This volume is a welcome addition to the Anchor Bible series of commentaries. Andersen’s background as a teacher is evident. He writes in a simple and straightforward style that will be understandable to the general reader and appreciated by the professional. Even so, there are sections, such as his discussion of 2:2–5, when the discussion becomes extremely complex, and some readers may become puzzled—perhaps appropriately so, given the difficult nature of the text. More than once he offers an honest appraisal that conclusions concerning a specific issue cannot (or should not) be reached. The careful reader at any level will find a wealth of material in this volume to justify the investment of time, effort, and money.

Andersen establishes three general goals for his study of Habakkuk. He wants to understand “the verbal and linguistic context of each word, phrase, and clause in the discourse of the book.” Second, he wishes to examine “the historical setting of Habakkuk and his book in the actual world, with its social, economic, religious, and political realities.” Finally, he attempts to relate the book to “the culture of ancient Israel, which has the larger background in the civilizations of the ancient Near East” (xiv). He characterizes his method as a “historical-grammatical interpretation” (267).
Andersen’s deep background in linguistics and Hebrew grammar is evident in this volume. His understanding of Hebrew poetical style is crucial at several points in his treatment of the text (see his helpful summary on pages 98–106). More than most other commentaries, the work focuses on the individual words, phrases, clauses, and sentences of the text itself. Words are carefully examined in their contexts, first within the writings of Habakkuk, then within the corpus of the Hebrew Bible and beyond. This effort provides a reading with unusual depth. It should be obvious that this step is necessary to establish a basis for all other levels of understanding. One methodological issue might be raised at this point: Was the Hebrew language such a static entity that it can be appropriately compared so directly across the wide variety of materials within the Hebrew Bible?

Andersen's analysis includes a summary of his scansion of the entire work as poetry, with syllable and stress counts. Andersen himself rightly speaks against those who would use this sort of analysis to justify “improvement” of the text through emendation. One might well wonder therefore, given the state of our understanding of Hebrew poetry, whether this exercise actually advances our understanding of the text in any substantial way beyond providing a discipline for the close reading of the text.

Andersen’s goal of setting of this biblical book within the larger cultural context is most evident in his analysis of the themes and motifs present in Hab 3. He reviews past efforts to link the text to Canaanite, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian mythology and literature. He finds the likelihood of any direct borrowing unsubstantiated by the evidence.

Probably the least satisfying aspect of the volume is Andersen’s treatment of the text’s historical setting. While many (but not all) would agree with his position that Habakkuk is a product of late seventh-century B.C.E. Judah, he assumes this dating rather than making a sustained argument for it. Crucial for understanding the text’s historical background is the identification of “the righteous” and “the wicked” (see 112). Andersen identifies “the righteous” as Habakkuk himself, without showing how this identification can be made (see 24, 125, 223, etc.). He bases this identification primarily on his subjective judgment about the “personal nature” of the writing. One might well question the process by which such “personal” writing becomes part of the literature of a community. A community’s preservation of the text suggests that more is at stake than the prophet’s personal Angst. Is the term righteous ever used elsewhere of such a prophetic figure? Similar issues exist for the traditional identification of “the wicked” with the Chaldeans (see 179). How can the Chaldeans be “the answer” to Habakkuk's initial complaint at the same time that they are the source of the problem (1:2–5)? A simple identification of Habakkuk as “the righteous” and the Chaldeans as “the wicked” does not seem tenable.
Andersen also makes assumptions about the nature and role of the community reflected in the writing. It is not clear that a “community of the covenant,” as he understands this phrase (see 126), existed at the time of Habakkuk. Throughout his comments, Andersen assumes that Habakkuk should be identified as a “covenant mediator” and that “the covenant” is a (the?) primary theological category for interpreting the work. This is surprising, since Andersen himself notes (334) that the word covenant and associated language are not used in the text. In his own words, “Habakkuk’s concerns, theological or ethical, are not those of Deuteronomy” (118). This being the case, why does he capitalize Torah in 1:4? What Torah does he have in mind? Many would also question Andersen’s vision of the “classical” prophets as solitary figures as opposed to the other prophets, who were “bureaucrats and timeservers” (91). This takes little account of studies that have stressed the social nature of all prophecy in the ancient world.

It should also be noted that conservatism in theological and historical matters (not surprisingly) pervades the volume. For example, Andersen assumes that the stories of Moses as a prophet occur early in Israel’s history (i.e., they are not a later creation of the tradents, as most scholars of prophecy in Judah would hold). He also assumes the historicity of the stories of Joshua (203) and of such events as those reported in the exodus narrative (144). At one point (278), he even suggests that a first-person verbal form may be the result of a first-person report by Moses of a theophany! This sort of biblical historicism means that many readers will be less than satisfied at his reconstruction of the historical context of this writing.

Finally, however, the commentary must be applauded. It struggles, often successfully, with a difficult text in a style that allows the reader to participate in this struggle. One can hardly ask more of a commentary.