

# WAS HABAKKUK PRESUMPTUOUS?

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Habakkuk is unique among the prophets in opening his prophecy with a series of complaints. This in itself creates a negative image, which Jewish traditional commentators may have resented. Any complaint in essence bears the seed of presumptuousness by implying that the complainer "knows better." However, it seems that in Habakkuk's case there is some emotional impatience and intellectual arrogance, which went well beyond what commentators could have written off as being in the nature of the subject matter treated. Perhaps Habakkuk's immersion in the problems of his people, his sensitivity to moral injustice, and his keen mind have blurred the boundaries of his prophetic mission, propelling him into presumptuous stances, which appear jarring to commentators and current readers.

A perusal of the Book of Habakkuk leaves the reader with uneasy feelings. It seems as though the prophet is more confrontational than would seem proper, impatient to a point approaching rudeness and assuming roles that are not rightfully his. Was Habakkuk presumptuous? Webster defines "presumptuous" as: "bold and confident to excess; adventuring without reasonable ground of success; taking liberties; rash; insolent; audacious; presumptive."<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, the brevity of the book (56 verses) does not permit a reliable analysis of whether Habakkuk possessed this character trait. In this paper, I will try to show that Habakkuk may have been insolent and perhaps took liberties in the presentation of his prophecies, or, at least, that some commentators have felt that he did so. My position is based on verse 1:3, which I consider to be an expression of insolence and on verses 1:6 and 2:1-2, which I believe exemplify taking liberties in making his case and being presumptuous.

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## HABAKKUK 1:3

*Why [lamma] do You make me see iniquity  
 [Why] do You look upon wrong?  
 Raiding and violence are before me  
 Strife continues and contention goes on.*

This verse, starting with "*lamma*," is a complaint. Determining the tenor of the *lamma* is significant for the question at hand, whether Habakkuk was presumptuous in his prophecy. *Lamma* usually means the interrogative "why." Bolle suggests as an alternate meaning "don't" (Ex. 32:11).<sup>2</sup> A break-up of the word into "*l*" [for] and "*ma*" [what] suggests the meaning "what for?" The crucial question is whether the *lamma* is inquisitive or rhetorical. Does Habakkuk inquire and try to understand the purpose for which he is shown those social and moral aberrations, or does he in essence say, "Why do You bother with this? I know it all" or "Don't bother with this. I know it all."

There would be no problems with an inquisitive *lamma*. In fact, the prophet could prudently assume that the Lord may have some purpose in directing him to look at the display before him, and wants him to elicit an insight that may have escaped him. Thus, the question "To what purpose do You show me wickedness, toil, lawlessness, destructive violence, strife and contention on the rise?" would appear as normal and natural. The rhetorical *lamma*, however, smacks of insolence and could brand Habakkuk as presumptuous. It suggests that Habakkuk is impatient, self-confident in his superior knowledge, and rejects out of hand the Lord's directive.

It is possible to assume that a prophet, in principle, would not be presumptuous in his prophecy, and were it the case, editors would have noticed it and excised or smoothed over such material. Thus the *lamma* must be inquisitive. Such reasoning, however, assumes that editors were sufficiently sensitive to this issue and had the freedom to make major textual changes in material that was essentially "canonized." More important, such reasoning would require some explanatory text from the Lord in the following verses. Yet, the following verse contains an elaboration by Habakkuk. Indeed, this very elaboration points to the kind of *lamma* that is used in Habakkuk 1:3.

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In Habakkuk 1:4, the prophet emphasizes that not only does he see what the Lord tries to make him see, but he also understands the repercussions of this state of affairs. This appears to be a claim for superior knowledge, implying that his insights do not require any thrusting of abuses and acts of violence in front of his eyes. The *lamma* in the preceding verse is clearly rhetorical. It is a very explicit "don't" because "I don't need."

The Bible contains a number of occasions when the Lord shows a prophet something for the sake of eliciting a response that enables Him to make His proclamation with greater emphasis. The prophets always go along and play their expected parts. Habakkuk does not. God shows him wickedness, toil, lawlessness, destructive violence, strife and contention on the rise. Habakkuk's reaction is "Do not bother with this. I know it all." One would certainly expect a prophet to let the Lord make His point. If the Lord wants the prophet to see something there may be a purpose in the directive; the prophet cannot presume that he knows all of God's intents and therefore can reject such a directive out of hand.

