

RBL 12/2018

Neuer Stuttgarter Kommentar
Altes Testament

Oskar Dangl

Das Buch Habakuk

25/1 Verlag Katholischer Bibelwerk

Oskar Dangl

Das Buch Habakuk

Neuer Stuttgarter Kommentar - Altes Testament

Volume: 25/1

Stuttgart: Bibelwerk, 2014. Pp. 151. Paper. €19.95. ISBN 9783460072510.

Csaba Balogh

Protestant Theological Institute of Cluj-Napoca

The Neuer Stuttgarter Kommentar series is written by scholars for readers interested in critical, exegetical questions but without any knowledge of the biblical languages. In line with this general concept, the volume contains no footnotes or endnotes. Scholars contributing to the interpretation of the prophecy are rarely mentioned by name, and discussion is limited to a generalizing presentation of some basic standpoints. The short bibliography mentioning merely six commentaries and ten articles (mostly in German) should not mislead the critical reader, as the author is clearly well-aware of the major issues and debates that play a role within the research on Habakkuk, far beyond his limited list of suggested further readings.

Writing a commentary with one eye for critical issues and with another for interested lay readers with no knowledge of biblical languages is always a demanding task, but it becomes an almost impossible undertaking in a case such as the book of Habakkuk, insofar as most problems of this controversial small composition are closely tied to (Hebrew) textuality. Although I did occasionally have doubts regarding the accessibility of the topic and the language of exposition for the general reader, one must ultimately recognize that Oskar Dangl did attain the purpose of any serious commentary with whatever audience in view, namely, to raise interest in a close reading and more text-focused study of the difficult prophetic compositions.

This commentary is subdivided into three main parts. It begins with an introductory section dealing with the structure of the book, textual criticism, literary criticism and compositional analysis, historical background, form criticism, and hermeneutical issues (9–24). The introduction is followed by a textual commentary on the prophecy of Habakkuk, in four subsections: the heading in Hab 1:1; the dialogue of the prophet with God in 1:2–2:5; the woe cries in 2:6–20; and the prayer of Habakkuk in 3:1–19. Each subsection opens with a general introduction to the pericope, followed by a detailed explanation of the biblical text (25–130). The third part of the commentary briefly discusses issues related to the history of interpretation of the Hebrew prophecy in the Septuagint, the Qumran Peshier of Habakkuk, the New Testament, the (Roman Catholic) liturgical tradition, music, visual arts and contemporary readings. The commentary includes three excursuses: (1) a basic discussion on social-scientific views of violence, considered throughout by Dangl as the major theme of Habakkuk; (2) a canonical understanding of the topic of faith in prophetic literature, connected to Hab 2:4b; (3) the issue of divine violence in relation to Hab 3. The commentary closes with a short, annotated bibliographical list with titles from 1975 to 2011.

Dangl adopts basically a historical-critical approach to the biblical text. Although he takes the final form as a starting point seriously, he does not refrain from discussing issues related to the eventual historical aspects, the process of literary composition of the book, textual development, later insertions, and the like. Yet he also integrates insights from the social sciences into his exegesis, especially the views of J. Galtung and R. Girard on violence. Beyond the textual commentary, this book occasionally attempts to connect the biblical text with the social world of the modern reader living in the context of globalism, capitalism, and militarism.

The commentary discusses the Hebrew text of the prophecy in constant relation to the German Einheitsübersetzung (Unified Translation), of Roman Catholic background, toward which Dangl is occasionally critical. This nature of the relationship between the translation version and the commentary is not clear to me. Some of the unavoidable, but nonetheless methodologically debatable, consequences of close relationship between a commentary with its own critical author, on the one side, and a biblical translation with its translator(s), on the other, is visible at several points. For instance, Dangl argues for the rhetorical coherence of Hab 2:4–5 and 2:6–20 (13, 88). Nevertheless, Hab 2:6–20 is still treated as an independent subsection because that is the way this passage appears in the Einheitsübersetzung. Similarly, in the case of Hab 1:2–2:5, Dangl seems to adhere to exegetical views that differ substantially from the interpretation of the translators working on the Einheitsübersetzung, such as with respect to the connections of Hab 2:1–5 (14) or

the rhetorical role of Hab 1:5–11 with respect to the previous verses (45–52).¹ Current studies on the delimitation of biblical texts expose the importance of sectioning (markers) for the interpretive process. I wonder whether the incongruencies between translation and explanation with respect to delimitation would contribute positively to clarifying the meaning of the prophecy for its intended readers. This, of course, is a question to be addressed to the editor of the series rather than author of the commentary, who felt himself free to present and argue his own standpoint.

