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The Laments of Habakkuk's Prophecy

By J. G. Harris

Dr. Harris's previous contributions to The Evangelical Quarterly have been concerned with the Qumran texts, a field of study to which he has also contributed his monograph "The Qumran Commentary on Habakkuk" (1966). Here he turns from the exegesis of Qumran to consider the book of Habakkuk itself.

THE brief prophecy of Habakkuk is an amalgam of at least four different literary types; laments, oracles, woes, and a psalm of epiphany. The types are skilfully interwoven into a composite whole which, when read consecutively, displays an underlying unity of thought and purpose. The whole prophecy is conceived in a spirit of expectancy and confidence which gives a coherence and consecutiveness to its treatment of its subject. Although its unity is embedded within its various literary forms, its definitive message about the divine control of history and the inviolable purpose that irradiates the whole clearly produces a climactic effect.

The two laments of the prophecy occur at strategic points. The first in chapter 1:2-4 provides the prophecy with its historical setting and its prime purpose, whilst the second in chapter 1:12-17 is offered in response to the divine reply to the first complaint. Questions about the historical background of the laments, especially the first, about their setting within the prophecy, and about their relationship, are the subject of speculation amongst exegetes. But before we examine these questions further a word needs to be said about the use of this literary type in the context of Habakkuk's prophecy.

As a literary type the lament is well known from its use in other Biblical prophecies and the Book of Psalms. The setting of a lament is furnished either by personal or communal disaster or threat to wellbeing. It might be uttered by an individual or by the community or someone who acts for the community. There are examples of both private and public laments in the Old Testament, but the pattern is usually comparable. There is a detailed description of the complaint, of its cause, of the overwhelming sense of disaster that was the occasion of the lament, and the expectation of divine intervention in response to it.

I

In the first lament Habakkuk complains that God had not answered when he called or manifested Himself when the prophet

cried out against the violence around him. There is also a description of the arrogance and perversity of the enemies of righteousness, the disruption of the moral order and the threat to the ethical norms that regulated the life of a covenant people. The directness and actuality of the lament makes it certain that the prophet has in mind the evils he himself encountered, and there is no need to understand them in a figurative or representative sense. The incisiveness of the references to the condition complained of makes it certain that the prophet has in mind the conditions in the Judah of Jehoiaquim's reign (608-597 B.C.). Whilst the prophecy as a whole is overshadowed by the advance of the Chaldeans (cf. 1:6) and the problem their threat raised for the prophet, he was also keenly aware of the internal situation in Judah and among his own people. There was an almost unbearable tension between the progress of evil and the content of his faith, and this shaped his lament. He had only an imperfect conception of natural law, and the prospect of righteousness being overtaken by evil, or of God remaining aloof from rampant evil, was to him a slur on divine sovereignty and justice.

Habakkuk's first lament, therefore, was an indictment of the sins of a people who belonged to the ethical tradition of the covenant. His complaint of the evils of Judah was also a record of God's wrath at the violation of the moral requirements of the covenant. Whenever the moral elements of the covenant are violated there is a threat of judgement. Judah was subject to divine righteousness but its claim on the divine providence had receded because of violence and apostasy.

The two units or strata of the first lament belong together. In the first (1:2-3a) the prophet initiates a dialogue with God in the manner of Jeremiah 11:20. He makes the divine being the dominant factor in his lament from the outset, he invokes God in an anticipatory manner, expecting that He will intervene to answer his complaint. The motif of the second stratum is also imprecatory. Here (1:3b-4) the prophet set forth how the enemies of righteousness achieve their malevolent purpose. The opening phrase is an autobiographical piece in the style of Zechariah 1:8, although we assume that the prophet spoke in the name of the people as a whole. We thus have a collective lament in the style of Jeremiah 10:23-25 or Isaiah 59:9-15. Speaking within the framework of a collective lament the prophet impinges upon a collectivist view of history. Judah's collective sin and apostasy, their collective guilt before God, is what the prophet complains of when he conveys their cause before God. As spokesman for his people he contends for them and enters into the conflicts of his time. He gives no hint of who is at the head of the sinful dissension in Judah, whether the king or any particular faction

or party. His preoccupation is with the problem of evil (the problem that is central to his prophecy as a whole) and he challenges God to explain why evil goes unchecked. His is the same problem as Malachi 2:17—where is the God of justice? God was the vindicator of universal ethical law and His people were subject to His righteous laws. Why did He not save when he cried violence? Or remain silent when trouble was abroad in Judah? The answer to the vexing dilemma was with God alone.