Andersen finds Habakkuk's addressing the Lord in the preceding verse somewhat improper in its tone, reflected in the Divine epithet used. Though the prophet starts with a prayer of complaint the invocation is rather abrupt and thus shades the tenor of verse 1:3. He says, "Habakkuk's language lacks the courtesy of address to a superior that customarily contains a title defining the role in which the deity is being supplicated ("my God" or "my Lord")."<sup>3</sup> It should be noted, however, that Habakkuk is effusive in honorifics in verse 1:12, when the danger of national extinction was very real. Yet, he also leaves an impression of being short-tempered and abrupt to a degree approaching insolence.

It is not clear to what degree the Jewish traditional commentators tried to avoid this impression of a presumptuous prophet. This impression is obviously removed if it is not the Lord who wants to make Habakkuk see all the evil that is being done. For instance, the Targum emends "*tareini* [You show me]" into "*ani roeh* [I see]," translating it as "*ana hazei*." Radak apparently follows the Targum, reading "*ereh* [I see]," and it seems as though Ibn Ezra reads "*tireh* [You see]."

Unfortunately, Hebrew does not distinguish between passive and active (or forced) seeing. "*Tareini*" could have the meaning of "you show me" (in

a passive sense) or the meaning "you make me see" (in an active or forced sense). Which of these meanings is intended must be inferred from the context in which *tareini* is used. In our case, I tend to agree with Roberts that it means "you make me see."<sup>4</sup> The tenor of the verse is that of acts forced on the prophet and these acts are juxtaposed with God's seeming indifference. Indeed, many commentators translate *tareini* as "You make me see."

Habakkuk was made to see, yet he complained. His rhetorical *lamma* makes it clear that from the prophet's perspective the "seeing" was unnecessary. Habakkuk appears to be confident that he has seen it all and understood. Did he? Metzudot, sensitive to the possibility of God showing Habakkuk what Habakkuk believes he already knows, says, "In a vision of prophecy he saw the covert sins of Israel." We are not told in the Masoretic text that this was indeed the case, but certainly there could have been something to show him, and Metzudot felt the need to point it out. Habakkuk should not have been so insolent as to presume that he knows all there is to know and therefore God does not have to show him anything.

The Midrash, attuned to thematic difficulties in the Bible, says, "There were four who prayed and spoke harshly to the Lord out of their love for Israel: Jeremiah, Habakkuk, David, and Moses" (Shocher Tov 90:2). This midrash states the obvious, that Habakkuk spoke harshly to the Lord (we characterize it as insolence). It tries to smooth over this jarring behavior in two ways: putting Habakkuk in exalted company, and making love of Israel the motive. As is usually the case, the midrashic solution leaves much to be desired.

In another midrash, Habakkuk's insolence is turned into a calm, respectful theological dialogue. We find:

Habakkuk the prophet asked the Holy One, Blessed is He: "Master of the Universe, if one person learns much and another little, will their reward be equal in the World to Come?" The Holy One, Blessed is He, replied: "No, each will be rewarded according to his ways." Then Habakkuk spoke additional words and asked: "Why are the righteous punished and the wicked appear to be rewarded?" The Lord showed him all the measures of Divine justice that had been revealed to Moses, the father of wisdom and the father of

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prophets, who had asked a similar question. He showed him the weights and scales of Divine justice (Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu Zuta 12). Very gently and diplomatically does this midrash intimate how Habakkuk should have spoken, that God had much to show him and that his presumptuousness was vacuous.

Finally, the term "*tokhahti*" in verse 2:1 has been understood by some as God's reproof of Habakkuk. For instance, the Septuagint translated *tokhahti* as "when I am reprov'd" and the Peshitta as "because of my chastisement." This appears to reflect the view that Habakkuk did something improper and deserved a reproof or chastisement. Indeed, both Metzudot and Rashi felt that Habakkuk's prayer in Chapter 3 is a consequence of his presumptuous behavior. Interpreting "*shigyonot*" as "*shgiot*, [errors]" Metzudot, like Rashi, says that the term refers here to the mistake committed by Habakkuk in questioning God's ways. Rashi identifies these mistakes as expressions found in verses 1:4 and 1:14, where, according to Rashi, "he chided God on His judgment." It seems to me that a case can be made, at least according to some commentators, that it was in verse 1:3 that Habakkuk formulated his insolent *lamma tareini* branding him as presumptuous.

