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Lamentations through the Centuries by Paul M. Joyce & Diana Lipton

This book is a product of the current wave of interest in the reception history of the Bible. The Wiley-Blackwell Bible Commentaries are specifically devoted to this perspective and are “based on the premise that how people have interpreted, and been influenced by, a sacred text like the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant” (p. viii). The series is particularly interested in how the various biblical texts have influenced literature, art, music, and film, religious beliefs and practices and social and political developments.

The book begins with an Introduction in which the authors address basic questions such as the character of Lamentations, the question of its authorship (tradition attributing it to Jeremiah), ancient versions and translations, the question of why it is such a generative and fertile text, and the current interest in the text and the contexts in which it has most commonly been received. The latter include the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 ce, the Reformation, the Shoah and radical experiences of loss (pp. 1–9). Then comes a discussion of the nature and ethics of the reception history approach (pp. 9–19). The authors take the view that historical criticism of the Bible, with its long quest for “original meaning,” is part of its reception history, so that it cannot be the foundation on which other forms of reception are based (p. 9). The Introduction ends with a statement of the structure and method of the commentary and helpful biographical notes on the two authors (pp. 19–25). The authors’ mixture of Roman Catholic (Joyce) and Jewish (Lipton) affiliations has fostered the tremendous range and dynamism that are evident throughout the commentary. The core of the book is the commentary on the five chapters of Lamentations (Chapter 1: pp. 26–67; Chapter 2: pp. 68–100; Chapter 3: pp. 101–46; Chapter 4: 147–74; and Chapter 5: 175–92). The book ends with an Afterword (pp. 193–95).

The approach taken in the commentary is that the authors first quote their own English translation of one, two or three verses of Lamentations and then discuss a very wide range of literary, artistic, cinematic, musical and other responses to that verse or those verses. While as biblical critics they modestly disclaim professional expertise in relation to these areas, in fact the quality of their discussion (even in relation to quite technical musical issues) is extremely high and very illuminating. One of the attractive features of the book is that the authors frequently work in details of historical criticism on Lamentations, on the basis (mentioned above) that they regard this as part of the reception history of the work. It is impossible to recount all the reception phenomena they mention; so I will provide a few examples. In relation to Lamentations 1:1 they discuss (pp. 26–32): Gregory of Nyssa’s *Funeral Oration on Meletius*; Deryn Guest’s 1999 article “Hiding Behind the Naked Woman in Lamentations: A Recriminative Response;” David Shatz’ 2011 collection of essays, *Contending with Catastrophe: Jewish Perspectives on September 11th*; and Andrew Lovett’s 2009 opera *Lonely Sits the City*. In relation to Lamentations 2:3–5 (pp. 71–74), which highlights God’s use of fire for destructive ends, they run through some of the ways that Lamentations was deployed to make sense of the Great Fire of London in 1666. These include a sermon preached by the Reverend Edward Stillingfleet in St Margaret’s church, Westminster on 10th October 1666, one month after the fire and a day appointed “humiliation and fasting,” a broadsheet ballad published in 1666 with an account of the fire entitled “The Londoners Lamentation” (reproduced on p. 72) and a work by Thomas Brooks entitled “London’s Lamentations,” published in 1670. In relation to Lamentations 4:1 (pp. 147–49), a verse which, like Lamentations 1:1 and 2:1, begins with the Hebrew word *eicha* (“How”), they discuss a 2001 Israeli film of that name, a name borne by the young heroine of the film who is caught up in controversy because of its troubling and contested connotations derived from Lamentations. In each case the authors do not merely summarize the various reception phenomena in their scope, but contextualise the discussion with deep and wide-ranging erudition, fair-mindedness and sensitivity to the historical, literary, artistic and musical dimensions of those phenomena.

The authors correctly note in their Afterword that “biblical scholars have no monopoly on illuminating exegesis” (p. 193). They were continually confronted with fresh options for understanding the ancient text, options generated by “receptive exegesis.” The present reviewer has also written at various times on the way that paintings on biblical subjects frequently reveal unexpected insights into the relevant texts.

And yet I must respectfully demur from the position of this Series and adopted here (quoted above) that how a text has been interpreted is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant. The authors follow Gadamer in the view that interpretation is a dialogue between an interpreter in his or her historical situatedness which yet recognizes the otherness of the past (p. 10). I have argued elsewhere (*New Testament Theology: Communion and Community*, pp. 76–84) that Gadamer’s understanding of the otherness

of the past did not go far enough; he did not take with sufficient seriousness the knowability of the intercultural other and exaggerated the significance of the interpreter's context. Respect for the alterity of the text, and for the person who created it and for those whom it was originally intended—in a deliberate dialogical act long ago—seems to me to mean that a reasonably convincing explanation of the meaning so conveyed is qualitatively different from, and should take priority over, this or that subsequent interpretation and application of the text (or part of it) in later periods and settings.

Philip F. Esler