. In order to understand the powerful
message of the prophets, “we must first recog-
nize that these persons, both male and female,
spoke within their own time, to an audience
with a frame of reference very different from
ours” (ix). The ancient issues the prophets ad-
dressed remain issues in our modern culture.
Once the ancient social world that produced
these prophetic messages is understood, mod-
ern parallels are unmistakable, making the
prophetic message powerful today.

Chapter 1 takes the reader on a geographic
tour of ancient Israel. This rudimentary mate-
rial may provide a foundation, but it is the least
helpful of the chapters and may deter some
readers from persevering to perhaps the most
helpful second chapter. Chapter 2 defines and
describes the OT prophet. In the process,
many misperceptions are corrected and a
clearer understanding of the purpose of the
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prophets emerges. For instance, Matthews notes that prophets “were part of a socio-political process that prevented the monarchs from becoming absolute rulers” (20). Adding to this important point, Matthews clearly outlines what prophets were and were not, the diverse circumstances both nationally and personally that shaped their message, and the source and purpose of their messages.

With this important foundation laid, the book moves into the pre-monarchic prophets (Moses, Balaam) as well as early monarchical prophets (Samuel, Nathan, etc.) and devotes a chapter to Elijah and Elisha. These chapters are helpful in developing an understanding of prophets and prophetic messages before discussing the prophetic books. The brief work on Moses as a paradigm for the prophets was especially helpful (37–40) and deserves more consideration.

In keeping with the focus of the book, the writing prophets are handled in chronological order, which allows the attention to remain on the social world that both prompted the prophetic messages and provides interpretive clues to understanding each unique message. Each chapter is helpful, and the summary effect of the book is beneficial as it calibrates modern readers to the original context and message as the foundation for the modern message that can be proclaimed today.

At this point, a few highlights and critiques of the book are worth noting. An upgrade from the first edition is an expanded glossary, which allows Matthews’s scholarly writing to remain accessible to multiple reading levels. The words are well chosen and the definitions are concise but complete. The addition of maps and tables in the second addition is also a valuable upgrade. The multiple inset boxes are reordered and the format is enhanced, making them more helpful. A suggestion for a future edition (that current readers may want to complete manually) would be an index of these insets. Several of the insets conveniently string together themes represented in several prophets, but each box of course only appears once. These valuable insets came to mind during subsequent chapters, but were then difficult to locate for reference.

Several recurring themes are worthy of further development. One example would be the tension between politics and religion (53, 57, 126, etc.). Readers may want to flag significant themes for further consideration as they become the foundation for modern application of these powerful prophetic messages. Lastly, Matthews’s refined thesis prevents the book from exploring modern application of the prophetic message. The reader must take the short but necessary step from the ancient message that is clearly distilled from the social world of the prophets, and find its parallel in the modern world to make the prophetic message relevant.

These suggestions should not deter the reader, but should rather encourage the reader to participate in the process. Matthews provides the background needed to understand the ancient prophetic message, allowing the reader to explore the powerful modern application for each individual and faith community. This book is therefore a worthy companion for the study of the OT prophets and their message.

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Here is a stimulating, and sometimes provocative, work on the New Testament, which will surely be of interest to serious readers of “the church’s book.” Boring seeks to give a balanced view of the issues one will face in analyzing this ancient, yet contemporary, collection
of writings. He affirms, on the one hand, that as a book of history it must be approached by using a critical method, asking the questions of authorship, time of writing, place, destination, and purpose. This approach is intended for what he calls “the beginning student,” one with serious purpose but without prior experience in various details of studying the Bible. Also, he notes in the preface that the NT is concerned with faith and theology, thus calling for theological reflection, namely to ask what the NT has to say concerning the faith.

This is a lengthy tome, consisting of twenty-eight chapters, with double columns on each page. The first seven chapters deal with what we can call “background materials”; they are followed by two on Jesus and Paul; seven on the Pauline (and pseudepigraphal) letters; two on the catholic epistles; three on the Johannine community and its writings; and, finally, a closing chapter titled “The New Testament as Word of God.” His coverage is generally broad and incisive, except for the five Johannine materials (including the Gospel of John, the three Johannine Epistles, and the Apocalypse), which suffer in comparison to his treatment of the three Gospels (76 pages to 155 pages, respectively). Two other general items could be noted. One, there are many excellent photographs and text boxes, which give the reader a feel for ancient sites and texts. These can give a sense of participation in the material being narrated. Second, there is a general paucity in the extent of bibliographical references. For the student who is looking for greater breadth and insight into the themes being treated there may well be some disappointment.

