

A RECONSTRUCTION OF *MATZOR* HABAKKUK 2:1

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על משמרתִי אֶעֱמְדָה	<i>I will stand on my watch,</i>
וְאֶתִּיצְבָה עַל <u>מַצּוֹר</u>	<i>Take up my station at the post</i>
וְאֶצְפֵה לְרֵאוֹת מֶה יִדְבַר בִּי	<i>And wait to see what He will say to me,</i>
וּמֶה אֲשִׁיב עַל תּוֹכַחְתִּי.	<i>What He will reply to my complaint.</i>

The scene in Habakkuk 2:1, of the prophet waiting on the *matzor* for God's answer to his rhetorical questions laid against the Lord for His treatment of His people, is well known. Yet, it is not altogether clear to what specifically the word "*matzor*" [מַצּוֹר] refers. Many assume that *matzor* is similar to *mishmeret*, because of the perceived parallelism between *matzor* and *mish-marti*. However, the grammatical difference between the two should be sufficient to dispel such a notion. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that *matzor* is a corruption and to reconstruct the original.

The text of Habakkuk 2:1 which elicits this scene is not altogether obvious. For instance, for J.J.M. Roberts, the entire tableau

. . . is unclear – whether one is to understand the language in Habakkuk as referring to a specific place where the prophet went to await an oracle or whether one should take the language as merely metaphoric for prophetic waiting for an oracle. There is some slight evidence that prophets followed a set pattern when awaiting an oracular response. Balaam went aside from the place of sacrifice 'to meet' the omens (Num. 23:3, 15, 24:1), and one of Mari letters seems to refer to waiting on a prophetic oracle as 'guarding the tent sanctuary'. By analogy, Habbakuk may also have had a particular place where he went to await an oracular response from [God],

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and that place could have been in the temple complex, but the evidence is insufficient to demonstrate either point.¹

Abarbanel also suggests that there was a preparatory stage prior to prophecy, in which the prophet isolated himself from the material things interfering with his spiritual and intellectual concentration on the issue that he wanted to understand. In his view, prophecy pertaining to the details of the issue under consideration was the result of the isolation and fixation of mind. Was there a retreat or specific place where such prophetic contemplation took place? Identification of the place or the type of place where Habakkuk awaited God's oracle of response could shed some light on this question and whether Habakkuk was or was not a cultic prophet.

The main elements of the verse – *משמרת* [*mishmarti*] and *מצור* [*matzor*] lend themselves to various interpretations, making this scene even less clear and the confrontation more ambiguous. Robert Haak says:

The word used for "post" [*mishmeret*] has a broad range of meanings, all revolving around the basic idea of "watching, guarding" [*shamor*]. It was used of both priestly and military positions. Although the language of Habakkuk is often influenced by the cult, the parallelism with "watch" and the military context generally present here would indicate that a military connotation cannot be ruled out.²

The term *mishmeret* itself means "custody, guard, observance, observed law or rite." While the meaning of *mishmeret* is essentially clear, the range of interpretative nuances is wide. The Septuagint translates it as "watch," M. Bolle as "the place of the guard," and Ibn Ezra does not see it as a place, but as "the portion of time on guard duty." Roberts breaks the parallelism of the first two clauses; he reads *mishmeret* as describing a positioning and *matzor* as actual guarding. Kimchi views it as a state of being "anxious to know, anxiously awaiting."³

While *mishmeret* does not appear to point in any particular direction (priestly or military position), *matzor* does. It would be difficult, however, to discern this direction from the plethora of meanings assigned to *matzor* in verse 2:1: *matzor* could mean "distress" (Deut. 28:53), "siege" (Ez. 4:2, 7), "a mound raised by besiegers" (Deut. 20:20, Mic. 4:14), "bulwark" or "citadel" (II Chr. 32:10). The etymology of *matzor* is unclear, though the word appears to have military connotations in the biblical literature.

F. Brown and others define it as "siege, enclosure, ramparts"; Koehler and Baumgartner translate "*Befestigung, feste Stadt*." In Gesenius's lexicon, the meaning here is "bulwark or citadel."⁴ Bolle derives the meaning "fortress" from II Chronicles 11:5, noting that the parallelism with *mishmarti* makes *matzor* a synonym of *mishmeret*, which implies that *matzor* in reality was somehow derived from the root מצור [*natzor*].⁵ Exegetes who relate *matzor* to the root *natzor* translate it as "watchtower." Some have treated *matzor* as a cognate of Akkadian *matzartu* ['guardpost'], a term which is apparently used in the religious sphere.⁶ The Septuagint, however, considered *matzor* to be derived from צור [*tzur*], translating it as "the rock."⁷ (We shall presently return to צור in another connection.)

