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Review of Dianne Bergant, Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading

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event. This raises the larger hermeneutical issue of dating prophetic texts, although it lies beyond the scope of B.Z.'s study. In a prophetic text, why are some events portrayed as past and other events as future? The author of the Book of Obadiah treats the fall of Judah and Jerusalem as a past occurrence but the judgment of Edom and of the nations and the restoration of Israel as future events. Can a prophet locate any event anywhere in time? When does an author use the so-called prophetic perfect, and when does he or she speak in terms of real past time; how can the reader tell the difference?

Ben Zvi raises another hermeneutical question concerning the use of historical and referential language in prophetic discourse. Are vv. 10-14 a description of the actual past actions of the Edomites? B.Z. generally opposes any historical mimetic reading by pointing to the use of conventional prophetic rhetoric. He rightly stresses that there is more to prophetic discourse than historical reporting, but perhaps one need not see conventional language and referential language as mutually exclusive. For example, the standard image of a lofty abode with its associated hubris, developed in vv. 3-4, "was selected because it was especially suitable given the geographic terrain in Edom's case" (p. 250 n. 3). Might not conventional language appropriately fit a given historical event as well? It seems unlikely that Edomite actions did not resemble what is said of them in vv. 10-14, or at least that the original community of rereaders did not consider what is said there to apply to the Edomites.

As B.Z. rightly emphasizes, the Book of Obadiah is not marked by a unique hatred toward Edom. Then why was Edom singled out? According to B.Z., only Edom could qualify as the brother of Jacob within the world of Israel's discourse, but because "Edom" represents not only the nation of Edom but also all the nations, the Book of Obadiah implies that all the nations should be considered Israel's "brother," with Yhwh as their common "father." Edom and the nations played the role of a "bad brother"; therefore, they will be condemned, while their younger, weaker brother (Jacob) will be exalted. Here B.Z. misinterprets the force of the book. The point is not that the nations are like Edom and therefore are also like Jacob's brother but just the reverse. The book does not promote the nations; rather it demotes Edom. Jacob's very own brother, Edom, has acted like the nations (v. 11); therefore, he will be judged as an outsider, as a common göy.

Ben Zvi's treatment of the Book of Obadiah reflects not only thorough research of the secondary literature but also extensive work with the concordance, something that too many commentaries lack. It is well worth the effort to work through this important and sophisticated study of what he shows to be a significant prophetic book.

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With this helpful basic survey of wisdom literature, Diane Bergant continues a very productive scholarly career that has also included other important statements in the study of Israelite wisdom literature. The present volume is part of a series being
produced by Fortress Press that will result in a collection of books useful for survey courses in universities and seminaries.

In her reading of wisdom literature (which includes chapters on Job, Psalms [specifically 1, 19, 37, 49, 73, 78, 111, 112, 119, 127, and 128], Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom of Solomon, and Sirach) B. briefly surveys major recent scholarship on the historical- and literary-critical readings of these books, and contributes her own "interested" reading regarding the role of women, environmental issues, and issues of social justice. As she indicates in the introduction, while her approach to wisdom with strong interests in "ecojustice," is not entirely new, it provides an important aspect of thinking about issues of justice in the context of creation, an emphasis central to wisdom teaching. B. cautions that her reading of wisdom will not participate in the "bias and tyranny of unyielding anthropocentrism, which has held sway for so long, but [will be] a perspective sensitive to the integrity of creation and its intrinsic value" (p. 4). Each chapter contains sections entitled: "Rhetorical Function" (a survey of issues of canon and the present form of the text), "Unmasking the Powers" (a consideration of issues of social power), and "Into the Looking Glass" (reflections on contemporary issues beyond those raised in the previous section). B. boldly suggests issues to be addressed by contemporary readings in various communities of believers who reflect on these materials.

