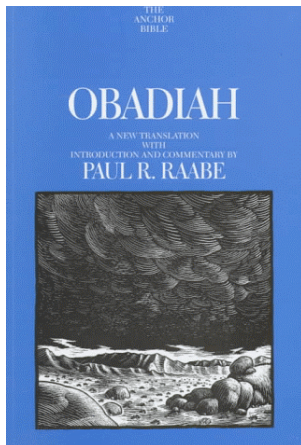


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Raabe, Paul R.

Obadiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary

Anchor Bible 24D

New York: Doubleday, 1997. Pp. xxvi + 310, Cloth, \$34.95, ISBN 0385412681.

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This volume is an important contribution to the study of the book of Obadiah. Raabe's notes and comments will be a required reading for any serious scholar of this book. As expected, the volume follows the typical arrangement that characterizes the Anchor Bible series. It includes a new translation, an extended introduction (pp. 3-60), and comprehensive sequential sections of notes and comments on the different subunits that Raabe proposes for the book, namely v. 1a, vv. 1b-4, vv. 5-7, vv. 8-18—itsself divided into vv. 8-15, vv. 16-18—and vv. 19-21. An excursus on “The Messenger Formula” (pp. 99-105) and a comprehensive excursus on “Drinking the Cup of Yahweh's Wrath” (pp. 206-42) further enrich the volume. The first excursus contains a discussion and critique of some aspects of J. T. Greene, *The Role of the Messenger and Message in the Ancient Near East* (BJS 169; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989). This discussion leads to the conclusion that “Obadiah claimed to have been Yahweh's messenger, commissioned to proclaim the heavenly king's decree to human hearers. He signaled his messenger role with the introduction ‘Thus spoke the Lord Yahweh’ and in this way authenticated the following speech as Yahweh's word” (p. 105). The second excursus is a comprehensive study of the motif. Raabe convincingly points out that “‘drinking the cup’ is a literary metaphor and should be treated as such” and that “one can discover one single institutional origin no more for the ‘cup of wrath’ than for the ‘broom of destruction’” (p. 241).

Raabe sets out “to avoid an anachronistic reading of the book in the light of contemporary western views and sentiments” (p. 5). He maintains that the book of

Obadiah “elegantly summarizes many of the great prophetic themes” and “serves as a concise epitome for much of the message of the prophets” (p. 3).

Raabe maintains that, unlike other biblical books, Obadiah does not exhibit (much) textual fluidity. He states, “the Hebrew text of the book has been well preserved” (p. 5), though “the text seems corrupt in some places, especially in v 7 and v 20 and possibly in v 16 and v 17” (p. 3-4). In v 7 he supports the proposal to emend *lahmēkā* to *lōhāmēlahmēkā* (p. 152, 159-60) and in v. 20 he follows D. N. Freedman's proposal that the first relative clause, the first verb and the first direct object marker have dropped out, and he translates: The exiles of this company, those belonging to the Israelites, who are in X the Canaanites up to Zarephath (“X” stands for the name of a place; significantly, according to Raabe, the term “Israelites” points to both the people of Judah and of Israel; see pp. 261-62).

Raabe elaborates on the style of the book, places a significant emphasis on metaphors, as well as on syllable and accent counting. He is a careful reader who is sensitive to the use of deliberate ambiguity as a literary device (e.g., the case of *hmd* in v. 5; p. 142). As expected, the volume also discusses the conventional, major issues in the study of Obadiah such as the relation between Edom and Judah, and that between the text of Obad 1-7 and Jer 49:14-16, 9-10. Regarding the latter, Raabe's conclusion is that Obadiah reused and adapted material from Jeremiah and that he may have had access to a Jeremiah scroll.

The book deals, of course, with matters of “compositional history and unity.” The brief, critical overview of the history of research on these questions is particularly noteworthy (pp. 14-18). Correctly in the opinion of this reviewer, Raabe maintains that “one’s overall working model with its set of expectations and assumptions determines to a great extent one's conclusions regarding the compositional history and unity of the book” (p. 17) and more explicitly that “if we start with the expectation that the original prophet had only one perspective, emphasis, and style, and if we assume that the book of Obadiah in its present form is the result of a lengthy process of development with additions and interpolations made along the way, and if we further assume that these different layers or strata can be identified on the basis of shifts in perspective, emphasis, and style, then we will conclude that the book had several stages in its compositional history” (p. 14). Raabe concludes this discussion by supporting the position that “all we can deal with is the book as we have it” and that “the book does present itself as a literary unit and structural unit, a unit that invites the reader to make coherent sense of the book's contents by interpreting the parts integrally related to each other rather than as self-contained and self-defining units” (p. 18).

