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# A Promise of Hope: A Call to Obedience: Joel and Malachi

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what is best for "the whole congregation" take precedence over the rights of individual persons; history is replete with examples of injustices defended in the name of a Christian majority. On the matter of how the church decides what is best she gives little direction, yet polity can be as divisive an issue as doctrine of practice.

Those who are still wondering about God's gender will find this a helpful book not only in considering the question of women's ordination but in thinking about the use of inclusive language in the church. The very complete bibliography provides an excellent resource for pursuing issues at greater depth. Even for those who have resolved the problems related to women's ordination and inclusive language the book may be worthwhile, for it has something to say to anyone who has wondered how to make sense of those biblical texts which to the twentieth-century reader appear to be irrelevant, unjust or even contradictory. Suffice it to say that the book raises many questions to spark a lively debate.

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### **A Promise of Hope—A Call to Obedience, A Commentary on the Books of Joel and Malachi. International Theological Commentary**

Graham S. Ogden and Richard R. Deutsch

Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1987

120 pp.

The goal of the International Theological Commentary series, say its editors, George A.F. Knight and Frederick Holmgren, is to help "ministers and Christian educators" make the Old Testament come alive in the church today. They write that they hope to accomplish this by producing commentaries that will move beyond "the usual critical-historical approach" to a more careful consideration of the underlying *theological* significance of the books of the Hebrew Bible and their relevance for the New Testament and the church. At the same time they want these commentaries to reflect the needs and challenges of the worldwide international church, not just the church of the West, and to be sensitive as well to the fact that these Scriptures are important not only for Christians but for Jews—and important too for an understanding of the Jewish origins and roots of Christianity.

How well do the two commentaries on Joel and Malachi in this slender volume measure up to these laudable goals and ideals? Far from moving

beyond critical-historical issues bearing upon the interpretation of the book of Joel, Graham Ogden's commentary had me pondering them more than ever, because of his novel hypothesis that Joel's opening two chapters refer not to a grasshopper plague, as generally thought, but to nations which were responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem in 586. Ogden believes the book of Joel may have originated in liturgical lament ceremonies in the community of those Judeans who returned to Judah from Babylon in 537, and should be regarded as a cry for salvation and vengeance against those who had participated in this destruction of their beloved city some fifty years earlier. He also argues that "lamentation in Joel is unrelated to the idea of repentance", and that the book's chief relevance for the church today lies, therefore, in its exemplification of the spiritual value of liturgical laments for sufferings other than our sins (in order that we might hear God's word of assurance "that he has not abandoned us to an uncaring world"). While greater freedom to lament in this manner might indeed be of value in the church today, Ogden's argument that this in fact is what the book of Joel is mainly about is questionable, and not altogether appropriate, perhaps, in a volume whose chief purpose is not to re-lay the foundations of historical criticism, but to help us move beyond such considerations.

Richard Deutsch's commentary on Malachi is exegetically more reliable and satisfying, and especially good at sensitizing us to the way this book served to strengthen Jewish identity in the Second Temple period and thus contributed to the rich Jewish soil in which Christianity initially took root and grew. I was disappointed, however, by his failure to discuss the book's overall message or relevance for the church today. A case in point would be his identification of the book's central theological concern (in his commentary's introduction) as indifference on the part of the Second Temple priests toward their divinely mandated role as teachers of Torah (Scripture). However, in further discussion of this point he says nothing regarding its relevance for contemporary theology or ministry. As a result the contemporary relevance of the book as a whole remains somewhat unclear and muted, contrary to what the series editors had led us to expect.

In summary, both commentaries are worth having and consulting, but fall short in my opinion of accomplishing what the series editors say they specifically set out to do.

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