The occurrence of a lament at the beginning of the prophecy has raised the question of its association with the cultus. It was evident that on certain occasions the people of Judah assembled in the sanctuary where they displayed their grief before God and pleaded with Him for deliverance. In such a cultic act the priest or cultic official played a distinctive role. Was Habakkuk's lament conceived in such a cultic occasion? And was he a cultic official? There are tendencies in the prophecy as a whole that have led some scholars to designate Habakkuk as a prophet-priest. To gain an effective insight into any role he may have played in the cultus means acquiring an adequate knowledge of cultic phenomena and the forms and psychological states that conditioned them and a lively appreciation of the conditions which governed cultic enactments in this period. The most we can say here at present is that Habakkuk was the mouthpiece of his God, he represented his people before Him and he used liturgical formulae. If we cannot rule out *a priori* that his prophecy displays no connection with the Jerusalem cultus neither can we overlook the genuinely prophetic insights of the prophecy.

When we examine the first lament more closely its language and content show a remarkable affinity with classical prophetism and are suited to the message the whole prophecy conveys. It may be rendered:

How long, Yahweh, shall I cry, and thou wilt not answer?
I cry "violence" unto thee, and thou wilt not save!
Why dost thou allow me to see trouble,
Why let me see mischief?

Devastation and violence are before me,
strife and dispute arise.
So law becomes ineffective,
and justice does not go out at all;
because the wicked surround the righteous,
justice then comes out crooked.

Habakkuk addresses God directly, using the sacred name Yahweh, the characteristic name used whenever the divine omnipotence (cf. Judges 5:4-5) or redemption (cf. Ex. 20:2) or sovereignty (cf. Ps. 10:16) or livingness (cf. Jer. 4:2) is invoked.

Part of the tragedy of Judah is summed up in its 'violence'. The term used denotes a breach in the moral order, the denigration of law and order. It described the state of the world before the flood (Gen. 6:11) and was often used in conjunction with corruption or readiness for punishment (cf. Jer. 20:8, Ezek. 45:9). The word used (*hms*) carries other overtones. When a man's life was threatened he cried out for the protection of the community and *hms* became a cry of appeal; cf. Job 19:7:

When I cry violence, no-one answers,
I cry for help, and there is no justice.

Habakkuk is agitated by the breakup of the normal conditions governing a cohesive society and cried "violence!" but Yahweh does not save!

As the chief contender in the situation he laments Yahweh shows the prophet trouble. This (*'wn*) is the inward misery born of wicked imagination and evil design; it is the evil that reinforces itself inwardly until the whole personality is full of misery. The parallel term (*'ml*) is used of wrong-doing to others (cf. Is. 10:1; Job 4:8). The agony of the prophet is felt beneath the weight of external affliction and is the agony of the spiritual tension that experiences unbearable injustice in a world governed by a just and holy God.

The second half of the lament re-enacts the conditions already articulated. With violence there goes devastation, that is, the spoiling of social sin. The principle of retribution is implicit here. The present conditions produce a boomerang effect (cf. Hos. 12:2; Is. 59:7). In such a situation strife (*ryb*) and contention (*mdwn*) arise. Both terms denote conditions bred of inner spiritual deviance (cf. Pr. 13:10; Ps. 31:20) and are its outward manifestation (cf. Gen. 13:7; Num. 30:13).

In such conditions law becomes ineffective. The verb used (*pwg*) means "to grow numb, to be helpless or slack" (cf. Gen. 45:26). The term law (*torah*) means originally instruction, especially that of a priest or prophet. But it also was used of instruction that is akin to the knowledge of God and carried the notion of revelation (cf. Is. 2:3). Therefore "to make the law ineffective" was tantamount to rejecting God himself, the refusal to allow instruction from God to be followed. Consequently, justice, the normative accompaniment of law, does not prosper.

In prophetic thinking the breakdown of justice is the ultimate in social depravity. Thereby the moral life of society is paralysed. But according to this lament, law, justice and righteousness, the normative organs of social government, have become numb. Justice (*mšpt*), which, involving more than an objective interest in legal justice,

carried a redemptive element in its prosecution, and righteousness (*sdvq*) were the quintessence of the divine will. They embodied the central authority from which the coherence of the social order stemmed. The collapse of the social order was due to the presence of criminal types (*rs'*) (cf. Ex. 2:13, 23) who outmanoeuvred the righteous.

It is clear that this complaint is presented in characteristic prophetic and conceptual forms. It carries overtones of the Deuteronomic interpretation of history, that is, dependence on the divine law, adherence to a prescribed social and ethical norm, the actualization of obedience, social identity and preservation, and an agreed theology of life. Fundamental to the Deuteronomic view is the concept of divine election, the enactment of the terms of the covenant, the inevitability of judgement, and the final outcome in restoration and deliverance. Furthermore, on this view (cf. Dt. 25:15, Ps. 51:19), history falls within the sphere of the divine operation, is the sphere wherein God acts and moves. The contravention of this principle is the way of disaster and of inevitable punishment.

