



**Thomas Renz**

***The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah***

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Thomas Renz is the rector of a parish within the Church of England in Monken Hadley (part of Greater London). He also taught Old Testament and Hebrew at Oak Hill Theological College in London. In 2003 he published a monograph on *Colometry and Accentuation in Hebrew Prophetic Poetry*, which can be regarded as a preliminary study of the present commentary because of its focus on Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. In the series New International Commentary on the Old Testament, it replaces the commentary 1990 by O. Palmer Robertson, which was about half as long. The difference can be explained by the fact that Renz elaborately discusses the overload of recent secondary literature on these three prophets, such as the commentaries by Jörg Jeremias on Nahum (BKAT, 2019) and Heinz-Josef Fabry on Habakkuk (HThKAT, 2018). These two examples also show that Renz not confined himself to English publications. Nevertheless, it remains regrettable that one still gets the impression that only scholarly work written in English and German is to be taken seriously.

NICOT is a series that aims “to publish biblical scholarship of the highest quality” (xiii) in combination with speaking “from within that interpretative tradition known as evangelicalism,” that is, from “the conviction that the Bible is God’s inspired Word” (xiv). This is wholeheartedly endorsed by Renz, as he ends his preface with the “prayer ... that this commentary will help many to receive the texts of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah as truthful and authoritative, carrying divine authority and bringing good news related to *the* good news: the gospel about our Lord and

Savior, Jesus Christ” (xvi). Those who are primarily interested in a historical or literary approach of the Hebrew text should not fear, however, that what follows is a collection of devotional texts using the ancient prophecies merely as a springboard for Christian sermons. They will find a detailed presentation and well-considered evaluation of recent scholarly discussions. Lazy preachers who hope to find parts of their sermon on an exotic text spelled out for them in this commentary are challenged by Renz to take a better look at the prophetic texts in their historical, literary, and biblical contexts.

In the general introduction Renz discusses a number of issues that concern all three prophetic books. With regard to the formation of the individual books, he states that he is skeptical about far-reaching redaction-critical proposals. The same holds true for the theories about the assumed influences on the individual books of the Minor Prophets in the process of combining them to the Book of the Twelve. In his discussion he includes interesting observations about the way the Minor Prophets were transmitted in the ancient and medieval manuscripts. His conclusion after carefully evaluating recent research is that there is no convincing proof of extensive reshaping of the individual writings more than “that some thought went into arranging them in a certain order” (11). In fact, we seem to have come little further than Franz Delitzsch, who already a century and a half ago noted the keyword connections between some of the Minor Prophets. More fruitful, according to Renz, is the careful analysis of the structure of the individual books. In this connection, he also pays much attention to the masoretic accentuation, including the paragraph divisions.

The commentaries on the individual books consist of an introduction discussing the profile of the book, the development or historical setting of the book, and the rhetorical function of the book in its different contexts, followed by a translation with many detailed notes. Throughout the following commentary he offers a number of interesting excursions, including two on lions (“Different Hebrew terms for Lions” and “Lion Imagery in Assyria”) and two on “Traditional Paragraph Divisions.” With regard to the date and structure of the books, Renz avoids speculations about dating the books far away from the time the prophecies were ushered according to the texts themselves and about strophic or concentric structures not explicitly indicated in the texts.

Renz dates the book of Nahum after the fall of Thebes, which is mentioned in 3:8, in 664 or 663 BCE, and before the 612 fall of Nineveh, as predicted by Nahum. Because the prophet pictures Assyria at ease in 1:12, Renz assumes a date before the wars against Babylon and Elam in 652–648. With regard to the structure of the book Renz, considers a division into five relatively big units about “YHWH the avenging God” (1:2–10), “YHWH’s verdict” (1:12–14), the “description of the end of Nineveh” (2:2–14), the “announcement of the end of an evil city” (3:1–7), and the “ridicule of the city’s complacency and resources” (3:8–12), with 1:11 about the “accusation against the city” and 2:1 with the “announcement of deliverance,” as hinge verses. Eventually, however, he decides to follow in the commentary a simpler outline, since he is “not convinced that the author or redactor clearly had such a structure in mind” (35). This is typical of

Renz's careful approach, attempting to let the text speak for itself as much as possible. It can also be seen as the opposite of and a reaction to the work of scholars such as Duane Christensen, who in his commentary on Nahum (AYB, 2009) proposed a detailed rhetorical structure used by the author. It can be remarked that, whereas Christensen may have gone too far, Renz may be too reluctant in this matter. He could at least have worked out his own proposal, using it as a working hypothesis in his commentary on the individual texts.

As was indicated in the introduction, Renz does not find the theory about the formation of the Book of the Twelve helpful in explaining the book of Nahum and its relation to the other Minor Prophets. More interesting in his view is the close relation to the book of Jonah. They can be read "as chapters of the same book" (50). With regard to the place in the biblical canon, he states that Nahum's task is "to unmask the pretensions of military power as well as to depict the awful consequences of God's wrath" (54). Renz does not agree with those who accuse the prophet of condoning sexual violence against women. Texts such as 3:5–6, which pictures the destruction of Nineveh as stripping a woman, should be read within their cultural-historical context and as an inversion of the Assyrian war propaganda (56). In the very detailed exegetical discussions Renz cautiously takes over the suggestion that both the name of the prophet and the name of his residence Elkosh are pen names, relating respectively to the "comfort" the prophet is bringing and to the "severe God" who is going to avenge the evil of Nineveh. With regard to the much-debated acrostic in chapter 1, he accepts my observation that the final letters of the first bicola (vv. 1–3) spell the name of YHWH and together with the first letters of the bicola in verses 2–3 spell "I am YHWH." He also accepts my observation (I would have appreciated a reference here to my 1998 *ZAW* article) that the two words following the divine name in verse 3a begin with an *aleph* and the two words following the divine name in verse 3b begin with a *beth*, thus forming the beginning of an alphabetic acrostic. Against the increasing number of scholars who doubt the existence of an acrostic (note the development from BHK to BHS and BHQ), Renz rightly maintains that "this doubt asks for too much coincidence" (65).