At the basis of Dangl's view on Habakkuk stands his conviction that the text of the prophecy is not simply difficult to grasp but intentionally ambiguous and left open to several possible readings (29, 43, 61, 69). This hermeneutical conviction naturally requires a great deal of self-control from the exegete, who should hardly pretend to offer anything more than a possible interpretation of the ancient text. One should to question, however, whether this ambiguity should be intrinsically related to the canonical value of the book² or whether vagueness directly involves a certain abstracted form of criticism against a system of worldviews,³ rather than concrete entities, as Dangl suggests.

No scholar familiar with Habakkuk's peculiar language questions that this prophetic book is built on polysemy, playfulness, inconclusiveness, far beyond many other prophetic-poetic texts from the Bible. Yet the question remains how far the rhetorical value of this lack of clarity should be emphasized. On the one hand, this conjecture might help Dangl to make sense of the divergent modern approaches to the identity of the righteous and the wicked in Hab 1:2–4 (whether it refers to two groups within Judah or to antagonism on an international level, Judah versus Babylon). On the other hand, his presupposition of intentional vagueness embedded within the prophecy itself appears to be tested by the rather concrete reference to the Chaldeans in the immediately following Hab 1:6—which on its turn would be reinterpreted later by a Qumranic community by a *symbolic* term, Kittim, in relation to the Roman world power. Would an author plainly disclosing one of its characters want to conceal the other? I believe that Dangl's inclination to treat the prophecy as promoting an openness of meaning is rather a postmodern projection that becomes doubtful in view of the bigger picture.

1. See the discrepancy between the heading of the subsection 1:5–11 and the interpretation of this pericope by the author.

2. "Als heilig kann ein Text nur gelten, wenn er nicht eindeutig ist. Gewinnt er Eindeutigkeit, verliert er seine Heiligkeit." (29): A text can be considered holy only insofar as it is ambiguous. If it gains clarity, it loses its holiness.

3. "Das Fehlen einer eindeutigen Füllung der Leerstelle deutet wiederum darauf hin, dass es primär um Systemkritik geht, die verborgene, strukturelle Gewalt aufdeckt und anklagt." (61): The absence of an unambiguous filling for this blank space indicates again that what this is about, in the first place, is criticism revealing and accusing a system for the hidden, structural violence.

Much depends, however, on how the literary and rhetorical relationship between the subsections of the prophecy is understood. In spite of its constant pursuit of accessible language, ahead of each section Dangl presents useful summaries with a fair amount of information on the critical issues involved. Restraining himself from large-scale relocations (like Seybold), he appears to read the prophecy as a growing book, though what this exactly means is unfortunately not clarified. Habakkuk 1 is, in his view, not a double dialogue between the prophet and God, as often presupposed (so also by the *Einheitsübersetzung*), but an intensifying monologue (*Steigerung*) composed of three complaints (*Klage*) of the prophet (47). Thus the much-debated Hab 1:5–11 is not a divine answer in view of the injustice described in 1:2–4 but a further complaint concerning the circumstances aggravating on an international level. The Chaldeans are not the means of correction but rather the reason of injustice (47). No explanation is offered how the content of 1:5–11 fits the complaint genre, an aspect that he does address with respect to the initial verses (39). He considers 1: 12–17 a third step where the threat of destruction involves all nations, just and unjust alike (53). With respect to the debated identity of the righteous and the wicked, Dangl appears to presuppose a development of this idea from inner-Judaean circumstances in 1:2–4 toward an international scale situation in 1:5–11 and 12–17 (68). How exactly this development relates to the compositional process of the book does not emerge from the commentary.

