8. The Prayer of Habakkuk in Habakkuk 3
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8. The Prayer of Habakkuk in Habakkuk 3—
Logotechnical Analysis

Guidelines

• Please read the General Introduction and the Introduction to the Embedded Poetry.
• For common features found in the numerical analysis charts, see the "Key to the charts".

Habakkuk 3 in its Literary Context

• The little Book of Habakkuk as a whole is a textbook example of a numerical composition. The divine name numbers 17 and 26 are not only woven into the text to signify God's presence in the prophecy, but also to give structure to it. Moreover, the numerical features strongly suggest that the book is a coherent literary unit and that the prayer in Chapter 3 is integral to the prophecy, like the prayers in 1:2-4 and 1:12-17. What makes the concluding prayer in Chapter 3 stand out is that it has been given the appearance of a psalm by being supplied with a psalm-like heading, three selahs, and a subscription. That it should be regarded as an inset psalm is therefore totally out of the question, but this holds true for all the embedded poems we have studied so far.

• Here is an overview of the numerical features of the book as a whole:

```
1:1  Heading of Chapters 1-2, and of the book as a whole           5
1:2-4 First prayer, his complaint: Yahweh, there is no justice!          41
1:5-6 Divine speech: Yahweh will raise up the Chaldeans         28
1:7-11 Habakkuk's comment: Description of the terrifying army      52 (2 x 26)
1:12-14 Second prayer, part 1: Yahweh, why do you keep silent?      39 (26 + 13)
1:15-17 Second prayer, part 2: Will the wicked slaughter the nations? 32
2:1-2a Habakkuk keeps a look-out, awaiting Yahweh's response       18
2:2b-d Divine speech, part 1: Write down the vision on tablets!         9 +
2:3  Divine speech, part 2: Yahweh vouches for its truth          17 = 26
2:4  Habakkuk says: The oppressor will die, the righteous will live  9
2:5-6 Habakkuk's comment: The fate of the oppressor: Woe!           43 (17a+26b)
2:4-6 Habakkuk's comments before he addresses the oppressor       52 (2 x 26)
2:7-8 He warns the plunderer that he himself will be plundered   26 (15a+11b)
2:9-11 He admonishes the plunderer: Woe betide his house!         26
2:12-14 He reprimands the oppressor: Woe betide his city!          31
2:15-17 He warns the man of violence: Woe betide his companions!    41
2:18-19 Woe to those who make idols and trust in them           35
2:20  Yahweh is in his temple! Be silent in his presence!           7
3:1-19 The third prayer (to be analysed in detail below)        212
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Chapter 1  First part of the Prophetic Oracle  197 = 106a + 91b
Chapter 2  Second part of the Prophetic Oracle  262 = 128a + 134b
Chapters 1-2  Habakkuk’s Prophetic Oracle  459 = 234a + 225b
Chapter 3  Habakkuk’s Prophetic Prayer  212 = 130a + 82b
Chapters 1-3  The Book of Habakkuk as a whole  671 = 364a + 307b.

The concluding statement (2:20; cf. 3:19) may be regarded as a coda. It stands apart from the woe oracles, for the prophet's words in 2:4-19 are clearly demarcated by two corresponding statements in 4a ('no life in him') and 19e ('no breath in it').
I consider it very likely that the number 32, occurring in the 64 (2 x 32) cola of the third prayer in 3:2-19c, and in the 32 words spoken by the prophet in 1:15-17, was determined by the numerical value of Habakkuk’s title ניבּ, ‘the prophet’ (5+14+2+10+1 = 32), which we find in both headings (1:1 and 3:1).

The 459 words in Habakkuk’s Prophetic Oracle (Chapters 1-2) are a multiple of 17 (459 = 27 x 17), while the words before atnach are a multiple of 26 (234 = 9 x 26). What is particularly significant, and obviously not by chance, is that the words before atnach in two totals are multiples of 26 (130a = 5 x 26, and 364a = 14 x 26).

- The numerical evidence supports the view that the book comprises two major sections:
  - **Chapters 1-2**  **Habakkuk’s Prophetic Oracle** (with a distinct heading)
  - **Chapter 3**  **Habakkuk’s Prophetic Prayer** (with a distinct heading)

The Prophetic Oracle in Chapters 1-2 divides into two distinct parts (corresponding to the chapter division) which constitute an unmistakable coherent literary unit. They are clearly differentiated by the prophet’s statement (2:1) in which he declares his intention to stand at his post, keeping a look-out and awaiting Yahweh’s response to his complaint.

- The numerical features also persuaded me to regard the famous statement in 2:4 as part of the prophet’s comment and not as part of Yahweh’s speech:

>Behold the impudent, surely, the life in him will be removed, While the righteous will live by being faithful.¹