In his lament Habakkuk says nothing of how righteousness is to be restored. In certain ritual forms the lament is followed by a prayer of penitence and the declaration of Yahweh's righteous demands. The view that is predominant in this lament is that sin must receive divine retribution, but in spite of this the ultimate purpose of God cannot be frustrated. Every action is a vindication of this purpose (cf. Mic. 7:9) and the present outburst of violence and evil presupposes further divine intervention. The lament is made in anticipation of this, but in the meanwhile the prophet must wait in patience.

II

We cannot tell what period of time may have elapsed between the first and second laments. The second was occasioned by the enigmatic nature of the divine response in chapter 1:5-11. It may also have been made necessary by a change in the external situation facing Judah. After the battle of Carchemish (605 B.C.) the Chaldeans were the undisputed rulers of the ancient world and they were intent on full realization of their power. The subject matter of the second lament was implicit in the first, and was made necessary once the prophet had discerned with studied precision the impact and implications of Yahweh's reply (1:5-11). The dilemma the divine oracle created had so eaten into the prophet's soul that he must lay it before Yahweh in the most personal agonizing terms. This lament may be rendered thus:

O Yahweh, art not thou from of old?
My God, my Holy One, we shall not die.

Thou didst set them up, O Yahweh, to execute judgement,
 Thou didst appoint them, O Mighty One, to chastise.
 Thou art of purer eyes than to countenance evil,
 or to gloat over the cunning of the wicked.
 Why dost thou look upon treacherous men?
 Why art thou silent when they consume men more just than themselves?
 And why make man as the fish of the sea,
 As a crawling creature who obeys no master?

They take everyone with a hook,
 they catch them in nets
 and drag them in their trawls,
 then they rejoice and make merry.
 So they sacrifice to their nets
 and burn incense to their trawls,
 for they make their diet fat
 and they eat rich food.
 Why then do they unsheathe their sword,
 and always slaughter nations without pity?

There is a deeper emotional involvement in this second lament, and the prophet invokes God in the direct formulae of his creed. This was the heart of his complaint. If Yahweh was not everlasting, holy, pure, and the mighty lord of history, there would be no substance in his speculation or no apprehension to disturb his peace. But how could a God so conceived acquiesce in this denial of his righteous authority? How could omnipotent justice and absolute purity decree that evil should go unpunished?

The tone of this lament is that of anguish in the grip of an insoluble dilemma. Its appeal is a daring challenge to Yahweh to show his hand. His present action has cast a shadow over the prophet's soul and this is a denial of God as he knew Him. As yet Habakkuk had not connected the dilemma with the possibility that the arrogant Chaldeans would also be punished. But the idea of vicious and sadistic action goes beyond any concept of a God who is too holy to look upon wickedness. The conviction that God is the author of the present evil hardens as the lament parades the gruesome details of the unrestrained rapacity of the enemy (1: 15-17).

Habakkuk utters his second lament from the heaviness of a soul waiting release. Two basic convictions inspire him to make this direct appeal. He believed God to be now what He had always been, and, however much the present appearances belied the operation of justice, there must still be a word from beyond. This is the note of poignant expectation with which he ends his lament. Must evil on this scale go on unhindered? Must the just government of the world be put in jeopardy?

Like the first lament this also is a monologue, and we have to wait until chapter 2 for the divine entry. The lament is full of historical

interest, but even more significant is the way it highlights the spiritual struggle of a prophet committed to the ways of righteousness in a time of grave peril. At heart he knew that vindication must come from his kinship with God who is other than he is now portrayed by the Chaldean tyranny. If at this moment the divine government of the world is an unresolved mystery, God is still immortal and holy. This is the reason for his scepticism. The intractable problem of why the righteous suffer at the hands of the guilty, a problem faced too by Jeremiah:

