

# HABAKKUK: FROM PERPLEXITY TO FAITH

SHIMON BAKON

## INTRODUCTION

Outside of the fact that Habakkuk, together with Nahum and Zephaniah, are the last pre-exilic minor prophets, there is almost nothing known about him except for a reference in the Talmud that he narrowed the Torah down to one mitzvah: Israel lives by its faith in God (Makkot 24a). His strange name has evoked some questions. The name may be rooted in the Akkadian *hambakuku* (a type of plant), or in the Hebrew *h-b-k*, to embrace, a term of endearment. According to the Zohar (Introduction 7b), he was the son of the grand lady, the Shunnamite who hosted the prophet Elisha. As a reward for her kindness, he prophesied *At this season next year you will be embracing (ho-ve-ket) a son* (II Kg. 4:16), hence the name Habakkuk for the child that was born. Of course, this is rather fanciful since Elisha's ministry was in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE whereas Habakkuk lived in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, *Seder Olam Rabbah* (Chapter 20) indicates that Habakkuk prophesied during the reign of King Manasseh (692-638 BCE). Yet this chronology poses a double difficulty: at this stage of history, the Babylonians were a minor tributary of the Assyrians and certainly no threat to Judah. This difficulty could be overcome by pointing to the power of prophecy foreseeing the future. There is, however, an even greater difficulty. King Manasseh is accused of many religious and moral sins: idolatry by setting up an Asherah in the House of the Lord, murder by putting so many innocent people to death (II Kg. 21) and who, in the final analysis, is held responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (II Kg. 23). It is therefore inconceivable that Habakkuk should take no notice of Manasseh and his sins. It is more logical to place Habakkuk at around 600 BCE. Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, fell in the year 612 by the onslaught of the Chaldeans. In 604, Nebuchadnezzar gained a decisive victory over Necho, King of Egypt. The Chaldeans now became the dominant force in the Near East. In 601, they invaded Judah at a time when King Josiah's reformation was already waning.

## HABAKKUK CHALLENGES THE LORD (CHAPTER 1)

That the Lord is a God of Justice was already a firm belief of Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. Justice has many faces. Thus, in the forthcoming destruction of Sodom, Abraham protests: is it in keeping with justice to destroy, indiscriminately, the righteous and the wicked? (Gen. 18:23) When God, in the rebellion of Korah, threatens to exterminate the entire congregation, Moses intercedes: *Shall one man sin and You are wroth with all the congregation?* (Num. 16:22). Jeremiah is seriously troubled by a fundamental dogma of God's justice. He queries: why do the wicked succeed? Job questions the entire structure of theodicy. In real life, there seems no causal relation between man's deeds and reward or punishment.

Habakkuk raises two or possibly three complaints, questioning other facets of God's moral rule. *How long O Lord shall I cry out and You not listen? Shall I shout to You 'violence' and You not save?* (1:1). He is troubled by God's silence in the face of rampant violence and evil. With this outcry against God's moral reign of the world, Habakkuk engages in a dialogue with the Lord. This seeming indifference of the Lord put the fundamental theodicy into question since *judgment emerges deformed* (1:4).

God's reply comes as a shock to Habakkuk. He has prepared an agent, the Chaldeans, to punish the wicked. The Chaldeans will march through the earth as *vultures that hasten to devour* (1:8). Resigned that *You have ordained them for judgment*, Habakkuk objects. Unquestionably, Habakkuk borrowed the concept of *God's rod of wrath* from Isaiah, but he goes beyond his great predecessor for he questions whether it is altogether in keeping with God's justice when *the wicked swallow up the one who is more righteous* (2:13).

Is it keeping with justice that the Lord whose eyes are *too pure to behold evil* will tolerate that the wicked will swallow up one more righteous than they? How can the Lord hold His peace when victims of world powers, compared to rapacious vultures, are punished? Habakkuk is then assured that Chaldeans are ordained to rectify evil but not to destroy Israel. The Chaldeans are to serve as His rod of wrath to judge the evildoers, to be a corrective instrument. True, answers Habakkuk, using the metaphor of a fishing net: the Chaldeans in their growing might *gather mankind (Adam) like the fish of the sea* (1:14). And there is no end to cruelties they commit.