It appears that the Targum reads *matzod* instead of *matzor*, translating it as "my stronghold" [*metzudati*]. Abarbanel understands *matzor* as "siege." In his view, Habakkuk was completely focused on the impending siege of Jerusalem and on the response he would give to those who would challenge him with the question "Where is the God of justice?" Kimchi, in another direction entirely, translates *matzor* as "distress and perplexity."⁸ According to the Midrash in Shoher Tov, *matzor* is "a [circular?] shape": Habakkuk made a shape and said: "I am not leaving unless I get a response [*shehetzar tzura ve-amar eini zaz ad sheyashiveni*]."

The view that *matzor* here is an earthen mound from which it was the practice to storm a city wall, and so was a fortification from which one had a good view, does not make sense.⁹ It may serve to dramatize Habakkuk's confrontation with heaven, as if he is ready to storm God's fortifications for an answer, but it is certainly unrealistic. No fortified city would let such a mound stand and thereby make it easier for an enemy suddenly to attack it. Such a mound would be quickly dismantled after siege and enemy departure.

While much scholarship focused on the meaning of *matzor*, its authenticity was not at issue. A number of commentators preferred the Dead Sea Habakkuk (DSH) version "*matzori*." In their view, the parallelism with preceding *mishmarti* favors the article or the pronominal suffix. However, of all the versions only the Targum appears to be in support of DSH. This led William Brownlee to observe, "The reading of DSH is stylistically better; that of MT is better supported." In his view, "the disappearance of the *yod* may have been caused by haplography with the following "vav" from which it may not have been distinguishable."¹⁰

Is *matzor* actually the original text? I suggest that the guide to understanding Habakkuk 2:1 is Isaiah 21:8: *And he cried as a lion* [aryeh] *'Upon the watch-tower* [mitzpeh], *O Lord, I stand continually in the daytime, and I am set in my ward all the nights.'* A comparison of the two verses points to an understanding of *matzor*. Rashi finds the similarities between Isaiah 21:8 and Habakkuk 2:1 so compelling that he suggests Isaiah predicted Habakkuk's act: "*and he cried as a lion: This is Habakkuk since aryeh in Gematria amounts to Habakkuk. Isaiah prophesied that Habakkuk is to pray about it and say the same.*" The correspondences between the two verses make the correspondence *matzor* <-> *mitzpeh* very probable. Indeed, Roberts notes that "The designation of the place where the prophet waits for a new word from [God] as a 'watch post' or 'guard post' has a very close parallel to the thought and wording of the oracle in Isaiah 21:8."¹¹

The very close correspondence between Habakkuk 2:1 and Isaiah 21:8 and the consequent correspondence *matzor* <-> *mitzpeh* suggest that the original text of Habakkuk 2:1 had *mitzpeh* [מיצפה] instead of *matzor*. This suggestion is further supported by the words *ha-mitzpeh* [המיצפה] in Isaiah 21:6 and "(v)*atzapeh*" [אצפֿה(ו)] in Habakkuk 2:1. The watchman was called a "*metzapeh*," and if asked what he would do on his post he would answer: "*etzpeh*" [I will watch]. Thus, the occurrence of *atzapeh* in Habakkuk 2:1 requires a *metzapeh* [watchman] and a *mitzpeh* [watchtower]. Moreover, both in Isaiah 21:6 and 21:8 *mitzpeh* is associated with the word "*amod*." It is thus very likely that *matzor* is a corruption of *mitzpeh*. Indeed, Mandelkern suggests this reading.¹²

How could *mitzpeh* have become *matzor*? It is not too difficult to imagine a scenario in which the text underwent understandable orthographic changes in subsequent rewritings. First, because of the great similarity of the letters "פ" and "צ" in the pre-Exilic Hebrew script, the two may have been exchanged. Thus *mitzpeh* became *mitzvah*. This change was not corrected because it may have been read as good sense (Neh. 10:23). Furthermore, there was perhaps a tradition about Habakkuk's cultic role in the Temple where he officiated. Thus, the first part of verse 2:1 was understood in the cultic sense. After the change of the old Hebrew alphabet to the Aramaic square script, it is possible that in transcription one leg of the "פ" in מיצפֿה was not completed, turning it into מיצֿור [matzor]. Again, *matzor* appeared to be a word that could make

good sense, though its true meaning was no longer clear.¹³ Therefore, it was not corrected.

