

## Habakkuk: A Political Night-Prayer

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In July 1940 the ecclesiastical journal of the city of Basel is censored by the Swiss military censor. The reason is a passage from Habakkuk printed under the heading "Word on the (Current) Situation," which the censors found could no longer be read as "neutral" (Vischer 1958, 40). Thus the military censors read the Habakkuk passage as current resistance literature against the National Socialist terror regime.

The book of the prophet Habakkuk has as its theme various dimensions of violence and the rule of violence. It names not only societal and social ills, lack of justice, and exploitation, but also terror, war, and violence in the international sphere. As clearly as Habakkuk points to the scope of violence on the one hand, he leaves the historic subjects of this violence equally unclear on the other. To be sure, the *kašdīm* (Chaldeans), that is, the Babylonians, appear in Habakkuk 1:6, but they can also be understood as symbolic of the aggressive expansionist policies of other superpowers. Already in antiquity the book of Habakkuk was read as commentary on the current time. The commentators of Habakkuk in Qumran (*Pesher Habakkuk* 4.5) recognize the Chaldeans as the Kitteans (Cypriots), that is, Greeks or Romans (Lohse 1964, 230-31). The Septuagint locates Habakkuk as a contemporary of Daniel in the Babylonian exile (Septuagint: Bel and the Dragon). Discussions in the literature about the historical context of Habakkuk assign it to various historical locations, which one can also interpret as giving it a contemporary meaning, albeit after the fact. Attempts to date the text range from the late reign of King Manasseh, to the time of Kings Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah, down to the exilic and late exilic period, in each respective case naming the corresponding ag-

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Translator's Note: "Political Night Prayer" (*Politisches Nachtgebet*) was the name of a late-night liturgy introduced in September 1968 at the general assembly of German Catholics in Essen by an ecumenical group around Dorothee Sölle. The group's intention was to bring the Vietnam War into reflection in light of biblical texts and meditation. Beginning in October 1968, similar sessions were held monthly in Cologne, and the themes expanded to include other concerns. The meditations are published; thus the name and the model have become widely known since the 1970s.

gressor superpowers such as the Scythians, Medes, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans (cf. Jöcken 1977).

There are as many hypotheses about the book's literary cohesion as there are about where to locate the book historically (cf. Mason 1994, 66ff.). One hears different voices in the book, but their entry is hardly ever clearly marked in a certain place. "The scribes and editors responsible for preparing the canonized version of traditional text saw in 'Habakkuk' something like the written by-product of a dialogue in which several voices from different times took part" (Seybold 1991, 51). In my opinion, the individual voices are not strengthened by literary-critical attempts to separate them into individual passages or by text-critical corrections, but rather by listening for associations between themes, motives, and key words within the book and between this book and other texts of the First Testament. For example, just as God's words are differentiated from those of the prophet (cf. 1:5, 12), it is very striking how the individual voices flow into one another as if they were composed into, over, and against one another. One hears not only voices of accusation and complaint, but also voices of wisdom, hymnlike, liturgical and prophetic voices that are connected by a fine net of key words and connecting motifs. In a wider context one also hears among these voices those from Qumran and the voice of Paul (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11).

This chapter attempts to read Habakkuk as an open score of a conversation with God that demands a reply, a conversation in which other voices are heard beside, with, and against that of Habakkuk. Because it offers only vague information about its historic time and place, Habakkuk practically begs to be read against the background of whatever the current situation might be. Its structure and language open it for the participation of other voices — including contemporary voices — in the conversation with God.

But who is this prophet Habakkuk who speaks with these different voices? The heading calls the book a vision<sup>1</sup> that the prophet Habakkuk saw. The meaning of the name Habakkuk is uncertain. It could be derived from the verb "to embrace" (*hbq*). Széles (1987, 5) takes this etymology a step further by saying the name could be understood to mean that Habakkuk shares the suffering of his people, taking it in his arms, but also that he struggles with God in his complaints and accusations against God (cf. Gen 32:23-31). A different etymology derives the name from an Assyrian garden plant (*hambaûku*), which was possibly used as a herbal curative plant (Széles 1987, 5).

