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BOOK REVIEW

Thomas Renz. *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*. NICOT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021. xxxix + 703 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0-8028-2626-8. \$56.00.

This commentary by Thomas Renz serves as the replacement for the 1990 volume in the same series by O. Palmer Robertson and is significantly longer than the original. Renz brings a wealth of experience to this subject matter. He has previously written monographs on Ezekiel and Hebrew poetry, and his peer-reviewed essays cover a wide swath of topics in both Habakkuk and the Book of the Twelve more broadly. Renz's preface clarifies that his chief interest is advancing the "understanding of the received Hebrew text" (xv) and that he rarely emends the MT. He also explains the purpose of the structure he follows for each pericope in the main body of the commentary. Translation notes are followed by a section he calls "Composition," which covers "structure and design" as well as "coherence" (xvi). Next is the discussion of individual verses, and the final section is "Reflection," which focuses on canonical and theological integration.

A twenty-page introduction precedes the treatments of the individual books. Renz holds that prophetic books contain the words of the historical prophets and that while later scribes may have been ultimately responsible for organizing and editing (even expanding) these oracles to function coherently as a book, any editorial activity was done to faithfully interpret the text, "rather than to merely add words that would speak to their generation" (2). Within the Christian canon as a whole, the Minor Prophets point both backwards to the Torah, which they exposit for their specific historical audiences, and forwards to Jesus Christ, who ultimately fulfills their messages about "guilt and reconciliation" (4). Perhaps most provocatively, Renz rejects

current proposals to read the Twelve as a “single literary entity” (4), devoting several pages to countering James Nogalski’s historical arguments that Sirach and Jerome read the Twelve as a unified book. Consequently, he is skeptical of both redactional theories and synchronic proposals that discern a thematic progression in the final form of the Twelve. For Renz, the ordering of Nahum–Zephaniah was determined by the books’ approximate chronology and their thematic focus on “the point of changing empires” (15). Zephaniah’s attention to “restoration” makes it an appropriate fit for the final position in the three books, even if it chronologically precedes Habakkuk. The introduction closes with a brief outline of key historical events in the ancient Near East from the middle of the eighth century through the end of the sixth century. For purposes of space, the remainder of this review will focus on the treatment of Habakkuk in this commentary.

The introduction to the section on Habakkuk begins with a discussion of the “profile” of the book. Renz divides Habakkuk into chs. 1–2 and ch. 3. Chapters 1–2 consist of prophecy that asks questions (1:2–4; 1:12–17) about an earlier oracle (1:5–11), with the answer given in ch. 2. In contrast, ch. 3 is “public prayer . . . in response to God’s revelation” (196). Renz significantly rejects attempts to reconstruct the redaction of the book, and instead lists and responds to six commonly proposed signs of incoherence in Habakkuk’s final form: (1) the presence of both pro- and anti-Babylonian material; (2) that an earlier version of the woe oracles of ch. 2 was directed towards Judah; (3) that foreign nations could not be expected to condemn idolatry (2:18–20); (4) that ch. 3 was a separate earlier composition; (5) the sudden shifts in genre throughout; and (6) that the redaction of Habakkuk was part of the redaction of the Twelve as a whole. While this section contains many worthwhile points, it misses what is in my estimation the most significant interpretive challenge driving the various source-critical theories about Habakkuk: the identity of the anonymous enemy parties in 1:2–4 and 1:12–17 (although he does discuss this later when addressing the dating of the book on pp. 207–9). It also fails to interact with proposals that argue that the original layer of ch. 1 was a com-

plaint about internal social problems in Judah, or that the book consisted of an original lament about Babylon that was later supplemented to address the problem of justice (see the literature review in David J. Fuller, *A Discourse Analysis of Habakkuk* [SSN 72; Leiden: Brill, 2020], 7–11).

Renz's discussion of the date of Habakkuk is detailed and logical. Since he views 1:5–11 as chronologically preceding the rest of ch. 1, he finds it appropriate to place Habakkuk in a time period when the Babylonians were already a visible threat, likely after the battle of Carchemish in 605. The breakdown of Torah in 1:4 suggests 609 (after the death of Josiah, the last "good king") as the earliest possible time it could have been written. Renz tentatively suggests a *terminus ad quem* of 597 due to the silence regarding "the destruction of the temple and the end of the monarchy" (208) although he allows for a post-538 date for the liturgical instructions in 3:19b. Renz then turns his attention to the "rhetorical function" of Habakkuk. He holds that the earliest written part of the book was the divine reply of 2:4–5, which lead to the recording of the rest of the prophecy in chs. 1–2 and the prophet's response to this revelation in ch. 3. Renz notes that chs. 1–2 would have communicated to their original audience that YHWH is "responsible for the havoc caused by the Babylonians" and that Judah "is indeed in desperate straits" (213). Renz finishes his introduction to Habakkuk with short summaries of Habakkuk's function within the Twelve and the biblical canon as a whole, its history of interpretation, and its value in the church today. Notably, his overview of Habakkuk's function within the Twelve is restricted to some observations on the order of Nahum–Zephaniah and some comparisons of Habakkuk with Jeremiah (specifically, how it is more like Jeremiah than any other book in the Twelve). Even though Renz has previously articulated his reasons for rejecting the now-vogue "Book of the Twelve" hypothesis, his silence regarding the place of Habakkuk in the widely acknowledged themes within this corpus (such as theodicy, etc.) is nonetheless surprising (for discussion and examples, see Beth M. Stovell and David J. Fuller, *The Book of the Twelve* [Cascade Companions; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022], 29–90, 110–29).

