Habakkuk: Challenger and Champion of Yahweh

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Introduction

The prophetic Book of Habakkuk in the Hebrew Bible is extremely brief when compared to the great prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, but it is nonetheless a passionate story of one man’s heart-wrenching struggle with the idea of a just God in an unjust world. In spite of its brevity and apparent bluntness, the message of Habakkuk is still widely debated today. Unlike the other Hebrew prophets, the prophet Habakkuk utilizes very ambiguous language to describe his characters: they are identified only as “the wicked” and “the righteous” (1:4). The identification of these characters, and the subsequent identification of “the wicked” and “those more righteous than they” in verse 13, is the basic building block for the interpretation of the rest of the book.

The prophet Habakkuk was probably active in the southern kingdom of Judah during the reign of Jehoiakim (609-598 B.C.E.), at the time that Nebuchadnezzar and his Neo-Babylonian armies were sweeping through the Assyrian kingdom. Because of this widely accepted historical setting, many scholars argue that “the righteous” in verse 4 is a small group of the faithful in Judah, while “the wicked” is made up of the majority within the society who bring some sort of “destruction and violence” upon the righteous. As Theodore Hiebert argues, the “strife and contention” described in 1:3 “appear to describe stresses in Judah’s judicial system brought on by irresponsible litigation or the failure to

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administer justice properly.” When read in this light, the prophet’s prayer in verses 2-4 asks God to solve the problem he sees when “the wicked surround the righteous” (v. 4b). In response to Habakkuk’s plea, God answers by declaring that he will use the “impetuous” Chaldean army as his divine agent to rectify the wrong in Judah (v. 6). Finally, the first chapter concludes with Habakkuk’s praise of God and his second argument in which “the wicked” of verse 13 become the Chaldean armies, and he questions the justice of allowing them to “swallow those more righteous than they.” The “more righteous” are now the ones who were identified as “the wicked” in verse 4.

Though this interpretation is easily understood within the book’s specific historical context and within the context of Habakkuk’s contemporaries, it ultimately depends too much on readings from the other prophets. For instance, in Jeremiah, the recurring theme is that Judah is being punished through the divine agent of a foreign army. When one scours the book of Habakkuk, the only definite identification is that of “the Chaldeans” in 1:6. When the language and structure of the first chapter is thoroughly studied, there is no need to change the identity of “the righteous” and “the wicked” in verses 4 and 13. When “the righteous” are identified as the prophet, his community, and all those threatened by the powerful and wicked Chaldeans, the book of Habakkuk can be viewed as a complete whole, despite its various literary structures. When read as a whole, Habakkuk represents a vital contribution to dissent literature, as the prophet struggles with the concept of pain in relation to God.

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The Struggle with Theodicy in 1:2 – 2:1

The interpretation of “the righteous” as all who are threatened by the Chaldeans is supported by Habakkuk’s struggle with theodicy in the first chapter. Habakkuk sees these “wicked” (v. 4) and “impetuous” (v. 6) armies conquering numerous territories without any intention to stop. For the prophet this is not only a problem because Nebuchadnezzar is headed for Judah; it is also a problem because it is unjust, and God is letting it happen. Habakkuk’s struggle is a struggle with God. The prophet wants to know how a just and personal God can allow unjust things to happen to those he describes as “righteous.”

After the introductory title of the book, the second verse opens with a very personal prayer addressed to Yahweh. This prayer is a desperate plea from the prophet: “Yahweh, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?” The use of “Yahweh” (translated as “O Lord” in the NRSV) as opposed to the typical honorific language of “my God” or “my Lord” is indicative of the prophet’s close relationship with God. For Habakkuk, his struggle with God’s justice is very personal.

In his initial plea, Habakkuk presents his inquiry to God:

Yahweh, how long shall I cry for help,

and you will not listen?

[How long shall I] cry to you “Lawlessness!”

and you will not save? (v. 2)

Again, his problem is personal – God is not responding to his pleas. In this instance, the question “how long…?” should not be read as an inquiry about future events, but rather as

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6 Here, and throughout this paper, I translate הָּעָשָׁה (hămāš) as “lawlessness” according to Andersen’s translation. See discussion below.
one about the past. Habakkuk does not want to know for how long he will have to cry out; he is desperate and is trying to ask, “How long are you going to ignore me?” Consider the following passage from Psalms:

> How long, Yahweh? Will you forget me forever?

> How long will you hide your face from me?

> How long must I bear my pain in my soul,

> And have sorrow in my heart all day long? (Psalm 13:1-2)

These writers do not want answers that deal with timelines. In fact, they do not want an answer at all. Their inquiries are actually complaints; they want God to recognize their cries, to recognize the pain within their souls, and to do something about it. Yahweh is supposed to be a just and caring God, who looks out for his people. Why is he ignoring the passionate cries of his prophet and the psalmist?