If one makes the connection between Habakkuk's name and his message, one could say that in a certain way Habakkuk is embraced by the pain of what he sees and that he desperately seeks healing. He cannot turn his eyes away from the wrongdoing in the national and international sphere. The sense of sight plays an

1. NRSV: "oracle"; Bail: "Lastspruch" — "an utterance laying a charge"; Luther translated the term similarly: "Klage" — a charge. [Translator's note.]

important role in his prophecy. Words having to do with seeing occur with far greater frequency than words for hearing. God is for Habakkuk also "not a God who listens but one who sees" (Keller 1973, 159; cf. especially Hab 1:3; 1:13; also the light phenomena that occur with God's appearance in chapter 3). Habakkuk is not a neutral observer, but one who, while standing at his observation post, is imprisoned by his perspective (2:1). As a victim of violence, his gaze is fixed on catastrophe. He sees reality with eyes that suffer from violence and injustice, and he brings this in a complaint before God. At the same time he accuses God because he must see injustice:

Why do you make me see wrongdoing  
and look at trouble?  
Destruction and violence are before me. (1:3)

With this question Habakkuk puts into words his vision of the reality of violence. But at the same time he contradicts the totality of this reality by expressing his vision before the God who cannot look on wrongdoing, whose eyes are too pure to behold evil (1:13). Here we also hear Hagar's voice, who likewise calls God a God who sees (Gen 16) — a God who sees misery and intervenes in a liberating way.

From a feminist perspective, violence is always gender-specific and must be differentiated, since women are affected by violence differently than men. In patriarchal social systems, women are subject to the violence of male power over their bodies, their freedom of movement, and their social status.

Habakkuk's visual description of social relationships of violence culminates in this statement:

So the law becomes perverted [NRSV: slack]  
and justice never prevails. (Hab 1:4)

The instructions of the Torah have no power any more, the law is manipulated, and violence is the order of the day. As applied to women, this could mean that a commandment such as the protection of widows (Exod 22:21 [Eng. 22]; Deut 10:18; 24:17-22; Ps 146:9) is perverted to bring about its opposite.

The aggressive superpower, too, which brutally invades and conquers the land, is characterized by injustice. It defines justice by its own power (Hab 1:7). Its might is its god and compassion is a foreign concept (1:17). The transition from seeing social violence to seeing the violence of war, which also marks a shift from the words of the prophet to those of God (1:4-5), strikes one as very muted. Without any clear signals we go from the prophet's vision to God's words, from the description of social violence in the land to that of war making by an aggressive superpower. Both relationships of violence are characterized by the fact that the justice that makes peace possible has become perverted.

Seen superficially, Habakkuk contains no notable gender-specific analysis of violence. The totality of terror and brutality (cf. the animal images in 1:8) is in the foreground of the views of violence. It is as if the victims of this violence are imprisoned in a net and cannot escape (1:14-17). Their dwellings and cities are being occupied, their land conquered (1:6), and they themselves are taken captive. These effects of war on the population affect both sexes and are clearly expressed. This must not necessarily be seen as a defect of the text; one can fill in the gaps with experiences of war specific to women as they are formulated in other texts. In the process of the violent conflicts of war, women are kidnapped and enslaved (Judg 5:30; Jer 8:10-12), and torn away from their children (Mic 2:9; Jer 18:21). "Sexual assault and brutal murder of pregnant women were very likely part of how armies in the ancient Near East fought their wars" (Schroer 1995, 122; ET, 1998, 124; cf. 2 Kings 8:12; 15:16; Hos 14:1 [Eng. 13:16]; Isa 13:16; Jer 8:10; Lam 5:11). Compared to other prophetic writings, Habakkuk strikingly does not use the metaphor of the faithless city as a woman, Jerusalem, who is therefore conquered and raped, language that must be considered sexist and pornographic (cf., for example, Jer 13:26; Ezek 16:36-42; Hos 2:5-15[3-13]; Nah 3:5 in reference to Nineveh). Habakkuk's vision of violence does not exclude the experiences of women, but gives them space through his open language.

Habakkuk does not dismiss God from these experiences of social violence and the violence of war. He interprets the catastrophe as God's working in history (Hab 2:13). But rather than taking the role of a passive victim or turning his eyes away from the terror, Habakkuk demands an answer from God to his accusation: "Why do you look on the treacherous, / and are silent?" (1:13).

I will keep watch to see what he will say against/through me,<sup>2</sup>  
and what he will answer concerning my complaint. (2:1)

To a certain extent Habakkuk struggles with God about the appropriateness of the means of punishment. "[I]f violence within Judah is bad, it should not be punished by worse violence from people who worship their own might" (Sanderson 1992, 223). God's justice stands in contradiction to what Habakkuk envisions.

The hope that a word from God will oppose this reality does not allow Habakkuk to close his eyes to violence and leave his "observation post." Yet God's answer redirects Habakkuk's gaze by telling him to write the vision of hope on tablets so that it can be read or called out (the Hebrew verb *qr*<sup>2</sup> has both meanings). Recording the vision in writing ensures that an end to the terror will in fact come. Hope only becomes possible when people's ability to see, which has been bound up by the catastrophe, is restored by the vision of the possibility of an end to violence. Even if the promised end to violence and terror brings hope to the edge of

2. NRSV: to me.

despair because it cannot yet be seen, but only read (or called out) as a promise, life is possible by holding fast to this hope (2:4). It is only the written vision that seems to free the people's perspective on violence, and thereby allow the expression of hope for an end to violence, hope for liberation.

