

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS OF HABAKKUK 3:8

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הבנהרים חרה י-הוה אם בנהרים אפך אם בים עברתך כי תרכב על סוסיך
מרכבתיך ישועה

Are You wroth, O Lord, with Neharim? Is Your anger against Neharim, Your rage against Yam – That you are driving Your steeds, Your victorious chariot?

(Hab. 3:8)

This passage clearly stands out of the prophet's theophany by its rhetorical questions, and as the only verse in which God directs His anger at the specific entities *neharim* and *yam*, these features have engendered widely-different interpretations by commentators and scholars. They range from mythological interpretation to contemporaneous history. I shall argue for the latter.

True understanding of the verse depends to a great degree on the meaning of נהרים [*neharim*] and ים [*yam*]. With respect to these terms, the following approaches are possible:

1. regular rivers and seas;
2. the Jordan River and the Red Sea;
3. mythological entities;
4. contemporaneous political entities.

Some of these approaches, while popular and accepted, raise significant questions that put their validity in doubt. I will discuss these approaches in order.

1. Assuming that נהרים [*neharim*] and ים [*yam*] refer to regular rivers and sea raises the questions: Why was God angry with them? What have the rivers and sea done to merit His anger and rage? Not a single hint is provided to satisfy these questions. We do find that God treads the earth (Hab. 3:12), but He does not appear to direct His anger *at* the earth. The only other entity for which a similar term (ףא – *af* "rage") is used in the theophany is the nations

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that He tramples (Hab. 3:12). It is conceivable that God's march in the theophany would affect elements of nature, but this would be a reactive effect. In Verse 8, however, God appears to act against rivers and sea by directing His fury at them. Furthermore, if regular rivers are intended, why does Habakkuk use נהרִים [neharim] rather than נהרות [neharot], the proper plural of נהר [nahar] as He does in the following verse? Why is נהר [nahar] in the plural, but ים [yam] in the singular? And why were only the waters singled out for God's anger? Adequate understanding has not been reached.

2. Traditional Jewish commentators favor the understanding that נהרִים [neharim] and ים [yam] are the Jordan River and the Red Sea. This approach, too, raises the question: Why did God rage against them? The answer given by these commentators is that poetic language (Radak: מליצה *melitzah*) is being used. When God split the Red Sea and the Jordan River, it was not a malicious act, though it appeared *as if* God were angry. While this answer may satisfy the question posed, other problems remain. For instance: Why is the Jordan River referred to in the plural "rivers"? Why does the act of crossing the Jordan River precede in this verse the historically earlier crossing of the Red Sea? Why in this verse, is the crossing of the Jordan River emphasized by a repetition, though the splitting of the Red Sea surely was much more miraculous? Here, too, the questions weaken the offered interpretation.

3. Many commentators consider this verse to contain ancient Near Eastern mythical elements. Soon after the Ugaritic texts became available, Cassuto¹ suggested that the parallelism of River/Sea in Habakkuk 3:8 reflects the Prince Sea/Judge River in these texts. Since then it became almost standard to interpret the verse in a mythological sense, recalling those hoary days when the Lord had shown His might in battling these mythological monsters or deities, and by implication hoping that a similar exhibition of God's might will be effected now against Israel's enemies.²

Indeed, numerous biblical passages show that popular legends about Creation once circulated in Israel. These references appear to be gleanings of what may have been once an epic about the God of Creation and the rebellious forces of primeval chaos at the outset of the cosmogonic process.

For example, Isaiah 51:9-10:

הַלּוֹא אֶת הַיָּם הַמְחַצְבֵּת רִבָּה [׀] מִחֹלְלֵת תַּנּוּיִן. הַלּוֹא אֶת הַיָּם הַמְחַצְבֵּת רִבָּה
מִי תְהוֹם רִבָּה, הַשְּׁמָה מֵעַמְקֵי יָם דָּרָךְ לַעֲבֹר גְּאוּלָּיִם.

It was you that hacked Rahab in pieces,/That pierced the Dragon./It was you that dried up the Sea,/That made the abysses of the Sea a road the redeemed might walk.

And 27:1:

ביום ההוא יפקד י-הוה בחרבו הקשה והגדולה והחזקה על לוייתן נחש ברח.
ועל לוייתן נחש עקלתון, והרג את התנין אשר בים.

