

Habakkuk 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Habakkuk chapter 3, a prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigeonath. O Lord, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I fear.

In the midst of the years, revive it. In the midst of the years, make it known. In wrath, remember mercy. God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran.

His splendour covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. His brightness was like the light, rays flashed from his hand. And there he veiled his power.

Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels. He stood and measured the earth. He looked and shook the nations. Then the eternal mountains were scattered. The everlasting hills sank low.

His were the everlasting ways. I saw the tents of Kushan in affliction. The curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. Was your wrath against the rivers, O Lord?

[0 : 55] Was your anger against the rivers, or your indignation against the sea, when you rode on your horses, on your chariot of salvation? You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows.

You split the earth with rivers. The mountains saw you and writhed. The raging waters swept on. The deep gave forth its voice. It lifted its hands on high.

The sun and moon stood still in their place, at the light of your arrows as they sped, at the flash of your glittering spear. You marched through the earth in fury. You threshed the nations in anger.

You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck. You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter me, rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret.

You trample the sea with your horses, the surging of mighty waters. I hear, and my body trembles. My lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters into my bones.

[2 : 02] My legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us. Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail, and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls.

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength. He makes my feet like the deer's.

He makes me tread on my high places. To the choirmaster, with stringed instruments. The book of Habakkuk has two main sections. The first two chapters contain the prophet's complaint and the Lord's response, assuring him that the proud Babylonians will not endure, but that those who trust in his word will live.

The third and final chapter is set apart from the others, and introduced by another superscription. Chapter 3 is the prayer of the prophet. It could be understood as the prophet's response to revelation that he has received.

The book that began with his prayer of complaint ends with his prayer of petition and confession. The relationship between the prayer and the rest of the book is worth considering, especially as many commentators have argued that they are independent works, a position held not least because the Habakkuk commentary found among the Dead Sea Scrolls only comments on chapters 1 and 2 of the book.

[3 : 26] As Francis Anderson argues, however, having such material as part of a prophetic book isn't strange. We have a similar prayer in Jonah chapter 2, for instance. As for its absence from the Habakkuk commentary, the commentary that we have was not an original, and it is quite possibly

incomplete.

He goes on to observe the presence of shared vocabulary with the rest of Habakkuk, supporting its integrity as a book. Besides, whatever position we arrive at concerning the prehistory of the text, its unity within the canon should be our primary point of departure.

Habakkuk chapter 3 is an incredibly difficult and much debated text in the Hebrew, with numerous suggested emendations and contrasting readings. The passage is introduced to us as a prayer of Habakkuk the prophet.

Various proposals for the meaning of the term Shigeonoth have been advanced. Some, for instance, have noted its similarity with the superscription of Psalm 7. It is likely that it is the name of the tune, or perhaps some other form of musical direction, but we can do little more than speculate. We should read the beginning of the prayer of Habakkuk against the backdrop of the rest of the book. Habakkuk was dismayed by the oracle that he quoted in chapter 1 verses 5 to 11.

[4 : 37] However, in chapter 2, the Lord responded to his complaint, revealing the doom of the proud Babylonians. We should read this prayer as the prophet's response to the Lord's fuller disclosure of his purpose and justice in that situation, and as a petition for the Lord to fulfill his word.

The posture of Habakkuk before the Lord has noticeably shifted to one of more pronounced humiliation before his majesty. He has heard of the great deeds of the Lord in the past, yet faced with current trials, feels keenly the need for the manifestation of the Lord's saving faithfulness once again, pleading with the Lord to show compassion to his people in the midst of his judgment upon them.

The prayer draws heavily upon theophanic imagery, describing the glorious advent of the Lord.

Timon and Mount Peran are both places associated with the land of Edom, south of Judah.

This is not the only description of the Lord coming from the land of Edom in scripture. We find other ones in places like Deuteronomy chapter 33 verse 2, in Moses' blessing of Israel. The Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us.

He shone forth from Mount Peran. He came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand. Also in the Song of Deborah in Judges chapter 5 verses 4 to 5, Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water, the mountains quaked before the Lord, even Sinai before the Lord, the God of Israel.

[6 : 05] As Anderson observes, the imagery of the Lord's coming from the south is described like the rising of a glorious and dreadful sun, much as in the imagery of Deuteronomy chapter 33. The Lord's advent is a dawn.

It's the coming of the day of the Lord. The Lord led a triumphal march as he went before his people in their first entry into the land, accompanied by splendour in the heavens and wonders and worship upon the earth.