One cannot be sure whether verse 16, *Therefore they sacrifice in to their net*, is God's reply to Habakkuk's metaphor of the net, or a continuation of Habakkuk's monologue. The meaning of the verse is clear: the Chaldeans so trust in the power of their arms that they deified it, strengthening a previous verse: *they impute their might in to their god* (1:11).

If these two verses are the word of God, they suggest that He views them as a sacrilege, hinting to Habakkuk that the arrogance of the Chaldeans is the beginning of their eventual destruction. Not only do they transgress and incur guilt ascribing their might to their god, but also for their cruelty, slaying nations without pity.

Radak (Kimḥi) discerns in Habakkuk's challenges the additional complaint: when will God put an end to the Chaldeans' greed for conquest?

#### THE VISION IS FOR AN APPOINTED TIME (CHAPTER 2)

*I will stand on my watch . . . and wait what He will reply to my complaint* (2:1).

Habakkuk is adamant in his request to the Lord made at the start of his prophecy: when will God step in to eliminate evil and put an end to the rapacious Chaldeans? On this verse Rashi comments: "he made a circle, like Honi ha-Me'aggel, proclaiming 'I shall not move from it until the Lord will answer my question: Why does He look on the success of evil?'"

In the forthcoming theophany comes the Lord's reply. The message is of such importance that Habakkuk is told to inscribe the prophecy on tablets. For it contains verities and lessons valid to this day. Their influence is incalculable in centuries that followed. *The vision is yet for the appointed time* [*ki od hazon la-mo'ed*] *and it declared of the end and does not lie* (2:3).

Though it carries, *wait for it, for it will surely come*. The vision of a trial for the world in a divine tribunal will be realized *in the appointed time*, but it is set for the distant future. The end of trouble and violence and the establishment of true justice will surely come. Tyranny, symbolized by the Chaldeans, *its soul puffed up*, will perish.

Indeed, the Chaldeans have been appointed to be His instrument of rectifying the evil rampant in Israel. But puffed up by their arrogance, ascribing their power and conquests to their gods, in fact raising the power of arms to the status of gods, the Chaldeans are committing unpardonable sins. They

have his *maw as wide as the Sheol, who is insatiable as Death* (2:5). In so doing, they have planted the seed for their own destruction. The nations on whom the Chaldeans have committed unspeakable crimes will rise and exact vengeance. *Because you have spoiled many nations, all the remnants will spoil you* (2:8). To strengthen the thought that the tyrannical empire will disintegrate by natural forces, Habakkuk uses the parable of the usurer who piles up what is not his: *Right suddenly will your creditors (noshekhekha) arise and you will be despoiled by them* (2:7). The Hebrew term *noshekhekha* (creditors) has the double meaning of "biters." By contrast, the righteous, either the individual or collective Israel, will live by loyalty to God: *but the righteous shall live by his faith (emunah)* (2:4).

This particular verse requires elaboration for it became one of the dividers between Judaism and Christianity. To R. Simlai in the Talmud, this verse signified the quintessence of mitzvot. He taught:

613 precepts were communicated to Moses. Came David and reduced them to 11 (Ps. 15). Isaiah came and reduced them to 6 principles (Is. 33:15-16). Micah reduced them to three: *It has been told to thee O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of thee; only to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly before the Lord* (Micah 6:8). But it is Habakkuk who came and based them all on one principle: *the righteous shall live by their faith [emunah]* (Mak-kot 24a,b)

It is the interpretation of the term *emunah* that caused the division of Judaism and Christianity. In the Jewish interpretation, *emunah* stands for steadfastness and loyalty to God and the mitzvot (see: *and his hands remained steady [va-yehi yadav emunah]* Ex. 17:12). By an ironic twist, Paul made it into faith without the encumbrance of mitzvot that leads to salvation. "To prove the transitory nature of the law, Paul derived his great anti-Jewish motto 'the just shall live by his faith' after giving it a new meaning".<sup>1</sup>

With the fall of the Chaldeans, the divine reign of justice and peace will become manifest. All nations will realize the impotence of graven images. In awe of the Lord *let all the earth keep silence before Him* (2:20).

