ABSTRACT

There is a fair amount of consensus that the book contains a dialogue between a prophet by the name of Habakkuk (1:1) and Yahweh. In this paper the focus of attention is on the relation between the prophet and Yahweh. Although virtually nothing can be known of Habakkuk, he does speak out against Yahweh and reacts to what is said by Yahweh. Yahweh on the other hand is portrayed vividly in the book, by what He says and especially by what He does. It is argued that the prophet is portrayed as non-violent while Yahweh is painted in rather violent colours. The thesis argued in this paper is that the book of Habakkuk may be read as a dialogue between a non-violent prophet and a violent God.

A INTRODUCTION

The book of Habakkuk has always been an interesting and intriguing book in Old Testament scholarship. In his introduction to the Old Testament Kaiser (1984: 244) calls this book one of the most puzzling texts of the Old Testament (rätselhaftesten alttestamentlichen Texten). It is a book of many and varied facets and accordingly has been studied from a number of different angles and perspectives in an attempt to get answers to the questions raised by scholarly investigation.

The book poses many questions to be answered. Viewing the book from a historical-critical perspective the date of the book was cause for debate (Holladay 2001:123-130). The reason for this being that the only concrete historical evidence that we have from the book itself is the reference to the Chaldeans in Habakkuk 1:6. The book has been subjected to intensive literary and redactional criticism leading often to conflicting results. Little wonder then that Otto (1985: 274) remarked: ‘… es (ist) nicht verwunderlich dass die historisch-kritische Forschung … sehr divergierende Lösungsversuche vorlegte.’ Another related question in this regard is the question of the identity of the wicked (was it Assyria, Egypt, Babylonia or even the Greeks?) in Habakkuk 1:4. In view of the

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fact that Habakkuk 3 is missing from the Qumran commentary on the book, questions were raised on the history of the composition of the book. How did the book originate? Is the book as we have it today the product of a long period of growth, or not? The book has a number of thorny text critical problems as the critical apparatus of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia clearly indicates (Herrman 2001:481-482).

Viewing the book from a literary perspective, there are at least as many problems as when it is viewed from a historical-critical perspective. Where historical investigation of the book asked questions on the compositional history of the book, literary investigation asked questions on the coherence – if any – of the book. The division of the book in different parts was and is an ongoing issue. The genre of the book (is it a cultic liturgy, a report of a visionary experience, or perhaps a wisdom text?) is a much-debated issue (cf Sweeney 1991:62). The meaning of specific verses – especially Habakkuk 2:4 – is still a disputed matter in the research on the book. The intertextual relationship between the book of Habakkuk and other prophetic books, the Psalms and some of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament is another question pursued by scholars. There are also problems concerning the translation of some parts or phrases in the book. The difficult problem of theodicy is another theme that was the cause for intensive discussion on the book (Otto 1985:274-295; Gunneweg 1986:400-415). The prophet Habakkuk as personality also attracted the attention of scholars. Was he one of the so-called Kultpropheten or was he one of the national Heilspropheten (Herrman 2001:481)?

Suffice to say that the book of Habakkuk never ceases to capture our interest and downright curiosity due to the many questions it raises.

B  WORKING HYPOTHESIS

There is a fair amount of consensus that the book contains a dialogue between a prophet by the name of Habakkuk (1:1) and Yahweh. In this paper the focus of attention is on the relation between the prophet and Yahweh. Although virtually nothing can be known of the prophet – Habakkuk is merely indicated as a 𐤇𐤆𐤆𐤇 (the prophet) in Habakkuk 1:1 – the prophet does speak out against Yahweh and reacts to what is said by Yahweh. Yahweh on the other hand is portrayed vividly in the book, by what He says and especially by what He does as well as how He is perceived by the prophet. It is argued that the prophet is portrayed as non-violent whereas Yahweh is painted in rather violent colours. The thesis argued in this paper is that the book of Habakkuk may be read as a dialogue between a non-violent prophet and a violent God.

Apart from the heading in Habakkuk 1:1, the book can be divided into two parts (Hab 1:2-2:20 and Hab 3:1-19) due to the distinct headings found
in Habakkuk 1:1 ἀχμ (oracle) and in Habakkuk 3:1 ἡλπτ (prayer) (Sweeney 1991:64; Prinsloo 1999:520).