From this petition we can also find out more about Habakkuk’s situation. Andersen notes that the word traditionally translated “violence,” חָמָס (ḥāmās), should not be given the denotation “of crime committed by force and with physical assault on people.” Instead, it can be more broadly read as “lawlessness.” His prayer continues:

> Why do you make me see wrongdoing

> And [why do you make me] look at trouble?

> Destruction and lawlessness are before me;

> Strife and contention arise. (v. 3)

This lawlessness is described as “wrongdoing,” “trouble,” and “destruction,” and it fosters “strife” and “contention.” Habakkuk’s world is one of complete devastation, but it is not

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7 Ibid., 109.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 112.
devastation that Judah has brought on itself. Verse 4 notes that “the wicked surround the righteous.” Habakkuk’s problem, then, is that the righteous are being attacked by the wicked, and as noted above, the just God will not intervene.

Habakkuk’s plea “How long…?” leads him to the demanding question, “Why?” If God is ignoring the prophet as well as the rampant lawlessness, there must be a reason. God’s actions must be just because God is just. Habakkuk feels he has a right to know how God is justifying his inaction. In fact, the final line of verse 3 employs the language of the courts. רִב (rîb, “strife”) is defined as “dispute, quarrel; case, lawsuit.” יִרְבּוּ (mādōn, “contention”) is derived from the root דָּן (dyn) meaning “judge.” When read together, this last line implies some sort of lawsuit. God is expected to be the judge of the lawless and the protector of the righteous; however, God has failed to do his job. This “lawsuit” is therefore against God, the accused judge.

The final verse of Habakkuk’s prayer continues with the use of juridical language:

So the law becomes slack
And justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous –
Therefore judgment comes forth perverted. (v. 4)

תּוְרָה (tôrâh, “law”) is supposed to be provided by God, but in this case it has become “slack.” Here תֹּפָּע (tāpûg) is defined as “feeble, numb, cold.” Andersen translates it as “paralyzed,” noting that when “applied to a bodily organ, such as the heart, it means

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10 In the following discussion of verses 5-11, we will see how this language is applied to the Chaldeans.
12 Andersen, 116.
13 Ibid., 119.
14 Holladay, 289.
‘grows numb and useless.’”  
This numbness of the law is not caused by human judges, but rather by God’s persistent silence.  

The final line of the above verse asserts that “judgment comes forth perverted.”  
The use of the verb הלע (‘ql) is unique to this passage; it is not used anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. However, it is synonymous with the verb חט (‘wt), which is found in a similar context in Job:  

Does God pervert justice?  
Or does the Almighty pervert the right?  

(Job 8:3)  

In this passage, Habakkuk’s own struggle is explicitly expressed. Habakkuk’s ultimate question is, “Is God responsible for the perversion of justice and the current state of lawlessness?” If God is responsible for the perversion and lawlessness, is it because he plays an active or a passive role?  

God finally answers Habakkuk, but not with the answer he wants. God is playing an active role in the lawlessness:  

Look at the nations, and see!  
Be astonished! Be astounded!  
For a work is being done in your days  
That you would not believe if you were told.  
For I am rousing the Chaldeans,  
That fierce and impetuous nation,  
Who march through the breadth of the earth  
to seize dwellings not their own.  

(vv. 5-6)  

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15 Andersen, 118.  
16 Ibid., 119.  
17 Ibid., 123.
Andersen argues that the third line, “for a work is being done…” should not be translated as passive, but rather “I am doing a work…”  

With this translation, it is impossible to believe that God does not play an active role, but God himself notes that for many, such a concept will be unbelievable. As Andersen notes, “if the inactivity of God (vv. 2-4) is incomprehensible, the activity of God (vv. 5-11) is incredible.”

The declaration, “I am rousing the Chaldeans,” at the opening of the sixth verse serves as the announcement of divine intention. This construct is common in the Hebrew Bible where God plays an active role. In 2 Samuel 12:11, God says to King David, “I will raise up troubles against you from within your own house,” and in Amos 6:14 he says, “I am raising up against you a nation.” In each of these scenarios, God is acting as the agent. However, unlike in the two examples above, God does not tell Habakkuk why he is rousing the Chaldeans. In 2 Samuel 12, God is punishing David for having “ despised the word of the Lord” (v. 9); and in Amos 6, Israel is being punished because of their unrighteousness. In Habakkuk, God does not declare the guilt of his victims. Because there is no mention of his victim at all in his reply, we must assume that the victims are “the righteous” from verse 4. God is punishing the righteous?

