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BOOK REVIEW

Heath Thomas. *Habakkuk*. The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018. xiv + 234 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-8028-6870-1. $25.00.

Understanding the book of Habakkuk in its immediate context is difficult, and an even more challenging task is unpacking its relationship to the New Testament and expositing it for the church today. Adding to this situation is the fact that many commentaries on Habakkuk, even those from reputable series, are often very short, being merely small portions of larger works that cover multiple books within the Minor Prophets. Therefore, there is good reason to be excited about the potential contribution that a volume such as Heath Thomas' *Habakkuk* can make. Thomas serves in both administrative and faculty capacities at Oklahoma Baptist University, and has written several books on both the narrative and poetic literature of the Old Testament.

This volume is organized into two major parts, and part one is the "Introduction and Commentary." The substantial fifty-six-page introduction begins by carefully defining the kind of theological interpretation being practiced in *Habakkuk*. The key goals identified by Thomas are "listening for God's address" (5) and resultant "transformation" (5). He then exposits four principles that guide his inquiry throughout. First, "Attention to the historical, philological literary, and theological context of Habakkuk enables one to hear God's address" (6). Second, "The historical contexts of Habakkuk fit within the dramatic narrative of Scripture" (6). Third, "Attending to God's address means gaining information that leads to transformation" (7). Finally, "The Spirit of God illumines hearts and minds so that readers can be transformed by the reading of Habakkuk" (8).

The first major section of the introduction is entitled "Hearing

Habakkuk," and it carefully establishes Thomas' positions on the "background" matters of the book. He provocatively asserts that the common reading of Habakkuk as a movement from fearfulness to faith is wrong, and that the traditional reconstruction of Habakkuk as one embedded vocationally in the cult is unconvincing. He avoids taking a dogmatic position on the literary unity of the book and is content to simply read it as a coherent final product regardless of its possible compositional stages. Thomas embraces the recent trend towards reading the Book of the Twelve as a unified corpus based on the clues found in some of the literature of Second Temple Judaism that the Minor Prophets were viewed as a single book, citing Sir 49:10; Acts 7:42; 4 Ezra 1:39–40; Mart. Ascen. Isa. 4:22. Although he once again rejects the excessive redactional hypotheses and overly specific historical reconstructions found in some sectors of this subfield, he nonetheless finds the collection of the Twelve to be crucial for interpreting Habakkuk, stating "I read Habakkuk within its own horizons and then correlate it to how it might be heard in the Minor Prophets to investigate how Habakkuk discloses God and orients its readers to him" (23).

Regarding the dating of the book and the related and convoluted issue of the identity of the anonymous evildoers in 1:2–4, Thomas states "It is best to read Habakkuk and his prayers against the context of the reign of Jehoiakim prior to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE" (28), with "the wicked as those who are presently Judahite" (28). With this choice of an appropriate *implied* context for the book, he avoids committing himself to a definite period in which the historical prophet Habakkuk either spoke or wrote these oracles, as he likewise avoids speculation on a context for the final editing of the book. (He makes a similarly shrewd move in the commentary itself: when faced with the question of whether or not 1:5–11 was originally an "answer" to 1:2–4, he simply states "Perhaps it [1:5–11] was written in a different period, or was originally a message given by the prophet to his contemporaries and only later set in its current literary position . . . the repetition of language between the sections serves as a literary tie . . . For this reason, they are intended to be read together" [86–87].)

The remaining four sections in the introduction address other topics. Thomas discloses that explicit systematic-theological presuppositions aid rather than hinder the task of interpretation, since they "usher us more deeply into the testimony of Scripture and thereby enable us to hear the voice of God better!" (33). When he states that he "aims at a productive dialectic between biblical theology and systematic theology" (34), it is important to note that he defines the former as encompassing everything from grammatical analysis to "the storied shape of Scripture in all its diversity and particularity, [which] presents a redemptive account . . . " (33). Readers who do not fully accept Thomas' overall project of theological interpretation may have difficulty seeing biblical theology as being so closely tied to the surface meaning of the text.