### HABAKKUK 1:6

*For lo, I am raising up the Chaldeans,  
That fierce, impetuous nation,  
Who cross the earth's wide spaces  
To seize homes not their own.*

Verse 1:6 is a central verse in the Habakkuk corpus. It was hyped up in the previous verse as an unusual event, hard to believe even when later retold. It tells about the raising up of the Chaldeans and making them an unstoppable power and God's punishing agent. We would have expected that such an unusual event would be attributed to the Lord, since it is the Lord who is causing this geopolitical upheaval. Yet in verse 1:5 the surprising event is described in neutral terms [*ki poal poel (For a work is being wrought)*], and in verse 1:6 Habakkuk unambiguously says that it is he who is raising up the Chaldeans [*ki hineni mekim et hakasdim (For Lo, I am raising up the Chaldeans)*]. Habakkuk appears here presumptuous by attributing to himself feats that would be executed by the Lord. He is taking

liberties with presenting the true state of affairs, leaving a strong impression of presumptuousness.

Most commentators assume that Habakkuk speaks here in God's name and the "I" in "*hineni*" refers to God. Similarly, it is understood that in 1:6 it is God who "does a deed, or acts an act." But this means reading into the text an interpretative position, which is based on the rationale "because Habakkuk could not have raised up the Chaldeans then it is obvious that the Lord is implied in both verses." Abarbanel, however, notes that nowhere in the book does Habakkuk speak in God's name. He attributes the *hineni* to Habakkuk [*hanavi al atzmo amar* ("The prophet spoke of himself)]. However, recognizing that such an interpretation would make Habakkuk appear presumptuous, he adds that the *hineni* is clearly a manner of speech that Habakkuk found convenient for the occasion. His vivid personal description of the Chaldeans pulled him into attributing to himself the act of raising them up.

Abarbanel tries to resolve the appearance of Habakkuk's presumptuousness by attributing it to the prophet's immersion in the matter and convenience of expression. However, the phrase "*ki hineni mekim*" is the very first in the verse and it is followed by the rich description of the Chaldeans. It cannot be argued that preceding verbiage about the Chaldeans pulled him into making a presumptuous statement. The same phrase is also used by Amos (Amos 6:14), yet Amos fully attributes the event to the Lord. Moreover, it would have been very easy for Habakkuk to attribute to the Lord the event of raising up the Chaldeans, for instance by saying "*ki hine Hashem mekim et hakasdim* [*For Lo, the Lord raises the Chaldeans*]."

Perhaps, Habakkuk's emotional and intellectual immersion in the prophetic mission led him to assume the role of either God or nation in the complicated relation between these entities. Thus, it is he who is raising up the Chaldeans (1:6) and it is he who is answered by the Lord (2:1). Habakkuk's remonstrations with God, his emotional and intellectual involvement, and his fundamental concern for the wellbeing of the nation would then be in line with the best prophetic traditions. Still, the poor choice of words leaves an ineradicable taste of presumptuousness.

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*I will stand on my watch,  
Take up my station at the post,  
And wait to see what He will say to me,  
What He will reply to my complaint.  
The Lord answered me and said:  
'Write the prophecy down,  
**Inscribe it clearly** [ba'er] on **tablets** [haluhot]  
So that it can be read easily'.*

The watchtower scene and God's response seem as if intended to imply some equivalency with the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Habakkuk is capitalizing on the *Leitwörter* "yityatzvu [they took their places]," "yidaber [(Moses) spoke]," "yannenu [(God) answered him]," and "lir'ot [to gaze]" in Exodus 19:17, 19 and 21 to intimate that he too had a dialogue with the Lord. and as with Moses it will remain private.