I found B.'s reading of Job to be particularly helpful, especially her insights into the inflated character of Job himself. Readers in the late twentieth century, eager to identify with Job the "dissident" (note W. Safire's popular work *The First Dissident* [New York: Random House, 1992]), appear unwilling to grant many valid points to Job's comforters, or to admit that Job himself does not speak with the full understanding that he rhetorically claims. B., on the other hand, is able to consider the depth of the various sides of the arguments presented in this most troubling work. Finally, however, she rightly points out that there can be a vast difference in how Job is read, depending on the "contingencies" of various readings and the sociological, economic, and political realities of the reader. Those who read Job as victims or in desperation find themselves not so much troubled by the challenge to "orthodoxy" as comforted by its insights, and helped by its calls to be "tenacious in their trust in God" (p. 37). B.'s attentiveness to socioeconomic issues leads to a new level of appreciation of the genuine radicalism of many sides of the Book of Job and validates the approach taken in this entire survey.

I had some disagreements with the approach taken to the Wisdom of Solomon. While B. acknowledges the importance of the deep influences of Hellenistic thought and the dialogue with non-Israelites that this presumes, she maintains that the Wisdom of Solomon ends as a defense of traditional Israelite values: "the worldview that it espouses is clearly particular to one specific people" (pp. 155-56). But one could read differently the obvious concern to explain the troubling nationalist elements of the old conquest traditions. Other arguments suggest that the Canaanites could have given up peacefully, for example. In short, the writer seems embarrassed by what could be perceived as brutish nationalism in the Israelite past, and she attempts to give it an ethical and rational face-lift. For whom is such rethinking necessary? For Hellenized Jews troubled by their own traditions? Are they troubled precisely because of an
interest in taking part in wider discussion in the Hellenistic world? Such questions might challenge B.'s reading of the Wisdom of Solomon as strikingly "ethnocentric" (p. 158), and different conclusions about the usefulness of the book for contemporary cross-cultural discussions might follow.

Bergant's book inspires both thoughtful dissent and grateful appreciation. She has made an important contribution that should inspire further critical work on wisdom literature from the perspective of the social issues she is "reading" along with the text. I highly recommend B.'s work for upper-division undergraduate and seminar courses that have significant sections on wisdom literature.

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The Westminster Bible Companion is directed toward the general Christian reader who turns to the Scriptures for inspiration and guidance, and toward those lay persons who are called on to teach in contexts of Christian formation. Birch's contribution fulfills the aims of this series in a way that not only should satisfy its readers but also should serve as a model for clarity in the communication of biblical content and scholarship to a general audience.

Convinced that the messages of the minor prophets are too important to be left to scholars and clergy alone, B. sets out to guide nonspecialist readers through the ancient particularities to the contemporary relevance of the Books of Hosea, Joel, and Amos. A focused introduction gives pertinent, available historical information and a thematic overview of each book. In the commentary sections there is a helpful balance of theme and content in a predictable and accessible format. B. divides the texts into appropriate units of thought, with suggestive headings and subheadings, and provides an overview for each major textual unit. His comments are brief, but they are more detailed than those of J. Limburg (Hosea–Micah [IBC; Atlanta: John Knox, 1988]), for reasons related to the purposes of the respective series. B.'s readers should be well prepared to make use of the teaching materials in Limburg's commentary or to pursue study in greater depth in commentaries published in some other series (for example, Hermeneia, the Old Testament Library, or the Anchor Bible).

Birch displays a willingness to confront the genuine difficulties of the three prophetic texts without offering artificial resolutions or digressing into undue speculation. For example, B. addresses the legitimate questions concerning the identity of the women in Hosea 3 without tying the interpretation of the passage to an ultimate decision on this indeterminate issue. Although B. generally accepts the consensus of a postexilic dating of Joel, he admits the limited evidence for dating the book and focuses his commentary on meanings that do not require such specificity. He neither obscures possible textual accretions in the Book of Amos nor allows their possibility to negate the coherence of the book as it is written.