

HABAKKUK'S PSALM OF PRAISE (CHAPTER 3)

(Robert Chisholm)

Praying for History to Repeat Itself (3:1-15)

Habakkuk responded to the prophecy of Babylon's demise with a prayer (v. 1). He had heard of the Lord's mighty acts in Israel's past. In fact, the report was so impressive that it gripped the prophet with fear (v. 2a).¹ He asked the Lord to renew these deeds in his own day but also requested that he temper his angry judgment with mercy (v. 2b).

What exactly did this report entail? Why did it instill the prophet with such fear? In verses 3-15, Habakkuk gives a detailed description of the report he had heard. This report has two parts. Verses 3-7 speak of the LORD in the third person and picture his march from the south. In verses 8-15, the prophet directly addresses the LORD as he recalls what the report said about him. References to the LORD trampling the sea with his horses bracket the unit.

The LORD approaches from the direction of Teman and Mount Paran (v. 3). Teman was an Edomite city (see Amos 1:12; Obad. 9) located to the southeast of Judah. Mount Paran was a mountain range located to the south of Judah, near the Gulf of Agaba. The tent-dwellers of Midian and Cushan, located in the southern Trans-Jordan, react with fear, realizing that they lie in the pathway of this mighty warrior's march (v. 7). The picture of the LORD coming from the south recalls earlier poetic descriptions of his march from this same area. Deuteronomy 33:2 describes him as coming from Sinai, Seir (that is, Edom), and Mount Paran to bless the Israelite tribes and lead them into the Promised Land. In Judges 5:4, he comes from Seir/Edom to fight against the Canaanite army of Sisera.

As the LORD arrives on the scene, the radiance of his royal splendor is blinding and elicits praise from those who view it (v. 3b). According to NIV, verse 4 compares his glory to the rays of the sun at dawn. However, it is possible that the image is that of lightning. The text reads literally, "and [his] radiance is like light, two horns from his hand to him." The Hebrew term translated "light" can refer to sunlight but does on occasion refer to lightning (see Job 36:32; 37:3, 11, 15). The reference to "two horns" may depict forked lightning. Mesopotamian gods are sometimes described as using "double lightning" as a weapon, and an Ugaritic text appears to call the storm god Baal's lightning a "horn." Verse 9 pictures the LORD shooting arrows, which are often used as a metaphor for lightning in theophanic texts (see Ps. 18:14; 77:17-18; 144:6; Zech. 9:14).

The LORD is accompanied by personified "plague" and "pestilence," viewed here as part of his royal entourage (v. 5). Before this fearsome trio the earth shakes, the nations tremble, and the age-old mountains, long known for their stability, disintegrate (v. 6). The Hebrew term *reshep* is normally, translated "pestilence" here because it is paired with the term *deber*; "plague", in the parallel structure of the verse. The word also refers to pestilence in Deuteronomy 32:24 and probably Psalm 78:48 as well. In some biblical texts the term *reshep* simply means "arrows" (see Ps. 76:3; Song of Sol. 8:6). This secondary meaning can be explained by the fact that, in the ancient Near East, *Resheph* was a warlike deity whose arrows brought pestilence.

Verse 8, through a series of questions, forces one to reflect on the object of God's anger. The LORD has climbed into his chariot to



¹ Verse 2a reads literally, "O Lord, I heard the report about you, I fear, O LORD, your work."

do battle, but against whom? Is he angry at the rivers and the sea? At first the question may seem strange, but verse 15 does indeed depict the hooves of the LORD'S chariot horses stomping on the surging water of the sea. It becomes apparent as the vision unfolds that the sea is the object of the LORD'S anger (see v. 10b as well). The imagery recalls the exodus, when the LORD dried up the sea. But the sea is a mere poetic symbol of the hostile nations (v. 12). The report pictures the Lord as a warrior armed with several weapons (vv. 9-14). As he prepares to shoot his arrows, he formally commissions them to do their deadly work (v. 9a). NIV translates the second line of verse 9 " you called for many arrows." but the Hebrew text (which reads literally, " adjured [are the] shafts [with a] word") is better rendered "you commission your arrows" (see NET). In the ancient Near East, warriors would sometimes empower their weapons with a magical formula. The LORD is depicted here as doing the same (see also Jer. 47:6-7).

As noted above, arrows are sometimes used in theophanies as a metaphor for lightning bolts. This is probably the case here, for storm imagery dominates verses 9b-10. A torrential downpour causes streams to flood their banks and run over the surface of the land, so that the earth appears to be split with rivers. The onslaught is so terrifying that the mountains shake and the great deep raises its hands (probably a reference to the surging waves produced by the strong wind accompanying the storm) and begs loudly for mercy. The language is similar to Psalm 77:16-18, a poetic account of Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea that depicts the LORD coming in a storm and subduing the sea so that he might lead his people safely through it. The bright flash of the Lord's arrows and spear (both metaphors for lightning) paralyzes the sun and moon (v. 1).²⁶² Here the language is reminiscent of Joshua 10:12-14, which depicts the sun and moon standing still so that the Israelite forces could slaughter their Canaanite enemies before nightfall.

The LORD'S primary purpose is to deliver his people and the Davidic king, referred to here as the LORD'S "anointed one" (vv.13-14a). The language seems to recall the military victories of David, who defeated many nations as he enjoyed supernatural deliverance and protection on the battlefield (see 2 Sam. 22).

The LORD focuses his attack on "the land (literally, "house") of wickedness." At this point the prophetic dimension of the report crowds out history, for the phrase "house of wickedness" alludes back to 2:9-11, where the Babylonian Empire is compared to a house built through unjust gain, and to 1:13, where the Babylonians are characterized as "wicked." The LORD'S attack on this wicked "house" is violent and decisive. Verses 13b-14a are best translated as follows: "You crush the head of the house of wickedness, laying him open from the lower body to the neck. With his arrows you pierce the heads of his soldiers." The "house of wickedness" is personified here as the LORD'S rival in battle. With his battle club the Lord crushes the enemy's head and then, with his sword, slices his body open. Taking his foe's arrows, the LORD shoots them into the heads of the enemy's soldiers.

Habakkuk Looks Confidently to the Future (3:16-19)

Having shared the report of the LORD'S mighty historical deeds, the prophet again described the fear that it produced within him (v. 16a; see v. 2a). Such a display of divine anger and power cannot help but be terrifying to observers, even if they are not the objects of divine anger. By the end of the book, Habakkuk knew that the God of Israel's past was still alive and ready to renew his mighty deeds among the nations. Nevertheless, the situation in Judah would get worse before final vindication arrived. While it was encouraging to reflect on the past and to realize that God would eventually renew his mighty deeds, the invasion of Judah (see 1:2-4) was on the immediate horizon (v. 16b). Yet Habakkuk could face the future with confidence, for he knew God would sustain his loyal followers (see 2:4b). Though food might disappear, Habakkuk would rejoice in the God who delivers his people from such crises (v. 17-18). Somehow the LORD would enable him to negotiate the dangerous obstacles ahead, just as an agile deer is able to run on rugged terrain (v. 19).