Habakkuk 1:2-2:20 can be divided into a number of sub-units following the dialogue between the prophet and Yahweh. In Habakkuk 1:2-4 the prophet is speaking, voicing a complaint against Yahweh. Although it is not stated explicitly, it is assumed that Yahweh answers to the complaint of the prophet in Habakkuk 1:5-11. Habakkuk 1:12-2:1 is a second complaint by the prophet directed to Yahweh followed by his intention to wait for yet another answer from Yahweh. Habakkuk 2:2-19 forms the second answer from Yahweh to the complaint of the prophet. After an initial statement in Habakkuk 2:2-5, Habakkuk 2:6-19 elaborates on the initial statement in the form of five woe oracles.

After a call to be silent in the presence of Yahweh in Habakkuk 2:20, Habakkuk 3 resumes the dialogue, this time in the form of a prayer. Habakkuk 3 may also be divided into a number of sub-units. Habakkuk 3:2 is a plea from the prophet to Yahweh to make his mighty deeds known once more. Habakkuk 3:3-15 is a description of a theophany of Yahweh. Habakkuk 3:16 describes the reaction of the prophet to the theophany in Habakkuk 3:3-15. The last part of the book – Habakkuk 3:17-19 – contains Habakkuk’s final reaction in his dialogue with Yahweh.

C A NON-VIOLENT PROPHET AND A VIOLENT GOD IN DIALOGUE

1 A non-violent prophet laments violence (Hab 1:2-4)

The book commences with a complaint (Robertson 1990:137; Sweeney 1991:66; Haak 1992:30; Snyman 1996:79) or lament (Roberts 1991:88) by the prophet directed to Yahweh on the issue of violence. The most common word used for violence סמ occurs twice and is according to Haak (1992:30) the pivotal term in verses 2-3. The first person singular and second person singular forms in verses 2-3 are an indication of the beginning of a dialogue between the prophet and Yahweh. He cries (ḇ.q) out to the Lord because of violence (v 2) surrounding him (v 3).

The question immediately raised by this complaint is what kind of violence is meant by the prophet. One of the answers given was that the violence lamented by the prophet might be caused by foreign powers (Assyria, Egypt, Babylonia, Greeks?) (Johnson 1985:258). A second possibility is that the violence refers to contemporary conditions in Judah. A third possibility is that the prophet himself is suffering from violence because of those who oppose him and his message (Janzen 1982:398).

The second possibility is the one favoured by the majority of commentaries (Rudolph 1975:201; Van der Woude 1978:16; Smith 1984:99; Achtemeier 1986:35; Robertson 1990:139; Roberts 1991:89). Arguments supporting this
option are that the vocabulary (בְּרִית הָרְאָת הרומ f p v m) used to describe violence points to an inner-Judean situation whereas not one of the world powers was in a position to exercise violence to such an extent as is pictured in Habakkuk 1:2-4 and that the word-pair דָּב וּסָמִית is characteristic of prophetic criticism of social injustice in Israel (Otto 1977:102).

Habakkuk 1:2-4 is not only a general complaint on violence in Judah, it is a complaint made to Yahweh. The question is not who committed violence but rather how Yahweh can let it happen (Van der Woude 1978:17; Smith 1984: 99). The complaint is directed to Yahweh because of his apparent inability to act against the violent conditions in Judah. Yahweh is the one who does not hear the complaints of his prophet (v 2), He is the one who does not come to the rescue of his prophet (v 3) even though the prophet cries out to him. The question ‘how long’ in verse 2 seems to indicate that this is not the first time that Habakkuk voiced his complaint to Yahweh. It seems as if Yahweh is indifferent to violence over an extended period of time: He does not hear the plea of his prophet nor does He come to the rescue of Habakkuk. Yahweh is inactive and passive while violence is a destructive force in society paralysing the law; prohibiting justice to go forth; the result of which is that the wicked surrounds the righteous ‘so that justice is perverted’ (NIV, v 4).

If the terms תּוֹרָה (h r w t) and מִסְתָּפַך (f p v m) are taken to refer to at least parts of the book of Deuteronomy as Johnson (1985:262) argues, another aspect comes into perspective. Instead of the סָמִית experienced by Habakkuk, he would rather expect the divine דְּסִי typical of the promises so characteristic of the covenant.

