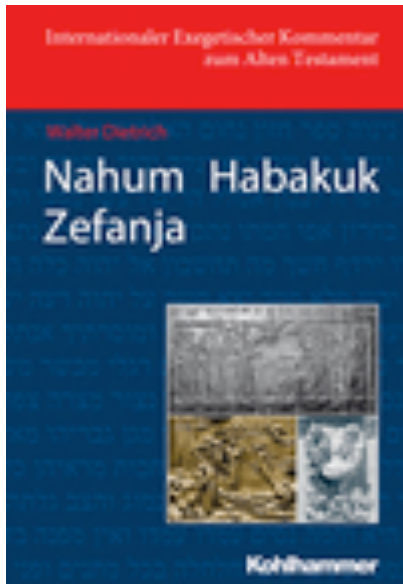


RBL 03/2016



Walter Dietrich

Nahum Habakuk Zefanja

Internationaler Exegetischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament

Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2014. Pp. 291. Hardcover.
€69.99. ISBN 9783170206588.

Klaas Spronk
Protestant Theological University
Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Whoever expects to get a scholarly sound and up-to-date commentary on these three prophetic books in this refreshing new series written by an excellent German scholar will not be disappointed. Walter Dietrich, professor emeritus of the University of Berne, appears to have found time and energy next to his ongoing work on the books of Samuel (especially in the *Biblischer Kommentar*) to give his insightful remarks on these books of a very different genre and on the recent history of their interpretation. He may have been inspired by the interesting, modern, multiperspective format of this new series, the *International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament*.

This series is presented as international, ecumenical, and combining the synchronic and diachronic approach. It is international not only because each volume will be published in both a German and an English version (the English translation of the present volume is in press) but also because the authors come from many countries. The emphasis, however, is on western Europe and North America. There are no contributions scheduled from scholars from the other two-thirds of the world. This could have been compensated for by at least a conversation with scholars from Africa, Asia, or South America or with Eastern Orthodox colleagues via their publications. In the present commentary, however, one looks in vain for such an intercultural approach. More attention is given to the way in which these prophetic books can play their part in modern theological discussions, for

instance, when it comes to the relation between religion and violence. There are also some interesting references to the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of particular texts.

The distinctiveness of the commentary lies primarily in the way it combines the synchronic and diachronic perspectives. This can be found on the level of the three books together (as part of the Twelve Prophets), on the book level, and in the interpretation of each pericope. Although Dietrich devotes much attention to a precise description of the text in the form as it is transmitted by the Masoretes, he apparently prefers the diachronic approach as the best way to understand the text. In general, it can be remarked that the editors of the series seem to be too optimistic when they suggest that it is possible to reach some kind of synthesis. This is illustrated in this commentary by a number of occasions where Dietrich refrains from a synchronic structural analysis of a large unit because he is of the opinion that it is a combination of layers from different times.

After a general introduction about the place of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah within the book of the Twelve Prophets, each book is discussed in a way that can be expected from a scholarly commentary. Dietrich offers his own translation, followed by a thorough discussion of the translation issues and text-critical problems. Along the way the reader receives good surveys of the recent scholarly literature, although the emphasis is on German and English publications of the last fifteen years. Dietrich offers many summaries of the discussion of specific themes with sober but fair evaluations. He does not hesitate to present views that are at variance with his own or to leave matters open. In some cases he only gives lists of recent literature on the subject where a reader one might have wished to find a discussion of the relevant arguments, for instance, on the relation between YHWH's jealousy and monotheism (214) or on the Philistines (230).

The books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah are taken together because their prophecies are related to the seventh century BCE. Dietrich pays due attention to the recent discussions about the formation of the book of the Twelve Prophets. He assumes that the books of Nahum and Habakkuk were combined in the early Persian period (with addition of the hymns at the beginning of Nahum and the end of Habakkuk). Later this book was added to the book of the Four (Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah). In this final phase of the formation of the book of the Twelve, in the Hellenistic period, the editor and the readers of the texts would no longer have had any knowledge of Assyria and Babylonia as different empires. Like the later Greek historians, they would have regarded them as one and the same dreadful enemy of the distant past. This would explain why Zephaniah could be placed after Habakkuk.

