

BOOK REVIEWS

Tim Bulkeley

Amos: Hypertext Bible Commentary.

Auckland: Hypertext Bible, 2005.

ISBN 0-473-10714-7.

US\$ 25.00 for individuals, US\$ 40.00 for institutions.

But also available – free – on the web: <http://hypertextbible.org/amos>

This is not a book it is a CD. But it is a CD which functions like a book, or rather like a library. Imagine a Bible commentary where you have the text (Hebrew and English) and comments in front of you, and where you at the same time are only a click away from relevant entries in exegetical and theological dictionaries, or where another click will enable you to listen to the text being read in Hebrew or English. This is the kind of commentary Dr Tim Bulkeley and the Hypertext Bible Project provides for us.

Dr Bulkeley is a British Old Testament scholar now teaching in Auckland, New Zealand. It is also of interest to notice that for nearly a decade (in the 1980s) he taught in Kinshasa, DRC, at the Faculté de Théologie Protestante au Zaïre. In spite of this the commentary has no traces of African Old Testament scholarship. Still, a few more general references to Africa can be found: geographical (the entry on *earthquake* relates the earthquake in 1:1 to the African 'rift'; the entry on *trade and commerce* notices that the Phoenicians claimed to have sailed right round Africa) as well as cultural (the entry on *monarchy* compares the state development with African experiences; the entry on *genre* compares greetings in Democratic Republic of Congo and the West). Cf. also below, the discussion of Amos 9:7.

The mission of the Hypertext Bible Project is to disseminate – in an electronic format – current biblical scholarship to a wide audience. This mission should indeed be within reach, as the commentary not only can be purchased as a CD, but is also available free (currently, it is said) on the web (cf. the address above). The project has here set an excellent example for other researchers. One of the major difficulties of doing biblical studies today is a publishing boom of

books and journals that hold prices which effectively prevent most of us from reading them. For some years it has been argued that 'the web is the solution'. But the problem is that most of what is available – free – on the web is either very old or very biased. In this respect the Hypertext Bible Project – and its Amos commentary – is an exception, and indeed a very welcome one.

The strength of this hypertext commentary is found in all the material that is linked up to the verse-by-verse commentary. The reader/user can easily jump from (Hebrew or English) text to comments, or from introductory problems to the beautiful sound of the (Hebrew or English) text being read. An illustrative example can be the famous disputation speech in Amos 3:3-8. One entry gives a survey of the whole chapter, and the interaction between vv. 3-8 and the surrounding text is here emphasized. Another entry approaches vv. 3-8 in more details, and then with further entries on rhetorical questions, the function of repeated words, monotheism, etc. And these entries again have new entries: from 'monotheism' there are for example links to texts and archaeology on pre-exilic popular religion. This is simply exciting, and an excellent way to get an overview.

But all the material that is linked up to the verse-by-verse hypertext commentary is also its weakness. It includes such a wide spectrum of material (isagogics, exegesis, history of Israel) and is aimed at such a wide audience (the 'thinking but untrained, as well as tertiary-trained students of the Bible' and 'various Christian and Jewish communities as well as secular readers') that the final result inevitably becomes somewhat superficial. The CD is more than a commentary, it is a whole library, but as such it lacks the more heavy volumes of the library.

An illustrative example of this problem can be the interpretation of Amos 9:7, the text comparing Israel and the African nation of Cush. First, one is (and some of us positively) surprised to find that the Hebrew *b^ene cushiyim*, which traditionally is rendered 'children of Cush/Ethiopia/Nubia/Sudan', here is rendered 'Africans': 'Are you not like the Africans to me, children of Israel?' This interesting interpretation is, however, not further substantiated; neither in the exegetical entry on *Cush*, nor in the commentary, which only paraphrases the text. And this lack of exegetical and hermeneutic interest is disappointing; one gets the impression that the author took the first step, but then changed his mind. Second, the same verse shows that the English text that can be listened to is another text than the translation given in the commentary. And in this case the commentary renders the *b^ene cushiyim* as 'Africans', whereas the voice version not that politically correct renders it 'negroes'.

In conclusion, though, it should be acknowledged that this is a good commentary. Good in the sense that it brings together a whole library of information, but also good in the sense that this material is organized in a structured and understandable way. And it is certainly also good in the sense that everyone with access to internet can go right into it, without costs.

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Bennie van der Walt & Rita Swanepoel (eds.)
Christianity and Democracy in South Africa,
Christian Responsibility for
Political Reflection and Service

Potchefstroom: Institute for Reformed Studies, 1996

What is democracy? In the ever-changing political arena, what role should Christians play in relation to the democracy of their countries? Are we to be satisfied with the existing articles in our constitutions or are we expected to review them in day-by-day political life?

According to the authors, a promise to adhere to democracy whether verbal or written is one thing, but to fulfill those promises is another. All sectors whether political, judicial, economic and religious should be used as indicators to audit our commitment to democracy. The church has a responsibility to do just that because God has ordained it to be the conscience of the society. That is what is called a **PROPHETIC CALL**.

This is a practical book aimed at both Christian leaders and practicing Christians. If in our quarters as Christians of any capacity fail to practice democratic values, we lack the audacity and moral authority to point a finger to others. Democracy is to be lived in any context of the ever-changing political scenario. Commitment to democracy does not make any sense if it is only shelved in our books (constitutions), it must be lived.

Christians are to be in the fore front to live democratic values as an example of good citizenship and continually review the existing nationalistic ideology in the light of the Christian – nationalistic values (read gospel values). Where elements of compromise or negation are traced, quick spiritual about-turn is necessary to maintain Christian credibility, faith and the Word of God itself. This is the only way we can safeguard the dignity of the citizens in any political environment. The sovereignty of God should be proclaimed in any given political arena: this checks the perpetuation of corrupt regimes, which preach human sovereignty and autonomy.

