

*Hope Amidst Ruin: A Literary and Theological Analysis of Ezra*, by A. Philip Brown II. Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2009.

*Hope Amidst Ruin* is a published version of the dissertation "A Literary and Theological Analysis of the Book of Ezra" researched by A. Philip Brown II in 2002. Brown uses a literary and theological approach to analyze the book of Ezra and concludes that it exposes the future and hope of the postexilic community amidst their "existential tension" (p.1). Unlike the preceding studies in Ezra that minimally touched the structure and theology mainly as introductory notes, Brown engages in an elaborate synthesis of the literary and theological components of the text of Ezra to derive its message. His literary engagement with Ezra resonates throughout the first half section of *Hope Amidst Ruin* as he tackles temporal ordering and point of view. His analytical credence features prominently as he develops the theology of Ezra in the second half of his work where he elaborates God's triumph over the external dark forces that seek to stifle His will. In addition, he exposes internal rebellion against God as a threat to the "people's holiness and as an obstruction to His fully reviving and restoring His people" (p. 220). The author advances a paradoxical proposition: Ezra is not a text for constructing a postexilic historiography; yet, as far as biblical history is concerned, the book of Ezra "forms the capstone of the Old Testament history, yielding the only coverage of the postexilic return from Cyrus to Artaxerxes I" (p. 3).

*Hope Amidst Ruin* is presented in eight chapters. Chapters 1-2 discuss how Ezra's narrative deviates from a historiographical orientation that it seemingly introduces in its opening verses. The text, rather, engages the reader in a narrational order that is at odds with chronology by displaying in 1:1-4:23 a time span from 538 B.C. to 445 B.C.—from Cyrus's decree to Nehemiah's return respectively. This time span embeds Darius's 521-486 B.C. reign (Ezra 4:24-6:22), Ahasuerus's reign (486-465 B.C., not in text), and Artaxerxes's reign (463-424 B.C., Ezra 7:1-4:44). Ezra's anachronous device marginalizes historical chronology to highlight "the narrative's theological motifs: opposition to God's people, hope for the future, the importance of obedience to the law, Yahweh's sovereign control of history, and His gracious goodness" (p. 43). Critics consider the book of Ezra as a chaotic text resulting from "scribal errors, redactors' blunders and confusion on the part of the Chronicler" (p. 49), a view that has yielded an attempt by some of these scholars to reconstruct the text. The traditional camp on its part accepts the conventional order of the text but aligns history with the text by transposing, skipping, or replacing kings. Brown discusses the textual structure that is characterized by analepses, prolepses and temporal proportioning designs that draw attention to the "narratives focal points." (p. 65).

Chapters 3 and 4 analyze the plot and point of view of the book of Ezra. The plot structure is a careful selection and rearrangement of events that radiate God's sovereignty and His bond with the people. The Ezra narrative is cast in three models of plot structures. Ezra 1-6 and 7-10, demonstrates the Aristotelian model that proposes a smooth plot movement from beginning, to middle and to end. Another Aristotelian model that proposes a protagonist's rise and fall is applied to exhibit Israel's fortunes in Ezra 1-6 and 7-10. Additionally, an analysis of the plots of Ezra 1-6 and 7-10 reveals their relevance to Freytag's "pyramidal model of conflict development and resolution" (p. 70) reflected in Cyrus's decree (Ezra 1:1-4), the returnees' worship (Ezra 1:5-3:13), halting temple construction (Ezra 4:1-24), and the resumption and completion of temple construction (Ezra 5:1-6:12-22). Brown identifies in Ezra 7:27-7:15 a theological crux that elucidates the point of view that shapes the discourse of the book of Ezra. Point of view thus, determines what is elaborated, the narration vantage points and the choice of characters. Brown contends that, "[a]ny analysis suggesting narratorial concerns that are at odds with the point of view expressed by Ezra should be considered invalid" (p. 115).

In Chapters 5-7, Brown discusses Ezra's narrational portrait of God as sovereignty and holy. This portrait justifies how the returnees strive to fit in the mold of Israel's remnant by separating themselves from anything that impinges on their covenant relationship with God. The book of Ezra indicates that though comparatively insignificant, the new Israel was a demonstration of God's immanent involvement behind the scene to usher in total restoration. Ezra makes evident that God is faithful to His promise to restore Israel physically and spiritually. Brown continues that "the message of Ezra revolves around three focal points: God, returnees, and relationship between them (p. 146). This relationship explains holiness, a motif that reverberates in different facets in the book of Ezra: the establishment of legitimate priesthood (Ezra 2:58-63), rejection of syncretists (4:1-2), the admittance of only the "separatist" (p. 149) to the Passover celebration (Ezra 6:20-22), consecrating the stewards of the temple articles (Ezra 8:24, 28), and the separation of foreign women from the community (Ezra 9-10). He argues that the events in Ezra are connected to the past and to the future of Israel. While genealogy connected individuals to the past and to the unfolding present, Jerusalem connected them to the promises of land and to national continuity. More still, Cyrus' declaration, the returnees' zeal to restart worship, the guilt for their unfaithfulness are indicators of continuity. Furthermore, hope is the basis for the theology of Ezra. The hostile circumstances cannot stifle the divinely planned existence of Israel as a nation; rather the prerequisite nationhood lies in the people's holiness enabled by their relationship with the holy God.