The five cries of woe that follow (2:6-20), against greed for goods and for power, against brutality in carrying out large construction projects, against boundless violence against people and animals, and against idolatry, may refer to internal and external political structures of violence and oppression. The voices of these cries raise a lamentation for the dead, a "pre-emptive lamentation over someone still alive" (Seybold 1991, 69). These lamentations bring attention to actions destructive to community by characterizing the perpetrators of violence as fictive dead people. In this way the evil-doing is dramatically brought into the present, and grief is expressed over asocial behavior.

In the First Testament, the lamentation is primarily the task of women (cf. Jer 38:22; 49:3; Ezek 8:14; 32:16; Amos 8:3; 2 Sam 1:24; Lam 1:18-22; Judg 11:40; cf. Jahnow 1923, 59; Jost 1995, 145-53), and it is passed on by women from generation to generation (Jer 9:19[20]). Jost argues, in view of the frequency of "lamentation and in association with it the naming of women as the ones lamenting in the context of prophetic proclamation, that women play a more powerful role within the prophetic movement than is visible from the texts that explicitly name women prophets" (Jost 1995, 135 n. 165). Thus it would be conceivable that women's voices, too, are heard in the chorus of voices of Habakkuk, through the medium of its lamentations for the dead.

Chapter 3 gives voice to Habakkuk's imaginative vision of liberation from terror and oppression. This chapter is a prayer of Habakkuk in which he challenges God "in wrath [to] remember mercy" (3:2) and to come forth to save his people (3:13). What is being described is a theophany or epiphany of God on a cosmological scale. God has the power to set creation into chaos, and he has the power to break the might of the evildoers. His horses and chariots (3:8) prove superior to the brutal Chaldean cavalry of 1:8. But by means of the clear reference to the exodus events, God is not characterized in completely militaristic terms: "With your horses you prepare the way through the sea" (3:15; cf. 3:13).<sup>3</sup> God's cosmological victory over the "chaotic enemy power of the mighty waters" (Seybold 1991, 81) relates to the liberation from slavery in Egypt. As God acted at the Sea of Reeds (Red Sea) to liberate Israel, so God now acts anew to lead Israel into freedom and peace. It is a matter of the rescue of a brutally conquered and oppressed people.

Many women reject violence as a means of conflict resolution and seek other models that avoid violence and oppression. On these grounds many reject biblical traditions that speak of violence. But "[I]t is all too easy for those who are in the luxurious position of not having to defend themselves and their very existence

3. NRSV: "You trampled the sea with your horses, / churning the mighty waters."

against violence to take strong positions" (Schroer 1994, 685). In biblical tradition it is often women who celebrate the military victories with drumming, singing, and dancing (Exod 15:19-21; Judg 11:34; 1 Sam 18:7). The relief of having escaped violence may be a factor in this. But another factor is that women do the work of grieving for the dead (Jer 9:17-21; 2 Sam 21). Their lamentation performs the function of ensuring "that people will remember those who have disappeared and died, and will not be at rest until the guilty parties are held accountable" (Schroer 1994, 681).

Habakkuk voices his hope for an end to the terror and violence in a prayer. He speaks out of a situation of fear and powerlessness. In situations of suffering, such texts can be the last thing that people who fear for life and limb "have left — as protest, accusation and cry for help. It follows as a matter of course that these texts are legitimate as they arise in this context from the lips of the victims, but spoken by the perpetrators are blasphemous" (Zenger 1994, 693). In situations in which even the stones cry out from the wall and the wooden beam joins in (Hab 2:11),<sup>4</sup> everything is invested in the hope that someday joy and jubilation will again be possible because God will come to their rescue. The book of Habakkuk gives witness to the fact that this hope must again and again be expressed liturgically in contemporary terms as a lamenting-accusing conversation with God (cf. the liturgical instructions in 3:1; 3:3; 3:9; 3:13; 3:19). Thus the book can be called a "political night-prayer" that lives in the tension between lamentation, accusatory outcry, and liberating hope:

Why do you make me see wrongdoing  
and look at trouble?  
Destruction and violence are before me. . . .  
Why do you look on the oppressor,<sup>5</sup>  
and are silent? (1:3, 13)

Yet I will rejoice in God  
and exult in the God of my salvation.  
God, the Lord, is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer  
and makes me tread upon my heights. (3:18-19)

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4. NRSV: "and the plaster will respond from the woodwork."

5. NRSV: "the treacherous."

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