After reviewing some of the poetic devices found in Habakkuk, Thomas presents his summation of the three key theological themes of the book: (1) "The revelation of Yahweh, the creator God and covenant Lord" (38); (2) "Prayer, Divine Justice, and the Future Hope" (38) (including the problem of the apparently audacious tone of the prophet, which Thomas views as a sign of deep faith in the inviolability of God's covenant); and (3) "Faith and Faithfulness," (42) in which he provides his definition of the nature of faith as revealed in Habakkuk: "the faithfulness of God's people to him, which is their fitting response to God's faithfulness to his people" (43). Finally, Thomas reviews major trends in the interpretation and application of Habakkuk from the patristic period to the modern era.

The body of the commentary itself is ninety-five pages. This subsection is divided into three chapters, corresponding to the three chapters of Habakkuk. Each chapter begins with Thomas' translation of the text, a summary of the key content and theological implications of the passage, and a helpful chart displaying the locations of significant repeated lexemes throughout (readers of all levels will appreciate the inclusion of *both* the Hebrew text and transliteration). This is followed by a familiar verse-by-verse (sometimes word-by-word) exposition. Each chapter also contains an "excursus"; these address "The Power of Lament Prayer," "The Power of Silence," and "The Power of Memory,"

respectively.

Some soundings into the type of analysis Thomas provides are now appropriate. He summarizes the significance of the dialogue in Hab 1 as being that "it clarifies the special way that *suffering* and *prayer* can and should sit closely together" (61). Regarding the disputed topic of the meaning of the designator מַשָּׂא (glossed by most English versions as "oracle"; cf. "burden" in NKJV, ASV, and JPS) in 1:1, he rightfully points out the shortcomings of over-reliance on the likely etymological connection it shares with the verb נָשָׂא ("lift, bear"). However, his solution is to adopt the definition offered by Weis, who saw it as signifying a special prophetic genre that provided "God's intention in human affairs" as well as "direction for human response in the light of God's revelation" (Richard D. Weis, "A Definition of the Genre *Maśśā* in the Hebrew Bible." PhD diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1986; Thomas erroneously cites it as having been written at Emory University). Unfortunately, Thomas does not consider the relevant work of Mark J. Boda ("Freeing the Burden of Prophecy: *Maśśā* and the Legitimacy of Prophecy in Zech 9–14." *Biblica* 87 [2006] 338–57), who identifies severe flaws in Weis' analysis.

Thomas frequently cites cross-references to illuminate the various words and phrases in the text. Sometimes his selection criteria are puzzling. In the case of the prophet's accusation in 1:2 that he cried out, but YHWH did not hear, Thomas sensibly points to Exod 2:23–25 as the paradigm of YHWH hearing his people's outcry and responding. In the case of Habakkuk, then, "the pattern of deliverance is inverted" (64). While Thomas also cites Job 19:1, 7 as a helpful example of a similar expression of lament with numerous lexical parallels, more detailed comparative work would have showcased the uniqueness of Habakkuk's outcry even more dramatically. In Hab 1:2b, the prophet tells YHWH "you do not hear" (וְלֹא תִשְׁמָע). In *every* other negated instance of שָׁמַע ("hear") with YHWH as the subject, YHWH's "deafness" is a punishment for human sin, making Habakkuk's experience an extreme outlier (so Isa 1:15; 59:2; Jer 7:16; 11:11; etc). Thomas' employment of Job 19:7 actually obscures this point, since in this case Job is the clausal subject with a niphal

1cs (passive) verb, וְלֹא אֵעָנֶה (“I am not heard”). Thomas inexplicably translates this as “he does not answer” (64), obfuscating both the clausal subject and the verbal voice.

Similar concerns arise in Thomas’ treatment of the prophet’s declaration that he will wait upon his “guard post” or “watch-post” (מִשְׁמַרְתִּי) in 2:1. While he draws upon possible allusions to Ezekiel’s “watchman” imagery and considers whether or not this noun points to a cultic context, he fails to consider the evidence that it was actually a military term (see *DCH* 5:547). Furthermore, although he develops the contrast between the prophetic roles of Ezekiel and Habakkuk, he neglects the intriguing parallel uses of צָפָה (“keep watch”) in Hos 9:8 and Mic 7:7 for prophetic activity in times of national disobedience.

