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Bulkeley, Tim

Amos: Hypertext Bible Commentary

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This is the first volume in a new series, the Hypertext Bible Commentary. The series as per its name uses new electronic technologies, online delivery, and particularly hypertextual capabilities to enrich the traditional genre of biblical commentary. The author of this volume has been at the helm of this project and its twin one of developing an online, free biblical encyclopedia, a kind of peer-reviewed Wikipedia (for information on both projects, see <http://bible.gen.nz/>). Both projects are aimed at the wide, general public that more and more searches for information online. As such, provided that their contents are appropriate, these and similar projects will play a significant, and likely ever-increasing role in the education of the general public on biblical matters. Certainly these are not light matters.

What do readers of this commentary encounter when they turn to it? Many are variants of the same features found in more traditional commentaries. For instance, they find a Hebrew text of Amos and an English translation. The difference is that almost every word in the Hebrew text carries a hyperlink to annotations. For instance, the only word that is not hyperlinked in Amos 1:1 is **עַל**. But are these annotations always helpful or even necessary? For instance, clicking on **יִשְׂרָאֵל** in 1:1 brings the following text:

yisra'el Israel. Name of both a people and a state. Jacob, the patriarch was remaned [sic] “Israel” after his fight at the Jabbok, and the nation which claims descent from his children are called “Children of Israel” or “Israel”. With the separation of the two kingdoms the northern state was called “Israel” and the southern one “Judah”.

To be sure, one may argue whether this is a correct place to introduce a sophisticated discussion of the possible (multiple) meanings evoked by the term “Israel” in the world of

the book and within the discourse of its intended and primary readerships or not, but I doubt very much that the information given above would help anyone competent enough to read the Hebrew text of Amos. Similarly, clicking on דַּבְּרִי in the same verse brings the following information:

דַּבֵּר *dbr* in the piel is the most commonly used word for “speak”: Am 3:1, 8 the qal has much the same sense: Am 5:10. *dabar* “word, message, story or business/affair”. The usage in Am 1:1 is discussed in the commentary. In the prophets the *dabar* is often the prophet's oracle 3:1; 4:1; 5:1; 7:10 (cf. 7:16; 8:11, 12). In Amos 3:7 “thing” seems best to describe what God is doing and announcing. The phrase לֹא דַבָּר *lo' dabar* in Am 6:13 can either mean “nothing” (‘no thing’) or refer to a town east Jordan (2 Sam 9:4-5; 17:27).

Leaving aside the problematic wording (*dbr* in the piel is *not* a word but a grammatical concept that can be represented by various words), who requires the basic dictionary entry for this or for that of הִיָּה, which is also hyperlinked? More problematic perhaps is the connoted connection between different occurrences of the same term. For instance, why is the reader of בְּיַמֵּי עֲזִיָּה מְלִיךְ־יְהוּדָה וּבְיַמֵּי יִרְבֵּעָם בֶּן־יֹאָשׁ מְלִיךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל asked to think of the “Day of the Lord”? Does the author suggest that there is some interpretative link that binds these different instances of the use of יוֹם? If this is the case, then this reviewer for one could not find it in the commentary. It is worth noting that, although the text seems extremely overlinked, some obvious cases in which links would have been helpful for beginners are not present. For instance, there are no links to Moab, Edom, Tyre, and the like, neither in the Hebrew nor the English text.

The commentary includes links to an (incipient?) Bible dictionary and glossary. The Hebrew entries are here offered in transliteration (unlike elsewhere in the commentary). Unlike the usual transliterations, ` = ע and ' = א. For a reason unclear to me, words beginning with ` = ע appear as such, although alphabetically they are located before any other letter (or number; i.e., עַל [= `al] under ` = ע); however, words beginning with א appear according to “their next letter [*sic*],” so אַב (= `ab) appears under “A,” as if א were not a letter. (The transliteration of the Hebrew vowel markers is, needless to say, very imprecise—why not use the SBL transliteration system?—and, of course, vowel markers do not constitute a “letter” in Hebrew.)

The English text represents the author's translation. He states that the “translation (the Temporary English Version! TempEV) is highly ‘literal’, giving the ‘flavor’ of the Hebrew,” and that “it should be read alongside a good recent translation like CEV which gives the sense in contemporary language.” The translation is indeed more “literal” than the CEV, but its characterization as “highly literal” is perhaps misleading. For instance,

מְלֶכֶת־יְהוּדָה בְּיָמֵי עֻזְיָהוּ is translated as “in the time of Uzziah King of Judah,” which is not wrong but not “highly literal” (cf. NRSV, NAB). One may notice that הַחֵלֶק in Amos 7:4 is translated as “the promised land {allotted portion}”; that is, “the portion” is present here only as an explanation, and the translation “abandoning righteousness on the land!” for וַצְדָקָה לְאַרְץ הַגִּיחוּ is certainly not “highly literal”—surprisingly, the author does provide a more literal translation in his notes on Amos 5:7. More problematic is, in my view, the claim that the translation provides the “flavor” of the Hebrew.