Brown, in Chapter 8 of *Hope Amidst Ruin*, designs a "Reader's Guide to the Theological Message of Ezra . . ." (p. 201). The guide underscores that prophecy-stimulated hope is realized in events that culminate in the two phases of return and the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 1-7). The guide, further advances that hope is foundational to the quest for restoration of holiness in Ezra 10. In Ezra 1-6, hope is qualified by "the Returnees' conduct in their relationship with Yahweh" demonstrated in their determination to separate themselves from foreign women. He exposes how parallelism and antithesis underscore the theological issues in the book of Ezra.

Reading Brown's work, leaves no doubt that it is one of the single comprehensive literary and theological studies done on the book of Ezra. Brown's identification of the temporal ordering of the plot structure, the temporal proportioning that sets to prominence the God-human relationship in Chapters 7-8, and point of view that governs the description of the setting, scenes, and events in Ezra, makes this work a significant contribution to the study of Ezra and, generally, of the Old Testament. First, Brown's work includes convincing arguments for a systematic literary arrangement of the text that critical scholars condemn as disorganized and impossible to understand or reconstruct (L. W. Batten, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, ICC, [1972], 3, 4, 23; R.W. Klein, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, NIB, 3. [1999], 665; Leslie, McFall, "Was Nehemiah Contemporary with Ezra?" *WTJ* 53 [1991]: 281). Second, this work attests against the traditional approach to smooth anomalies in the chronology of the text (L. L. Grabbe, "Josephus, and the Reconstruction of the Judean Restoration," *JBL* 106 [1987]: 233; Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, [2008], 500). Third, Brown analyzes the theological thrust in Ezra and perceives that the text contrasts "Yahweh's character and the Returnees' conduct" and displays the latter's endeavor to orient their life in line with the former. This proposition undoes the social-political approach that views Ezra's mission either as a bid to salvage land from the Persian control (H. R. Marbury, "The Strange Woman in the Persian Yehud," in *Approaching Yehud*, SBL [2007], 167-169) or as to maintain imperial order in the Trans-Euphrates (J. Blenkinsopp, "Mission of Udjahorresnet," *JBL* 106 (1987): 420-421). Brown's proposition further sways off the social anthropological approach that views the expulsion of women in Ezra 9-10 as a result of perceiving women as inherently polluting (H. C. Washington, "Israel's Holy Seed and the Foreign Women of Ezra-Nehemiah," *BI* 11 [2003]: 429; S. M. Olyan, "Purity Ideology in Ezra-Nehemiah," *JSJ* 35 [2004]: 4).

*Hope Amidst Ruin* is a valuable springboard first for those who seriously endeavor to pursue an exegetical study of the book of Ezra. Finally, its treatment of the theology of Ezra may inspire pastors to turn to

the book of Ezra and draw sermons that are relevant and inspiring for personal commitment.

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*Lord, I Have a Question: Everything You Ever Wanted to Ask God But Were Afraid to Say Out Loud*, by Dan Smith. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2004.

When this book was published, Dan Smith was a senior pastor at the La Sierra University Church in California. His wife, Hilda, and his two sons, Alex and Eric, have accompanied him in his service on mission trips around the world. While working as a missionary and pastor, he became aware of the need of his church members who kept asking questions about God in quietness. The author introduces basic questions related to God, particularly on the issues about the cross, evil, suffering, and eschatology. He admits that his answers are not the last words (9-18). He gives some anchor points that are clear on the topic and strengthen his arguments.

Smith speaks about the divine nature and attributes of God, which, according to the biblical text, cannot be changed, negotiated, or questioned by man (19-28). Smith explains that the tree in the garden of Eden was a loving warning of the natural consequences, and the cross and the fire (at the second death) are the natural consequences of sin (29-43). Smith describes briefly some models of atonement: satisfaction model, moral influence model, victory model, and the revelatory substitution model. According to Smith, the last theory, revelatory substitution, is the closest to the criteria of atonement and has accommodated the other theories of atonement (44-66). He analyzes the meaning of grace, hell, and the unchanging God. Here, Smith also discusses the term predestination, which comes from the understanding that God is variable. Smith affirms that God is constant and sin does change man, but does not change God. Grace is for everyone, everywhere, and every time (67-75). The author strongly affirms that God's grace is not a 'cheap grace.' He states that man's salvation is never based on good works (76-89).

Smith shows that God speaks to human beings through all of Scripture. Every figure in the Old Testament and New Testament, although imperfect, speaks meaningfully to those who need to hear the good news about Christ. All stories and events have been used to describe and clarify the work of Christ to save human beings (90-104). Smith