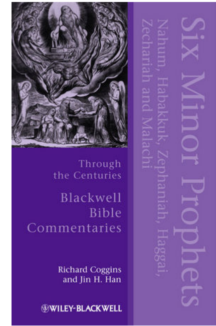
Six Minor Prophets Through the Centuries: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, by Richard Coggins and Jin H. Han



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This book, part of the Blackwell Bible Commentaries series which focuses on reception history of the Old and the New Testaments, explores the uses of the latter six books of the Minor Prophets / the Book of the Twelve (Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) in Jewish and Christian contexts throughout the ages. It provides a fascinating journey of discovery and can be read, unlike most other commentaries, from cover to cover. The key idea of the series is to produce verse-by-verse commentaries which highlight a representative selection of interpretations of the given verse from written sermons, commentaries, and other theological works. The selection is, of course, subjective, yet the guiding principle of the series is to emphasize interpretations that have been especially influential and/or historically significant. In my review, I will do the same, i.e., highlight what I perceive to be the most noteworthy interpretations.

The present book consists of two independent parts. As mentioned in the forward, Richard Coggin's commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi was already written when Jin H. Han began his work on Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. This division of labour is reflected in many ways, both in terms of content and in terms of structure. It does not detract from the value of the book, but it explains the differences in style and content. In particular, the reader is given significantly more information about the first

three books than about the latter three books, especially noticeable when taking into account the relative difference in length of the books in question, with the fourteen chapters of Zechariah taking up fewer pages (150–86) than the three chapters of Habakkuk (36–91).

The first part, written by Han, explores the first three of the aforementioned prophetic books. Han begins each of the three chapters with a short introduction and a survey of the use of the pertinent book in literature, the arts, and worship. He then provides a verse-by-verse commentary of the book in question.

Beginning with Nahum, Han notes the early tendency of reading Nahum and Jonah together, a practice inspired by their shared focus on Nineveh. Primarily Christian exegetes used the book of Nahum as a lesson for Christians concerning the doom that awaited those who turned their back on God. In contrast, most modern interpreters focus their attention on the theological problems inherent in Nahum, namely the sanctioning of divine violence and its obvious joy over Nineveh's downfall, and highlight how these aspects render the book difficult from a modern, ethical perspective. Other modern commentators point out that the book celebrates the victory of the downtrodden Israelites over their oppressors, and proclaims divine justice for those having suffered injustice by the hands of evil-doers.

Han then provides a small sample of references to the fall of Nineveh in literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century, and a longer survey of the use of Nahum in art. As in literature, the focus in art is on the fall of Nineveh. Throughout the last two millennia, the prophet Nahum has been depicted standing with a scroll in his hand, against the backdrop of the city of Nineveh in various stages of destruction. Turning to Nahum in worship, Han discusses its use as *haftarah* reading in different Jewish traditions, and, likewise, its (limited) use in Christian lectionaries.

In the actual commentary, Han goes systematically through the text of Nahum. Han devotes approximately the same amount of space to Jewish and Christian exegetes. Yet, the reader perceives that he is more familiar with the Christian material. Whereas the writings of the Church Fathers are often cited directly from the primary sources, Han's use of the mediaeval Jewish exegetes appears to depend on English translations or even secondary literature. For example, Rashi is cited (18–19), yet the book listed is not his commentary in the Rabbinic Bible but Frank Talmage's book *David Kimhi: The Man and the Commentaries* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976). In contrast, Han cites the *Midrashim* directly.

Turning to the book of Habakkuk, Han discusses its two-part structure, with chapters 1–2 containing laments and divine oracles which deal with issues of theodicy, and chapter 3 consisting of a prayer which celebrates complete trust in God. Han notes the textual evidence from Qumran (*Pesher Habakkuk*) which may support an original version of the book consisting of only chapters 1–2. In literature, Han notes the importance of Habakkuk as a text which promotes spiritual renewal. It has also been used in the twentieth century to express critique of excessive use of violence. For example, the wolf imagery in Hab 1:8 appears in several poems in the English language.

As to the arts, Han notes how the reference in Hab 3:2b that "You will be known between two living creatures" connected Habakkuk to Jesus, which led to the appearance of the prophet in more than one nativity scene as the prophet who foresaw the crucifixion. The prophet Habakkuk is also often depicted alongside Daniel. The juxtaposition of these two characters is based on the addition to the book of Daniel known as "Bel and the Dragon" which in the LXX is introduced as "from the prophecy of Habakkuk."

In worship, Habakkuk appears in Jewish prayer books as part of the prayer "I believe" (*ʾani maʾamin*) which is based on Maimonides's *Thirteen Principles of Faith*. Texts from Habakkuk have also been used in various Jewish communities as haftarah reading. In Christian tradition, Habakkuk appears in several lectionary traditions. In addition, Hab 3 has been the source of inspiration of various hymns.

