

Gianni Barbiero, *“Tu mi hai sedotto, Signore”. Le confessioni di Geremia alla luce della sua vocazione profetica* (Studia Analecta Biblica 2, Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press 2013). Pp. 330. € 35. ISBN 978-88-7653-356-3

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The Book of Jeremiah is a prophetic book with the largest number of autobiographical elements. A special place among these is held by the prophet’s “confessions” scattered throughout chapters 11 to 20. These confessions corroborate the fact that prophetic calling was oftentimes a source of life crisis for the one called to prophesy. Jeremiah’s tribulations occur on numerous planes but finally take the shape of struggling – even fighting – with God’s word. Jeremiah’s individual spiritual and historical experience becomes through his confessions God’s word for subsequent generations of the prophet’s listeners, thereby becoming a paradigmatic experience of listening to God’s word. It is no wonder, then, that Jeremiah’s confessions raise constant interest of biblical scholars.

One of the most recent studies of Jeremiah’s confessions, titled *“Tu mi hai sedotto, Signore”. Le confessioni di Geremia alla luce della sua vocazione profetica*, has been authored by Gianni Barbiero, an Italian biblical scholar and professor at Biblicum. Barbiero explains the specificity of his study in the introduction (pp. 7-14). To capture the theological value of Jeremiah’s confessions Barbiero privileges the synchronic approach, studying the canonical text of the Book of Jeremiah. To avoid the danger of focusing on Jeremiah as a “purely literary creation without historical concreteness” (p. 11), Barbiero does not completely give up on the historical critical method. The second aspect of Barbiero’s study is the reading of Jeremiah’s confessions in their literary context. Such a decision stems not only from the synchronic approach to text that Barbiero privileges but also from his conviction that the current positioning of Jeremiah’s confessions within the Book of Jeremiah has a bearing on their interpretation. For this reason, at the very beginning of his book Barbiero posits a hypothesis that the reading of Jeremiah’s confessions should not be severed from the account of his prophetic calling in Chapter 1, for it is this chapter that contains “the source of Jeremiah’s ‘I’” (p. 12). Barbiero’s ultimate goal is to capture the “individual – collective” dualism of the figure of Jeremiah: “Having initially

only an individual dimension, Jeremiah becomes a paradigm for his disciples and tradents, who see in him not only an estranged hero to admire but a model that can inspire them to accept the word of God in moments of crisis” (p. 12).

This hypothesis is corroborated in the subsequent chapters of Barbiero’s book that constitute an analysis of Jeremiah’s confessions included in 11:18–12:6; 15:10–21; 17:5–18; 18:18–23 and 20:7–18, preceded by a study of the narrative of the prophet’s calling in 1:4–19. Barbiero’s scholarly method corresponds to the methodological assumptions presented in the introduction. The author begins with analysing the context of a given confession to then propose his own explanation of the text with an appropriate textual commentary. Subsequently, he analyses the structure of the confession, which enables him to capture the theological dynamic of the text. This is followed by “diachronic observations”. The final element of the study of each confession is the text’s exegesis according to the text’s structure established earlier. Formally speaking, Barbiero’s book contains exegetical commentary on Jeremiah’s confessions. Where does its exegetical and theological novelty lie?

Barbiero points to the novel aspect of his exegesis already in the preface to his book: “The present study [...] is based on the deepened analysis of the original texts in the new translation: it is the comparison to the official CEI translation that makes it possible to capture the novelty of the exegesis” (p. 5). This sentence is not an unfounded promise. Generally speaking, the author sticks to the Masoretic text, but he does so only after engaging in the textual discussion of the text. Doing so, he often restores clarity and pointedness to Jeremiah’s confessions, unravelling the prophet’s dramatic situation. At the same time, in his exegesis Barbiero shows the reasonableness of the expressions included in the Masoretic text, which are oftentimes called *crux interpretum*. To give just one example (p. 71), the Masoretic text of Jer 11:19 includes the following sentence: “let us destroy the tree with its bread”, which is usually rendered as “let us destroy the tree in its strength”. Barbiero, by contrast, points to the metaphorical sense of this expression, whereby the tree is a metaphor of the prophet, hence “bread” – figuratively speaking, the fruit – would refer to God’s word (p. 81).

The exegesis shows similar sensitivity to the text and context throughout the whole book. Exegesis is not Barbiero’s goal in itself, though, as its aim is to bring to light the theological message of Jeremiah’s confessions. Barbiero shows the tragedy of Jeremiah, who is torn between his love of God and his love of his people. Jeremiah’s words testify to the prophet’s internal conflict between loyalty to God and solidarity with the people. This conflict may seem impossible to resolve. “Jeremiah needs to choose between solidarity with the people and solidarity with God. Solidarity with God translates for him into animosity from the people” (p. 143). As Barbiero shows, there is a way out of this drama: namely, the word of God. He does not mean the obvious activity

of the prophet's listening to God's word. Jeremiah's calling encompasses "new solidarity achieved not as a result of opposition to the word, but as a result of loyalty to the word" (p. 141). The prophet's loyalty to God's word makes him become God's word himself and participate in the fate of God's word (p. 127).