The background materials are varied and basic to one’s study of the NT documents themselves. The reader is instructed as to the nature of the NT, and the necessity of the discipline of textual criticism of the manuscripts while studying it. There are important impli-
cations here for the literary study and also for discerning its theological implications. Boring reminds us that “all interpretation is perspectival, from within an interpreting community” (54). These observations are followed by two helpful chapters on both the NT and Palestinian Judaism within the Hellenistic world. They are useful in establishing a perspective for the NT documents themselves, emphasizing that these materials reflect the social and cultural aspects of the period from Alexander the Great (4th century B.C.E. through the first century C.E.).

The treatment of the NT materials follows a chronological sequence, hence he begins with Paul and ends with John (at least the Johannine school). (Historically, of course, Jesus preceded Paul, so two chapters are first devoted to “Jesus within Judaism” and “Jesus and Paul.”) After a sketch of Paul’s life and mission to 50 C.E., and a look at letters in the ancient world and in the NT, Boring engulfs the reader with a detailed examination of the Pauline literature (chapters 11–16). In his approach, he divides the letters between epistles written by Paul himself (1 Thessalonians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans), and by persons within the Pauline school (Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Timothy). The pattern here is first to discuss historical-critical questions, then engage the reader in an “Exegetical-Theological Précis” of each letter. He appears to vacillate between a more “liberal” and more “conservative” option, but has a lengthy history of scholarship upon which he draws, trying to be fair to the evidence within the letters themselves.

The final units of text for the NT epistles are concerned with an advance into consolidation of the Pauline letter-writing style with a study of 1 Peter and Hebrews, followed by materials covering James, Jude, and 2 Peter. The remainder of the book is concerned with the Gospels (along with other Johannine writings).

When we encounter these materials we are faced with factors like divine inspiration, individual memory, and community tradition. In addition, one encounters the Synoptic Problem, i.e., by whom were they written? In what order were they composed? and, What is their literary relationship? (There are a good number of text boxes in this discussion that will aid the reader by illustrating various aspects of the issues at hand in each of the Gospels.) The priority of the Gospel of Mark is attested, and Boring goes on from there to give an interpretation of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. The Lukan section is the lengthiest, composed of a unit on the writer as theologian, composer, and historian, followed by the interpretation of Luke-Acts. This synoptic discussion is one of the oldest in church history, extending at least as far back as the church father Papias in the second century. Boring shows good balance here between historical reading and devotional reading.

The final, brief section considers the work of the Johannine community. It opens with an analysis of the book of Revelation, followed by his investigation of 2, 3, and 1 John (in that order) and, finally, the Gospel of John. One might wish for more substance on the Apocalypse, given its length and the long study of it. And, our writer makes a good point in saying that the Christology of the Gospel is its distinctive feature.

The epilogue is concerned with the NT as “Word of God.” God is portrayed as speaking, in the Bible. But Boring is loath to hang too much on such a Scripture text as 2 Tim 3:16, “All scripture is inspired by God.” He goes on to discuss ideas of inspiration—pro and con—and concludes with the statement (with reference to 2 Cor 4:7), “Both treasure and clay are absolutely real—truly treasure/truly clay—and both are from God” (711–712).

Take up and read. Read with faith and discernment.

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THEOLOGY FOR LIBERAL PROTESTANTS
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In today’s burgeoning field of eco-theology Larry Rasmussen’s works are viewed by many as foundational, if not already classical. For over twenty-five years he has written on what Thomas Berry called “The Great Work,” or the formation of a viable ecological ethic. These contributions are perhaps most widely recognized in Rasmussen’s award-winning 1989 publication of Earth Community, Earth Ethics. It was here that Rasmussen began outlining the principles that undergird his most recent work, Earth-Honoring Faith.

In the first section of his book Rasmussen examines the reality of our contemporary situation—who we are, the state of the world we inhabit, and the dynamic nature of faith. Through accessible interdisciplinary means, Rasmussen situates his work in daily life and brings urgency and gravity to what he calls “the ethic we need.” Early on, four chapters are dedicated to unpacking this ethic of oikos. In the first of these, Rasmussen addresses the grave need for dialectical/adaptive change, noting that the “greening” of models based on unlimited consumption will not suffice. Believing that we now live in a new era, an ecozoic Anthropocene wherein our planet proves to be a tough new place, he argues that entirely “new wineskins and cloth are needed.” Demonstrating how behavioral changes frequently precede attitudinal ones, Rasmussen suggests that the drag of normalcy be resisted and that conventional wisdom be doubted. He urges the reader to prioritize the perspectives and voices from within marginal communities while also appreciating the complexity of today’s systems. And finally, he pragmatically encourages those engaged in grassroots efforts to effectively partner with influential allies with an aim for greater impact.