The demarcation of the prophet’s comment, 2:4-6, is based on the fact that the author differentiates between the woe statement put on the lips of those who hurl taunts at the oppressor (2:6), and the woe’s Habakkuk himself directs at him (2:7-17).

- A closer examination of the two divine speeches reveals that they form a chiastic pattern, showing that they are logotechnically closely connected (for the numerical chiasmus, see the **General Introduction**, p. 12):

First speech (1:5-6)  28 = 13a + 15b
Second speech (2:2-3)  26 = 13a + 13b
Yahweh’s speeches  54 = 26a + 28b

This is additionally demonstrated by the fact that they are composed of altogether 54 words, which is the numerical value of Habakkuk (8+2+19+6+19 = 54). See the chart, and for the use of the numerical value of a key-word or key-name as a structuring device, see the **General Introduction**, p. 13.

- It is worth noting that the 26 words in 2:7-8 are divided by atnach into 15a (YH) and 11b (WH), and that the first woe saying (2:9-11) is made up of 26 words. Note also that the 43 words in 2:5-6 are neatly divided into 17 words before, and 26 after atnach, and that the prophet’s comments in 2:4-6 are composed of 52 (2 x 26 = 9 + 43) words.

- Note also the use of 39 words in the first part of Habakkuk’s second prayer (1:12-14), which represents the YHWH-‘echad formula (39 = 26 + 13) signifying Yahweh’s **uniqueness**. The subtle reference to Yahweh’s ‘One-ness’ is most appropriate, for the prophet explicitly appeals to his incomparable characteristics (everlasting, holy, immortal) to urge him not to keep silent but to act for the sake of justice. For the 39 words in 3:4-7, see Observation 2.

- For a detailed survey of the research into the compositional problems and literary issues of the Book of Habakkuk, see the article by Marvin A. Sweeney, “Habakkuk, Book of”, in **The Anchor Bible Dictionary**, Volume 3 (1992).

¹ Preserving, but rearranging the consonantal text of MT, with A.S. van der Woude, **Habakuk Zefanja** (De Prediking van het Oude Testament, 1978). The impudent oppressor is Chaldea, the righteous victim is Judah.
Special Features of the Prayer

- The prayer in Habakkuk 3 is the high point of the book, being the third - and by far the longest - prayer after the prayers in 1:2-4 and 1:12-17. The remarkable way in which it is demarcated by the psalm-like addition, יִטְנָה יִנְוָה, to the heading in 3:1 and the typical technical terms, הָיָה הָיָה, at the end (3:19d), highlights it as a momentous component of the book. At the same time, the psalm-like brackets function as explicit markers of its hymnic status, which characterizes it as a hymnic Prayer. Its positioning by means of the well-known 'split-and-embed' technique gives it the appearance of an embedded poem.  
  
- To accentuate its psalm-like character in still another way, the author (or a later priestly editor?) supplied it with three selahs (in vs. 3b, 9b, and 13d), a technical term occurring only in the Book of Psalms. Their precise role is unclear, for they do not seem to have a highlighting or demarcating function as in many psalms, except for the selah in v. 13 which may have been intended to mark the end of a strophe. Since they do not form part of the poietical body of the prayer, which also holds true for the superscription and subscription, I shall leave them out of consideration in my logotechnical analysis.  
  
- In terms of content, the prayer was composed as the third and final prayer in the book, as indicated by the heading. It functions in the book as a petition addressed to Yahweh to manifest his divine power to deliver the land from invading forces, expressing confidence that the vision of the prophet in 1:1-4 will be fulfilled and that God’s righteousness will be vindicated with the deliverance of his people.

Compositional Structure

- The prayer as such, excluding the superscription, the three selahs, and the subscription, has 28 verselines, 64 cola and 202 words. Its compositional structure is disputed. At first sight, the macro structure appears to be fundamentally determined by the change in the direction of address: words explicitly addressed to God (vs. 2 and 8-15) alternating with words spoken about him (vs. 3-7 and 16-19):  
  v. 2 Invocation introducing the petition  
  vs. 3-7 The use of theophany images as motivation for petitioning Yahweh  
  vs. 8-15 The use of cosmic battle images to urge Yahweh to act  
  vs. 16-19 The prophet’s personal response.  
  
Consequently, in terms of content, the prayer can be subdivided into 9 strophes:  
  v. 2 Invocation introducing the petition: I am in awe of what you have done  
  vs. 3-5 Description of a theophany as the manifestation of Yahweh’s power  
  vs. 6-7 Yahweh’s acts during the theophany, and what the prophet observes  
  vs. 8-11 Yahweh, you prepare for battle on a cosmic level  
  vs. 12-13 Yahweh, you traverse the earth to crush evil powers and save your people  