Still it is worth stressing that Raabe is very much interested in the prophet Obadiah himself, his time, and even the precise setting in which he proclaimed his prophecy. He

dates Obadiah to the period between 587/6-553 B.C.E. He not only advances the possibility that the text is a prophetic response to *actual*, exilic prayers in lamentation services in the exilic period—which to be sure are not mentioned in the book of Obadiah—but also discusses the “prophet's expression of shock and disbelief” at the *actual* historical activities in which the Edomites were engaged at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem—Raabe considers the text of v 12 to be “an accurate description of Edom's behavior” (p. 52). He also accounts for Obadiah's disbelief and dismay in historical terms (i.e., Edomite betrayal of Judah) and proposes that “the prophet actually intended to influence the Edomites,” that his message was meant to be heard by both Judahites and Edomites (p. 57).

This reviewer wrote a comprehensive monograph on Obadiah more or less at the same time that Raabe wrote his commentary. A review is *not* the place to compare our understanding of the text nor our respective annotations to the text. A review, however, is a place to bring forward and to highlight research assumptions that govern some important aspects of the work being reviewed.

To illustrate, when Raabe dates Obadiah—both the prophet and the book—to the period between 587/6-553 B.C.E., his *terminus ad quem* is set mainly on the argument that whereas Nabonidus' campaign against Edom took place in 553 B.C.E., the fall of Edom is presented as a future event in Obadiah's prophecy (pp. 54-55). Does the reference to the fall of Edom as a future event within the world of the book—that is from the perspective of the speaker that exists within the world of the book—necessarily point to a composition prior to that event? The answer to that question is likely to be a categorical no (see Moses' references to the future conquest and loss of the land in Deuteronomy), unless in the case of book of Obadiah one tends to collapse the difference between the world of the book and the “historical world,” that is to blur the difference between (a) literary characters within a written book such as the Edomites and Obadiah in the book of Obadiah and (b) “real-life” figures such as the actual Edomites at the time of the fall of Jerusalem, and the historical figure of an individual such as Obadiah. Raabe's reading tends to minimize this difference, and frequently moves from the world created in the text to the historical world and vice-versa. For instance, he writes, “only if the Edomites actually engaged in such activities does the prophet's expression of shock and disbelief make sense. Therefore we should understand vv. 12-14 as an accurate description of Edom's behavior. . .” (p. 52). Needless to say, the historical figure of Obadiah, his shock and disbelief are based fully on (a) the image of Obadiah created by a reading that accepts as reliable the explicit claims of the implied author of the book, and of the main positive/authoritative characters in the book, namely YHWH and Obadiah—that is, a sympathetic reading; and (b) a tendency to identify literary reliability with historical reliability. Other aspects of Raabe's reconstruction of the historical circumstances and rhetorical purpose of the book such as his claim that its text was meant to be heard and to influence the Edomites living in the “actual” world (not only the literary world of the text) depend also on similar assumptions. Similarly, Raabe does not

allow, for instance, the possibility that the implied author is suggesting the intended readers of the book that they should ponder and wonder whether the Obadiah of this book is to be identified with the one they know from 1 Kings 18. For Raabe, the hearers of the words of the prophet and the first readers of the text know well who Obadiah is. He is the prophet speaking before them at a commemoration service at the site of the destroyed temple (see p. 57); they could see his shock, disbelief, and pain before their own eyes. It is this trend towards a close identification between the world of the book and the historical world that allows Raabe to claim at the same time that all we have is the text of the book and still advance a quite detailed reconstruction of events, thoughts and feelings of individuals, actions of nations and the like, all of which he places in the historical world. Raabe's approach to these matters is surely not unique, but certainly debatable.

All this said, and whether I share or reject some of Raabe's methodological assumptions, and whether I agree or disagree with him on his treatment and understanding of particular units, I would like to restate my general evaluation that no serious scholar of Obadiah will be able to ignore Raabe's substantial contribution to the study of this book. All those interested in the book of Obadiah should be thankful to him, as is this reviewer.