The word "ba'er [make distinct, plain]" occurs two more times in the Bible (Deut. 1:5, 27:8), clearly referring to the Torah. The term "*haluhot* [the tablets]" is mainly used for the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written, the Tablets of the Covenant. The association of *haluhot* (in which "ha" is an unnecessary definite article) in Habakkuk 2:2 with the Tablets of the Covenant is certainly more than suggestive. This piling of *Leitwörter*, which are clearly linked to the giving of the Torah to Moses, makes it difficult to dispel the impression that it is intentional and obviously presumptuous. For a Moses Habakkuk was not.

The Targum makes the association and translates "*al haluhot*" as "in the book of the law [*al sifra d'oraita*]". However, according to the Targum there was nothing to write, because the Lord simply directs Habakkuk to go back to the Torah and read what is clearly written there.<sup>5</sup> The Targum's making the *luhot* one and the same as the Torah somewhat deflates Habakkuk's presumptuousness but does not obviate it.<sup>6</sup> The presumptuousness expressed by the *Leitwörter* *yityatzvu*, *yidaber*, *yannenu* and *lir'ot* remains.

The midrash, ever sensitive to delicate biblical nuances, may have picked up on Habakkuk's casting himself in the role of a Moses vis-à-vis the Lord. We have already mentioned two midrashic sources in which Habakkuk is co-equal to Moses. Another link between Habakkuk and Moses can be found in Habakkuk's encapsulation of all the biblical precepts into one

principle. We read: "Six hundred thirteen precepts were told to Moses on Sinai . . . Habakkuk came and encapsulated them in one principle: *The righteous man shall live by his steadfastness* (Hab. 2:4)" (TB Makkoth 24a, TB Sanhedrin 81). Perhaps the midrash is intimating here that Habakkuk was presumptuous to believe that he could encapsulate in a single principle what the Lord gave Moses in the form of 613 precepts.

Indeed, Abarbanel sees "*hine uppla*" in verse 2:4 [usually translated "puffed up"] as a reference to Habakkuk's misguided behavior. Abarbanel emends *uppla* into "*afeila* [darkness]"<sup>7</sup> and gives it a philosophical interpretation. When a person relies on his own reasoning and deductions his soul will be in the darkness and not upright in him, because he will always ponder about his doubts and perplexities. On the other hand, the righteous who believes that God's conduct is just and unbiased will accept it unquestioningly. In his view, the verse refers to Habakkuk, who wanted to argue with God, using theological arguments about good and evil. God says that these doubts are a dark road. "Behold, dark is a soul in a man when it is not upright," but has doubts, which are deviations from uprightness. Abarbanel felt that in being argumentative and confrontational, Habakkuk embarked on an unprofitable dark road of reasoning that does not befit the righteous. Even if Abarbanel's emendation of *uppla* into *afeila* is accepted, the derogatory overtones of *uppla* [haughtiness, spite] continue to linger.

Typically, biblical prophets reproved the Israelites for their sins and announced God's just judgment. In some cases, as a member of the oppressed community, a prophet would stand up against "God's punishing rod," because he felt that "God's agent" had subverted his mandate to excess. Habakkuk, however, stands out as a prophet who tipped the scales toward complaint rather than justification of the punishment in accord with the Covenant. There seems to be some circumstantial evidence that Habakkuk's stance might have been a by-product of presumptuousness and that it was so perceived by various commentators.<sup>8</sup>

#### NOTES

1. *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, revised by J.L. McKechnie (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983).
2. M. Bolle, *Sepher Habakkuk, in Terei Asar im Perush Daat Mikra*, Vol. II. (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1970) p. 2.

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3. F.I. Andersen, *Habakkuk*. AB 25. (New York: Doubleday, 2001) p.110.
4. J.J.M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) p. 89.
- 5 The Targum says, "And I was answered from the Lord, and he said, 'The prophecy is written and expressed clearly in the book of the law so that whoever reads in it may hasten to be wise.'"
6. A. Pinker, "The Targum on Habakkuk 2:2." To appear in *Revue Biblique*..
7. Isaac Abarbanel, *Perush al Neviim Ahronim*. (Jerusalem: Books Export Enterprises) (Photostat of second edition 1641).
8. A. Ahuviah, "'Why Do You Countenance Treachery': A Study in the Oracle Which Habakkuk the Prophet Saw (Hab. 1:1-24)," *Beth Mikra* 31 (1985-1986) pp. 320-327.