In the exercise of a true democracy, Christians have no choice but to protest

against any undemocratic practice and governance. Their protests will be in a varied manner: some will do it through the press, preaching or even holding public demonstrations. These are some of the themes clearly mooted by the editors. In the end of it all, the editors have produced a book which is an invaluable account of the true nature of democracy and a clear cut role of the Christian fraternity to any people of any place in the world.

The book has nine major sections (chapters). The first section deals with the main theme of the conference, which is based on the original theme of Potchefstroom University (the host). Although Potchefstroom University had given herself to the perpetuation of democracy from a Christian perspective, over the years this was compromised and thus lost her focus plugging herself into un-biblical and nationalistic ideology of the day: apartheid. Institute for Reformation Studies chips in to offer an inclusive voice; a Christian voice in the area of politics to strengthen Potchefstroom University's bid even as it struggles to rid herself of the apartheid values and heritage. Other challenges mentioned in this section are: emergence of the new pluralistic civil society; the maintaining of constitutional checks and balances; power reversal in the structure of the relationship between the state and the society in the New South Africa; and the role of Christianity in democratization.

People from varied background and political parties share their experiences of the new democracy in South Africa: this includes parties like ANC, NP, IFP, FF, DP and PAC. Such approach as captured by the editors presents healthy, coherent, holistic and camper- active democratic experiences in the New South Africa.

The other sections address themes like 'evaluation of the New South African Constitutional dispensation' and dynamics from a Christian perspective.' The editors accurately assert that true democracy should be based on freedom and equal protection of the citizens by government which is open, just, accountable, that values human dignity, practices tolerance and justice. The two institutions (government and church) however must stay separate, distinct and unique. Whenever one is assimilated by the other as history and experience show, the results are nefarious. It is upon the church to continually enrich and protect our fledgling democracy. A good constitution and democracy should also address property rights starting with land, security and freedom.

One of the richest sections in this book is the fourth one, 'International experiences of democracy from a Christian perspective.' Here experiences are drawn from Korea, Europe, America and some African countries, for example,

Kenya. In the African perspective, the authors show that many countries have ushered in a new dispensation by adopting new constitutions, which have allowed the practice of multi-party systems. Through the whole process, the church is shown to have been active for it has,

- Identified itself with the goals and intentions of the state.
- Engaged in critical and constructive collaboration with the power of the state in the light of what the Bible teaches.
- Resisted any disservice by the government to the people.

Internationally, the church (Christians) should not develop a view, which is only domestic oriented, but one that has an international face. Collaboration with institutions like European Economic Community is essential, these have the potential to grow and transcend their regional domain.

The church has the responsibility to nurture the New South African democracy from infancy to maturity. It is called upon to play two divine roles, namely, being the conscience of the society, and assuming the prophetic role.

The final section is on the topic, 'The Political Strategies.' During political campaigns, a lot of violence is witnessed. The authors rightly state that one of the key elements of political strategy should be reconciliation in order to promote peace and unity. To fathom reconciliation, there is need for training programmes to empower people for reconciliation so as to bring about development (delivering housing, education, health, transport, safety and security); thus serving the interest of others.

The sections (chapters) provide sufficient information for the topics discussed. The book is a good introduction to the issues of Christianity, Christian responsibility and service in a democratic society. The supporting references will help the reader to explore issues further. It is a well-structured book and easy to read by anyone even those without a good background in politics. Evidently, the different contributors have read widely as it is evidenced by the wealth of references they provide. The book can be used as a textbook for anyone pursuing politics and the church or teachers teaching political sociology.

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*The Historical Critical Method in
Catholic Exegesis.*

Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana (Tesi Gregoriana:
Serie Teologica, 50). 346 pp.
ISBN: 88-7652-825-3. US\$ 22.50.

The book is a revised version of a Th.D. dissertation accepted by the Gregorian University in Rome, and the author is an American Catholic priest, who at present teaches at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, Philadelphia. The book analyzes the place of historical-critical concerns in Catholic exegesis in two periods: (i) exegetical literature from patristic and medieval times, and (ii) ecclesial documents from modern times, 1893-1943, 1943-1965, 1965-the present. The major perspective of the book is that the hermeneutical basis of the modern historical-critical approach, as well as several of its more practical-exegetical procedures, to some extent go back to the biblical interpretation of the early church. The book concludes that in spite of certain limitations, the historical-critical method is needed in Catholic exegesis, (i) to determine the literal sense of the text, (ii) to promote reading and translation of the original texts, (iii) to determine the original reading from the numerous textual witnesses, (iv) to address problems due to the historical setting of the text, (v) to deal with issues of interpretation raised by the biblical text, and (vi) to facilitate ecumenical discussion.

The book provides an interesting case study of how Catholic exegesis throughout the last century built its way in constant tension between dogma and tradition on the one hand and an increasing historical awareness on the other. From an evangelical perspective it is interesting to notice how church tradition actually protected Catholic exegesis from following some of the more radical tendencies of the historical-critical method during its height in the 19th and 20th centuries. As for the major perspective of the book, that the hermeneutical basis of the historical-critical approach to some extent go

back to the biblical interpretation of the early church, I would argue that it deserves further attention, also from an evangelical perspective. One should of course not neglect the obvious epistemological presuppositions of the historical-critical method in post-reformation rationalism. Still, its emphasis on the historical and literal meaning of the biblical texts should not too easily be brushed aside as a rationalistic legacy, as it indeed echoes a central aspect of the theology of the reformation, an aspect that must be taken seriously also in circles, African as well as western, that do not share all the epistemological presuppositions of what counts as the historical-critical method.

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