  vs. 14-15 Yahweh, you fight those who try to devour the poor; you tread the sea  
  v. 16 What the prophet observes and experiences awaiting the day of disaster  
  vs. 17-18 Whatever befalls him, he will exult in Yahweh and rejoice in the saviour  
  v. 19 The prophet asseverates his trust in Yahweh who will elevate him.  

This division corresponds to the macro structure proposed by R.L. Smith (Word Biblical Commentary, 1984): 2 Petition; 3-7 Theophany; 8-15 Battle; 16-19 Response of Faith.

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2 For this compositional technique, which we encountered in all of the embedded poetry we have studied so far, see the paragraph “Embedding and Framing Techniques” in the Introduction to the Embedded Poetry, pp. 6-7.  
3 For some preliminary remarks on the disputed role of the psalm headings and other technical terms, such as the selahs, see my Analysis of Psalm 3, Observations 1 and 4.  
4 For an in-depth discussion of the prayer in its context, see the article by J.W. Watts cited in the Bibliography.
In his logoprosodic analysis, Duane Christensen, who includes the superscription, the selahs, and the subscription in the word-count, finds 13 strophes:
vs. 1-2, 3, 4-5, 6, 7, 8, 9-11, 12-13b, 13cd, 14-15, 16, 17, 18-19.
For particulars, see: http://www.bibal.net/04/proso/psalms-ii/pdf/dlc_hk003-001-d.pdf. Christensen reads an extra word in v. 13b and counts 213 words in the entire text.

F.I. Andersen (The Anchor Bible, 2001) has a different view of the structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>v. 2</th>
<th>vs. 3-15</th>
<th>vs. 3-7 First Deliverance</th>
<th>vs. 8-11 Creation</th>
<th>vs. 12-15 Second Deliverance</th>
<th>vs. 16-19 Response</th>
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<td>First Deliverance</td>
<td>Creation</td>
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On rhetorical grounds, Pieter van der Lugt has argued persuasively that the text exhibits great regularity in the division of its 28 verselines. He finds 5 cantos and 12 strophes:
vs. 2 || 3, 4-6b, 6c-7 || 8-9, 10, 11-12 || 13, 14-15, 16 || 17, 18-19.
Taken together, the opening and concluding cantos comprise 7 verselines, which means that the canto structure is determined by the number 7: a 2-line introduction, three 7-line cantos, and a 5-line concluding canto.

### Logotechnical analysis

- Columns a and b show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column c: words addressed to God; d: words spoken about God.
- The verseline numbering is in the first column to the right of the Hebrew text.
- As it stands in the Masoretic text, I regard Habakkuk 3 as a text in its own right.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>c</th>
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6c

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### Observations

1. The arithmetic centre on all levels (of words, verselines, and cola) is to be found in v. 10, but it does not constitute a persuasive consciously designed meaningful centre. Pieter van der Lugt finds the quintessential thought of the poem in v. 19a: Yahweh my Lord is my strength, but it is rather the gist of the prophet’s attestation of faith (18-19) than the gist of the poem as a whole.

2. The divine name numbers feature in the following select instances:

   - vs. 4-7 **39 words (26a + 13b)**, the YHWH ‘echad formula; compare the **39** words of 1:12-14 and see my remark at the bottom of page 2 above.
   - vs. 3-7 **51** (3 x 17) words in total spoken about God: Canto II
   - vs. 8-12 **52** (2 x 26) words in total addressed to God: Canto III
   - vs. 14-15 **17** words in total: Strophe 9
   - vs. 17-18 **26** words in total, with **17** before the *atnach*

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3. In line with the use of the numerical value of the word יִבְנִי, ‘the prophet’ (32), and the name Habakkuk (54) as a structuring device (which occur in 1:1 and 3:1; see p. 2 above), it is very likely that the 66 words of 3:2-7 have been determined by the numerical value of קָבָלָה, ‘belonging to Habakkuk’ (3:1).

4. In the Prophetic Prayer (Chapter 3), the name יְהֹוָה occurs 5x (2a, 2b, 8a, 18a, 19a), יִתְנָה, ‘God’, 1x (3a), Elohim 1x (18b), and Adonay 1x (19a).

In the preceding Prophetic Oracle (Chapters 1-2), the divine name appears 7 times in a menorah pattern (1:2a and 12a, 2:2a, 13a, 14b, 16c, and 20a). Note that in the middle instance (2:13) the divine name is combined with Sebaoth, which is most appropriate in a battle context.

Bibliography

See the list in Marvin A. Sweeney, “Habakkuk, Book of”, in The Anchor Bible Dictionary, 1992, as well as F.I. Andersen’s Commentary (The Anchor Bible, 2001), pp. 31-84

See also Duane Christensen’s extensive list: http://www.bibal.net/04/proso/psalms-ii/pdf/dlc_hk003-001-d.pdf.