Habakkuk is no propagator of violence (Robertson 1990:139), he is rather a protester against violence, while Yahweh tolerates violence by his inactivity on this matter.

2 And a violent God responds (Hab 1:5-11)

There is no direct proof that it is Yahweh speaking in 1:5-11. The imperative forms in verse 5 (וֹמֵת וֹמִת נְפָּר נְפָּר) serve as a pointer that a change has taken place and that the prophet is no longer speaking. We assume therefore that the initial complaint by the prophet is followed by a response by Yahweh.

Yahweh’s response comes as an unexpected surprise. By four (2nd person plural) imperatives (וֹמֵת וֹמִת נְפָּר נְפָּר) in verse 5 a warning is given of the coming surprise. Yahweh’s response will be the cause for wonder and amazement (v 5b וֹמֵת וֹמִת נְפָּר), it will be met as something utterly incredible (v 5b רְפָּי יָק וָנְמָת אֲל). The unexpectedness of the surprise does not lie in the fact that Yahweh will act against the violence in Judah; the surprise lies in the way in which Yahweh intends to act. A foreign nation initiated by Yahweh will come who will act in a most violent way. The Chaldeans are described as a bitter and impetuous nation (v 6), harbouring fear and terror (v 7), seizing territory as they
march across the breadth of the earth (v 6). The violence among the inhabitants of Judah will be punished with the violence of the Babylonians (Achtermeier 1986:39). The collapsed justice (v 4) Habakkuk complained about in verses 2-4, will be replaced by the justice of the Chaldeans as defined by themselves. Rudolph (1975:207) remarked in this regard that it would be a justice marked by the right of the strongest and therefore a violent kind of justice.

The metaphors used to describe the actions of the coming Chaldeans are significant to the theme of this paper. Their horses are compared to leopards and wolves (v 8). Leopards and wolves are both predators known for their cruelty and cunning hunting skills. They bring down their prey in a violent and bloody way. In verse 8 they are also compared to an eagle – a bird of prey – eager to devour prey hastily by ripping it to pieces. Verse 9 serves as an apt summary: they come for violence. The rest of verses 9-11 gives a description of the unstoppable strength and military force of the Chaldeans even up to the point where their own power becomes their object of worship. The picture painted of the Chaldeans is a picture of a nation treating its foes with a disturbing degree of violence. They are the people acting as an instrument in the hands of Yahweh to curb the violence and the resultant collapse of torah in Judean society.

The problem of a non-violent Habakkuk posed in 1:2-4, is by no means solved. Roberts (1991:96) notes a tone of disapproval in the statement ‘to seize habitations not belonging to him’ in verse 6. Habakkuk does not present the Chaldeans as paragons of justice (Roberts 1991:96). Habakkuk 1:5-11 cannot be regarded as a proper answer to the initial complaint of Habakkuk, but is rather the reason for the complaint of the prophet (Floyd 2000:96). How can Yahweh be reconciled with the brutal and violent behaviour of the Chaldeans? How can it be that Yahweh is the instigator of such a violent nation? Only if God is a violent God may he allow and tolerate such a degree of violence executed by a foreign nation. The violence Habakkuk complained about is met with an announcement from Yahweh that even more violence may be expected to come.

Yahweh’s violent response to his non-violent prophet raises more questions than answers. In 1:2-4 the prophet was disturbed by Yahweh’s passive attitude to violence current in Judean society that raises the question whether Yahweh concurs with violence in society. In 1:5-11 the tension heightens: it seems as if Yahweh is in fact actively involved in violence by instigating a violent nation to terrify the nations in general but also specifically Judah with its brutal force, military power and violent behaviour.

3 A non-violent prophet complains again (Hab 1:12-2:1)

A non-violent prophet is not satisfied with the violent means employed by Yahweh that was revealed to him in the previous unit. In Habakkuk 1:12-2:1 the prophet launches another complaint against Yahweh. This time the prophet makes an appeal to the qualities of Yahweh that He is known for. He is known by
the name of Yahweh, a name that would bring back memories of God’s remarkable delivery of his people from the bondage of Egypt. Yahweh is the God from antiquity. The Hebrew term μδqm is often employed in biblical literature to refer to Yahweh’s role as creator and master of the world (cf Dt 33:27; Is 14:21; 44:2; Pr 8:22-3; Sweeney 1991:69).

