O’Brien, Julia M.

Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries


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Within the rather limited scope of this commentary series that aims at a general readership, Julia O’Brien comments on the six prophetical books that contain the second part of the Dodekapropheton. The book opens with a short introduction into the concepts of prophet and prophetic books. Here she clearly states that books are not equal to living persons and that the books are what we have to interpret. Although she has a keen eye for the idea of a historical context—both of the ancient and the modern reader—she wants to overcome the traditional historicizing reading of these texts. I hope to have understood her correctly when I conclude that applying meaning to a text should be based on its reading against the historical background of the final redaction. She construes the historical environment of the “original” prophecy as a later-day literary construct. I can only agree with this approach, especially in view of the fact that too many commentaries on prophetical books start with a description of the original context that is, however, always almost deduced from lines and phrases within the prophetical book. This often reminds one of Baron of Münchhausen, who tried to get out of a marsh by pulling himself upward at his hair. Nevertheless, I will never deny that there has been a historical context—and quite often a very bitter one—that, however, needs to be (re)constructed from data outside the text under consideration.
The further outline of O’Brien’s book is very clear. Each prophetical book is introduced shortly but nicely. The various textual units are discussed in three rounds: the “Literary Analysis” pays attention to structure and style; the “Exegetical Analysis” elucidates various aspects of the text; and in the “Theological Analysis” O’Brien offers her ideas about the symbolic world of the text and how much of that is still of value for the modern reader.

Her commentary on Nahum is a good abstract from her book in the Readings series. She outlines the vivid and sometimes frightening language of this book. The powerful poetry of Nahum gives rise to the hope that forthcoming doom for Nineveh will go hand in hand with prosperity for Judah: return from exile and a land to live in. The poetry is in yet another way powerful in that its magnificent metaphors also display a negative attitude against women. The metaphor of the whore who will be punished for her wrongdoing does not reveal a positive view on women’s sexuality, to say the least. O’Brien does not support strategies that plead for kicking these texts out of the Bible, nor does she soften this brutal voice. In the end, she quotes Abraham Heschel, who argues that the concept of a violent and punishing God should not be abandoned, since these dark sides of God show that the divine really cares about the personae miserae of all times.

The book of Habakkuk is construed as basically a wisdom text since it discusses the theodicy problem. Two voices are heard. One has often been identified as the voice of God, who promises a better future for those who stay faithful under the oppression of the wicked, that is, the Babylonians in the textual world of Habakkuk but difficult to identify in the real-time universe. The other voice is that of the prophet. According to O’Brien, the laments of this voice should not be seen as only personal but as the expression of the bitterness of a people’s fate. The psalm of Hab 3 has traditionally been seen as an age-old hymn on the divine warrior added for some obscure reason to the prophetic book. Like, for example, Adam van der Woude, O’Brien opts for a view in which this hymn is a functional part of the book. She interprets Hab 3 as a hymnic description of past acts of the deity to which the prophets answers with a prayer-like text. “Habakkuk’s final response to Yahweh is not argument, but prayer; and his hope comes as much from remembering what God has done in the past as from concrete promises for the future” (61).

Zephaniah, too, is a difficult book to interpret. At first sight the message of the book seems to be inconsistent. Chapter 1 offers a prophecy of doom for Judah, and the entire world, while chapter 3 ends with promises of restoration for Judah. This apparent tension has given rise to two kinds of explanation: redaction-history and compositional analysis. O’Brien tries to solve the riddle by looking at—what I would call—the conceptual coherence of the book that, if I understand her correctly, is to be found in the multifaceted
idea of God implied in the book. God is neither a soft and caring social worker nor a revenging browbeater but has the potentiality of acting in different ways against humans, depending on their conduct. This view, once more, makes the lines in Zeph 2:1–3(4) pivotal for understanding the book. Unfortunately, the Hebrew of this canticle is enigmatic. O’Brien discusses the various textual and translational problems. It could have been of great help if she would have supplied her own translation. By way of a side remark, it is a pity that she could not have used the magnificent commentary by Sweeney on Zephaniah in the Hermeneia series.

The little book of Haggai is set by O’Brien in the early Persian period, identifying Darius with the first Persian king of that name. In my view, an identification with Darius II and hence a date in middle of the fifth century B.C.E. would make more sense historically. I admit that the history of the Persian Period—and especially its first decades—is complex and enigmatic, but it strikes me that O’Brien is too dedicated to an identification with Darius I, especially in the light of her hermeneutical insights into the problematic connection between text and history. Correctly, she notes that the main theme of the book of Haggai is the need for the rebuilding of the temple. She eventually defends Haggai against liberal, nineteenth-century exegetes for whom the postexilic periods were of lesser importance with their interest in temple and cult. Since postexilic Yahwism was in completely different circumstances, the stress on a sanctuary is more than understandable. There was a need for a visible symbol that could help define a Yahwistic identity.

The same holds for Zech 1–8, although the language of the “book” is more poetical than the narratives in Haggai. O’Brien shares the critical view to distinguish between First and Second Zechariah, but she does not seem to be sympathetic with the proposal of, for example, Beuken, Meyers and Meyers, and Van Amerongen, that Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 should be read as one book. Her analyses of the vision-reports in First Zechariah are impressive. Second Zechariah is indeed a different universe. Here a deity is portrayed who vents anger against inimical cities. Second Zechariah’s language of hope is easily embraced, but many readers have problems with the harsh and seemingly inescapable future of Syrian and Palestinian cities. In this connection, O’Brien makes a interesting but debatable remark: “cries of Black Africans under apartheid ... might be understood as an expression of righteous indignation, whereas the voice of a white, middle-class American railing against Mexicans might not” (237). As a reader of O’Brien’s commentary, I am very much interested in the criterion applied in this moral argument.

Finally, she presents Malachi as a dangerous book, not so much because of the prophet’s ideas on divorce but because of the God-talk. In Malachi God is portrayed as scolding, a parent who shames his son Judah. In O’Brien’s view, this is a model of bad parenthood
that might function as legitimation of unbalanced power roles within (Christian) families and eventually could lead to child abuse of various sorts.

Reading this commentary has been an enriching experience for me. A voice like hers is much needed in the sub-dialogue of readers of the Minor Prophets. Nevertheless, I would like to round off with a critical remark. The fact that the bibliography only contains works written in English is understandable in view the target market of this commentary series. It struck me, however, that non-American authors are very much underrepresented in this bibliography.