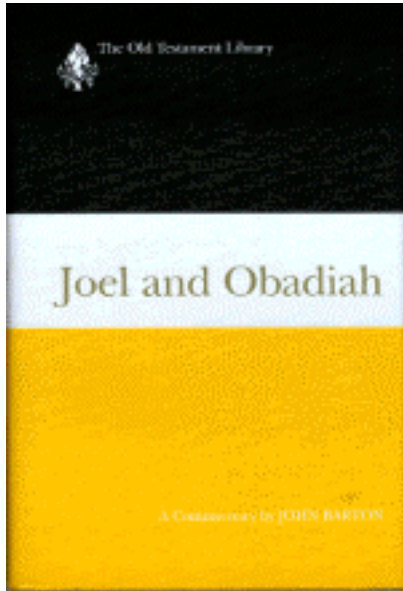


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**Barton, John**

*Joel and Obadiah: A Commentary*

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John Barton has written a concise, lucid commentary on the short, postexilic prophetic books of Joel and Obadiah. After introductory sections covering basic critical questions, he systematically works through carefully delineated pericopes. For each unit of text, Barton presents a literal translation (based on the NRSV), appropriately selected textual notes, and a focused commentary. His arguments and written expression throughout are clear and accessible.

Taking a determinedly historical-critical approach, Barton's tone and mode of operation are meticulously rational and circumspect. He typically surveys a variety of interpretive options before presenting his own exegetical assessments. About the latter he is never doctrinaire. He offers regular disclaimers that his conclusions are tentative and concedes more than once that a text's meaning is lost to us.

Barton's decision to orient his commentary in a historical-critical direction is nowhere clearer than in his decision to bifurcate both Obadiah and Joel into earlier and later halves. Dividing Obadiah into verses 1–14, 15b on the one hand and verses 15a, 16–21 on the other, he defends the thesis that the latter verses stem from a “Deutero-Obadiah.” He attributes its origins to a late Persian and Hellenistic tendency to tack on eschatological supplements to earlier prophetic texts.

Barton likewise interprets Joel as two separate collections from two independent dates. The first half of Joel foretells a locust plague and calls the people to a communal lament ceremony to entreat God's deliverance. A major caesura occurs after Joel 2:27, according to Barton, and a "Deutero-Joel" encompasses the remainder of the book.

Barton argues that only the second collection within Joel is concerned with the end time. Throughout Joel 1:1–2:27, the descriptions of plagues and trauma refer merely to a literal, inner-historical disaster, confined to one particular occasion in the postexilic era. This original section thus presupposes a rather "simple" theology. "It is taken for granted that the will of God lies behind natural disaster and that God is free to inflict it or to reverse it."

It is not hard to discern that Barton values the first half of Joel over the second, "Deutero-Joel," section. When the book's second half begins, "the rot sets in." The interpreter encounters "a muddle" of independent texts in "no particular order," replete with a sometimes "bloodthirsty" apocalypticism and a citation-laden style that Barton characterizes as "derivative." Barton devotes one-third less commentary space to "Deutero-Joel" than to what he takes to be authentic, primary Joel material.

Barton's treatment of Obadiah offers several helpful interpretive observations that are well worth flagging. He rightly interprets Obadiah as a cultic prophet of the early exilic period who held a Zion theology particularly close to his heart. It is also quite on target to stress that Obadiah is a scribal, "learned" prophet who treasured and studied earlier Scriptures such as Jer 49.

There is also much to commend in Barton's interpretation of Joel. His ascription of Joel's historical milieu to Yehud in the 400s is surely correct, as is his understanding that Joel, like Obadiah, was a cultic prophet, perhaps a priest, who summoned his people to communal fasting and lamentation at the time of a locust plague. Even more than Obadiah, Joel is a learned prophet whose texts contain a marked prevalence of scriptural quotations.

The commentary also has weaknesses. The decision to bifurcate Obadiah overrides the book's interlocking literary features and style of progression. Both parts of Obadiah prophesy Edom's destruction; eschatological judgment figures in each; and each relies on Jer 49 as a source. Further, the two halves of Obadiah are knit together by a hinge bicolon in verse 15a, which Barton is forced conjecturally to emend in order to dis sever his "Deutero" collection.

Barton's isolation of the first half of Joel as a nonapocalyptic collection is his major weakness in interpreting that book. The move runs roughshod over Joel's rhetorical structure, which takes the form of a pattern of doubled descriptions.

Joel contains two descriptions of catastrophe, two descriptions of lamentation, and two descriptions of deliverance answering the double catastrophe. An immediate deliverance pictured in 2:18–27 parallels and answers the description of ecological catastrophe in 1:2–12. A second, apocalyptic promise of transcendent deliverance in 2:28–3:21 parallels and answers the second picture of catastrophe in 2:1–11.

The apocalyptic answer that stands parallel to 2:1–11 unequivocally establishes the nature of the catastrophe in these verses. It is a picture of apocalyptic crisis, a vision of doomsday. In this pericope, the prophet has interpreted a contemporary locust and sirocco plague as a harbinger, or portent, of the apocalyptic "Day of YHWH." Barton has broken off the first half of Joel and made his apocalyptic "Deutero-Joel" begin precisely where the reader should expect a depiction of radical deliverance explaining the horrific crisis of 2:1–11. Barton has left us a torso.

Even deprived of rhetorical guidance about the apocalyptic nature of 2:1–11, clear signs within the first half of Joel should alert the interpreter that Joel saw more than a mere ecological crisis in the locust invasion he experienced. Joel's diction at 2:10, for example, echoes the apocalyptic language of Isa 13:10 and 34:4. Further, his description of the invaders as the "northerner" (2:20) does not fit a mundane locust and sirocco crisis. Locusts and siroccos enter Israel/Palestine from the east, out of the desert. The term "northerner," rather, recalls Ezekiel's earlier prophecy of a coming invasion of the apocalyptic forces of Gog of Magog (Ezek 38–39).

Beyond robbing Proto-Joel of its authentic apocalypticism, Barton undervalues apocalyptic theology when he does recognize its presence in "Deutero-Joel." A concerted effort to respect the radical, transcendent imagination at issue is necessary in order to do justice to the worldview of apocalyptic texts, but this is not Barton's enterprise. Rather, he describes Joel's belief in God's special election of Israel and Zion as "particularism." He chooses the slur "xenophobia" to characterize Joel's horror at a vision of world powers massed against God's holy mountain. He dismisses Joel's concept of a coming divine overthrow of global wickedness as an "extraordinarily bloodthirsty world, in which there is no mercy for foreigners."

My disagreements with Barton should not diminish his accomplishment. He has contributed to the field a judiciously reasoned, clearly written, and succinctly presented

interpretation of Joel and Obadiah. Readers may now look to the Old Testament Library for a complete set of professional commentaries on the Minor Prophets.