The words тwnn al (we shall not die) used in 1:12 are problematic. The sudden change to a first person plural form seems odd. The words тwnn al are regarded as one of the so-called ‘corrections of the scribes’ or Tiqqune Sopherim that should actually be read as тwmt al ‘you shall not die’. The argument behind this alteration of the text is that the mere thought of Yahweh’s dying is unthinkable and that it has been changed to ‘we shall not die’, making it an utterance of trust. Whereas some commentaries accepted this reading as a correction of the scribes and read тwmt al (you shall not die) instead of тwnn al (we shall not die), others are less convinced. Haak (1992:48) pointed out that it is by no means certain which one of the two possible readings should be regarded as the corrected text. According to one line of interpretation the text appearing in MT is a ‘corrected text’ and that the ‘original’ reading is preserved in the list of the Tiqqune Sopherim. Another line of interpretation is that MT has the original reading while the correction is contained in the list. The problem is further complicated by the fact that there is no manuscript or version supporting the тwmt al reading. Granted that this is a difficult problem to which there is no easy or final solution, this paper opts for the reading of тwmt al (you shall not die) because it is in accordance with what has already been said of Yahweh, that he is from eternity; and secondly, the second person singular forms in verse 12 also point to a reading of тwmt al rather than a first person plural reading of тwnn al (Roberts 1991:101; Snyman 1996:76).

He is known to be the holy God, which is also an age-old quality of the God of Israel and Judah. He is the Rock of his people – a quality of God already found in the book of Deuteronomy (32:4; 15; 18) indicating stability, trustworthiness, power, protection and security (Szeles 1987:26). He is pure, the one who cannot tolerate evil or injustice.

What is striking is that no appeal is made to Yahweh’s violent qualities. The point the prophet is making is that Yahweh contravenes his own being (Rudolph 1975:209) by making use of the Chaldeans as an instrument of punishment. Assuming the goodness, holiness and universal sovereignty of Yahweh, how does one explain his standing aside while the wicked swallow the righteous (Smith 1984:103)?

Verse 12-13 is thus a passionate protest of a non-violent prophet against the violence of a nation initiated and commissioned by Yahweh himself to act violently. How can an eternal, holy God, the Rock of Judah, his people, a God too pure to even see evil, tolerate the violence exercised by the Chaldeans? By
allowing this to happen, Yahweh is in conflict with his own being (Van der Woude 1978:28). How is it possible that a God of righteousness replaces one society with another even more idolatrous and evil (Achtemeier 1986:40)?

In a new set of metaphors drawn once again from the animal world, human beings are likened to fish caught with hooks and different kinds of fishing nets (1:14-17). Whereas there is a distance kept between Yahweh and the Chaldeans in the previous unit (1:5-11), the distance between Yahweh and the Chaldeans is much closer in this unit. It is Yahweh who is accused of treating human beings as fish to be caught with all kinds of fishing tackle making them vulnerable and easy prey. In 1:8 the metaphor of predators attacking prey with speed is used from the perspective of the Chaldeans. In 1:14-17 the perspective is changed to the victims of a hunt – human beings are treated by the Chaldeans like fish caught by a hook. Apparently all this happens with the knowledge and approval of Yahweh since the Chaldeans are in his service (Rudolph 1975:210). If the sovereignty of God is recognised, the conclusion the prophet has to make is that ultimately God himself is behind this massive maltreatment of humanity (Robertson 1990:162).

According to the interpretation Floyd (2000:109) offers, Yahweh is addressed, first by expressing confidence in his moral integrity in verse 12 and then upbraiding him for the present situation that seems to deny strongly any such integrity in verses 13-17. If it is true that the Chaldeans will come to power by the hand of Yahweh while at the same time Yahweh does not act upon their brutal and excessive misuse of power because of their perverted sense of justice, the uneasy and inevitable conclusion is that Yahweh is indeed a violent God. Once more, the tension is heightened: it now seems that Yahweh is not a passive onlooker as is suggested in 1:2-4, he is actively involved in violence executed by the Chaldeans.

True to his own being Habakkuk remains the non-violent person he is by patiently awaiting Yahweh’s response to his complaint (2:1; Floyd 2000:118).