In the actual commentary, Han highlights at length the importance of Hab 2:4b ("to live by faith") in Christian tradition, including an excursus on the reception history of the verse in Augustine's works. In the same manner, Han surveys the use of Hab 3:2b in the writings of the Church Fathers.

In the case of Zephaniah, Han notes that the book is never cited in the New Testament and there are overall very few direct citations of the book in the literature of the first centuries CE. A badly damaged *pesher Zephaniah* has been found among the Qumran texts, bearing witness to the use of and relevance of the biblical book in the Qumran community. Likewise, the so-called *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, probably written in Greece or Egypt, attests to the early significance of the book. In Jewish tradition, the Targums show particular interest in the prophet's conception of God's transcendence, whereas in Christian tradition, the Church Fathers maintain that Zephaniah's prophecy of promise and threat came true in the life of Jesus. In modern study, Han notes a tendency to criticize Zephaniah, primarily for his perceived failings in terms of poetic ability and lack of independent imaginary power (the book

depends to a large extent on previous prophetic traditions). At the same time, Zephaniah is applauded for his sheer religious passion and persistence as he emphasizes God's righteousness and the need for social justice.

Zephaniah does not hold a prominent place in art. In contrast, the book has had a significant impact on music, primarily due to Zeph 1:14–18 and its theme of "the Day of Wrath" (v. 15), in Latin known as *Dies irae* (from the Vulgate). The *Dies irae* appears in many requiems, ranging from those of Mozart and Verdi to the more modern ones by Vaughan Williams and Benjamin Britten, as well as in other types of music. In this capacity as part of the Requiem Mass, as well as in other forms, Zeph 1:14–18 has been used frequently in church liturgy. The *Dies irae* has also made its mark in literature. For example, the choir in Faust sings "*Dies irae, dies illa*" to portray Gretchen's fear as the Evil Spirit drives her to suicidal despair. Another example is its prominent place in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The command in Zeph 3:14–20 to Daughter Zion to rejoice has also had an impact in the liturgy of the church, being part of many triumphant hymns.

In the actual commentary, Han highlights, among many other things, how the reference to Cush in 3:10 has had an impact in understanding the role of the African church. Cyril of Jerusalem cites Zeph 3:10 as a proof-text in his discussion of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8.

The second part, written by Coggins, has a different feel to it and a different layout. Coggins opens with an introduction devoted to the history of understanding the links between Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, as well as the editorial process which formed the Book of the Twelve.

Turning to the book of Haggai, Coggins opens with a fairly substantial general discussion of general aspects of its reception history. He notes that Haggai plays no part in Jewish liturgy and there are no obvious connections between Haggai and the New Testament. In fact, Christian tradition has largely ignored the book, with the exceptions of the promises to Zerubbabel in Hag 2:20–23 which traditionally have been understood to find a greater fulfilment in Jesus. The problem with Haggai was perceived to be his view of the cult. While his prophetic predecessors spoke out against cultic failings, Haggai's message pertaining to the building of the temple ran the danger of reinforcing those same failings. Turning to modern studies, Coggins highlights the endeavour of modern scholars of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible to overcome their issues of faith and instead to treat the biblical text as one piece of evidence in their investigation of the social and historical situation presupposed by and addressed in the text.

Coggins also offers a detailed discussion of most verses in Hag 1–2. On the whole, these comments are briefer than those of Han and offer fewer examples of the use of the text in Jewish and Christian traditions. The balance between Jewish and Christian traditions is relatively even. On some verses, Coggins chooses to interact only with modern scholars (e.g., Hag 2:14).

As with Han, Coggins does not always refer to the original sources. For example his reference to Ibn Ezra's interpretation of Hag 1:6 is based on Adele Berlin's book *Biblical Poetry Through Medieval Jewish Eyes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 78. This reference has the additional problem of being potentially misleading. To me, a reference to "the medieval Jewish writer Ibn Ezra" (141) brings to mind the exegete Rabbi Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra. Yet, looking up Berlin's book, the person responsible for alluding to Hag 1:6 is Rabbi Moshe ben Jacob ibn Ezra (who is not listed in the later Brief Biographies at the end of present book).

I appreciate Coggins's honesty as he occasionally notes that he has been unable to verify a certain interpretation. For example, on Hag 1:11, he notes that "this verse is said to be one of those used by biblical prophecy expert Reverend Thomas Brunel" in *Weekly World News*, yet "I have not seen the article in question."