Dangl considers Hab 2 the first explicit reference to a change of speakers (63). He does not avoid concise discussion of weighty semantic problems in these verses, albeit struggling with the limitations imposed by the specific audience of the commentary.⁴ He usually adheres to the Masoretic Text but does not always clarify the consequences of this. As a result, the reader wonders what exactly is the base text assumed in Hab 2:1, where Dangl follows the MT *’āšīb* “I shall respond”⁵ instead of the usual emendation proposal “he responds.” At the same time, Dangl quite strikingly maintains that *toḥaktī* alludes to a condemning prophecy that Habakkuk is supposed to speak as soon as it is revealed to him. Leaving now the soundness of his interpretation of the term *toḥakat*, as well as the theological problem raised by this reading beyond consideration (Habakkuk is supposed to have been familiar with the genre of his message *before* its actual revelation), it remains rather unclear how the ellipsis in his translation of the phrase (what I shall answer...) could be filled in a way that can be justified both syntactically and morphologically.

A rather peculiar opinion is put forward with respect to Hab 2:4b. The phrase translated by him as “the just shall live by his faith(fulness)” is regarded as a later interpolation,

4. “Der von EÜ mit ‘Klage’ übersetzte Terminus...” (71): the term translated by ‘complaint’ in the *Einheitsübersetzung*.

5. “Was ich ... entgegenen werde” (71): what I shall answer ...

rhetorically disturbing the continuing line of thought in 2:4a+5 and lacking a proper parallel for *ṣaddîq* (68, 73). The interpolator must have had 1:12 in view, more specifically its MT version, which Dangel renders as “wir wollen nicht sterben = we will/do not want to die” (58). This interrelatedness suggests that the rhetorical contention of Hab 2:4b is the promise of life (shall live) (69). At the same time, it appears quite striking that despite assumptions for a later derivation of this text, Dangel mobilizes considerable efforts to argue that the rhetoric of this later interpolation is coherent with the original intention of the prophecy, for when he defines *ʿemunā* in relation to Isa 30:15 as abandoning violence (*auf Gewalt verzichten*, 76–77), he seems to presuppose the cogency of the message within the two textual layers of Habakkuk.

In view of the available evidence (esp. the Qumran peshar on Habakkuk) and scholarly discussions, Dangel considers Hab 3 an integral part of the book. He emphasizes the close rhetorical connections between the vision in Hab 3 and the vision promoted in 2:3 (110). The historical and compositional details of the commentator’s view remain here, too, reduced to a minimum. The textual difficulties are also generally, and in view of the readers, understandably ignored. What is discussed rather extensively is the theological aspect raised by Hab 3: a divinity arriving to help his people with intimidating and overwhelming power.

Violence is the major theme that one encounters continuously within this Habakkuk commentary. One may have the impression that the topic functioned as a kind of hermeneutical master key for Dangel, presumed to open every individual text. I have the impression that Dangel injects considerable effort to separate a (normative) prophetic worldview and violence from each other. For this reason, in the woe cries of Hab 2:6–20, the powerful repercussions of the former deeds of Chaldaea are argued to have been free of a *direct* divine involvement. In his interpretation, Chaldaean violence was supposed to be tackled with within the boundaries of the ancient world of automatism and interrelatedness between acts and consequences (*Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang*, 76–77).

Within this interpretive frame, the militant theophany of Hab 3 causes problems, as divine power discloses itself here more directly than anywhere else in this book. A small excursus addresses the modern reader facing this topic. Dangel concludes that the explicit exposure of divine power is to be explained by the specific circumstances of the praying person. The life-threatening, existential danger accounts for the language used in his prayer, evoking an intimidating deity. This language, unusual as it might seem for a modern reader, helps the believer to deal with his or her fears of death. Such language is acceptable only in analogous situations, as the prayer of the victim (122–23). Whether Dangel’s approach accounts for all similar texts in the Bible is a point beyond discussion. Nonetheless, one has the impression that Dangel treats powerful divine appearance as such

a manifestation of violence, even though the specific Hebrew term *ḥāmās* does not appear in this context, and even though *ḥāmās* is more explicitly connected by Habakkuk to lawlessness rather than to manifestations of power.

A short discussion on later traditions building on the book of Habakkuk in the final section of the book should prove useful for the intended audience.

Despite a few critical comments above, this is a solid exegetical work of its type, with impressive profundity, respect for the text, seriously dealing with literary and historical questions, and aiming to preserve this difficult prophetic book among the favorites of the Old Testament. Beyond any textual insight, it is this spirit that deserves to be admired in this commentary.