



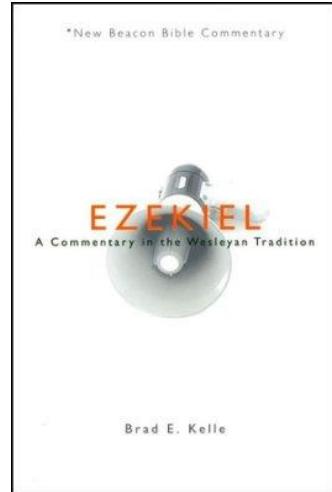
CRUCIBLE

THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

Brad E. Kelle, *Ezekiel: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. New Beacon Bible Commentary. Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2013.

Reviewed by Andrew Sloane.

As the subtitle suggests, Brad Kelle has written a commentary on the book of Ezekiel as a Wesleyan and with an eye on how his understanding of the book relates to the theological tradition he inhabits. In so doing he has done his readers a service. Not only does he bring his work to bear on a theological perspective and church tradition with which he is familiar, but he models how biblical scholarship can engage with broader theological concerns and the life of Christians and their communities. As will become clear, I do not share a number of his convictions (either theological or hermeneutical), and so I find a number of his claims unpersuasive. Nonetheless, given the nature of his task and the perspective he adopts, this is a useful commentary. It can be read with profit by those who do not agree with him as much as those who do. But let me spell out what he does and how he goes about it, noting along the way where I find him insightful, interesting, problematic or wrong-headed.



The commentary opens in familiar fashion with an introduction to the book. And this he does well. He covers standard questions of history, context, authorship, etc., but also helpfully engages with recent trauma studies (pp.30-32). These psychological and sociological approaches have illuminated both the nature of traumatic experiences and how humans attempt to deal with them. He rightly argues that 'exile' (however we understand it) is a deeply traumatic experience for individuals and communities, and one that literature such as Ezekiel attempts to address theologically. In particular, he notes that 'disruption', the inability to make sense of the experience in light of existing categories, is fundamental to them being experienced as trauma. This, in turn, means that those who experience trauma need a coherent narrative that enables them to make sense of the events and integrate them into a morally meaningful life story. That, he suggests, is a key to understanding Ezekiel, especially inasmuch as he gives a theological answer to what he understands as primarily a theological problem. As the commentary unfolds, it becomes clear that Kelle understands trauma and the attempt to make moral sense of it as God's action as a key to understanding the book,

including some of the bizarre and confronting material we find in the oracles, symbolic actions and visions.

Kelle explicitly adopts a moderately conservative critical interpretive line: the book contains both oral and literary elements, as well as evidencing the work of later editors; this work was completed before 538 and the end of the exile; the rhetoric of the book focuses on the second generation of exiles, for whom the fall of Jerusalem is a painful memory and who are anticipating what future, if any, there might be for the Judean community. He discusses the literary features and rhetoric of the book well, and outlines its theology, using trauma and theological debate as primary categories. I appreciated his emphasis on holiness, judgement, and the way that hope and transformation enable moral responsiveness in the message of the book, as well as the way he shows how the prophet is almost subsumed by YHWH and YHWH's word, despite the dominance of first person language in the book. I should say that, while I do not always agree with his perspective or his conclusions, I think his explicit adoption of a particular interpretive stance (rather than hiding his own views behind a deceptive veil of supposed neutrality) is a model of intellectual honesty. This is reflected in the commentary proper.

His commentary identifies what he sees as the major literary blocks in the book and divides the treatment of these units into three major sections: behind the text (covering, as you would expect, matters of historical, cultural and literary context); in the text (in which he does his primary exegetical work); and from the text (in which he explores the theological implications of the text from an explicitly Wesleyan [and implicitly post/modern American] context and seeks to wrestle with what he sees as theological and moral issues raised by the passages). He includes a number of 'side-bar' type excurses throughout the commentary relating to the impact of the text on contemporary culture and art, historical and theological perspectives on the text's reception and the like. These are generally insightful, although I found them distracting on occasion.

Let me note a few instances of where I found his comments insightful, interesting, problematic or plain wrong-headed.

In his discussion of Ezekiel 3:1–15 he claims that Ezekiel symbolically ingests the trauma of the exilic community, thereby with it (and them), drawing parallels to the ways that (in his view) the priests ingested the sin/guilt of the people in an act of identification in Leviticus 8–9 (pp.76–77). That seems problematic to me: first, because I am not persuaded of his reading of the significance of Leviticus; but second, the vision more obviously speaks of Ezekiel

consuming the judgement and its effects that the scroll contains. On the other hand, the seven days of seclusion in 3:14 probably does echo priestly ordination as he suggests (p.78). But I would add, here it is appropriated for prophetic initiation and in a way that fits the character of his ministry. Similar points could be made about his discussion of the modeled siege of Jerusalem in Ch.4.