4 And a violent God responds in defense (Hab 2:2-19)

Habakkuk 2:2 states clearly that Yahweh is about to answer the complaints of the prophet. Habakkuk is told to write down the vision on tablets to facilitate easy reading. The vision will surely be fulfilled and therefore the prophet must exercise patience in waiting for its outcome. Habakkuk 2:4 has been the object of countless proposals aiming at a better understanding of this verse (Scott 1985:330-331; Sweeney 1991:75-77; Haak 1992:55; Floyd 1993:473-477 and most commentaries). Space does not allow investigating this problem thoroughly. Suffice it to say that in 2:4 a contrast or antithesis (Gunnweg 1986:413) is drawn between the eventual destiny of the ‘puffed up’ ones (חָרָם, the inflated (Bruce 1999:858) or the greedy (Floyd 2000:125) who are not upright (חָיַב) and the righteous (ְיָדָֹו) ones on the other hand who remain faithful (עָשָׂמְךָ). The
puffed up people will suffer judgement while the righteous people will live through their faithfulness.

As from verse 5 an extended view is given of the fate of the unjust by five woe oracles. The word hoy (יהו) introducing the woe oracles has an ambiguous meaning. Much research has been done in recent times on the function of hoy in a woe oracle. Concerning the setting or Sitz of the woe, scholarly opinion is divided into three main camps. There are scholars who believe that the hoy exclamation must be traced back to funeral practices where the woe served as a dirge. Others are convinced that the woe has a wisdom background found in proverbial sayings whereas others believe that woe should be taken as a neutral interjection. In the case of Habakkuk 2:6-20 hoy is used perhaps as a mixture of both a dirge and a wisdom saying. That hoy should be related to a dirge is seen from verse 5 where the greed of the oppressor is likened to an insatiable appetite for death. The international outcry voiced in Habakkuk 2:6-20 serves as an indication that hoy should be taken as a kind of proverbial saying (Floyd 2000:138). In each of the woe oracles, doom and destruction are announced which will inevitably follow as a consequence of their self-destructive behaviour. The unjust will suffer what they did to others according to the principle of just reversal (Floyd 2000:131; Smith 1984:111-112).

What is of particular concern to the theme of this paper is that it is not the fate of the righteous that is elaborated on, as one would expect, but the fate of those in opposition to the righteous. Little is said of their eventual plight: the righteous shall live by their trustworthiness or faithfulness (2:4b). One expects a more elaborate answer than that. On the other hand the destiny of the unjust is described in much more detail. In fact, Habakkuk 2:5-20 may be read as Yahweh’s defense in the face of Habakkuk’s accusation of inability to act against violence (1:2-4) and his active involvement in violence later on (1:5-11). Those living by violence will suffer judgement by violence executed by Yahweh (Van der Woude 1978:49). Violence is met with violence. As Janzen (1982:408) put it rather graphically: The Chaldean’s intoxicating sense of power will turn into the wrath of God which the Chaldean himself will be forced to consume.

While Habakkuk must exercise patience, waiting for Yahweh to take action (2:3), Yahweh will in due time act violently against the unjust to restore moral order in the world (2:5-19). Those who plundered will be plundered (2:8); those who build a town by bloodshed and a city on injustice will find that they wearied themselves for fire and exhausted themselves for emptiness – all this comes from Yahweh himself (2:12-13). The statement in Habakkuk 2:14 that the glory (דּוּבֵק) of Yahweh will fill the earth is not a statement about Yahweh’s violent behaviour, but is best understood as the eventual outcome or result of Yahweh’s punitive measures against those behaving unjustly. Those who made their neighbours drink until they were drunk, will have to face the cup in Yahweh’s right hand (2:17). Drinking a cup handed to people by Yahweh is a well-known
metaphor for Yahweh’s judgement (Janzen 1982:408; Szeles 1987:41; Robertson 1990:203; Smith 1984:111). The violence directed at Lebanon, the maltreatment of cattle and the bloodshed of human beings because of the Babylonian exercise of power would be turned against them by Yahweh himself (2:17).

Yahweh is thus very much involved in world affairs and cannot be accused of standing aloof in the face of violence (1:2-4). When the Chaldeans overstep the limits of their power, Yahweh once again do not tolerate such a misuse of power and will act against Babylonia. Habakkuk 2:5-20 serves as a vivid testimony to Yahweh’s intended action against the violent behaviour of the Babylonian powers. He is the one who is bringing about the downfall of Babylon (Floyd 2000:117).