Noting how attention to such matters prove the whole of life to be “startlingly moral,” Rasmussen then moves on in chapter five to suggest how an authentically ecological ethic must emerge from beyond classical categories of moral theory to an inclusive moral vision, one that draws upon myriad traditions while innovatively responding to contemporary demands. To some, Rasmussen’s section on moral theory will seem idealistic or even incoherent, as he takes no time to explain how competing approaches to morality might cooperate. Here the dialectical tensions inherent to any community seem to be assumed and accepted. Yet, to be sure, Rasmussen’s explicit aim is to underscore the ecological concern and charge commonly shared between all persons. To this end, his thorough research on interreligious perspectives on ecology is particularly helpful and undeniably a trademark of Rasmussen’s working legacy.

As attested to by multiple religious traditions, the matrix of community is essential to the “Great Work,” which Rasmussen argues is yet ahead. Dedicating chapter six to this theme, Rasmussen begins uncovering some of the economic influences on civil society. With broad strokes he retraces what he refers to as “the marriage of Big Politics and Big Economics,” showing how both market and state economic models fail as moral proxies. Here Rasmussen’s rich background in political ethics is clear; his finely nuanced arguments help any reader navigate the complex waters of what Rasmussen argues is the critical triptych of contemporary affairs—economics, ecology, and religion—while also helping the reader steer clear of overly simplistic and impractical conclusions. Looking to an economy of communion and small, localized communities better able to anticipate need, Rasmussen suggests that a globalized earth-honoring ethic emerges in the accumulation of numerous small-scale efforts and changes. Collectively such efforts can amount to a tipping point, he argues, which is organic, contextual, and thereby more productive. The
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reader’s takeaway is a clear, motivating challenge—till and keep the very space in which you live, both literally and figuratively.

Transitioning to the metaphorical by way of the metaphysical Rasmussen concludes the first section of his book discussing the human notion of self. Those familiar with his work find already trodden territory here. We must, he asserts, move from ego to ecosphere, from soul to sole to soil. This is possible when religion, and more specifically, monotheistic traditions such as Christianity, repent of wayward dualisms and abandon anthropocentric models of dominion and stewardship. Related to his point, albeit seemingly forced into the flow of his overall argument, is the environmental justice movement. Rasmussen’s concern for justice is unquestionable, yet his decision to address ecological matters pertaining to race, gender, and economic station in tandem with his overall schema rather than as central to it appears to counteract his aforementioned emphasis on community. Moreover, the anecdotal nature in which Rasmussen discusses environmental justice, while no doubt intended to personalize the issue, might too easily be misconstrued as a peripheral issue rather than a central one.

The latter section of Earth-Honoring Faith builds upon the ethical criteria mentioned above and attempts a “constructive response that takes the form of renewed deep religious traditions speaking to Earth-destructive forces.” Rasmussen with great care and in thoughtful detail considers asceticism, sacramentalism, mysticism, and prophetic-liberative approaches, respectively. His exegesis of these varied religious approaches is an immensely helpful resource for religious leaders who seek paradigmatic approaches to faith and ecology, as well as for students in need of greater understanding of religious understandings of ecology. The breadth with which Rasmussen canopies these perspectives coupled with his unique ability to note symbiosis and synthesis among them is remarkable, and evidence of his mastery of the field. Ultimately, Rasmussen argues for a wisdom approach to an eco-centric faith wherein elements of all of these traditions can be honored and feasible practices and embodied principles can emerge.

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Recently there has been an increasing interest in the thought of the eighteenth-century philosopher, linguist, and theologian Johann Georg Hamann. Isaiah Berlin opened this new conversation on Hamann in English with his work The Magus of the North (1–2). Berlin argues that Hamann began the irrationalist rebellion against the enlightenment, which ran from Herder and the Sturm und Drang movement through romanticism, and culminated in Hitler (16). This assessment of Hamann has not been without its challengers. In After Enlightenment, John Betz adds his voice of dissent to those of James C. O’Flaherty, John Milbank, and Oswald Bayer, who reject the idea that Hamann’s thought amounts to irrationalism—much less that he is responsible for the philosophical basis of the Third Reich (1–2).