Within the body of the commentary on Habakkuk itself, there is much to appreciate. Renz demonstrates considerable facility in adjudicating the many grammatical challenges posed by the text of Habakkuk, such as the matter of determining the clause divisions in the first two lines of 2:5. He also offers convincing explanations of many of the unusual literary features found throughout the book. For example, many readers have doubtless been puzzled that in the woe oracles of ch. 2, the fifth and final oracle has the וָיָהּ (“Woe!”) in 2:19, rather than in the expected place at the start of the oracle in 2:18. Renz notes that this startling deviation serves to “mark the climax of the sayings” and associate the denunciation of idolatry in 2:18 with the previous oracles, creating a progression from “imperialism” to “the ultimate powerlessness of the conqueror, who cannot expect help from his gods” (326). Renz also develops novel philological suggestions, such as in the case of the mysterious עַל שִׁיגִינּוֹת in 3:1 (simply transliterated in most English versions as “according to Shigionoth” [NASB, NRSV]), which he renders as “besides vehement protests” (331, with discussion on pp. 335–41). Grammar specialists will approve of his handling of the use of verbal tense-forms in the poem of ch. 3 (see notes on pp. 341, 344–45). Finally, Renz’s attention to intertextuality bears fruit, such as in his analysis of 3:19a, where he identifies citations of 2 Sam 22:34 and Deut 33:29 but notes the crucial transformation that rather than a human king representing the people and conquering other nations, “the people of God are concentrated in the pleading and suffering prophet” (411).

Of course, in a work of this length and comprehensiveness, there inevitably are some details with which some specialists may disagree. As previously noted, Renz reads 1:5–11 as a citation of an earlier oracle within a larger single prayer (the rest of ch. 1) that protests the realization of the oracle. As a result, he asserts that “vv. 12–17 do not read well as Habakkuk’s reply to vv. 5–11” (236), since the prophet still accuses YHWH of passivity in 1:13. Thus, “such a complaint about God’s inaction would make little sense on the assumption that it responds to news about a major divine intervention” (236). This conclusion, however, fails to take into account the considerable linguistic

links between the two speeches, as the prophet in 1:12–17 actually heightens his acknowledgement of divine action while still complaining that YHWH does not put an end to injustice (see Fuller, *Discourse Analysis*, 112–18). For another example, regarding the description in 2:11 of the stones and beams of the evildoer’s house crying out against him, Renz delves into ancient building practices (311) but ultimately concludes this is simply a picture of the witnesses that will testify against Babylonian oppression. However, this interpretation does not interact with the background work of David Stephen Vanderhooft (*The Neo-Babylonian Empire and Babylon in the Latter Prophets* [HSM 59; Atlanta: Scholars, 1999], 162) who argues that this is an allusion to the Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions, which depict buildings themselves praying to the gods for the king (see *COS* 2.122A). Also, sometimes Renz’s poetic sensibilities lead to line divisions that some may find awkward. For example, he translates 3:2a as “YHWH, I have heard the report about you” // “I am alarmed” // “YHWH, your work—” // “in the midst of years, renew it” (343) which deviates from the more natural reading, in which YHWH’s work would be the direct object of the prophet’s fear (“and I stand in awe, O LORD, of your work” [NRSV]). Renz defends this analysis on the basis that it “does greater justice to the significance of a number of key terms” (344), suggesting several pieces of evidence for this. First, he notes that his reading would create a parallel with the first two clauses of 3:3, in which the divine name is the first word in both clauses. This seems unlikely, as his reconstruction simply places “YHWH, your work—” (a fragment rather than a clause) on a line by itself, and does not form a true parallel with a full clause (he also points to his translation of Nah 1:3). Renz then notes that אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה (“your work”) recalls the use of that lexeme in 1:5 (and his suggested emendation of 2:4). However, since this is not in the first position in the clause in Renz’s line divisions, it is unclear how his poetic analysis better captures its “significance” in the book. He offers other connections to key terms throughout the book, although none are affected by his unique line division.

More positively, special mention must be made of the “reflection” sections throughout this commentary, which consistently

offer thoughtful and insightful canonical and devotional integration. For example, in Renz's treatment of 1:5–11, the reflection section links this description of military violence to the gathering of Satan's army in Rev 20:9. Renz then presents a pacifist reading of Christ's final defeat of evil. He ties this back to the context of Habakkuk as he concludes "the announcement of the rise of an empire that is going to bring violence cannot be God's final word" (253). His handling of the use of Hab 2:4 in Rom 1:17 is also notable, as it leverages newer trends in New Testament scholarship to focus on the faithfulness exhibited by Jesus himself, so that the work of Christ is the ultimate exemplification of Hab 2:4. The theological analysis of the havoc wreaked upon creation in the course of YHWH's punishment of the foreign empire in 3:8–15 leads to a nuanced discussion of the "direct" and "indirect" work of God (394). Even the postscript in 3:19b leads Renz to an intriguing summary of unexpected places Hab 3 was inserted in ancient manuscripts, along with its liturgical applications throughout church history.

In conclusion, this is an excellent commentary that will be appreciated and frequently consulted by pastors and scholars alike. The 226 pages devoted to Habakkuk comprise the most in-depth study of the Hebrew text of the book since the work of Francis I. Andersen, *Habakkuk* (AYB; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) just over two decades ago. In an age when publishers are releasing more commentaries than ever before, Renz's work on Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah most certainly stands out. Its combination of rigorous treatment of the original language, theological integration, and substantial application to spiritual formation make it a model for all confessional reference works to emulate.

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