God’s astonishing and astounding reply continues as he describes the wickedness and evil of his chosen agent. They are dreadful and fearsome, and they answer to no higher power (v. 7). Verse 7 describes how “their justice and dignity proceed from themselves.” It is because of this that “judgment comes forth perverted” (v. 4). Their armies are absolutely terrifying, as is seen through the parallelism of the poetry:

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18 Ibid., 143.
19 Ibid.
Their horses are swifter than leopards
more menacing than wolves at dusk
Their horses charge.

Their horsemen come from far away
They fly like an eagle swift to devour. (v. 8)

These armies will stop at nothing. They will transgress borders and take things that are not theirs (v. 6).

In verses 9-11, God emphasizes the lawlessness of these horrible armies. They “come for lawlessness” and “gather captives like the sand” (v. 9). They have no business with kings and laws, and they destroy every fortress they meet (v. 10). They are guilty and praise their own might as if it were a god (v. 11). The lawlessness and destruction that Habakkuk describes in his opening prayer is caused by these wicked armies. God is using the depraved to attack the righteous.

At the end of God’s answer to Habakkuk, Habakkuk is even more upset. In his opening prayer he pleaded for God to do something about the rampant injustice that surrounded him; God replied by saying that indeed he was the one causing the perceived injustice. Habakkuk’s second prayer to God opens with the caustic questioning of God:

Are you not from of old,
O Lord my God, my Holy One? (v. 12)

When the construction “Are you not…?” occurs in the Latter Prophets, God is most often the speaker. When God uses this rhetorical question in prophetic oracles, the question acts as a rebuke, “chiding the hearer for overlooking an important fact.”

What makes Habakkuk unique in this respect is that God is not speaking; Habakkuk is, and he is

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20 Ibid., 175.
speaking to God. Here Habakkuk uses God’s construction to chastise God. God’s answer in verses 5-11 is not sufficient for the prophet. Instead, it worsens Habakkuk’s problem.

After Habakkuk reminds God of his fundamental nature of being “from of old,” Habakkuk continues:

O Lord, you have marked them for judgment;
and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment.  (v. 12b)

Andersen argues that the question posed in the first half of the verse is continued here, so that Habakkuk is asking, “Weren’t you supposed to punish them (the Chaldeans)? Why haven’t you?”

This question leads the prophet to his central problem:

Your eyes are too pure to behold evil,
and you cannot look on wrongdoing;
Why do you look on the treacherous,
and are silent when the wicked swallow
those more righteous than they?  (v. 13)

Habakkuk is not satisfied by God’s answer to his first plea; in this second plea he has to restate his plea from verses 3-4. The prophet still cannot understand how a just God can look upon an unjust world, or worse, be a force behind that unjust world.

In the final verses of the chapter, Habakkuk introduces the metaphor of the fisherman. In verse 14 the prophet reminds God that he was responsible for the creation of humankind: “You have made the people like the fish of the sea.” Though God created mankind,

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21 Ibid., 178.
The enemy brings all of them up with a hook;
he drags them out with his net,
he gathers them with his seine;
so he rejoices and exults.   (v. 15)

At this point in history, it is no longer the creating God, but rather an “impetuous” enemy that controls the happenings of the earth. The chapter ends with Habakkuk’s final plea:

Is he then to keep on emptying his net,
and destroying nations without mercy?   (v. 17)

Is God going to continue to allow the Chaldeans to tramp across the earth, taking up the belongings and lives of the righteous? The view of the prophet Habakkuk is not limited to Judah. The prophet sees the righteous everywhere being surrounded and persecuted by Nebuchadnezzar’s armies. Throughout the chapter the prophet pleads to know the reasoning behind all of the terror and how God is allowing it (or causing it) to happen. After God’s devastating message, Habakkuk can only hope for a different message in response to his final plea, “Are you going to make them stop?!” In the opening verse of Chapter 2 the prophet declares that he will wait patiently for Yahweh’s answer.

**Yahweh’s Answer in 2:2 – 2:20**

Though the following verses make up a distinct literary form, their vocabulary and their message clearly relate to Habakkuk’s pleas in the first chapter. Yahweh answers Habakkuk’s final plea by giving him a vision which he is to write on tablets, “so he may run who reads it.”

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The vision is one “for the appointed time” (v. 3a):

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If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay. (v. 3b)

Though scholars have had troubles dealing with these verses, they act as an encouragement to the prophet. In Chapter 1, Habakkuk spent a great deal of time trying to grapple with the idea of Yahweh’s justice. Here Yahweh assures the prophet that his justice will prevail in the time that he has appointed. Even if Habakkuk thinks that Yahweh’s justice is delayed, Yahweh is ultimately in control, and his justice will prevail.