Habakkuk’s questions are answered: Yahweh is not inactive on the issue of violence as Habakkuk once thought him to be in Habakkuk 1:2-4. Nor does He tolerate the outrageously violent behaviour of the Babylonians when they exceeded the powers given to them (1:5-11, 12-17). Yahweh acts in the interest of restoring justice to the world but He does so by making use of violent means.

Habakkuk 2:20 forms a suitable conclusion not only to the last of the woe oracles or to chapter 2 but also to the oracle (axmḥ) Habakkuk saw. All the earth is called upon to be silent in the presence of such a powerful God. It is clear that Yahweh is not only a local god of a particular nation – He is Lord of all nations.

5 And a non-violent prophet surrenders to a violent God (3:1-19)

Habakkuk 3:1-19 forms the second part of the book. A new heading in Habakkuk 3:1 (aybnh qwqbjl hlpt) distinguishes the remainder of the book as a prayer while the first part was seen as an oracle (axm). Although the heading designates the rest of the book as a prayer, only part of the chapter can be seen as prayer (vv 2, 8-15, 16, 17-19).

Chapter 3 begins with a vocative calling upon the name of Yahweh identifying at the outset the central focus of the poem, Yahweh, the God of Israel (Hiebert 1986:61). What the prophet heard about Yahweh and the work that he saw (supposedly performed by Yahweh) filled him with fear (yt ẓr ṣ̄). The first hint that the non-violent prophet surrenders to Yahweh’s fearful actions is stated in verse 2b. It is a plea that Yahweh should hasten to bring his work about. The pronounced judgement must come alive (ḥyj) and be made known (ḥydḥ), that is, Yahweh should renew his activity and make himself known in the course of events (Floyd 2000:150) even during the lifetime of the prophet himself. Let Yahweh do what He intends to do. It is of no use to question Yahweh any longer. Yet, in spite of his fear for the work of Yahweh, he nevertheless makes an appeal to Yahweh’s mercy and compassion (µjr) in these turbulent (tjr) times (Rudolph 1975:242). An appeal to mercy is typical of a non-violent person operating in a violent environment (ẓgr ṣ̄). Habakkuk bears witness to God as the living,
powerful, active, dreadful but also compassionate Lord, the God who redeems his people (Szeles 1987:46).

There is fair consensus that Habakkuk 3:3-15 consists of a description of the mighty theophany of Yahweh where Yahweh is asked to manifest his divine power in the world by delivering the land from invaders (Sweeney 1991:78). Habakkuk 3:3-15 can be divided in two parts, verses 3-7 and 8-15.

In verses 3-7 a description is given of Yahweh’s coming from Teman and Paran. Teman and Paran are associated with the southern part of Israel: part of Edom and Sinai in particular. Mentioning Teman and Paran brings back memories of Yahweh’s mighty theophany at Mount Sinai, recalling at the same time the saving history of his people (Haak 1992:83; Rudolph 1975:243). God is called Eloha (יהוה), a strange and seldomly used name for Yahweh in the Old Testament (Rudolph 1975:243; Robertson 1990:222; Van der Woude 1978:67; Roberts 1991:151). The general picture one gets from verses 3-7 is that of Yahweh’s coming in power, leaving those who see it in awe. Yahweh is the Holy One, unapproachable and to be feared because he is the One who will judge the unjust in the world (Szeles 1987:47). Metaphors used are metaphors indicating power. The metaphor of light in verse 3 and the use of עַל, or horns, are common metaphors for power (Haak 1992:86) serve as ample evidence. Yahweh in his mighty display of power is accompanied by plague and pestilence according to verse 5. It may be a reminder of the events during the Exodus but it may also be that deber (דבר) and resheph (רעפים) are references to divine beings and members of God’s cosmic army marching with him (Hiebert 1986:92; Haak 1992:90; Bruce 1999:883). When Yahweh moves onto action, even the unshakable mountains are shattered and the hills are bowed down. In verses 3-7 Yahweh is described as a warrior, coming to fight for his people (Hiebert 1986:90). The metaphors used indicate that violence will be used when Yahweh takes action.

