

Benedetta Rossi, *L'intercessione nel tempo della fine. Studio dell'intercessione profetica nel libro di Geremia* (Analecta Biblica 204; Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press 2013). Pp 462. € 34. ISBN: 978-88-7653-206-1

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Biblical prophets deserve the name “the servants of the word”. This expression remains polyvalent, though, on account of the diversity of the words uttered by the prophets. One such word was the word of intercession on behalf of the people. Such service was likely to be misunderstood both by the people – who treated intercession mechanically, assuming that God will obviously listen to the words of the prophet interceding on their behalf – and by the prophet himself – who might receive prohibition from God against interceding on behalf of the people. That was the case of Jeremiah, who heard such a prohibition three times (Jer 7:17; 11:14; 14:11), yet God orders him – at some point during the two-year siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians – to perform such a service (cf. Jer 33:3). After the fall of Jerusalem, the people themselves ask Jeremiah to intercede with God on their behalf (cf. Jer 42:2). Even these texts raise the question of the character of Jeremiah’s intercession, its aim and the conditions that would make it effective. These issues are successfully addressed by Benedetta Rossi in her doctoral dissertation defended at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome (written under the supervision of Pietro Bovati SJ) and published in 2013 in the Analecta Biblica series.

The introduction to the book (pp. 7-24) presents an overview of earlier studies devoted to the phenomenon of intercession (especially those of P.A.H. de Boer, H. Hesse, and F. Rossier), showing their insufficient treatment of negated intercession. Rossi intends to focus precisely on this aspect in her reading of the Book of Jeremiah, privileging the synchronic approach. Rossi presents the order of her analysis in a very lucid way: starting with the phenomenological description of intercession, referring to biblical texts, she will then verify the presence of the topic of intercession in the Book of Jeremiah, to finally conduct an exegetical analysis of the book’s fragments devoted to Jeremiah’s intercession.

The subsequent five chapters of the book fully correspond to the structure of the analysis sketched in the introduction. Chapter One (pp. 29-95) intends to

describe the phenomenon of prophetic intercession with the use of lexicographical and narrative tools. On the basis of the texts analysed (among others, Gen 18; Exod 32), Rossi concludes that in the Hebrew Bible there are no special words to denote the phenomenon of intercession. To express this idea, the terms belonging to the semantic field of prayer are used, modified by proper prepositions clarifying the relationship between the one interceding and the beneficiaries of his actions (p. 45). The activity of intercession is not limited to acts of speech only, as it may also assume the character of a gesture of intercession towards God. The biblical narratives analysed let Rossi to pinpoint the specificity of the relationship between the intercessor and both Yahweh and the community. Through the prophet-intercessor God reveals his desire to forgive his people (p. 44), which enables the prophet both to represent the guilty people and to invite God to restore the relationship of communion with them (p. 75). For the communion to be restored, the people need to perform specific acts reflecting their awareness of their guilt and their decision to return to God (p. 95).

In Chapter Two (pp. 97-118) Rossi lists the texts on prophetic intercession in the Book of Jeremiah, selected on the basis of the earlier-established criteria of identifying such texts. Even though she divides such texts into three groups (p. 103) – (1) texts including the prophet's words of intercession on behalf of the people; (2) texts containing prohibition against intercession; and (3) texts testifying to the people's request for the prophet's intercession – yet their presence in the book is not balanced (p. 108) and gives an impression of confusion and fortuity (p. 111). The author does not resign from trying to understand the logic of the positioning of the analysed texts within the book, and she sees it in the dynamics of the prophet's intercession, co-related to the chronology of the events in the background of individual texts of the prophet's intercession.

This assumption becomes clear in the second part of the book, comprised of three exegetical chapters. Rossi treats the pericope in Jer 14:1–15:9 as a key text to understand the phenomenon of prophetic intercession – to be more precise, the tension between intercession and the prohibition against it. The pericope is analysed in Chapter Four, the longest in the whole book (pp. 157-300). The texts preceding the pericope in the Book of Jeremiah (4:10; 5:3-6; 7:16; 11:14) are analysed in Chapter Three (pp. 119-156) as proof of the prophet's attempts at intercession that meet God's prohibition. Chapter Five (pp. 301-368) constitutes an exegesis of the texts whose background is the end of the Kingdom of Judah, sealed by Jerusalem's fall to the Babylonians in 586 BCE (18:20; 21:2; 32:16-25; 33:3; 37:3.7; 42:2.4.20). Rossi reads the prophet's intercessory service anew in light of these texts. The book ends with the conclusion (pp. 369-380), followed by bibliography, index of authors, index of cited biblical texts and index of selected Hebrew terms.