In that day the Lord will punish, with His great, cruel, mighty sword Leviathan the Elusive Serpent – Leviathan the Twisting Serpent; He will slay the Dragon of the sea.

(The notes in the JPS translation of 1986 identify some of these names as "primeval monsters" [p. 729], and add "here [they] stand for the forces of evil in the present world" [p. 670].)

The Talmud, cognizant of the cryptic treatment of the mythological entities in the Bible, provides additional detail and context. One legend has it that when God first decided to create the world, the suffusing primordial, chaotic waters refused to obey the Divine command to gather into one area so that the dry land might appear. The sea kept on expanding; thereupon, He rebuked it, and it dried up (T.B. Haggigah 12a). In another legend (T.B. Bava Batra 74b): At the time of creation, God said to the angel of the sea, "Open thy mouth and swallow all the waters of the world." The angel said, "Lord of the Universe, it is enough that I remain with my own." The Lord struck him with His foot and killed him, as it is written: *He stirreth up the sea with His power and by His understanding He smiteth through Rahab* (Job 26.12).

Nahum Sarna understands Habakkuk 3:8 as an exemplar of a whole set of such biblical verses reflecting the tension between order and chaos.³ He refers to Psalms 74:13-14, 89:11, and 104:5,7,9. All these use the same mythological allusions as Habakkuk and Isaiah. However, just because *Yam* and *Neharim* appear in Ugaritic literature as actual cosmic foes of the main deity, and there are similarities in the terms used to describe the battle between the deity and these "powers," a prima facie conclusion that these mythological appellations are used in the same way in Habakkuk 3:8 is unjustified. Questions remain: Why are only two cosmic forces associated with water mentioned in Habakkuk and no other monsters? Why in the Ugaritic texts is *nahar* typically singular but in Habakkuk the plural is used, while *yam* (yam), on the other hand, is consistently in the singular?

It should be pointed out that fragments of the "Israelite conflict myth" appear exclusively in poetic texts, the psalms and prophets. They may have served only as literary devices for presenting historical events in mythological terms for didactic purposes, or as allusions for security reasons. In like manner, one scholar sees the context of Habakkuk 3:8-15 – where he Lord appears mounted on a horse-drawn chariot, carrying a bow and a quiver full of arrows – as "imagery drawn from the traditional picture of the storm god in Semitic mythology."⁴ However, the martial imagery used to describe the storm god derives from the standard military practice of those days. It makes sense to say that biblical descriptions of God in battle drew upon contemporaneous military practice.

Moreover, fully to justify a mythological interpretation of Habakkuk 3:8, it must be shown that no other potential understanding is reasonably likely.

4. A fourth approach to this verse is that of the Targum. The Targum understands נהרִים [neharim] and יָם [yam] as referring to the ruling elites – political entities of the time – that rise up like the waters of a river: מַלְכֵיהוֹן מְלִכֵיהוֹן .דַּטְגִּיאִין כְּמִי נִהְרָא. Isaiah called Egypt רַהַב rahav [lit. "arrogance"], evidently because the female monster of chaos whom God smote and left prostrate was an appropriate allusion (Is. 30:7). The imagery is intended to reinforce the prophet's view that Egypt was essentially impotent, and that the policy of trying to ally Judah with her, advocated by many, was a strategy for disaster. Similarly, Ezekiel calls the contemporary Pharaoh הַתַּנִּין הַגָּדוֹל ha'tanin ha'gadol [lit. "the Large Dragon"] (Ezek. 29:3) to intimate a fate like that of Egypt.

Although Babylon is not mentioned explicitly in Habakkuk's vision, and it is not clear from the context that נהרִים [neharim] and יָם [yam] refer to Babylon, J. M. Roberts suggests that Habakkuk's query is directed at the fundamental significance of God's intervention:

The point of the questions [of verse 3:8] is not to suggest that God's anger is really directed at Babylon, rather than the natural world. The point of the questions is to identify Babylon with the primal powers of chaos, and thus to suggest that this new march of [the Lord] is a fundamental reenactment of [His] primeval victories from which there emerged an ordered world under God's kingship (cf. Ps. 74:12-17). The questions if answered affirmatively contain

the promise for Israel of renewed national life under their divine king (cf. Is. 51:9-11).⁵

I submit that Roberts points the way to a satisfactory understanding of Habakkuk's text. I think that most of the questions posed and difficulties encountered can be resolved, not by resorting to mythological literary forms of the Near East but by taking a more earthly view.

