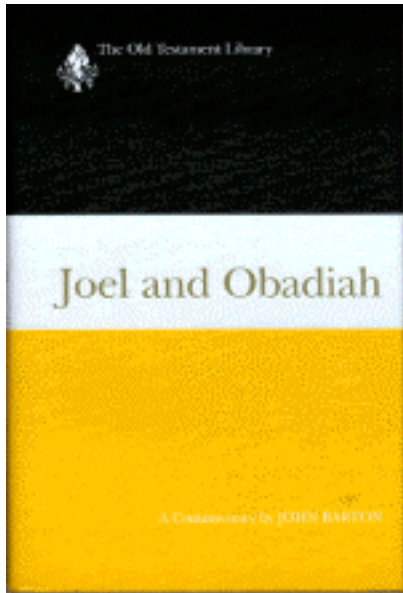


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Barton, John

Joel and Obadiah: A Commentary

Old Testament Library

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Aaron Schart
University of Duisburg-Essen
Germany

In this volume of the well-known Old Testament Library series John Barton presents a classical historical-critical commentary on Joel and Obadiah. Since both writings of the Book of the Twelve Prophets have many things in common (e.g., Day of YHWH, eschatological judgment of the nations), the combination of both in one volume seems appropriate.

In the introduction to Joel, Barton deals with the usual topics: canon and text (4–5), unity and structure (5–14), historical context (14–18), Joel’s role within Israelite prophecy (18–22), and theological themes (27–34). More recent developments in exegesis are reflected in the emphasis on “quotations in Joel” (22–27) and on “reading the book of Joel as a whole” (34–36). However, in those chapters Barton summarizes more or less critically the work of others. Concerning the literary unity of Joel, Barton follows those scholars who see a source-critical break before Joel 2:28 (MT 3:1). In order to highlight the differences between the two parts, he labels the second half “Deutero-Joel.” The first part goes back to an oral prophecy delivered in early postexilic times, whereas Deutero-Joel stems from a significantly later period. The original Joel (1:2–2:27) called his hearers to turn to YHWH in a situation in which an extraordinary locust plague devastated the land. After the people followed his appeal he was “able to assure them that

disaster will be replaced with prosperity” (13). In contrast, Deutero-Joel describes events of the eschaton, God’s final intervention into history in order to establish God’s world order. Whereas the first part of Joel is well designed and coherent, the second part is simply a collection of oracles stitched “together to make a kind of patchwork quilt” (32). Although the original Joel already shows signs of using the wording of earlier prophets to express his own thoughts, “it is even more evident in the secondary additions to his book” (27). From this source-critical analysis follows the important question whether the writing of Joel can be perceived as a coherent whole with a consistent message. Although Barton mentions the “Day of YHWH” as a possible kernel around which the other topics can be construed, he favors Crenshaw’s idea that YHWH’s justice is illuminated without assuming that the eschaton has drawn near (James L. Crenshaw, *Joel* [AB 24C; New York: Doubleday, 1995]). A locust plague is taken as starting point to disclose that “God is in control of all things and will carry out God’s good purposes in God’s own good time” (36). This view is the result, if one perceives the original Joel as the most important part and Deutero-Joel as a mere collection of appendices. However, if the later additions were understood as a redesign of the whole writing, the reader would have to impose the eschatological tone of the second half onto the first (93). Whereas Barton demands that a historical-critical reading has to choose the first option, this reviewer would prefer the second, canon-oriented approach.

Within the verse-to-verse commentary Barton concentrates on the problems of the meaning of the text. He shows no interest in the poetic artistry of Joel or in grammatical issues. Concerning the locusts in Joel 1–2, Barton adopts the literal understanding: Joel describes real locusts, although he sometimes uses expressions that do not seem to be appropriate for such an understanding (e.g., the “northerner” in Joel 2:20 [48] or “the fire before and after him” in Joel 2:3). In those cases an eschatological understanding, inspired by the second part of Joel, would fit well that perceives the locusts as metaphor for the evil forces, which will launch a final attack against Zion in the eschaton (45).

The “return to YHWH” in Joel 2:12–13 is said “to mean simply that the people should turn in appeal to YHWH, asking God to save them from the threatened disaster” (78). Since Joel never speaks of the sin of Israel explicitly, Barton insists that no repentance is implied. Commentators who want to reconstruct the sin of the people out of Joel’s call undertake “a hopeless quest” (80). YHWH’s character, as described with the famous attributes in 2:13, is the reason the prophet still sees a possibility to avoid total destruction of Israel. In the case of the rough transition “from lamentation to divine response” (2:17 to 2:18), underscored by an astonishing use of narrative (*wayyiqtol*), Barton proposes the possibility that “the narrative about YHWH’s having pity on the people, could be taking place within the prophetic vision and might not refer to events that actually occurred in the external world” (87).