At the outset of his book Barbiero posits the paradigmatic nature of Jeremiah. During the analysis of individual confessions, he concludes that this paradigmatic character lies in the first place in the conversion the prophet is encouraged to (p. 143). Jeremiah's internal fight "anticipates Israel's fate, a move from the old to the new covenant, from a man who trusts only in himself to the one who trusts in God" (p. 285). Jeremiah's paradigmatic character is the reason for his presentation in the confessions both as an individual and as a communal being (p. 286).

A canonical reading of the Bible that Barbiero proposes endows this paradigmatic character with the value of a prophecy. Throughout his exegesis Barbiero often refers to the New Testament and to Jesus Christ, showing some common features of Jeremiah's and Christ's fates. What could be treated as examples of intertextuality is developed and systematized at the end of the book in the form of a Christological reading of Jeremiah's confessions (pp. 286-289).

Due to its methodological presumptions, Barbiero's study sheds a new light on Jeremiah's confessions. However, his contextual reading of these texts seems insufficient. First of all, this feeling of insufficiency stems from the fact that the "diachronic observations" that accompany the analysis of each confession should be more justly treated as literary criticism, as their aim is to verify the literary cohesion of a given text. Whenever Barbiero tries to situate a given confession temporarily with relation to Jeremiah's life, he merely cites the opinions of other scholars. Even if this helps Barbiero show the historical dimension of the figure of Jeremiah, some suggestions on the historical circumstances of a given confession seems debatable without proper argumentation. This seems particularly true about the dating of Jeremiah's confession in Jer 20:7-18, which Barbiero situates after 594 BCE (pp. 241-242). A question arises, though, if the literary context of the confession – suggesting the years 605-604 – has any significance for the determination of the confession's historical circumstances (cf. Jer 20:18 and 20:1-6). The question is inevitable particularly due to Barbiero's conviction of the importance of the literary context for the interpretation of Jeremiah's confessions.

The analysis of an oracle's context, and – by inference – of its structure, requires the delimitation of the text. In the introduction Barbiero indicates that "the determination of the texts of the confessions is not definitive" (p. 7, n. 1). As the following sentences show, the comment does not refer only to the number of confessions but also to their delimitation in the Book of Jeremiah. The problem is particularly noticeable in the analysis of the confession included in Jer 17. It may simply be the question of Barbiero's methodology, but the analysis on

pages 145-149 of the rhetorical units of Chapter 17 and the lexical connections between them does not lead to the delimitation of the confession included in the chapter. Barbiero states that “the analysis will be limited to vv. 5-18, that is the genuine confession” (vv. 14-18) and its immediate context (vv. 5-11) with which it forms compositive unity (p. 151). From the perspective of the methodology of rhetorical analysis developed by Ronald Meynet – Barbiero’s analysis of the structure conforming to this type of study – the arguments for the sake of such compositive unity are debatable especially when it comes to the framing formed by vv. 5-8 and vv. 14-18 (p. 158). The statement that “the newest comments of Holladay, Carroll, McKane and Brueggemann do not give a comprehensive overview of Chapter 17” (p. 145) is only partly accurate. A meticulous reading of the units composing Chapter 17 these scholars comment on enables one to recreate the whole text of Jer 17. It seems surprising why in his enumeration of various delimitations of Jer 17 Barbiero overlooks Jack B. Ludblom’s study, which stands out from others due to its meticulous and detailed analysis of the structure of the Book of Jeremiah.

The value of Barbiero’s book stems also from the semantic analysis he attempts throughout his exegesis. There can be no doubt that the meaning of a given term is determined by the context in which it is used. For this reason, it seems worthy of investigation whether Jer 17:12 refers to “the temple or the whole city of Jerusalem” as a place of God’s residence (p. 186). The context makes it clear that the place is not the Jerusalem temple. By the same token, the context of the verb “to watch over” (שָׁקַד) in Jer 1:12 raises the question if the vision of an almond tree foretells only misfortune (p. 48). The expression that God is “watching over [his] word” recurs in Jer 31:28, in which the sentences included in 1:10 and 1:12 are joined. In light of this, it is obvious that the realization of the word of punishment foretold by God occurs alongside the realization of God’s word foretelling new life. This is guaranteed by the fact that God “watches over his word”. These two examples of Barbiero’s semantic analysis show that his comments are an inspiration for further research.

Jeremiah’s confessions show the prophet not only as a paradigm of a new, future Israel. A contemporary person open to listening to God’s word may also relate to Jeremiah’s life experiences. Listening to God’s word may oftentimes correspond to struggling with God’s word. Pointing to the connections between Jeremiah and Christ in the conclusion of his book, Barbiero notes that the Book of Jeremiah does not mention the idea of resurrection. Having struggled with God’s word, the prophet ultimately vanishes. Forced by his compatriots, after the fall of Jerusalem Jeremiah flees with them to Egypt, where he disappears without a trace. What remains is word, God’s words speaking to us today. In this way, Jeremiah also remains, having put God’s word into practice in his life.