First, Habakkuk here uses imagery, as mentioned above, drawn from the standard acts associated with a major king embarking on a war campaign – albeit with exaggeration and cosmic elements, as befitting the majesty of the Divine. We have to imagine the march of troops, horses, and chariots; the wake of dust, the flapping of curtains of the tents, and the excitement of cheering crowds on the route of the march. As the columns pass by, they are urged on by the crowds with shouts, "Aren't you angry at them? Don't you rage at them that you ride your horses, your chariots to victory? Victory!" The terse poetic genre of the prophets, drawn from earthly experience, does not permit delving into a prosaic elaborate explication of the background. This has to be supplemented by the reader who, from scant poetic sketches of the Lord's march and its effect, has to reconstruct an entire scene (cf. II Chr. 20:20-22).

Second, I suggest that the text originally had different vowel-pointing for נהרִים [neharim]. Transliteration will make my point more clear, since the Hebrew spelling is the same: instead of "neharim" ["rivers"], read "neharaim" ["two rivers"], a code-name for Babylon, which was located between the two rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Thus the name אַרַם נְהַרַיִם Aram-Neharayim (Syria-of-Two-Rivers) refers to Mesopotamia, and Habakkuk's repetition of the term נהרִים [neharim] may reflect this designation, or it may poetically reinforce the duality of נהרִים [neharim].

His use of יַם [yam] requires a more intricate explanation. According to Assyrian documents, the southeastern part of Chaldean territory included a lagoon. The Romans called it *lacus Chaldaicus*,⁶ and the Hebrews called it הַיָּם הַמֶּרְחֵק ha'nahar ha'mar [the Bitter River]. There was a strong link between the rising Babylon and the rulers of Bit Jakin on the Bitter River. The almost continuous restiveness of the Chaldeans must have made the Bitter River a fixture in ancient news of the Near East. It appears, then, that Habakkuk employs in 3:8 a natural association of a nation with a major river or lake

within it, as Jeremiah (2:18), Isaiah (8:6-7, 23:3), Ezekiel (29:9), and Amos (8:8) did. Because *neharim* (Is. 18:2,7,33:21) was the old and familiar appellation for Babylon, it was given precedence and emphasis. *Yam*, a reference to the delta of the Euphrates (Jer. 51:36,42) or the Bitter Lakes is a secondary name or a new appellation connected with the Chaldeans.

Note that Habakkuk uses the word עברתך [*evratecha*] derived from עברה [*evrah*] to depict God's indignation (though other terms might have been used). It appears he intended to associate עברה [*evrah*] with עבר הנהר, [*ever ha'nahar*] as in II Samuel 10:16: ארם אשר מעבר הנהר [*aram asher me'ever ha'nahar*] (and other places), the area beyond the Euphrates, or on either side of it. It appears reasonable to assume that the prophet's choice of עברה [*evrah*] was intended to closely link it and ים [*yam*] to Mesopotamia.

In conclusion, I suggest that in Verses 7-8, Habakkuk describes the passing of *God's columns*. It is the roaring crowd (not Habakkuk) that is shouting out the rhetorical questions to God: *Is it at the [nation of the] two rivers that You direct Your rage, Lord? Is Your indignation aimed at the [Bitter] Sea? [Against them] You ride Your horses, chariots? Victory!*

The suggested interpretation does not require any emendations, only a change of vowel-pointing in one word. It avoids all the difficulties entailed by mythological context, connects the salvation of the people with the real oppressor (Babylon), and is in accord with the biblical practice of identifying a nation with a major river or lake within it.⁷

NOTES

1. U. Cassuto, "The Israelite Epic," in *Biblical and Oriental Studies, Vol. II. Bible and Ancient Oriental Texts*, trans. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975) pp. 60-68.
2. T. Hiebert, *God of My Victory: The Ancient Hymn in Habakkuk* 3. Harvard Semitic Monographs 38 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) pp. 24-25.
3. Nahum Sarma, *On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayers of Ancient Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1993) p. 57. See also: Job 7.12, 9.13, 26.12-13, 38.4, 8,11.
4. Hiebert, p. 98.
5. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1991) p. 155.
6. Aron Pinker, "Better Bitter River," in *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 114 (2002) 112-115.
7. I am indebted to Prof. Larry Zaleman for his insightful comments.