The value of the book lies primarily in its subject matter. Even though the phenomenon of prophetic intercession has been explored by many biblical scholars, which the author notes in the introduction, there have so far not been any studies of the phenomenon in the context of the Book of Jeremiah, primarily as regards the prohibition against intercession. In her reading of individual texts of the Book of Jeremiah Rossi shows the sense of the prohibition against intercession, which “lifts the veil covering the community’s lie. [...] The lack of correspondence between the community’s idolatrous conduct and their prayer leaves no room for prophetic intercession” (p. 153). The prohibition against intercession repeated three times and Jeremiah’s attempts at intercession that follow, either at God’s command (Jer 33:3) or at the people’s request (Jer 42:2), show a completely different aim of intercession in times of misery and judgment befalling the community. The aim is not intervention that would reverse judgment but awareness that “salvation is not to be expected outside doom, as an alternative to judgment; on the contrary, salvation is to be sought precisely in the experience of the end” (p. 285). “The prophet does not try to avert the community’s doom, intervening on their behalf so that doom will not befall them, but he experiences the doom to the core so as to show that God does not desert his people even in the experience of the end and to prove that God can create new things on the earth” (p. 300). “The prophet’s intercession does not lie in the rejection of doom, but in the secret of life granted through passing through death” (p. 330).

What is also noteworthy about the book is the author’s attempt to understand the service of the prophet-intercessor in relation to God and in relation to the people. Especially the analysis of this first aspect allows Rossi to redefine prophetic intercession. “Engaging in a dialogue with an intercessor, God reveals his desire to forgive” (p. 44). God wishes to include the prophet-intercessor in his desire to forgive, which makes intercession seem “the dramatization of God’s freedom” (p. 44). The prophet-intercessor himself is “a place where God’s point of view and man’s point of view meet, a paradoxical meeting which shows how God assumes man’s point of view and how man assumes God’s point of view, in a real, free and transforming exchange” (p. 94).

Methodologically speaking, what is worthy of note are Rossi’s rhetorical analyses following the methodology of Roland Meynet but aiming to capture the dynamics of the intercessory process in the texts under analysis (especially in Jer 14:1–15:9). Rossi does not limit her analysis only to formal and material aspects of the text but also verifies the text’s communicative development through, among others, the observation of “dialogical shifts between various voices present in the text” (p. 178). In this context, Rossi should be commended for her semantic analyses, which on the one hand respect the context of a given word/expression, but on the other frequently turn into paradigmatic analyses

that enable her to capture the specificity of the deployment of a given word/ expression in the text under study. To give an example, one could mention the analysis of the expression *‘āmad liḥnē yhwē*, indicating the prophet-intercessor’s readiness to confront God (pp. 58-59), or the phrase *‘ābad lēb*, signifying the loss not of courage but of understanding (pp. 125-126). It has to be added that detailed and often extended semantic analyses do not encumber the body of the text as they are shifted to footnotes, thanks to which the reader may follow the author’s line of thought easily.

The book testifies to the author’s perfect familiarity with the existing literature on the subject. Rossi engages in meaningful discussions with other biblical scholars, assessing their points of view and expressing and justifying her own. Typically, these debates are moved to footnotes, which may inspire the reader to further reflections or research. An example may be the discussion of the meaning of the syntagma *nāsā’ ḥatṭā’* (pp. 73-74) or the verb *‘āhab* (pp. 224-225).

What may be handy for the reader are the conclusions that Rossi formulates not only at the end of each chapter but also at the end of each section. She calls these parts “synthesis”, which lucidly, often in bullet points, enumerate major conclusions stemming from a given stage of the analysis. The book’s conclusion does not merely reiterate the conclusions formulated earlier but offers a conclusive synthesis of the whole study, giving a coherent picture of the prophetic service of intercession.

To comply with my role of a reviewer, I would like at the end to signal two minor shortcomings. One is a clearly formal thing, namely the fact that on p. 49 several spelling mistakes can be noted: instead of the root *šm<sup>c</sup>* there is the root *šm<sup>ç</sup>*; instead of the root *nṯh* there is *nṯh*; instead of 2Re 19:16 there is 1Re 19:16. The second comment may be treated as an invitation to engage in the discussion over the meaning of the Hebrew expression “to fall on face” on p. 121 (likewise on pp. 352-353). According to Rossi, the expression signifies an intercessory gesture, which is supposedly confirmed by the usage of this expression in Ezek 9:8 and 11:13. However, Mayer Gruber in his book *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East* (Studia Pohl 12/II; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980) mentions two criteria – (1) the prostration takes place in response to the death of loved ones; (2) the prostration is associated with other nonverbal expressions of grief – that make the expression in Ezek 9:8 and 11:14 denote not intercession but mourning (pp. 475-476). Referring to Gruber’s study would enable Rossi to deepen her interpretation of other expressions denoting an act of intercession discussed in Chapter One.

Undoubtedly, Rossi’s book *L’intercessione nel tempo della fine* is a valuable contribution to the understanding of prophetic intercession. Its reading should be a must for all those who wish to expand their understanding of Jeremiah as a prophet in the context of the paradoxical prohibition against intercession.