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The Book of Ruth, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah

David J. Reimer

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The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah

Palmer Robertson

The New International Commentary on the Old Testament,
R.K. Harrison, General Editor

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990

x + 357 pp. U.S. \$28.95

The Book of Ruth

Robert L. Hubbard, Jr.

The New International Commentary on the Old Testament,
R.K. Harrison, General Editor

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988

xiv + 317 pp. U.S. \$26.95

No matter how well conceived and implemented a commentary series, it is inevitable that individual volumes will vary in quality. Nowhere is this more clear than in the two volumes under review here, both from the New International Commentary on the Old Testament (NICOT) series. With general oversight from R.K. Harrison, the series is conservative in orientation. Individual volumes attend both to technical aspects of the text as well as to its "homiletical/devotional" implications. The series format is less structured than that found elsewhere: the author's translation (technical details found in footnotes) is simply followed by the verse-by-verse commentary. While this approach cuts down on repetition, it also makes it more difficult to find the *kind* of discourse of interest. Multiple indices conclude the commentaries and enhance their usefulness.

Robertson's offering is the "bad news" of this pair. At first blush, Robertson's assignment seems a mixed blessing: three obscure books from the Minor Prophets, books that at the same time are under-studied and yet full of possibilities and potential for the commentator. All three, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, come from the twilight days between the fall of the Assyrian Empire, the rise of the Babylonian, and the growing threat this holds for the harassed state of Judah before its fall of 587 B.C.E. Nahum is concerned wholly with the fall of Assyria (Nineveh, its capital city); Habakkuk with the demise of Judah; and Zephaniah alone of the Minor Prophets is a sort of "Major Prophet" in miniature, its structure reflecting those of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Though not well known, then, these books hold much of interest to historian and pastor alike.

All the more lamentable, then, that this volume is an opportunity missed. On the literary level, Robertson's analyses of both macro- and micro- structures consistently miss the mark. His divisions of the prophetic works into sections run roughshod over the inherent disjunctions of the text so that the visions of Habakkuk and the prophecies of Zephaniah are

obscured. When analyzing poetry, Robertson shows no awareness of the wealth of insight recently gained in several important works on Hebrew poetry; nor does he evidence any intuitive feel for the poetry he reads. His superficial divisions into *a*'s, *b*'s and *c*'s cloud rather than clarify or deepen the workings of these poetic lines. On the technical level, things are no better. Despite Robertson's obviously extensive experience, his understanding of textual transmission remains curiously lacking. The presentation of historical matters is confused throughout with the discourse of theology at best and, more often, trite moralizing. Examples are legion; one will be mentioned. Robertson wonders why Josiah's reforms did not reach into his own family. The answer? Josiah, it is pointed out, was living a life of polygamy by the age of 15. This seems sufficient to account for his apostate offspring (p. 12). So what of "theology" proper? Robertson's introduction has two sections on "Theological Perspective": the first is on messianism (which—as Robertson duly notes—is absent in these books!); the second on the centrality of God. The combination strikes me as alternately unhelpful and unimaginative.

In sum, Robertson operates with a pervasive myopia, so that in looking at the text through his eyes it must be asked whether the text has been seen at all.

High time, then, to turn to the good news. If Robertson's volume represents a nadir for the NICOT series, Hubbard's must be considered among those that provide the zenith. Hubbard converses with a wide range of scholarship on Ruth and engages with it in a way that draws the reader into the quest for meaning of this tale. Hubbard's sensibilities appear to be attuned to those of the narrator. Rather than supply facile judgments from a world external to the text, Hubbard queries the narrator for leads and clues about the world of the text. A fine example can be found in the exchange between Naomi and Ruth, while mother and daughter-in-law are on the road from Moab to Judah. Naomi wants Ruth to return to her land and her gods (1:15). Hubbard notes that the narrator is untroubled by the implication that Moab's god (Chemosh) is as good as that of Israel's (Yahweh; p. 116). Similarly, Hubbard is able to point out the aggressively sexual nature of Naomi's plan for Ruth to woo Boaz without embarrassment or judgment (pp. 196–206). In these two cases, Hubbard shows an openness to the theological and moral world of the text without the sort of trivializing that characterizes the volume reviewed above. As for Ruth itself, it displays the opposite potential for theologizing than that of the trio of prophets just considered. There is little by way of direct theological intent in the tale, little even in the setting of the book. Rather, as a story of human faithfulness and divine approval, the theology *is* the story, so that Hubbard's attention to the narrative itself is all the more appropriate. It is at this point, however, that my only complaint about the book surfaces. Hubbard divides the narrative into small bits for comment. Better, it seems to me, to look at the story in its larger movements (clearly connected as they are), rather than in the more atomistic fashion that is employed here.

Even with this detracting feature, Hubbard's volume remains an important resource for any wishing insight into this beautiful and well-known story.

This tale of two commentaries, then, underscores the obvious: any commentary series is bound to show some unevenness. If Robertson on Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah is the "worst of times" to be avoided, Hubbard on Ruth represents the "best of times": welcome and worth seeking out.

David J. Reimer
Wilfrid Laurier University

Prophetic Oracles of Salvation

Claus Westermann

Translator Keith Crim

Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991

283 pp. with bibliography

This book is a welcome companion to Westermann's now classic *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, 1967 (reprinted with new forward 1991; original 1964). Since that work dealt only with the forms in which judgment was announced, it was incumbent on the new emeritus professor at the University of Heidelberg to investigate the prophetic salvation oracles. Westermann does a thorough job of what he sets out to accomplish, "to develop from a survey of all the prophetic oracles of salvation a grouping of these oracles on the basis of their structure and content" (15). In a well-organized fashion, he presents four distinctive types of salvation oracles. The first group, the major group, is an unconditional proclamation of salvation. Chiefly in Deutero-Isaiah, this literary form has its origin in worship as God's response to the lament of the individual (65). Westermann proposes that Deutero-Isaiah developed the form of the oracle of salvation by analogy to the oracle of salvation to the individual (especially the king in Assyrian texts, p. 42). The prophet creatively adapts these forms to proclaim the liberation of Israel from Babylonian captivity. In addition, in these oracles the salvation announced for Israel is open to the people of all nations and the regaining of political power and influence for Israel is not proclaimed.

The oracles of group 2 follow the pattern "proclamation of judgment on the enemy"—proclamation of deliverance for Judah-Israel, with the full weight placed on the destruction of the enemy.

The third group of salvation oracles (termed nonprophetic) is characterized by its conditional quality. The new possibility is conditional upon obedience to God's commands. Westermann proposes that oracles from the mouth of the prophets which contain exhortations and warnings were derived from the deuteronomic updating of the prophetic words (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15-18) after the collapse of the nation (587 BC).