In the first chapter of the book, Habakkuk, unshaken in his firm belief of a God of justice and moral government of the world, queries: why then is there evil and violence on earth, and why has He chosen the Chaldeans, a rapacious and cruel nation, to be His instrument of wrath? In the second chapter, Habakkuk is answered by the Lord that by a natural process the Chaldeans will disintegrate but Israel will live by unswerving loyalty to God.

Habakkuk is disappointed. The Chaldean empire seems to be growing and is impregnable; the fulfillment of the promise in chapter 2 still tarries. He prays: *I am awed O Lord by Your deeds, renew them in these years* (3:2). He is now granted a majestic theophany. The Lord appears in inspiring splendor and terrifying power to accomplish the deliverance of His people. He will set up a tribunal in the "Day of Trouble" to judge the world.

Habakkuk, in all probability a Levite blessed with prophetic vision and great poetic skill, clothed the theophany in the form of a psalm: *A prayer of the Prophet Habakkuk in the mode of Shigionot* (3:1).<sup>2</sup> According to Driver, it is a lyric mode which for the sublimity of poetic conception and splendor of diction ranks with the finest which Hebrew poetry has produced.<sup>3</sup>

Coming up from Teman and Paran<sup>4</sup> as a mighty warrior in a chariot, God, accompanied by His celestial servants shatters formidable mountains, floods the earth and will execute judgment. To the rhetorical question: *Is it, O Lord, is it that Thine anger is kindled against the rivers, or Thy wrath against the sea* (3:8)? The answer comes: *Thou art come forth for the deliverance of Thine anointed* (3:13).

In hearing it, Habakkuk is profoundly shaken by the message of a world tribunal, the "Day of Trouble", for it will inevitably bring great hardship to Israel: *And I tremble where I stand that I should wait for the day of trouble* (3:16).

In the end however, the deep concerns of Habakkuk are abated: *Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will exult in the God of my salvation* (3:18). Habakkuk is certain *in wrath He will remember compassion* (3:2).

It might be of some use to enter here a general observation of Erich Fromm. He divided psalms into two main classes: the one-mood psalm and the dynamic psalm. The essential feature of the dynamic psalm consists is the fact that a change of mood is going on within the poet, a change that is reflected in the psalm.<sup>5</sup>

In this particular psalm, the grand finale of this little book, the prophet-psalmist begins in a mood of despair. His mood is lifted up by the Lord's assurance of a world tribunal to punish the wicked, then falls in despair that Israel would be affected by the upheaval. In the end, this mood changes to confidence: *Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will exult in the God of my salvation* (3:18).

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The prophecies of Habakkuk, contained in merely three chapters, are significant out of proportion to their size. Habakkuk is in the line of Abraham, Moses, Job and Jeremiah who raised questions regarding God's just and moral reign of the Universe. He is troubled by the fact that God does not interfere and bring an end to the blatant sins of Israel. He is also disturbed that God has appointed a vicious country to be *His rod of wrath* to rectify the sins of Israel.

Habakkuk presents us with a remarkable vision of the fall of empires by a natural process of rebellion of nations which these empires subdued. He has also left for us the immortal *the righteous shall live by their faithfulness to the Lord* interpreted by the Talmud as the quintessence of mitzvot.

And finally, Habakkuk, like many of the prophets before and after him, envisions a *Day of Trouble* (*yom tzarah*) where the Lord will judge the world. However, he differed from all the prophets by portraying this day in the framework of an exquisite psalm.

#### NOTES

1. Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1941) p. 4-5.
2. The term *shigionot* appears only once more, in Psalm 7:1. It has been interpreted to be a musical instrument. Gesenius insists that, stemming from the root *sagah*, the term means "to extol", to celebrate in an ecstatic song.
3. S.R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909) p. 339.
4. The Lord who has revealed Himself in Sinai, He will now come up from Teman in the southern part of Israel, to set up a Divine tribunal to judge the Chaldeans (the world?). Habakkuk uses an image reminiscent of the Song of Deborah: *When you came up from Seir . . . advanced from the country of Edom* (Jud. 5:4).
5. Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be As Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (Greenwich CT: Fawcett Publishers. 1980) p. 163.