The words of encouragement continue in verses 4a and 5a:

Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them.
Moreover, wealth is treacherous;
the arrogant do not endure.

Verse 5 continues with a familiar description of the Chaldeans, reminiscent of 1:15-16:

They open their throats wide as Sheol;
like Death they never have enough.
They gather all nations for themselves,
and collect all peoples as their own.

While the wicked do not endure, Yahweh ensures Habakkuk that “the righteous live by their faith” (v. 4b). Ultimately, the tables will be turned and the righteous will surround the wicked.

In verse 6, Yahweh introduces the five woe oracles that make up the rest of the chapter. When the “appointed time” comes for the righteous to surround the wicked, the righteous ones will taunt those who once taunted them. In each of these oracles, the

23 Andersen, 205-08.
Chaldeans are chastised for the wicked acts that they have done to others.\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, the first oracle is against those who “seize dwellings not their own” (1:6):

- Alas for you who heap up what is not your own!
- How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge?
- Will not your own creditors suddenly rise,
- and those who make you tremble wake up?

_Then you will be booty for them._

- Because you have plundered many nations,
- all that survive of the peoples shall plunder you –
- because of human bloodshed, and violence to the earth,
- to cities and all who live in them. (vv. 6b-8)

Andersen notes that though each oracle varies in length and shape, there is a judgment “spoken directly to the culprit” in the middle of each.\textsuperscript{25} In this first oracle, the Chaldeans, who have spent much of their time as plundering thieves, will become the plundered. Because of all of their horrible acts of violence, their fortunes will turn, and the Chaldeans will become the booty of those they have oppressed.

The second oracle (vv. 9-11) condemns those who “get evil gain” and set their houses on high “to be safe from the reach of harm” (v. 9). In the first chapter, the Chaldeans are described as those who “come for lawlessness” (1:9); “their justice and dignity proceed from themselves” (1:7). The impetuous conquerors worship their own might (1:11) as they scoff at kings (1:10) and keep “destroying nations without mercy” (1:17). Through the dreadful acts of conquering and scattering nations, the Chaldeans

\textsuperscript{24} Hiebert, 646-47.
\textsuperscript{25} Andersen, 227.
believe themselves to be invincible. However, their transgressions have actually brought
shame upon the fierce nation and have caused them to forfeit their lives (2:10). Just as
they razed fortresses in order to display their might, so too shall their own fortresses be
razed. The destructive forces of the Chaldeans are so terrible that even the bricks of the
cities will cry out against them:

The very stones will cry out from the wall,
and the plaster will respond from the woodwork. (v. 11)

Here the verb הָיָה (z’q, “cry”) the same used to describe Habakkuk’s crying out in 1:2.26
Everyone and everything has seen the horror wrought by the Chaldeans; here Yahweh
assures the nations that the eventual destruction of the Chaldeans will be as complete and
as devastating as the destruction that they visited on others.

The third oracle (vv. 12-14) continues to rail against the foreign conqueror:27

“Alas for you who build a town by bloodshed,
and found a city on iniquity!” (v. 12)

Andersen notes that “the foundation of a city was often seen in the Hebrew Bible as an act
of political arrogance, the act of a person who lives away from God.”28 In the Genesis
story of Cain and Abel, Cain builds a city after he is sent away from the presence of God
for killing his brother (Gen 4:16-17); and in Exodus 1:11 Pharaoh, the great oppressor of
the ancient Israelites, is described as a city-builder. “God’s disapproval of such enterprises
is revealed in the Babel story”29 of Genesis 11:1-9 when God sees men building a city for
themselves, and he decides to confuse their languages and scatter them abroad. The

26 Hiebert, 647.
27 Andersen, 240.
28 Ibid., 243.
29 Ibid.
Chaldeans do not only build cities, but they build cities “by bloodshed.” In a fashion similar to that of Pharaoh, the Chaldeans build their cities by the oppression and forced labor of those they have conquered. Yahweh insists that they will be punished accordingly.

When viewed metaphorically, the fourth oracle (vv. 15-17) is yet another condemnation of the destructive ways of the Chaldeans, as they continue to “march through the breadth of the earth” (1:6) and go on “destroying nations without mercy” (1:17):

“Alas for you who make your neighbors drink,

pouring out your wrath until they are drunk,

in order to gaze on their nakedness!” (2:15)

Indeed, just as the Chaldeans are described in the first chapter as the fisherman who “keep[s] on emptying his net” (1:17), here they are the ones who keep “pouring out [their] wrath.” This world conqueror knows no limits. “They all come for lawlessness” (1:9); “they laugh at every fortress” (1:10); “they sweep by like the wind” (1:11); “their own might is their god!” (1:11). They will continue to mock kings and glorify their own power. However, this oracle presents that the wickedness of the Chaldeans will be stopped as Yahweh delivers their sentence:

You will be sated with contempt instead of glory.