Unlike traditional commentaries, this one includes an audio file with the book of Amos read in Hebrew and in the author’s English translation. To include these audio files is probably a good idea, but the Hebrew file contains mistakes (see already Amos 1:4–5). Since there has been for a quite some time a very good audio version of the Hebrew text available on the Internet (and used, e.g., in the Snunit site; see <http://kodesh.snunit.k12.il/i/t/ t1501.htm>), one wonders why the author did not use it.

Despite its nontraditional form, the commentary includes some “traditional” sections such as a general introduction to the book of Amos, to the prophet, and to the historical setting (of the prophet); a timeline; and some introductory remarks on prophetic literature. It contains a bibliography and a helpful search function. From a contents perspective, this innovative commentary tends to be clearly on the “traditional” side. The basic assumption is that much goes back to Amos, the eighth-century prophet. This is, of course, a legitimate position that is advanced by many in the field, even if not shared by the present reviewer. The author also identifies to a very large extent with the claims advanced by the character Amos in the book and with the other prophets in general, who according to him, “spoke God’s message without fear or favor.” Debatable or not, this is not an unusual but rather a very “traditional” approach to a prophetic book.

Agreements and disagreements concerning the positions advanced by Bulkeley are only to be expected, cannot be seriously dealt in any review, and above all are not a reason for concern in themselves, the more so in a book aimed at the general public. But the same does not hold true for general matters regarding the presentation advanced in the book. In my opinion, at times it is simply too brief. To illustrate, given the history of interpretation of Amos 2:4–5, is the following all that should be said about this pericope?

Language and Imagery:

This oracle against Judah is weak compared with the others - the punishment is described in general terms and briefly “fire on Judah” and “Jerusalem’s citadels consumed”. The crime too is both less and more precise - no particular acts are mentioned (less precision), but rather unfaithfulness to Adonai and his decrees is condemned (greater precision of the person offended).

Rhetorical effect:

However, given the context of a Judean prophet addressing an Israelite audience, the effect is startling - perhaps this is why the wording is simple. (Surely a prophet who condemns his own, neighbouring, people must be true!) Following the series of oracles against traditional neighbouring enemies, which surely found a ready audience, this one would raise their appreciation and expectation of Amos still higher....

My main concern here is not necessarily or mainly with what is said, but that *only* this is said. To be sure, any commentary aimed at a large public tends to oversimplify matters, but still it has to convey a sense of the large picture and above all avoid conveying a false sense of closure on matters that are certainly not closed. I tend to think that beginners, and especially beginners, should be made aware that this is the situation. Moreover, attention to the needs of a wide range of readers requires attention to the way in which matters are explained, but not “simplified” contents.

The author’s laudable attempt to be easily understood by a wide public led him on occasion to slide into potentially problematic statements. For instance, the commentary to 8:14 (הַנְּשֻׁבְעִים בְּאַשְׁמַת שְׁמֵרוֹן וְאָמְרוּ חַי אֱלֹהֵיךָ דָן וְחַי דָּרְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ-שֹׁבַע וְנִפְלוּ וְלֹא-יָקוּמוּ עוֹד) includes the follow remark, which given the tone of the verse being discussed and the expected readership of the commentary, might lead to misinterpretation:

In this case all three are references not to other gods, but to the localized worship of Adonai. Canaanite religion localized the gods and goddesses so that they became multiple and linked to particular places. This tendency in religious practice perhaps finds expression in popular Catholicism in the difference perceived by the devout between the Blessed Virgin of Guadalupe and other representations of Jesus’ mother.

I am sure that statements that might lead to misinterpretation occur in almost every commentary and that commentaries aimed at a general public may tend to oversimplify matters, but if (a) many more people will read the Hypertext Bible Commentary than the more specialized commentaries that this reviewer and most academics love, and (b) the Hypertext Bible Commentary is going to exert its influence not only over a wider range of people than most commentaries, over people who may not have had any critical education on biblical and cognate matters, and for the most part will exert its influence in a way that is not be mediated by academically trained instructors/tutors, then follows (c): a great degree of care for its contents is required. It is from this perspective that I raise questions concerning what I see as potentially misleading oversimplification and the potential impact of remarks expressed in a less than felicitous way.

We all owe a debt of gratitude to Tim Bulkeley for all his work in this important project. I see this Amos commentary as a version 1.0 that will, I hope, lead to further and better versions in which many of the problems mentioned here will be solved. I am aware that even this version represents an improvement over previous versions (notice, e.g., the wise removal of the term “postmodern” from the title of the series; cf. <http://bible.gen.nz/>), and I confidently hope that this process will continue and even accelerate.