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Mason, Rex

Micah, Nahum and Obadiah

T&T Clark Study Guides (previously Sheffield Guides)

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Julia M. O'Brien
Lancaster Theological Seminary
Lancaster, PA 17603

Study of the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible is decidedly richer for the life and work of Rex Mason, retired lecturer and tutor in Old Testament and Hebrew at the University of Oxford. Mason's concentration on the postexilic Minor Prophets, as well as on intertextual relations between prophetic books, has earned him respect in the field. The 1996 volume prepared in his honor, *After the Exile: Essays in Honour of Rex Mason* (ed. John Barton and David J. Reimer; Mercer University Press, 1996), testifies to his reputation and influence. Any new work by Mason warrants the attention and interest of students of the prophets.

But as the back cover of this volume explains, the T&T Clark Study Guide on Micah, Nahum, and Obadiah is not a new offering by Mason but rather a reprint and repackaging of his 1991 commentary of the same name in the Sheffield Old Testament Guides series. The text of the commentary has not changed since 1991, but it now appears in a smaller, 4.5 x 7-inch format,

The Sheffield Guides series was/is valuable for general introductory work. Faced with a truncated semester in which to teach the entire book of Isaiah, for example, I assigned

seminary students the trio of books on First, Second, and Third Isaiah—so that they could survey the critical dimensions of the material while still having time to read the biblical material itself.

Mason's work on these three Minor Prophets fits well into the Sheffield Guides series. The treatment of each book varies, but for each Mason provides an overview of the book's contents, historical background, a history of criticism, and a basic statement of the book's message, including its theological dimensions. The chapters are short, none more than seven pages.

His discussion of Micah is almost chatty, employing contemporary comparisons—in one case comparing the death of Judah's popular king Uzziah to the death of Queen Victoria and in another suggesting that Judeans knew Micah as "the Moreshite" much as Spaniards knew the great painter as "the Greek" (El Greco). After explaining in some detail the array of proposals advanced for the book's redaction, he concludes with gentle skepticism of the method itself and turns to a consideration of what Micah may have meant in its postexilic final form, even though the section on "historical background" covers the Assyrian period.

In the section on Nahum, Mason well highlights the poetic nature of the book and argues, along with others, that Nineveh in the final form of Nahum symbolizes all that is evil. Although he does not speak at length about the violence and misogyny of chapters 2 and 3, he does maintain that "if we examine the book [of Nahum] with too narrow a lens we may distort it" (58). Reading the book in a "canonical perspective" alongside Jonah, beside which it appears in the Septuagint, he suggests that "the two books say that in both judgment and mercy God is working out his purposes of justice and order in the world" (83).

Similarly, Mason reads Obadiah's final form as concerned with Edom not as a historical entity but as the symbol of all that opposes Yahweh. Highlighting intertextual connections between the prophetic books, as he has done in numerous of his publications, he concludes (along with other interpreters) that the material now found in Obadiah derives from temple worship, where it served theological and not nationalistic purposes. "What is envisaged [in the closing verses of Obadiah] is not, in the end, primarily national superiority for Israel, but the universal rule of God as king.... He will eradicate all that which 'Edom' and 'the nations' could be seen to represent and of which they were symbols" (107). I am not persuaded that the territorial expansion envisioned by Obadiah 19–21 benefits only Yahweh, but I appreciate the argument that Mason advances.

This was a useful short commentary when it first appeared in 1991, and the aspects that I have highlighted generally stand the test of time. But now, in the book's 2004 reiteration, the history-of-interpretation chapters are dated. The latest bibliographical entry with which Mason interacts was published in 1991, while most of the commentaries mentioned are from the 1970s and 1980s. Because Mason's volume was not updated when it was reprinted, it does not reflect upon the important commentaries that have been published in the past fifteen years, such as studies on Obadiah by Raabe (1993) and Ben Zvi (1996); on Micah by Ben Zvi (2000), Wolff (1990), and Andersen and Freedman (2000); on Nahum by J. J. M. Roberts (1991); and on the redaction of the Book of the Twelve by Nogalski (1993).

The Sheffield Guides have become T&T Clark Study Guides as the result of a string of acquisitions and mergers between publishers in the late 1900s and early 2000s. The Sheffield Academic Press imprint, under which the Sheffield Guides were first published, now belongs (along with the former T&T Clark and Trinity Press International imprints) to T&T Clark International, which itself belongs to the larger Continuum International Publishing Group. While I am not in a position to evaluate the financial wisdom of these acquisitions and organizational structures, I am not convinced that the changes have benefited readers or authors. The reissued volume, in my judgment, is no improvement on the original. Reducing the size of the volume and the print detracts from rather than adds to the value to the book—its ability to fit into the pocket of a pair of cargo pants does not compensate for the eye strain.

I am grateful that Mason's volume will continue to be available, though I am saddened that, due to the business decisions of publishers, it will be in this format.