Drink, you yourself, and stagger!

The cup in the Lord’s right hand

will come around to you,

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30 Ibid., 247-48. Andersen proposes that in the context of the other woe oracles, it makes more sense to take this image metaphorically rather than literally.
and shame will come upon your glory!

For the lawlessness done to Lebanon will overwhelm you;
the destruction of the animals will terrify you –
because of human bloodshed and violence to the earth,
to cities and all who live in them. (vv. 16-17)

Just as the Chaldeans defeated and shamed countless nations, so will Yahweh bring shame and defeat upon the wicked. Though verse 17 is problematic because it does not fit with the metaphor of verse 16, and 17b is a refrain from 2:8b, it can still be related to the message of this particular oracle. This verse continues Yahweh’s condemnation of the Chaldeans actions and asserts once again that Yahweh’s justice will prevail and the wicked will receive the proper punishment.

The final oracle of the second chapter (vv. 18-19) is against the idolatry of the Chaldeans:

What use is an idol
once its maker has shaped it –
a cast image, a teacher of lies?
For its maker trusts in what has been made,
though the product is only an idol that cannot speak!
Alas for you who say to the wood, “Wake up!”
to silent stone, “Rouse yourself!”
Can it teach?
See, it is gold and silver plated,
and there is no breath in it at all.
Babylonian religion included the belief in a pantheon of gods, whose head was the god Marduk.\(^{31}\) The language of the oracle points to the futility of these other gods: they are “idols” that have been “shaped” by a “maker.” “It” is “a cast image, a teacher of lies.” “It” is a “product” that was “made” by a “maker.” “It” is “wood” and “stone” that “cannot speak,” “and there is no breath (רֻהַ rûah) in it.” The closing is fitting, as it reminds the reader that Yahweh is the only god who has breath. The breath of Yahweh is first described in Genesis 2:7 as the breath (עֲשֵׂ יָנָה nēšāmâ) that creates human life and “reveals [that] human beings [are] bound together inseparably with Yahweh.”\(^{32}\) The term rûah, when used in the sense of “wind,” is, “in the vast majority of instances…associated directly with God’s active intervention.”\(^{33}\) Thus, Yahweh’s ridicule of futile idols also serves to remind the prophet of God’s life-giving and life-saving breath.

The final woe oracle leads into the closing lines of the chapter:

*But the Lord is in his holy temple;*

*let all the earth keep silence before him!* (v. 20)

Though these lines are not part of the final oracle, they provide a proper transition between the oracles of Chapter 2 and the prophet’s hymn in Chapter 3. In relation to the fifth woe oracle, this proclamation of the presence of Yahweh stands in direct contrast to the futility of the wood and stone idols of the Chaldeans. It also acts as a fitting conclusion to Yahweh’s final response to the pleading prophet. The book opened with the prophet crying out in despair to Yahweh, who would not listen (1:2). This section ends with

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Yahweh’s oracles against the Chaldeans; Yahweh has finally answered the prophet’s initial plea with devastating oracles of the ruin of the wicked, and it is now the prophet’s turn to be silent and stand in awe of Yahweh’s justice. However, as the closing chapter illustrates, Habakkuk cannot contain his praise of Yahweh, as he is overcome by his glory and power. The book properly closes with Habakkuk’s response to Yahweh’s final message: with a hymn of praise.

The Theophany of Chapter 3

In some ways, the third chapter of Habakkuk is the most problematic for scholars. The opening superscription provides the first problem. Hiebert notes that “in prophetic collections, such superscriptions occasionally attribute later compositions to earlier prophets who could not have composed them (e.g., Isa 13:1; Jer 46:1). In the psalms, superscriptions attributing authorship are commonly later additions, based on subsequent exegesis interested in locating the text in a precise historical setting.”

The poem itself was not a product of the prophet Habakkuk; it is an ancient theophany that has affinities with Deuteronomy 33, Judges 5 and Psalm 77, as it “recites the conflict and victory of Yahweh over hostile powers.” Because the poem itself is clearly not the work of Habakkuk, many scholars believe that it is a post-exilic addition. If Habakkuk 1-2 dealt with the coming of the Chaldeans, then Chapter 3 was added to serve as a message of hope. Andersen contends that while the poem itself is an ancient theophany and does serve as a message of hope, Habakkuk has personalized it by adding his own invocation (v. 2)

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34 Hiebert, 650.
36 Andersen 260-61.
and response (vv. 16-19a). Also, in light of the above discussion of the dialogue between Habakkuk and Yahweh, this ancient theophany serves as the prophet’s response to Yahweh’s declaration of the woe oracles in Chapter 2.

