



Review of Julie Woods: Jeremiah 48 as Christian Scripture (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick 2011)

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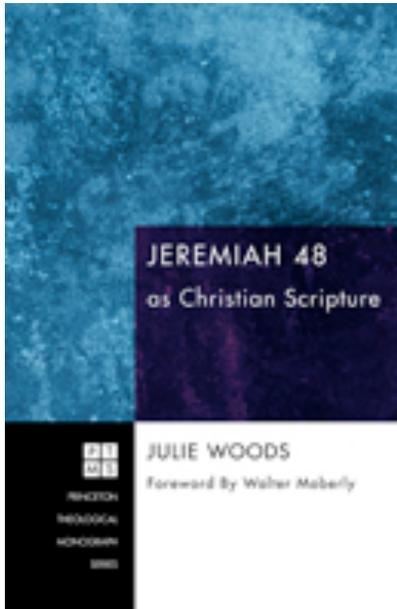
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Jeremiah 48 as Christian Scripture

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The oracles against the nations (OANs) constitute a significant part of the prophetic literature of the Bible. Nevertheless, interpreters have often overlooked, if not ignored, these oracles, especially within a Christian context; for instance, none of these passages occurs in the Revised Common Lectionary. How, then, should we as Christians read them today? That is the main concern of this fine work by Julie Woods, using the oracle about Moab in Jeremiah as a case study. The book is a revised version of her Ph.D. dissertation at Durham University under the supervision of Walter Moberly, who has also written the foreword.

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the scholarly work on the OANs and on Jer 46–51 in particular. Noticing the lack of attention given to these oracles in the history of scholarship, Woods lists several factors. These include a focus on authenticity, which regards the OANs as later additions—and, therefore, of less importance—and a focus on universal monotheism and moral values, which discards the OANs because of their narrow nationalism and rough and bloodthirsty content. Generally, historical-critical scholars have concentrated on authorship and date of the OANs, their original “Sitz im Leben,” and parallels to them in other ancient Near Eastern text material. In particular, Woods examines McKane’s concept of a “rolling corpus,” which explains the development of the

book of Jeremiah by comparing MT Jeremiah with the LXX version. Since the paradigm shift in biblical studies, the attention to the final form of the text has promoted study of the OANs. Woods even suggests that the increased interest may be a result of globalization and the growing focus on international relations (for instance, the United States is often compared with the Babylonian Empire). In addition, the greater interest in the interpreter's role and context has, according to Woods, enhanced the reading of Old Testament texts as Christian Scripture.

Chapter 2 carefully compares the MT Jeremiah version of the oracle concerning Moab (ch. 48) with that of LXX Jeremiah (ch. 31) to seek out variances in nuance; tables present the relevant MT and LXX passages together with standard English translations. First, Woods investigates the divergence of the order of nations in the final forms of MT (46:1–51:64) and LXX (25:14–31:44) as well as the different canonical positions of the OANs within the two versions of the book. Second, she analyzes the material present in MT but absent in LXX (48:40b, 41b, and 45–47). Most importantly, MT ends with a promise of restoration for Moab, whereas LXX concludes with a definitive judgement of Moab. Third, she examines differences and variations between the two texts. In general, MT appears to be slightly more intense than the LXX version in terms of the expression of laments, the nature of divine involvement, and YHWH's punishment. Nevertheless, Woods concludes that "the dissimilarities do not seem major enough to lead to distinct theologies" (66) and, therefore, prefers to speak of varying nuances.

Chapter 3 compares Jer 48 and Isa 15–16, both about Moab. Once again the examination of the text material is both careful and illuminating. Woods maintains the view, supported by most commentators, that Jer 48 might have drawn upon Isa 15–16 (and 24:17–18), although with substantial reworking. Indeed, the purposes behind Jer 48 and Isa 15–16 appear to be somewhat separate.