**Why is the way of the wicked prosperous,
And the dealers in treachery at ease? (12:2)—**

committed the prophet to the unenviable task of transcribing his doubts into words without losing anything of the faith that sustained him. When he aired the primal religious problem of his time he not only articulated its essence but also stated the affirmation of faith in the form of a direct question. There could be no experience of faith that did not also face the question of God's seemingly strange ways. Once faith is exposed to the reality of evil it faces its greatest challenge. Any supreme being who is known through vicissitudes of historical events will make some truths about himself more obviously clear as new historical situations develop. Apart from this faith Habakkuk could not speak meaningfully of complaint or history or speculation. In this faith his lament made him open to the response of the transcendent God to his dilemma. Insofar as God Himself had released the Chaldean fury against Judah (1:5-6) the only logical thing was for the prophet to bring back his problem to Him. In so doing he makes a confession of his theocentric faith. In style and theme the opening phase of this lament is akin to a formal confession of faith and is an apt prelude to what follows. Similar confessional statements are interspersed in other prophetic books (cf. Amos 5:8f), and if such confession of faith was made to initiate a cultic occasion, it is right that this prophet should confess God in terms of His metaphysical qualities—that is, the immortal Lord who is holy, pure and mighty. In true prophetic tradition the confession of faith proclaims the ethical purity of God. Altogether this confession of faith proclaims God in His transcendent glory and majestic purity. He is from of old (cf. Isa. 45:21; Ps. 74:2) and manifests Himself above the passing changes of the historical scene and passing evils (cf. Dt. 33:27). By addressing Yahweh in personal terms, Habakkuk declares, in the use of a generic term (*El*), that He is supreme and absolute ruler. As the prophet knew nothing of the notion of god-head in abstraction or of self-contained holiness, he declares that the relationship of "The Holy One" is inviolable and "we shall not

die" (so MT, but LXX, RSV and NEB "immortal" giving a proper parallel to *mqdm*; the scribe substituted "we shall not die" for "thou shalt not die" to eliminate the blasphemous thought that Yahweh might die).

The second part of the opening verse (12b) gives an oblique clue as to why Yahweh had raised up the Chaldeans. They were His instrument for the chastisement of His own people. There is a hint that the prophet had pierced behind the purpose of Yahweh's strange action. It is clear that he has in mind an external enemy, but the problem still remains as acute as ever precisely because he was committed to his credal statement. On the axiom that the world or matter is evil there is no problem, but when it is controlled by a God who is too pure to behold evil, that is, to acquiesce in it, and whose moral perfection is the heart of faith, it is inconceivable that He should be silent, that is, inactive, when the more guilty oppress the righteous. The visible disintegration of what faith confessed rendered intolerable the promise that virtue would always triumph. God's knowledge is equal to His power and He knows what He is doing. Why then is He silent?

There now follow two scathing complaints of the enemy. These are couched in striking images. They make men as the fish of the sea, that is leaderless and numberless (MT reads singular "man", LXX plural "men") and like crawling creatures, that is, evil that is the cause of death, that allures men away from God to suffer the fatal consequences of sin (cf. Gen. 3). Hitherto when Yahweh acted in history it was seen to contain a unified purpose. Even when appearances were misleading the purpose had never been in doubt. Even when things went wrong God had acted (cf. Mic. 4:10; Jer. 4:6), but now the virulent exploitations of the enemy spelt doom for the people of God.

The unrestrained triumph of evil men was carried out in a spirit of cynical merriment. Like a fisherman, the tyrant hooks his catch. The figure is reminiscent of Babylonian mythology which represented Ea as a fabulous monster having the body of a fish. In any case here is a reference to the Babylonian method of deportation, the hook was used to drag away corpses or to fasten captives together in line for the march into captivity (cf. Amos 4:2; Ezek. 29:4). Whilst this gruesome image portends doom for the victims, their conquerors "rejoice and make merry". Some MSS omit this phrase, but the raucous rejoicing and self-congratulation (cf. Pr. 2:14; 17:5) is in keeping with the context. The victory was also celebrated in a cultic festival when the heathen sacrificed to their nets. Whether or not the Chaldeans sacrificed to their nets (the Hebrew *hrm* could also mean a weapon of war) is not proven, although Herodotus (iv.62)

tells of the yearly sacrifice which the Scythians made to the sword. From the Greek period Arrian (*Anabasis* ii.24.6) reported that Alexander placed his war machine in the temple of Melkart after the sack of Tyre. But there is no need to see in this context any direct reference to Greek practice and therefore to assign the prophecy to this period. What the lament refers to is a cultic act of deep offensiveness to the prophet. The heathen celebrated their victory in idolatrous fashion without acknowledging the living God (cf. Is. 10:13-14). At the same time they feasted on the exploitation of their victims (MT "his portion is fat"; RSV "by them he lives in luxury"). This lies behind the heartfelt plea of the final couplet. Why do they unsheathe their sword, that is, engage in warlike acts or deposit their victims in captivity (MT "his net", so LXX and RSV; NEB "unsheathe the sword")?

The lament is an impressive unity composed of a confession of faith, the exposure of the prophet's dilemma to the heart of his faith, and a challenging confrontation with God of the issue of His government of the world.

Who is the real enemy? God or the Chaldeans? The lament does not seek an answer to the problem of evil or why the innocent must suffer. Neither does it cavil at the just punishment of wickedness. What he complains about is that something has gone wrong with the just government of the world. Why does God act in a self-contradictory way by taking upon Himself the responsibility for the evil now rampant? Habakkuk anticipates an answer that will vindicate his faith. Is faith to be verified or falsified? The lament ends on a note of anticipation.

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