The invocation serves as the prophet’s personal introduction to the poem:

Yahweh, I have heard of your renown,
and I stand in awe, Yahweh, of your work.

In our own time revive it;
in our own time make it known;
– in wrath may you remember mercy. (v. 2)

The opening of verse 2, “Yahweh,” automatically signals ties with Habakkuk’s opening prayer in 1:2 and his second complaint in 1:12. The use of this intimate name for God revives the personal relationship between the prophet and God that was apparent in the opening chapter and signifies an “intensely personal response of the poet.”

Andersen argues that the “wrath” in the last line of verse 2 should not be read as Yahweh’s wrath, but rather as the fear of the prophet. The root here is רגצ (rgz), which “is rarely used to refer to the wrath of God.”

The root is used again in 3:7b, “the tent-curtains of the land of Midian trembled (רגצ),” and in 3:16, “I hear, and I tremble (רגצ) within.” Because of its use in the rest of the chapter, and especially in describing the prophet in verse 16, Andersen concludes that this final line should refer to the trembling or distress of the prophet. When read in this sense, the line reiterates the problem of the

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 276.
39 Ibid., 282.
40 Ibid.
first chapter. The prophet is distressed and pleads with Yahweh to remember his mercy, as he did in 1:12.

The ancient theophany\(^{41}\) begins in verse 3 and has three distinct sections.\(^{42}\) The first section is made up of verses 3-7 and provides the first account of deliverance. According to Andersen, this section recalls the story of the Exodus while maintaining Yahweh’s influence over the cosmos.\(^{43}\) The section opens and closes with references to geographical locations:

God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran. \(v. 3a\)

I saw the tents of Cushan under affliction;
the tent-curtains of the land of Midian trembled. \(v. 7\)

Andersen notes that “these opening and closing bicolons…provide a foothold, a much-needed piece of firm ground, from which to venture into the more treacherous places of the intervening text.”\(^{44}\) The intervening text is indeed a dangerous place to be. God’s “glory covered the heavens” \(v. 3b\), and its “brightness was like the sun” \(v.4a\). God was not the only one on the rampage; he was accompanied by the god Pestilence that went before him and by Plague which followed him \(v. 5\). God destroyed all in his path:

He stopped and shook the earth;
he looked and made the nations tremble.

The eternal mountains were shattered;
along his ancient pathways

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\(^{41}\) As noted above, see Deuteronomy 33, Judges 5 and Psalm 77 for other biblical instances of theophanies.

\(^{42}\) Andersen, 261-62.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 261.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 284.
the everlasting hills sank low. (v. 6)

In case such a picture is not devastating enough, in verses 8-11 the perspective abruptly switches to the second person, and Yahweh is portrayed as the divine warrior whose wrath is against the cosmos. From his place as divine warrior, Yahweh has control over the waters and the mountains:

Was your wrath against the rivers, Yahweh?

Or your anger against the rivers,
or your rage against the sea?
when you drove your horses,
your chariots to victory?

You brandished your naked bow,
sated were the arrows at your command. Selah

You split the earth with rivers.
The mountains saw you, and writhed;
a torrent of water swept by;
the deep gave forth its voice. (vv. 8-10)

Yahweh is no stationary god; with bow and arrow in hand, he drives his chariot across the cosmos commanding the low waters and the high mountains. Even the sun and the moon recognize his glory:

The sun raised high its hands;
the moon stood still in its exalted place,
at the light of your arrows speeding by,
at the gleam of your flashing spear. (vv. 10-11)
Andersen argues that “victory” at the end of verse 8 would be better translated as “deliverance.” When deliverance is the goal, Yahweh’s “anger is not judicial and punitive, destroying the wicked by way of penalty. It is redemptive. The defeat of the wicked is only a means to God’s real intention: the deliverance of his people.” This concept takes us back to Habakkuk’s initial complaint in 1:2-4. The prophet does not expect Yahweh to be moved to action by the evil and injustice that the wicked perform; rather he is expected to react to the suffering of the righteous. Habakkuk expects Yahweh to save, not to punish.

This theme continues into the third section of the theophany (verses 12-15), as Yahweh enters history and crushes nations:

In fury you trod the earth,
in anger you trampled nations.
You came forth to save your people,
to save your anointed. (v. 12-13a)

Within these four lines, it is interesting to note the parallel structure:

In fury you trod the earth,
in anger you trampled nations.
You came forth to save your people,
to save your anointed.