According to Betz, Hamann is a forerunner of post-secularism and the postmodern turn to language and rejection of pure reason. For Betz, Hamann represents an alternative to the dominant strain of Kantian rationalism followed in modern philosophy and theology. Instead of following an intellectual idealism, Hamann approaches nature, life, and theology as real experiences brought into being by the Word of God that creates reality out of nothing.
As Kant’s friend and first critic, Hamann pushed back against Kant’s assumption of the existence and prescience of reason above all and before all. Hamann argued that speech precedes reason and that, indeed, God’s speech created reason. In this “Metacritique” of Kant, says Betz, Hamann did not reject reason itself, as Berlin maintained, but rather rejects the idea of a pure, abstract reason in which lies the power of being and the explanation to existence (234–235).

Betz sees Hamann’s views as very timely for postmoderns. Hamann, like Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida, calls into question the basic assumptions of modernity, especially the uniformity of reality through abstract reason. At the same time, Hamann recognizes the importance of language and narrative. Yet, unlike the “postmodern triumvirate,” Hamann does not devolve into nihilism and irrationalism (313–319). For Betz, Hamann stands between the extremes of absolutist, objectivist rationalism and subjective existentialism, qualifying reason by its relationship and subjugation to faith, but not rejecting it entirely (193).

Students, professors, pastors, and lay Christians can all learn something valuable from this work about the sometimes forgotten figure of Hamann. For theological academics, Hamann’s criticism of Kantianism and other streams of modern thought can be a breath of fresh air, enlivening current conversations about reality, reason, and language. For pastors, the way Betz relates Hamann’s views on Scripture is illuminating. Betz portrays Hamann as true reader of Scripture who is willing to use his mind and critical analysis to read the biblical text but who is also attentive to the voice of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who speaks through the Bible (43–44). Indeed, all Christians have something to learn from this reader who is attentive to the God who speaks “glory in the ‘rags’ of Scripture” (43). As Betz relates,
the voices of modernity have often ignored or tried to drown out the voice of God in the Scriptures, and Hamann can help us as postmodern Christians to retune our ears to that voice.

Hamann appears in Betz’s work as something of a pilgrim for whom the narrative of Scripture forms the personal narrative of one’s life. In the story of Scripture, with all its gore and sexual content, one finds the word of God spoken through the grit and earthiness of real life. In the same way, says Hamann, the Holy Spirit uses the Scriptures to bring the word of God into our real lives with all their varieties of experience (40–44). Such a view of the Bible’s narrative formation of the reader brings a fresh perspective to the notion that—as Betz quotes Bayer on Hamann—“Scripture interprets me, and not I Scripture” (41). For Hamann, the Author of Scripture is also indelibly the Author of a person’s life history (40). The story of Hamann’s life, including his conversion, travels, intellectual relationships, political intrigues, and sexual experiences, comes alive with theological meaning in a way that postmodern Christians who value the power of story will appreciate.

Yet, there are two drawbacks to this volume (19). The first is that the author’s own Catholic theology noticeably affects how he reads Hamann. Betz describes Hamann’s regard for the word of God as that which calls reality into being as a “Catholic universalism (with all its objectivity and sacramental view of reality).” That Betz is speaking of a Roman Catholic sacramental worldview is evident by the fact that he capitalizes “Catholic” and juxtaposes it to a “Protestant Christocentrism.” This conflicts with what Hamann actually said against Roman absolutist metaphysics, the papacy, and the viability of a universal worldview, and is at odds with Protestant scholarship of Hamann, especially Bayer’s. Betz desires Hamann to be a figure who brings together the best of Protestantism (i.e., Christocentrism) and the best of Catholicism (i.e., a “sacramental” metaphysic) in a philosophical theology that then serves as an alternative to Kantian rationalism, the subjective romanticism of Schleiermacher, and the existentialism of Kierkegaard and Barth. Whether or not the real Hamann actually is this figure is questionable. The second drawback is that through Betz’s longings that modern thought had followed Hamann instead of Kant, this volume is permeated by nostalgia for what might have been (18–19, 337–340). Readers may legitimately question whether such nostalgia for an alternative history is productive, especially considering Hamann’s expressed desire to live on “crumbs” of truth rather than a comprehensive worldview (82–83).

Despite these drawbacks, Betz’s work provides a helpful and thorough sketch of Hamann and his thought. Betz presents Hamann as someone who was skeptical of the absolutist claims of reason without being a skeptic, who realized the precedence of language and God’s word, and who read the Bible and saw God through it as the Author of his life’s story. Most of all, Betz’s work is valuable because it encourages its reader to get to know Hamann as someone who can be a genuinely valuable resource for doing christocentric theology and preaching the word of God in a world “after enlightenment.”

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