Renz concludes the exegetical discussion of each pericope with a "reflection" in which he discusses theological issues and the way the ancient prophecy can be related to the situation of the modern reader. He does not shy away from bold statements. In this regard he is less reluctant than in the exegesis. He explicitly presents himself as a faithful Christian. When he states in his reflection on 1:1–10 that the avenging God "must be a God who is loving and good because the enemies of the God to whom the Bible testifies are enemies of love and goodness" (88), he adds in a footnote, "Readers who do not accept the truth of Scripture may well apply a hermeneutic of suspicion here, seeing the claims to love, goodness, and justice as a mere front to justify discrimination and violence. I am writing as someone who has come to accept the claims of Scripture as truthful." Reflections like this, not hesitating also to relate, for instance, the fall of Nineveh to the fall of communism, are found throughout the commentary and are of course open to discussion. The good thing is that most of the time Renz himself opens this discussion by describing the different

contexts in which the texts can be read and always leaves room for counterarguments by describing and evaluating different options.

With regard to the structure of the book of Habakkuk, Renz is less reluctant in presenting his own analysis as helpful for getting a grasp of the overall movement of the book. He divides the first part of the book (“the pronouncement,” 1:1–2:20) into “Habakkuk’s complaint” (1:2–17), the prophet’s “resolve to get an answer” (2:1), and “YHWH’s reply” (2:2–20). The second part (“the prayer,” 3:1–19) is divided into the opening (3:2), “a reflection of YHWH’s appearance” (3:3–7), “expression of marvel at YHWH’s attack on his enemies” (3:8–15), and “expression of confidence in the midst of distress (3:16–19a). The commentary uses the same sections, but without the indicated hierarchical ordering. Renz finds little convincing evidence of redactional activity. He only assumes that 1:5–11 is a later, polemic rewriting of an earlier prophecy such as Jer 5:15–17. The book can be dated to the period after the death of Josiah (609 BCE) and maybe before the deportation to Babylon in 597. The message of Habakkuk is best compared to the book of Lamentations: “In terms of their concern, Lamentations encourages those who have strayed from YHWH to repent; Habakkuk encourages the faithful to remain loyal to YHWH” (215). Due attention is paid to the famous verse 2:4b (translated by Renz as “but the righteous: in his faithfulness he will live”) and its use in the New Testament (284–98). The commentary on Hab 3 with its “fascinating mix of traditions and motifs” (332) starts with an interesting discussion of the phenomenon of prayer in the Hebrew Bible (334–43). Next to these more theological considerations one also finds elaborate discussions about formal matters, such as the composition of 3:3–7 (353–58). Then again, the commentary on Habakkuk is concluded by a hymn based on Hab 3 by a former student (418–19).

The most important discussion partners in the commentary on Zephaniah are Hubert Irsigler with his commentary in the series *Herders Theologischer Kommentar* (2002) and Marvin H. Sweeney’s 2003 commentary. In most cases Renz sides with the latter against the former, for instance, when he states that he is “disinclined to isolate smaller units from the overarching literary context of the book of Zephaniah” (425). Only 3:6–7 is explained as a later addition (595–97). In contrast to the books of Nahum and Habakkuk, Renz finds no clear indication of any kind of intricate and rhetorically significant design. The outline he uses “has as much to do with the rhetoric of the commentary as the rhetoric of Zephaniah” (431). It is merely a tool to highlight the features that the commentator finds important. The text is divided into nine units following the superscription: “declaration of sweeping judgments” (1:2–6), “announcement of the Day of YHWH” (1:7–18), “call to submit to God’s judgment” (2:1–4), “announcements of the fate of nations” (2:5–15), “Jerusalem will share the fate of nations” (3:1–5), “reaffirmation of comprehensive judgment” (3:9–13), “celebration of life beyond judgment” (3:14–17), and “promise of salvation” (3:18–20). According to Renz, the most likely date for the book is somewhere between 640 and 620 BCE. The absence of any reference to Josiah’s reforms or to the growth of Egyptian hegemony in the region fits to this early date. Much attention is paid to the Day of YHWH, especially in the reflection discussing the way Zephaniah’s prophecy was and is applied (512–517). Renz sees Zephaniah’s

particular contribution to biblical theology in three areas: “first, the comprehensiveness and finality of divine judgment; second, the relationship between poverty and humility; third, the universal outlook for the people of God” (449).

In accordance with the format of the series, the book is concluded by extensive indices of authors, of subjects, of scripture (including all references to the three books!) and (the few mentioned) other ancient sources, and of Hebrew words. The book is well edited. I only found some minor flaws. In some cases it is not clear where an excursus ends (7?, 81?), and in the rendering of the palistrophic structure on page 627 the indentation is not correct.

I highly recommend this commentary both for in-depth exegesis and for the application of the prophetic texts.