As a basis for Woods's own interpretation, chapters 4 and 5 analyze how five U.S. and U.K. commentators (Fretheim, Miller, Brueggemann, Jones, and Clements) have recently expounded Jer 48. All of them are, or have been, active churchmen, and Woods examines how their confessional backgrounds affect their understanding of the oracle. Furthermore, she investigates how they handle the oracle as Scripture for Christians today. This is, indeed, a valuable move. A study of these expositions reveals what the major themes in relation to Jer 48 are. Even though the five commentaries are quite different in terms of focus and layout, all highlight either the aspect of YHWH's universal sovereignty or the element of lament. In addition, all of them approach the text through the lens of the New Testament and their Christian faith. Woods is, however, dissatisfied with their applicative moves from the text to the contemporary world on the grounds that their applications tend to be too general.

Chapter 6 examines the curse of those who withhold their sword (Jer 48:10), which seems anomalous in its present context. Woods proposes that the curse may have been added by a scribe or redactor who was disappointed that the prophecy against Moab had not been fulfilled. At the end, she briefly explores how this verse has been interpreted by Christian theologians (especially Calvin, S. Severus, and Pope Gregory VII), who have fluctuated between literalistic and metaphorical readings.

Chapter 7 presents Woods's own reading. To begin, she classifies herself as "a Western Protestant, who lives in that strange time where modernism and post-modernism coexist, if not always in harmony" (218). Such explicit reflections on our own presuppositions are not common in scholarly works, at least not in Europe, but here they are both innovative and relevant. After some general comments on figural interpretation as a reading strategy, Woods asserts that the key themes of Jer 48 (judgment, lament, pride, destruction) all come together at the cross. In short, a Christian reading may propose that, through the lens of the passion narratives, Christ takes the burden of Moab's lament. She then painstakingly examines the oracle verse by verse with attention to motifs related to a Christian framework. As an illustration, Moab's sin (v. 7) thematically relates to the New Testament parables on riches and trust.

With regard to YHWH's mourning over Moab (vv. 31–36), Woods sees a figurative parallel in Jesus' sorrow for Jerusalem. Accordingly, she proposes to read Jer 48 as a critic of the self-satisfied church (substituting Moab) and as an exhortation to remember those who stand outside the Christian community. Maintaining the promise of restoration for Moab as an integrated part of the MT version, Woods asserts that this promise demonstrates the promise of God to those who are not his people and, thereby, for the church—the promise of Easter Sunday in a nutshell. In a concluding reflection, Woods argues that the diversity of the OANs hinders any sure determination of God's future action; indeed, the OANs inform us "that God punishes wrong-doing ... but beyond this, there is an element to God's freedom that cannot be fathomed" (280). Finally, two codas present two film-like storyboards of Jer 48 set within a sixth-century context and within a Christian framework.

A short conclusion sums up the main observations made in the discrete chapters and stresses that Jer 48 as Christian Scripture ought to be read as a critique of the self-satisfied church. The book concludes with a bibliography, a Scripture index, and a general index.

The book is a brilliant work. It is well written and handles important hermeneutical questions. Whereas other academic studies often look at the general problems of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture, Woods here dares to engage theologically in reading a *specific* text in its full length. That is, indeed, one of the strengths of the study. She

competently combines classical exegesis of Jer 48 (textual variations, structure, literary context, purpose, and content) with the concern of reading it as Christian literature. She thereby not only offers descriptive observations but also proposes a valuable constructive interpretation of the oracle. In addition, she has chosen one of the “hard” texts as a case study instead of merely picking a Christian highlight from Isaiah or the Psalms.

Although Woods briefly discusses the question of canon and the significance of the LXX, a reflection on “Christian Scripture” in general would have been helpful. In what sense is the Old Testament *Christian* Scripture? Are some parts more important than others? Are Christian interpreters obliged to explain every single word of the Old Testament? Nevertheless, at the level of detailed exegesis of Old Testament passages as Christian Scripture, Woods definitely presents an approach that invites application to other texts as well. Therefore, I recommend this book for anyone who is interested in theological interpretation of the Bible.