A more intriguing possibility is that *mitzvah* was deliberately changed into *matzor* to create a parallelism between the pairs "תוכחתי - מצור" [*matzor* - *tokhahati*] in 2.1 and a play on these words in a similar sounding pair " - צור - להוכיח" [*tzur* - *lehokiah*] in verse 1:12. The redactor who might have made the change may have wanted to highlight the reversals that occurred: Habakkuk hoped that a protective God (in the metaphor *tzur* [*rock*]) would reprove Judah, but He became a besieger [*matzor*], and thus the just chastisement [*hokhaha*] of Judah became the prophet's reproof [*tokhaha*] of God. The change may have ameliorated the embarrassing incident that occurred at Mizpeh, where the Jerusalem notable Gedaliah ben-Ahikam, who had been put in charge by the Babylonians, was murdered together with the Babylonian garrison.

If this possibility can be sustained, it would provide some support to Roberts's view:

The second lament may have actually been formulated some time after the initial lament. It seems to presuppose a significant experience of Babylonian oppression, so it could date several years later than the original lament, perhaps as late as the Babylonian destruction of the temple in 597 BCE, which would have raised serious questions about the Babylonians as God's agents.¹⁴

It is also possible to view Habakkuk 2:1 as a continuation of the netting metaphor (1:14-17) on land. Nets were used to capture birds and animals. The simple methods required that the hunter be at a good vantage point to know when to close the trap or release the net. Hosea 5:1 uses this well-known trapping procedure to describe an aberration, a case where the hunter (in Hosea's case, the priests and royalty of Israel) becomes the captive: *But you have become a snare to Mizpah / And a net spread over Tabor*. The description in Hosea uses the key words "*reshet*" [net] and *mitzpeh*. In our case the word *reshet* is implied and *mitzpeh*, as was suggested, was the original reading instead of *matzor*. Habakkuk may have seen his arguments as logical entrapments and he wondered how the Lord would respond or get out from His entanglements.

It is obviously difficult to judge whether Habakkuk was influenced by the text or metaphor in Isaiah 21:8 or Hosea 5:1.¹⁵ His propensity to employ *double entendres* speaks for admitting the view that both the military and fishing metaphors may have crossed his mind and have found expression in

his text. In either case, however, *matzor* appears to be a corruption of *mitz-peh*.

NOTES

1. J.J.M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) p. 108.
2. Robert D. Haak, *Habakkuk*, Supplement to *Vetus Testamentum* Vol. XLIV (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992) p. 53.
3. Lancelot C.L. Brenton, *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, 1987) p. 1107; M. Bolle, *Sepher Habakkuk*, in *Tere Asar im Perush Daat Mikra*, Vol. II. (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1970) p. 9; Ibn Ezra, in *Mikraot Gedolot: Neviim Achronim* (New York: Schocken, 1959) p. 328; Roberts, p. 105; Kimchi, in *Mikraot Gedolot: Neviim Achronim* (New York: Schocken, 1959) p. 328.
4. F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs (BDB), *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Oxford: Oxford, 1907) p. 849; L. Kohler and W. Baumgartner, *Hebraisches und aramaisches Lexicon zum Alten Testament*, 3rd ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967); H.W.F. Gesenius, *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, trans. by S.P. Tregelles (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979).
5. Bolle, p. 10.
6. Roberts, p. 105
7. Brenton, p. 1107.
8. Kimchi, p. 328.
9. Maria Eszenyei Szeles, *Wrath and Mercy: A Commentary on the Books of Habakkuk & Zephaniah*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans/Handsels, 1987) p.29.
10. William H. Brownlee, "The Text of Habakkuk in the Ancient Commentary from Qumran," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Monograph Series, Vol. XI (1959) p. 40.
11. Roberts, p. 108.
12. Solomon Mandelkern, *Concordantiae Hebraicae Atque Chaldaicae* (Leipzig: Lipsiae Veit, 1896) p. 993.
13. The Midrash tells a story that shows the uncertainty of the meaning: "Once most of Adar went by without rain. They sent to Honi Ham'agel and asked him to pray for rain. He prayed but no rain fell. What did he do? He made a circle and stood in it, as the prophet Habakkuk did, as it says I will stand on my watch, take up my station at the post [חצור]" (TB Taanit 19).
14. Roberts, p. 102.
15. William H. Brownlee, "The Placard Revelation of Habakkuk." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1963) pp. 319-325. In Brownlee's opinion, Habakkuk apparently borrowed this figure of the prophet as "watchman" from Hosea (v. 9:8). He passed it on to Ezekiel (vv. 3:17-21, 33:1-9) and to an unnamed exilic prophet (Isa. 21:6-21).