While Thomas’ identification of repeated lexemes throughout the book is useful, it unfortunately leaves out other types of devices that can tie sections together. For example while he notes that the verbs for “seeing” and nouns for “justice” and “violence” connect 1:2–4 with 1:5–11 (85), this investigation could be strengthened by incorporating linguistic concepts such as cohesive chains (in which case, YHWH and the prophet/audience are the only shared entities between the two speeches) or chain interaction (in which case, the clusters of YHWH/prophet/evil forces in 1:2–4 and the Chaldean/Chaldean’s power/victims in 1:5–11 are entirely dissimilar). His myopic focus on free-standing lexemes leads him to neglect subjects embedded within finite verbs. If these are taken into consideration, the contrasting portrayals of YHWH and the prophet/audience in the two speeches are quite intriguing (see David J. Fuller, *A Discourse Analysis of Habakkuk*. SSN 72. Leiden, Brill, 2019 [83–88]).

Thomas’ translations are clear and helpful, but are not intended to be philologically rigorous. Within ch. 1, for example, he renders 1:5c as “For I am doing a deed in your days” (59) without further discussion, despite the absence of any kind of 1cs pronoun in this clause in the MT, and he reads 1:14 as a question (apparently implying the interrogative pronoun from the previous verse through ellipsis) despite this being a minority opinion. At the same time, his translation leaves 1:17 as a statement rather than a question (61) despite his commentary mentioning the

parallel interrogative particles here and in v. 12 (90) (although this may simply be a misprint).

Regarding macro-level interpretive decisions, it is refreshing to see Thomas' detail and nuance when investigating the type of societal oppression described in 1:2–4. Rather than restricting himself to the usual "Judah or Babylon" question, he notes the ways that foreign taxation on the crown could have created a ripple effect of internal exploitation (76). Additionally, Thomas repeatedly throughout reiterates the conventional position that Hab 1 exposits how YHWH has raised Babylon to execute judgment on Judah for its sins. While this is nearly unanimously held among commentators, is it necessarily correct? Careful attention to the text shows that Babylon's aggression is in every case occurring against the nations, not Judah itself (1:12 notwithstanding). Even if canonical considerations lead one to read the book this way, should not its glaring absence from the surface of the text raise questions about the book's purpose or provenance? (Was Habakkuk more interested in the international instability arising from the fall of Assyria? Were these themes of sin and punishment no longer relevant to a post-exilic community learning from the prophet's faith journey?) Even Thomas does not sound entirely convinced as he states "Being a contemporary of Jeremiah, Habakkuk may understand the situation this way as well" (88).

Part two of *Habakkuk* is entitled "Theological Horizons," and it contains three chapters, encompassing fifty-five pages in total: "Major Themes in the Minor Prophet: Habakkuk and Biblical Theology," "Centering Shalom: Habakkuk and Prayer," and "Dead Ends to Doorways: Habakkuk and Spiritual Formation." As an example of Thomas' work in this section, the chapter on biblical theology begins by succinctly reading certain themes of Habakkuk within the Book of the Twelve as a whole, focusing on the "Destructive power of sin" (158), "Waiting on the Lord" (158), "Righteous suffering" (160), and "God, Israel, and the Nations" (161). He then works through select connections to the New Testament, focusing on "Future hope" (162), "Faith in the faithfulness of God" (164), "Righteous suffering" (167), and "The promised end" (167).

Regardless of any disagreements that could occur over individual interpretive decisions, there can be no doubt that *Habakkuk* is an important and worthy volume. Although it will not address all the questions that scholars will raise, it nonetheless contains much material that will be of value for academics, ministry leaders, and laypeople alike. Readers who are interested in biblical theology or the theological interpretation of Scripture will find this work particularly helpful and insightful.

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