While Habakkuk 3:3-7 is marked by third person singular forms, verses 3:8-15 are marked by second person singular forms where Yahweh is addressed. The rather violent colours, in which Yahweh is painted in, continue. Yahweh is a warrior riding in a chariot to meet the enemy. His rage is directed against the river and the sea, reminding one of the conflicts with the powers of chaos in Semitic mythology. As a violent warrior riding a chariot, Yahweh makes use of weapons like a bow and arrow and spears. Yahweh is pictured as a God of wrath, anger and rage (vv 8, 12). When mountains saw Yahweh, they trembled (v 10). The very graphic description of water roaring, surging, sweeping by (v 10) emphasises the terror of the moment. The non-violent prophet is confronted with a frightening manifestation of the power of Yahweh. Keller (1985:158) makes mention of the violent way in which Yahweh is manifested in the theophany of chapter 3. Herrman (2001:482) makes us aware of the fact that theophanies describing terrible events taking place in nature often serve to explain the overwhelming violence of Yahweh.
The purpose of this overwhelming picture of Yahweh’s power is to bring home the message that Yahweh acts on behalf of his people as He had done in the past when the sun and moon stood still (Jos 10:12-14). In the end the victory of Yahweh will be complete and devastating for the enemy. Their leaders will be crushed and their buildings will be demolished (vv 13-14).

The reaction of the prophet to this terrific theophany is one of total submission. Verse 16 describes the fear of the prophet in the face of the theophany. Hiebert (1986:113) describes the fear as the deep dread of the worshipper of Yahweh at the recognition of his awesome power. It conveys the sense of numinous dread or *tremendum* and at the same time the *fascinosum* in which Habakkuk is drawn into an attitude of acceptance and commitment (Janzen 1982:411). The violent means of Yahweh overpowered his non-violent prophet. As earlier in 2:1 the prophet is content to wait upon the day of vindication against the people who once invaded his country.

Habakkuk, the non-violent prophet, finally surrenders to Yahweh who does act violently. In the last verse (v 19) of his book, he calls Yahweh, his God, his strength. The word translated as strength (יְלֵי) may also be translated as ‘my army’ (Haak 1992:104; Koehler & Baumgartner 1958:295). The use of יְלֵי is particularly striking because it is not a metaphor used normally for indicating Yahweh’s strength as a source of comfort for the afflicted believer in the Old Testament. In the Psalms (28:7; 118:14; Ex 15:2) one finds the word יִלֶל (my strength) for the strength of the Lord in which the believer may share. For the first time in the book, Habakkuk uses a metaphor from the military to describe Yahweh. Roberts (1991:158) suggested that יְלֵי might be used in contrast to the Babylonian oppressor who worshipped military might as a god. Another possibility is that the use of this metaphor may be coming from verses 3-15 where Yahweh is portrayed as a divine warrior. It might also be a subtle indication that in the end the prophet has to surrender to a violent Yahweh.

Habakkuk has to submit to a God who is just and righteous but in ways quite different from what Habakkuk expected him to be. Habakkuk remains faithful to God, the One who delivers, the One who is the source of his strength, his army, the One who let him walk on the heights in safety (vv 18-19).

**D CONCLUSION**

Little evidence can be deduced from the book itself or even from the rest of the Old Testament, informing us on Habakkuk, the human being behind the oracle and prayer. We have no personal data on where he came from, whether he was married, had children or who his parents were. Even the meaning of his name remains to a large extent a mystery to us. Although one is hesitant to deduce too much from the name of a person it is nevertheless interesting to remind ourselves of Luther’s interpretation of the name Habakkuk. According to Luther the name...
Habakkuk is related to the Hebrew חֶבֶר meaning to ‘embrace’, ‘comprehend’, ‘enfold’, ‘clasp to the heart’, hence the name Herzer in German (embracer; Bruce 1999:832) or embraced, either way a fitting name for a non-violent person. Is it too much to construct a picture of a prophet who has a very personal encounter with Yahweh, who dares to question him on the issue of violence and his stance on violence, not only within the community of Judah itself but also in a broader perspective of world affairs outside of the borders of Judah? Keller (1985:166) sees Habakkuk as someone voicing his doubt on Yahweh’s ruling of the world; he is a human being who holds fast unto the ideal of righteousness and one who is concerned therefore about the plight of the righteous who suffers unjustly. To this we may also add that he was a non-violent prophet who did not shy away from entering into a dialogue with God who at times can be described as violent. Habakkuk made his point although he eventually had to submit to the overwhelming power of Yahweh.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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