In his wrath, Yahweh destroyed the earth and the nations. Did he save his people and his anointed because of his wrath? If Yahweh is angry about the suffering of the righteous, then the trampling and trodding of the wicked is a direct effect of saving the righteous. In

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46 Ibid.
other words, the righteous are not saved because the wicked are punished, rather the
wicked are punished because the righteous are saved.

This section ends with language reminiscent of Habakkuk 1-2:

You have crushed the head of the wicked house,
laying it bare from foundation to roof. Selah
You pierced with their own arrows the head of his warriors,
who came like a whirlwind to scatter us,
gloating as if ready to devour the poor who were hiding.
You trampled the sea with your horses,
churning the mighty waters. (vv. 13b-15)

When Yahweh crushes “the head of the wicked house,” we are reminded of the second
woe oracle of Chapter 2, in which the reader is told that the wicked have “devised shame”
for their house and that the stones and plaster will cry out (vv. 10-11).

Yahweh continues to pierce the warriors who were responsible for invading and
scattering peoples and nations. In his initial reply to Habakkuk, Yahweh describes the
Chaldeans as those who “sweep by like the wind” (1:11) and “seize dwellings not their
own” (1:6). Here Yahweh finally puts a stop to the one who “keeps on emptying his net”
as he proceeds in “destroying nations without mercy” (1:17). This is Yahweh’s ultimate
response to the pleas of the prophet: he will crush those “gloating as if ready to devour the
poor who were hiding” (3:14), thus putting an end to the wicked who “surround the
righteous” (1:4) and “swallow those more righteous than they” (1:13).
The book of Habakkuk closes with the prophet’s final response to Yahweh and the theophany (vv. 16-19). Within the first verse of his response, Habakkuk’s demeanor changes from one of fear and trembling to one of calm and expectation:

I hear, and I tremble within;
my lips quiver at the sound.
Rottenness enters into my bones,
And my steps tremble beneath me.
I wait quietly for the day of calamity
to come upon the people who attack us.

In the beginning of the verse, the prophet reacts to the terror of the preceding theophany. Simply hearing the theophany makes Habakkuk tremble and quiver; his bones begin to give out as he attempts to walk. Yahweh’s theophany is truly petrifying and debilitating. Yet from the horror of the theophany, Habakkuk is still able to find some sort of peace. The theophany, no matter how terrible it sounds, serves as the ultimate answer to his passionate pleading with Yahweh. Finally Yahweh has answered with something that the prophet can digest – in time, God will save the righteous and destroy the wicked. The change in Habakkuk is abrupt: his entire body trembles with fear, making his steps uneven, but in the next line he realizes that Yahweh will save the righteous and he just needs to “wait quietly.” The image here is amazing. As Habakkuk shambles down the road moaning about the injustice of God, he suddenly realizes that God’s justice will prevail, and he straightens his back, evens out his step, and is silent before “Yahweh in his holy temple” (2:20).

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47 Ibid., 342.
Verses 17-19 bring the book to a close as Habakkuk concludes with a magnificent praise of Yahweh:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails,
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold,
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in Yahweh;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
God, Yahweh, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.

The picture is one of widespread desolation – the trees and vines will not blossom, the fields will not produce food, and the flocks and herds have been devastated. In these lines, the prophet insists on worshiping Yahweh despite any type of destruction that he might bring. If his demeanor changed in verse 16 from one of fear to one of calm and expectation, these final verses see it change again to one of ecstasy and praise.48 For the first time, the prophet identifies Yahweh as “the God of my salvation.” Habakkuk re-embraces Yahweh, who is once again the protector and defender of the righteous. In the last lines of the book, Yahweh makes the feet of the prophet “like the feet of a deer,” and he makes him “tread upon the heights” (v. 19). This is an immediate contrast with the opening of verse 16, when Yahweh fills Habakkuk with fear and makes him tremble.

48 Ibid.
Thus, the book that opened with the prophet’s sharp critique of Yahweh’s action ends with the prophet’s praise of Yahweh’s action.