The chapter on Zechariah begins with a relatively short overview. Coggins opens by noting that Jewish and Christian scholars alike consider Zechariah to be a difficult book. Its obscurity, however, has often heightened its appeal. Notably, the New Testament—especially the Passion narrative and the book of Revelation—contains more quotes from Zechariah than from any other book in the Book of the Twelve. Modern scholarship has been concerned primarily with the unity of the book. In line with contemporary scholarly practice, Coggins discusses Zech 1–8 apart from Zech 9-14.

The discussion of the reception of the vision report in Zech 1–6 highlights intriguing uses of the biblical material. For example, I was interested to learn that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for his time very unusually, understood Zech 2:12 (Eng 2:8, "the apple of [God's] eye") as referring to the Jews. I was also intrigued to realize the importance of the image of the "branch plucked out of the fire" (Zech 3:2) in certain evangelical traditions which use the passage to emphasize the individual's struggle against evil. Notably, John Wesley saw himself as such a "branch" as he was saved from a fire as a child.

At the same time, the section is regrettably brief and sometimes too general and unspecific. For example, Coggins notes that "the Talmud" saw the red horses in Zech 1:8 as symbolizing blood, while Radak argued that the red

colour was a straightforward reference to its colour with no symbolic meaning. Coggins fails to annotate where in the Talmud this references is found (unless the reference further below to *b.San.* 93a applies also here), and I can only presume that Radak's interpretation can be found in his commentary in the Rabbinic Bible. Likewise, Coggins refers to Jerome's interpretation of Zech 2:5 (Eng 2:1) but fails to specify where exactly. This lack of precision renders the volume less useful than it could have been, as anyone who wishes to read a given interpretation in its original context does not know where exactly to look.

Turning to Zech 9–14, Coggins opens with a discussion of the famous passage in Matt 27:9 which attributes the text in Zech 11:12–13 to Jeremiah, and he explores how this passage contributed to the discussion of different authorship of Zech 1–8 and 9–14. Coggins further notes the Talmudic tradition (*b.Baba Bathra* 14b) that some parts of the prophetic texts might have been written by anonymous writers.

Turning to the actual commentary, Coggins focuses on Christian reception history, a decision which makes sense given the frequent use of these chapters in the New Testament. He discusses at length Zech 9:9-10 and its use in the New Testament as a prediction of the Passion of Jesus (Matt 21:4-7), as well as in later Christian hymns. He also discusses ways in which 1 Macc 11:60-74; 12:1-38; 13:6-11 use the passage as a prediction of the *messiah*. In a similar manner, Coggins discusses the uses in the NT and subsequent Christian traditions of Zech 11:12-13 and its reference to "thirty pieces of silver." He also notes its significance in Jewish Messianism. *Genesis Rabbah*, for example, depicts the king *messiah* as he gathers the exiles of Israel and distributes to them thirty pieces of silver. Coggins also discusses many of the Christian interpretations relating to Zech 12:10–12 and Zech 14:4. The latter passage has held a significant position in both Christian and Jewish tradition. Christian tradition understood the passage to prefigure Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:9–12) and his expected second coming. Jewish tradition, exemplified by the Targum Jonathan, envisioned God as standing on Mt Olives blowing a trumpet to awaken the dead.

Finally, Coggins discusses the book of Malachi. Coggins begins by discussing its significance as the final book of the Christian canon, and emphasizes that this is a relatively recent tradition. In the canon of the MT, it concludes the Prophets and is followed by the Writings. In addition, textual evidence from Qumran suggests that Jonah at one point ended the Book of the Twelve. Nevertheless, Malachi is often seen as the final book in the

prophetic canon and, as in some Jewish traditions, a book that is easily overlooked or treated as an appendix. It does not hold a prominent place in the reception history of the Bible.

Coggins highlights the significance of Mal 1:11 in Christian tradition. He outlines the various interpretations of the passage. Notably, Catholics tend to see this verse as prefiguring the Mass, while the dominant Jewish interpretation is to understand it as a reference to the Jews of the Diaspora. He further examines at length the issues arising from Mal 2:16, a verse which has often been understood to say that God is against divorce. Coggins further discusses the statement that God will send his messenger in Mal 3:1–3 and surveys its Christological interpretations among the Church Fathers, as well as in the libretto of the first part of Handel's oratorio *Messiah*. Likewise, he discusses the ways in which Christians have interpreted the "day" which will come according to Mal 3:19 (Eng 4:1). Turning to the final section in Mal 3:24–26 (Eng 4:4–6), Coggins highlights the Jewish tradition of setting a place for Elijah at the Passover table, and the Christian tradition of identifying Elijah with John the Baptist (Matt 11:14; 17:13; Mark 9:11–13). He also notes the importance of all of 3:19-24 (Eng 4:1–6) in Mormon interpretation which claims that Joseph Smith received a vision of Elijah.

The volume ends with a Glossary of key books referred to, Brief Biographies of biblical exegetes and theologians, and an extensive Bibliography.

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