In the case of all three books Dietrich assumes three or four layers reaching from the period of the original prophets in the seventh century to the Persian period. With regard

to the structure of the individual book as a whole Dietrich suggests to read all three of them as drama (22, 94, 190). He is very positive about the literary quality of these dramas, but he does not explicitly attribute this to the final editor of the text. It is noteworthy that Dietrich does not seem to be convinced by any of the attempts of a synchronic structural analysis of the individual books, as these have been offered by a number of scholars. He notes some clear cases of concentric or other formal literary structures on a small scale, but on the level of chapters, let alone whole books, he is very reluctant. He does mention the most important studies on the structural analysis of these books in his list of secondary literature, but he does not take up the discussion. He ignores the suggestions about overall concentric structures in the book of Nahum, for instance, by Loren Bliese in his article in the *Journal of Translation and Textlinguistics* in 1995 or in my commentary of 1997. The same can be said with regard to the work of Gert Prinsloo on the structure of the book of Habakkuk in the form as it is handed over by the Masoretes (in *Pericope* 7, 2009; see also the work of Bliese in the *Journal of Translation and Textlinguistics* in 1999). He does give a short survey of the suggestions by other scholars for well-considered structure of the book of Zephaniah (189–90) but only to reject them with the argument that the final part of the book stems from a later period.

Dietrich is brief and clear in his evaluation of the synchronic approach of the book of Nahum by Duane Christensen (Anchor Bible, 2009). With hardly concealed disdain he gives a short description of his “archaeomusicological” approach with the advice: “Mag dem folgen, wer will” (24). Christensen’s attention for the word in the middle of the book and for the number of words of the book as part of the Book of the Twelve evokes the outcry “Auch so lässt sich Redaktionskritik treiben!” (72). Although doubts concerning Christensen’s methods will be shared by many (see also my *RBL* review, http://bookreviews.org/pdf/7296_7943.pdf), this cynicism should not shut one’s eyes to the fact that likewise the mainstream, primarily diachronic approach by Dietrich is not beyond speculation. His aversion of the work of Christensen may also have misguided Dietrich in too easily dismissing some interpretations. Dietrich does not agree with Christensen, for instance, that the name of the place of origin of Nahum, Elkosh, could very well have been selected by the author “for literary reasons.” According to Dietrich, this testifies of “übertriebene Skepsis” (36 n. 37). Not only does this qualification not fit Christensen; it also ignores the fact that the name of the unknown city Elkosh can be easily translated as “God is severe,” which perfectly fits the context.

Another case of an unfounded dismissal concerns the well-known discussion about the acrostic in the first verses of the book of Nahum. Dietrich takes the common position that there is a partial alphabetic acrostic running to the letter *kaph* in verse 8. Without comment he notes the suggestion by Adam van der Woude of a message hidden in this acrostic, but he strongly opposes Christensen’s proposal building on the one by van der

Woude, especially the suggestion that it is no coincidence that the final letters of the first four lines form the Tetragrammaton: “Das scheint mir doch etwas viel der Geheimwissenschaft” (51). Here Dietrich himself may have been too skeptical. The mention of the name of YHWH in this place accords very well with the emphasis on this name in the first verses. Moreover, one could point to the fact that this literary device of a name acrostic via the letters at the end of the lines is also known in Mesopotamian texts from the same period (see my recent contribution to this topic, also mentioned by Dietrich in his list of literature, in *Pericope* 7, 2009).

All this does not alter the fact that, as was indicated in the first lines of this review, this commentary can be welcomed as an important contribution to the ongoing discussion on the analysis of these books, both synchronic and diachronic .