**The Unity of Habakkuk**

Though the book of Habakkuk is comprised of three distinct pieces, we have seen that when “the wicked” of 1:4 are identified as the Chaldeans, the individual sections of the book can be brought together to form a meaningful whole. With this reading of “the wicked,” the classification of “the righteous” includes the prophet and his community, as well as the other nations that have been terrified by the Chaldeans. Thus, the divine-human dialogue that takes place in the first chapter actually continues throughout the rest of the book. The book opens with Habakkuk’s initial complaint to Yahweh in 1:2-4, as he questions Yahweh’s motives in allowing “the wicked [to] surround the righteous” (v. 4). Yahweh responds in 1:5-11, declaring to the prophet that he is not simply *allowing* lawlessness to pervade society, but that he is *causing* the lawlessness. If Habakkuk’s first complaint was bold, his second complaint in 1:12-2:1 is even more audacious, as he continues to question Yahweh’s justice. Indeed, the prophet *expects* to have some influence over Yahweh, as he insists on waiting for another, more acceptable response. Yahweh’s second response to Habakkuk comes in 2:2-20 and includes the woe oracles against the Chaldeans. Finally, the prophet is able to accept Yahweh’s message, and the book ends with Habakkuk’s praise of Yahweh and his declaration of faith in 3:2-19.

When one reads in this light, the reader is able to see the full development of the prophet and of Yahweh. Habakkuk is introduced as one who brings a complaint against God, yet in the end, he is able to stand and rejoice in God’s salvation. Yahweh, the silent
God of Chapter 1, becomes the divine warrior of Chapter 3. By the end of the book, the two main characters have switched roles. In Habakkuk’s opening prayer, he screams at Yahweh for his silence as “the wicked surround the righteous” (1:2, 4). In these first verses, the prophet is actively complaining while Yahweh is portrayed as silently ignoring the prophet’s pleas. Both characters take on an active role in 1:5-2:1 as they argue with one another over Yahweh’s justice. In Chapter 3, the action of Yahweh overpowers the prophet, as Yahweh becomes the divine warrior, leader and controller of the cosmos and everything therein. As “his glory covered the heavens” (3:3), he “made the nations tremble” and shattered mountains (3:6), and in his wrath he attacked the waters (3:8). He continued to “trample nations” and “crush the head of the wicked house,” demolishing its foundations (3:14). While the prophet describes Yahweh’s active role in the final chapter, the prophet himself is left standing in awe of God. Thus, in the final verses of the book, everything returns to its proper order as the prophet is silent in the presence of Yahweh, who will save the righteous and destroy the wicked. Habakkuk, who at the beginning of the book was wailing about Yahweh’s silence and injustice, is left in silent amazement of the justice of the God of his salvation (3:18).

**Conclusion – the Purpose of Habakkuk**

Claus Westermann classifies Habakkuk 1 as a “complete example” of a communal lament.\(^{49}\) However, the elements of the communal lament that Westermann identifies are not limited to the first chapter of Habakkuk. Particularly, “the divine response”\(^{50}\) can be seen in the proclamation of the vision delivered by Yahweh in Chapter 2, and the prophet’s

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\(^{50}\) Ibid., 42.
closing lines in 3:16-19 constitute “the vow to praise.” Thus, as a whole, the book of Habakkuk “reflects a basic thematic movement from lament to thanksgiving, hence a structural ‘incline’ that is typical of the lament genre.” As a lament, Habakkuk belongs to dissent literature, and as a part of dissent literature, Habakkuk finds its meaning.

For the dissenter, the problems with society are not based on the corruption of the system of political and social structures; rather the basic problem is with “the God who appears to sanction or at least tolerate the system.” The only option for the dissenter is to “appeal to God against God.” Thus, in literature of dissent, one is forced to put aside expected conventions, roll up one’s sleeves, and bravely confront God. To bring such a complaint against God was one of the most daring actions that one could take. Walter Brueggemann argues that the act of protest against God was a dangerous, yet necessary attempt to “articulate the pain fully.” For Brueggemann, dissent literature arose out of the need to break away from the structures of “common theology” and deal with the problem of pain that pervades human society.

Such is the role that Habakkuk plays. As a member of an ancient religious tradition, the prophet is expected to abide by the structures of a “common theology,” which assert that God is sovereign and “beyond the reach of historical circumstance.” Such a theology, however, does not allow the prophet to properly express his pain. Habakkuk

51 Ibid., 43
54 Balentine, 195.
55 Ibid.
must assert himself by standing outside the accepted conventions and confront God on his own. Habakkuk does not challenge God only once; he challenges him twice! The prophet refuses to accept that Yahweh’s justice is revealed when “the wicked surround the righteous” (1:4). Habakkuk’s lament serves as an ultimate attestation of faith in God. In his struggle to deal with pain that he believes to be unjust, Habakkuk steps up and cries out in complaint against God. When evil persists, he continues to insist in his belief that Yahweh is a just god, and he cries out once more, forcing Yahweh to listen and answer. As a minority voice in a world of strictly structured theology, Habakkuk’s lament is an attempt to deal with pain and a challenge to the ancient views of the divine-human relationship.

Bibliography