The passage on the outpouring of the spirit on all flesh (2:28) is viewed as ambiguous. On the one hand, the expression “all flesh” must include all humankind, what would be an exceptional concept in the Old Testament; on the other hand, the description of the outcome that the empowerment by the spirit has limits prophetic activity to “your sons and your daughters,” what would comprise only Judeans. Nevertheless, the phrase “all flesh” is rightly a basis for the Christian interpretation given by Peter in Acts 2:16–21, that the spirit sanctifies all Gentiles so that they can be incorporated into God’s people. In the case of Joel 3:9–13 Barton states: “With these verses, we are in an extraordinarily bloodthirsty world, in which there is no mercy for foreigners: a million miles away from the hint in 2:28 that YHWH might pour out the spirit on ‘all flesh.’ I cannot see how that oracle and this can come from the same hand” (105).

The commentary on the writing of Obadiah is designed in the same way as the one on Joel. Concerning the structure Barton follows Fohrer in dividing the text into six oracles that are connected by thematic overlap but are not parts of a coherent macro structure: 1–4, 5–7, 8–11, 12–14 and 15b, 15a and 16–18, 19–21 (Georg Fohrer, “Die Sprüche Obadja,” in *Studia biblica et semitica* [Wageningen 1966], 81–93). In the source-critical analysis Barton follows those scholars who see a break between verse 15a and 15b. The second half (15a, 16–21) he calls “Deutero-Obadiah” (118). The first part best fits the historical setting of early exilic times; the second part is dated in the later Persian or Hellenistic period. Similarly to Joel, Obadiah depends heavily on older written prophetic texts. This is especially true for Jer 49:7–22. Although Raabe has argued strongly for the hypothesis that Obadiah cites Jer 49, Barton supports the older view that both cite a common, perhaps oral *Vorlage* (Paul R. Raabe, *Obadiah* [AB 24D; New York, 1996]). Concerning the theology it is remarkable that Barton defends Obadiah several times against scholars who perceive the writing as nationalistic, xenophobic, and filled with hatred (e.g., 126–29). Obadiah simply confesses that YHWH who rules in justice from Zion cannot overlook the cruel attack on YHWH’s people by its brother Edom. YHWH does not act with ferocity beyond self-control but simply confronts Edom with the consequences of its deeds (Obad 15b).

Throughout the book Barton summarizes the most important branches of the history of exegesis so that the reader has the options on the table. After that he makes always-thoughtful and well-balanced judgments. Almost never does Barton draw far-reaching conclusions out of small evidence. Although this attitude is highly welcomed in a time in which quite a few theories are produced just to say something new, Barton tends to give up deciding a case earlier than would be necessary. For example, he leaves it undecided whether Joel 2:32 quotes Obad 17 or the other way around (98). However, since we have a quotation formula in Joel (“As YHWH has said”), it seems overly sceptical to this reviewer not to assume that Joel quotes Obadiah. A further example is Barton’s theory of

“a ‘pool’ of free-floating prophetic oracles, either written or transmitted orally” in postexilic times that was used by the redactors of different books (27, also 153). It is perfectly in order not to contend literary dependency too quickly, since we only have a very small part of the texts that existed in postexilic Judah. On the other hand, it must be taken into account that the reader of the canonical scriptures has them as a self-referential entity. Even if the original authors depended on prophecies that later redactors did not include in the canonical collection, the reader of the final product must assume that close verbal parallels to other texts are purposeful.

Unfortunately, Barton is very sceptical that a Book of the Twelve ever existed as a redactional unity (116–17). As a consequence, he only once (157) explores how Joel and Obadiah function as a frame around Amos in the Hebrew order of the Book of the Twelve. This reviewer, however, would have liked to understand more fully the reader of the Twelve, who must perceive Obadiah as a prophet who restates or reformulates important themes of his predecessor Joel after Amos has delivered his speeches in reaction to Joel.

Barton has written a handy and comprehensible commentary for the reader who does not want to be engaged with every detail. It is a valuable tool that conveys profoundly the present state of what we confidently can say about these two theological challenging writings.