The movement began in the region of Midian, Kushan and the land of Midian being referenced in verse 7. Kushan is an unusual word. It seems likely that this is the Kush that's associated with Moses through his Midianite wife Zipporah, not the Kush that is in the region of Sudan.

The Lord comes flanked by destroyers, by pestilence before him, plague behind him, and fire in his hand. Anderson proposes that, given what we know about the four destroyers elsewhere in scripture, in places like the book of Ezekiel, we should probably imagine the sword on his other hand.

This description of the Lord on his war path into the land should remind us of various places in the Psalms. Psalm 68 verses 6 to 8, for instance. God settles the solitary in a home.

[7 : 16] He leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious dwell in a parched land. O God, when you went out before your people, when you marched through the wilderness, the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain, before God, the one of Sinai, before God, the God of Israel.

The theophanic imagery of the Lord's marching into battle and the earth quaking and melting before him is used elsewhere in the Psalms. Psalm 97 verses 1 to 5, The Lord reigns.

Let the earth rejoice. Let the many coastlands be glad. Clouds and thick darkness are all around him. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around.

His lightnings light up the world. The earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. The shaking of the world order as the Lord comes is more

than just generic theophanic imagery.

It recalls the way that as the Lord first led his people into the land, the world order really was turned upside down. The Lord overturning the old order and refounding it by his presence and providence. [8 : 26] Again, we see this in the Psalms, in Psalm 114, for instance. When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became his sanctuary, Israel his dominion.

The sea looked and fled. Jordan turned back. The mountains skipped like rams. The hills like lambs. What ails you, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back.

O mountains, that you skip like rams. O hills like lambs. Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water.

The cosmic imagery throughout this prayer accents the Lord's remaking of the world by his coming, presenting his past actions and leading his people in a way that reminds the reader that in such mighty deeds, he was acting as the creator ruling in his creation, with no force or power sufficient to oppose or to resist him.

Verses 8 to 15 have a symmetrical structure, flanked by the horses of the Lord in the opening and closing verses, and having other concentric or paralleled elements within.

[9 : 35] It depicts the Lord as a chariot-riding warrior, employing, among other things, the imagery of cosmogonic myth, but using it to characterize the Lord's leading his people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

By playing with the imagery of ancient Near Eastern creation myths and the conflict with the chaotic sea, Baal and Yam or Majuk and Tiamat, the prayer presents the Exodus as a new creation event. We might also appreciate an ironic contrast between the Lord, the great warrior advancing before his people with his war chariots, and Pharaoh and the pursuing Egyptians with theirs. The Lord acts with anger and with might, not against the rivers and the sea, but against the pagan nations, the rivers, the mountains, the raging waters, the deep, the sun and moon, all recall the foundations and the fundamental elements of the creation.

The Lord is once again dividing and exerting his mastery over the elements to establish his heavens and his earth. In the Exodus, the Lord acted to deliver his anointed people, crushing the head of the house of the wicked.

Such head-crushing should recall Genesis chapter 3 verse 15 and the promised crushing of the head of the serpent. In scripture, enemies of the people of God are frequently characterized as serpent-like, not least Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

[10 : 52] Psalm 74 verses 13 to 14 You divided the sea by your might. You broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan. You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.

Psalm 89 verses 9 to 10 You rule the raging of the sea. When its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass. You scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.

The Egyptians had thought that they would be able to storm, scatter and devour the Israelites, pursuing them to the Red Sea. However, in dividing the waters and then crushing the heads of the Egyptians within them, the Lord both brought about a new sort of creation, bringing a new symbolic dry land up from the Gentile waters, and also defeated the old enemy, the dragon, crushing his head as promised.

In verse 16, Habakkuk returns to the language of verse 2, referring to his hearing of the great deeds of the Lord. The theophanic splendour and dread of the Lord's coming overwhelms the prophet. However, his response is to wait, as he was instructed to do back in chapter 2 verse 3. The Lord would avenge his people, and he would act for their deliverance once more. However, in the interim, Habakkuk will have to be patient and persevere in trusting the Lord.

[12 : 08] In verses 17-19, Habakkuk makes a climactic confession. The confession makes extensive use of parallelism, with each statement followed by a counterbalancing synonymous statement.

When the land denies man its bounty, when farmers lose their flocks and herds, and their crops are destroyed, life becomes progressively more challenging, necessities gradually being stripped away. In such desperate and dark times, it might be easy to abandon faith in the Lord. However, now Habakkuk's response is to rejoice in the Lord. The Lord has delivered his people before, and he will

