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Ben Zvi, Ehud.
A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Obadiah

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First one must ask about the title. "Historical Critical" is a term with a long history in Old Testament scholarship. What Ehud ben Zvi means by this term has little or nothing to do with what S. R. Driver or Otto Eissfeldt understood it to mean. He anticipates our question and defines his work as "a historical- critical study whose goal is to reconstruct the most likely reading of the Book of Obadiah for the community/ies within which and for which the book was composed" (p. 1). He looks at the reading process both in terms of reading for the first time and of (re)reading the text which has by then become a familiar experience. "The goal is to understand the way in which a historical community shaped, reflected itself, and in turn was shaped by the Book of Obadiah" (p. 2). History is understood as social and religious history, "circumstances in which it was composed." The contemporary emphasis on the reader and the reading is evident throughout. The emphasis is on the message conveyed "including its theological/ideological horizon."

There is no reference to canonical criticism here, but the treatment of prophetic reading communities and the repertoire of their books makes significant contribution to the discussion of the development of Scriptural canon. Ben Zvi argues cogently that these (re)reading communities of "the word of God" are what separates Israel's relationship to God from God's relation to the nations.

The book gives good expression to a current view of the composition of the prophetic books by "the community/ies of highly trained writers and (re)readers in which the Book of Obadiah was composed and to whose repertoire it was accepted" (p. 230). Presumably the theory is also applicable to other prophetic books.

In answer to the question of why Edom is singled out in Obadiah, Ben Zvi argues convincingly that none of the traditional answers applies. "Edom is unique among 'the nations' because of its association with Esau, the brother of Jacob. . . . No other people could qualify as 'the brother of Jacob'" (p. 246). He suggests that there is deliberate

ambiguity in the use of terms like "Edom" in a clear "oscillation between representative and generic terms" (p. 25).

The body of the monograph is dedicated to the detailed study of eight units of from one to four verses. Ben Zvi found the book to be well and compactly composed.

The study of vv. 19-21 is particularly useful. After exhaustive treatment of the main interpretations of v. 19, Ben Zvi turns to indications that help to identify the implied writer/readers of the book. He recognizes various groups who are promised a part in the new (idealized) distribution of land and then chooses "this company of Israelite exiles" (v. 21) to identify the readers, persons not in Jerusalem or exiles from Jerusalem.

In discussing the dynamics of the reading process which included direct speech to the nations, etc., Ben Zvi writes of a "presenter" and "voices" in the text, as well as of an implied audience. However, his earlier insistence on focusing attention on the purely verbal, rather than visionary, nature of the text prevents him from exploring the imagined drama within which the voices speak.

Obadiah is resolutely treated as an independent book and made to stand on its own. Treatments of Jeremiah's oracle (49:14-16) are critiqued for ignoring the context. Ben Zvi, however, gives no attention to the context of Obadiah in the Book of the Twelve. In his chapter, "Why Edom was Singled out in Obadiah," his very excellent treatment of the choice of Edom in prophetic books misses important questions related to this context. For instance, why is Edom of all the nations in Amos 1-2 the one chosen for Obadiah? Or, what significance do the positions of Obadiah (Edom) and Jonah (Nineveh) before Micah and Nahum (Nineveh) and Habakkuk (Babylon) at the core of the Book of the Twelve have for understanding Obadiah's emphasis? The position that Obadiah must be read independently of the context in the Twelve produces a very different reading than it would have if read or (re)read in that context. Ben Zvi's argument that the use of a separate title and name means the book must be read as a distinct and separate "book" (p. 19 *et passim*) is beside the point. The title of the larger "book," as used by Josephus, the Talmud, and Jerome, is "The Book of the Twelve Prophets," which assumes the multiple identities of the "prophets" (or prophetic books) incorporated within it.

The idea that the punishment of Edom is the primary subject of the book may need reconsideration in light of the final verses. Is the "punishment of Edom" not subordinated by these verses to the "occupation of the mountain of Edom" and to the foreseen redistribution of all lands when the kingship of the Lord in Jerusalem is fulfilled?

The monograph is carefully documented, well presented, and informative of many things beyond the range of Obadiah's chapters. It deals with a mass of detail in interpreting the text. At the same time it draws in discussion of many relevant matters, especially those

which relate to a (re)reader's horizon of potential understandings of the text. Future study of Obadiah will not be able to bypass this book. Ehud ben Zvi has now produced a significant corpus of works on the prophets. His work will need to figure in any serious discussion of the subject.