His commentary pays particular attention to the devastation of the land in the exile, focusing on the imagery of the destruction of nature (see, for instance, ‘from the text’ pp.104–109), which is a theme of his work on Ezekiel (as seen, for instance, in his 2009 article in JBL). In this context he seeks to wrestle with the images of divine violence so prevalent in Ezekiel. It is clear that he is uncomfortable with them, and, while he does not dismiss them as such, he effectively subordinates them to God's compassion. That fits his avowedly Wesleyan theological and interpretive interests, I suppose, but I'm not satisfied that it gives adequate weight to the text. This, understandably, is a pervasive theme in his commentary even as it pervades the book of Ezekiel; but I find his attempt to account for it, while laudable, in the end unsatisfactory given that at crucial points he seems to sit over the text in theological judgement of it, rather than sitting under it and allowing it to form and inform his theological judgements. Similar points can be made about his treatment of the metaphor of whoredom, about which he is as ambivalent as he is about divine violence (see esp. pp.181-183, 185-198, 202-205, 231-243). These are difficult texts and themes, but I think there are better ways of addressing them.

Let me hasten to add, there is some fine work here as well, even whimsical touches along the way. For example, he describes the idols (Heb: gillulim) as ‘dung gods’, noting an allusion in the Hebrew (pp.100–101). This echoes the observations of others (Lyons, in his book on Ezekiel, calls them ‘detestable turds’): crappy gods one might say. He also rightly observes that the assumption that the female prophets in Ch.13 engage in dark magic may reflect gender bias rather than the text, especially as Ezekiel does not explicitly accuse them of sorcery. Rather, the marking for life or death may reflect healing or prophetic rituals that Ezekiel sees as usurping YHWH's sovereignty (pp.169-170). So too, he made some lovely points on the application of the Oracles Against the Nations in Ezekiel 25–32 to the wealth, militarism and consumerism of the US (and dare I say, Australia). Similarly, his discussion of the restoration oracles is often illuminating. I appreciated, amongst other points, his sidebar on God being affected by Israel's actions (p.296), and his observation that the final Temple vision was not intended to give a blueprint for Israel's future building project—after all, it is presented as a purely divine work, not a human construction (pp.331–332).

It is also laudable that he seeks to engage theologically with the text. He recognizes that there are significant issues relating to the contents of Ezekiel and the OT as Christian Scripture, and seeks to allow for a diversity of voices. But in the end he seems to privilege some voices over others in a manner that conforms to the values and tastes of the (post/modern) Western (Wesleyan) church rather than allowing for a critique of them. For instance: do Christians facing violent persecution have the same problems with the violence of divine judgement that we do in the comfortable West? The evidence from the book of Revelation (and elsewhere) suggests not. Also, in line with his Wesleyan perspective, he consistently downplays divine sovereignty in the book and turns it into a call to 'total holiness' (e.g., pp.242-243). I find this another instance of his failure to submit to the text. Rather than dodging theological perspectives antithetical to his own, I would have liked to have seen how he might honestly wrestle with them and allow them to enter into a robust mutually critical interaction with his own tradition. He does that with Ezek. 29:17-21, a text that puzzles those with a stronger commitment to (particular versions of) divine sovereignty; I would like to see him do the same with texts less conducive to his own theological agenda. He does come close to doing so from time to time (see, e.g., pp.269-270 on judgement), but he needs to do so more, and more consistently.

Let me reiterate: this is a helpful commentary, well worth reading whether you are Wesleyan or not. Kelle will enrich your understanding of and appreciation for the text and its background. He will help you come to grips with the traumatic nature of the exile and the creative way that Ezekiel deals with it theologically. He will also encourage you join him in theological reflection on the text and its significance for us as Christian Scripture. In the end, I guess what I would have liked is a more seriously critical theological reading of the text that allowed Ezekiel (and the God for whom he speaks) to speak more clearly in his own, uncomfortable voice.

About the Reviewer

Andrew Sloane is Lecturer in Old Testament and Christian Thought, and Director of Postgraduate Studies at Morling College, Sydney. He studied medicine at the University of NSW and practiced briefly as a doctor before training for Baptist ministry. His academic interests include Old Testament and Biblical interpretation, philosophical theology, bioethics and epistemology (philosophy) and the integration of theology and other disciplines.

