

# Life for the righteous, doom for the wicked: Reading Habakkuk from a wisdom perspective<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

### Life for the righteous, doom for the wicked: Reading Habakkuk from a wisdom perspective

*In many ways, the book of Habakkuk is unique in the Book of the Twelve Prophets. One of the reasons is that the Gattungen normally associated with prophetic literature are either absent or occur in unique forms. On the other hand, it has long since been recognised that wisdom motifs had a definite influence upon the book. This can be seen in the vocabulary, in many of the themes, in the dialogic character of the book, and even in the overall structure of the book. The purpose of this article is to illuminate the intertextual relations between Habakkuk and wisdom texts in the Old Testament, especially the so called sceptical wisdom. The importance of these motifs in determining the theological thrust of the book is discussed. It is shown that the recognition of these motifs has implications for the date of the book in its final form as well.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In many ways, the book of Habakkuk is unique in the Book of the Twelve Prophets. The uniqueness of the book commences with the superscription (1:1) which contains absolutely no information about the prophet. He remains anonymous (Prinsloo 1979:146). The uniqueness is continued in the first

pericope (1:2-4), which is not, as is suggested by the אָמַן “oracle” in the superscription, an oracle of doom against a person or a nation, but a lament about the deplorable state of affairs confronting an unspecified group of צַדִּיקִים who are being surrounded by רִשְׁעִים. This strangeness continues in every pericope, to such an extent that the book has been called “the Old Testament’s maverick prophecy” (Thompson 1993:53)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Profesor Wil Vosloo introduced me to the exegesis of the Minor Prophets. Ever since then I have had a special interest in those books, especially in the Book of Habakkuk. Prof Vosloo asked me to participate in many projects and always impressed me with his thoroughness, erudition and sincere love for the Old Testament. I hope this article will be a fitting tribute to a respected Old Testament scholar.

<sup>2</sup> Keller (1973:156-165) lists five features that make the book unique, namely: the small amount of oracles; preference for words denoting “seeing” above words denoting “hearing”; indications that the spoken word is worthless; a preference for visual

The book of Habakkuk is, of course, notorious for the many problems it presents to the exegete<sup>3</sup>. These problems will not be discussed in this paper. Rather, one of the reasons for the so called strangeness of the book will be discussed. The hypothesis is that many of the unique features are due to the fact that the book has been profoundly influenced by wisdom motifs and can consistently be read from a wisdom perspective. Such a reading in no way excludes other legitimate approaches to the text (Loader 1986:103), but wisdom motifs certainly give the book a distinctive character. Recognition of this fact has definite implications for the interpretation of the book.

## 2 WISDOM MOTIFS IN THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

It has long been recognised that the book of Habakkuk contains many wisdom motifs (Keller 1973:162). Gowan (1968:157-166) has identified at least six levels of wisdom influence. The central theme of the book is theodicy. The prophet questions the righteousness of God. The only other prophetic book where this occurs, is the book of Jeremiah (cf Jr 12:1-4). However, the theme is central in wisdom literature. The book of Job discusses the theodicy problem in great detail, as Psalm 73 does. The theme is also discussed in Qohelet and in many of the psalms of lament (cf Loader 1986:106). According to Gowan, it can safely be stated that the book of Habakkuk stands in the broad tradition of sceptical wisdom. The book of Habakkuk displays a distinct *dialogic character*. The first two chapters are written in the form of a dialogue between Yahweh and the prophet. The only prophetic parallel occurs in the book of Jeremiah. Yet, the closest parallel is to be found in the book of Job. The vocabulary of the book clearly displays the influence of wisdom literature. The terminology for the oppressive situation described in 1:2-4 and repeated throughout the book, occur mostly in the wisdom books

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elements; and the conflation of various traditions from cultic, wisdom and mythic origins. Coggins (1981:86-87) points to the lack of traces of a deuteronomistic redaction and the fact that there are few allusions to the themes of other prophetic books as factors which set Habakkuk apart from other prophetic books. According to Floyd (1991:397) the use of complaint, a genre normally associated with the Psalter, in conjunction with the more traditionally prophetic genre of oracular speeches, sets Habakkuk and Jeremiah apart in the prophetic corpus.

<sup>3</sup> These problems include matters such as authorship, date, the identity of the righteous and the wicked mentioned in 1:2-4 and subsequent pericopes, the unity of the book, the redactional history of the book, the relationship between Habakkuk 3 and the first two chapters and the mythological background of Habakkuk 3. The problems are discussed in numerous publications (Prinsloo 1989; Sweeney 1992; Mason 1994). In spite of a magnitude of publications, most of the problems have not been solved adequately (Jöcken 1977a:519).

and in laments (Gunneweg 1986:403).<sup>4</sup> This is even more true of certain technical terms that occur in wisdom literature and in the book of Habakkuk, such as the proverbial depiction of the netherworld as insatiable (2:5, cf Pr 27:20; 30:16) and the occurrence of *הַכֹּחַח* in 2:1, *חִידוֹר* and *מִשַׁל* in 2:6. All three are technical wisdom terms (cf. also Thompson 1993:45). The lack of specifically prophetic features such as oracles of doom and salvation, underlines the uniqueness of the book. Familiar prophetic themes, such as election or covenant are absent. The only concrete historical data in the book is the reference to the Chaldeans in 1:6. The reference to *הַזְּרוּרָה* and the condemnation of idolatry in 2:18-19 are prophetic themes, but *הַזְּרוּרָה* is equally important in wisdom literature (cf Pr 3:1; 4:2; 28:4). Habakkuk is mainly concerned with an universal dilemma, treated especially in the skeptical wisdom, and therefore does not have a profoundly prophetic character. Even the structure of the book displays the influence of wisdom. The book has the same general structure as the book of Job. Both commence with a lament and conclude with a theophany. In both books, the theophany functions as God's response to man's complaint, emphasising the reality of his presence.

According to Gowan (1968:163-165) there are two possible explanations for the wisdom motifs in the book of Habakkuk. The first is that the prophet had a specific position in life. The close parallels to the psalms of lament might suggest that he was a cultic prophet. It could be suggested that Habakkuk was the type of person who produced the "learned psalmography" of the post-exilic period such as Psalm 1, 34 and 37. Gowan indicates that such a conclusion is not necessarily acceptable. The prophets borrowed images from all spheres of life. It is therefore difficult to make conclusions about the exact origins of individual prophets (cf also Coggins 1981:85). Rather, it suggests that wisdom influences were to be found everywhere in Israelite society. Wisdom literature did not originate in secluded circles, but was integral to everyday life. Wisdom represents a certain outlook, an approach to life conveyed in special language and images. Wisdom is not confined to those books specially designated "wisdom literature", but also occurs elsewhere. A prophet could freely use these ideas to convey his message (cf Whybray 1981:186).

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<sup>4</sup> He refers to specific terms such as *עֵמֶל* (1:3; 1:13). In 1:13 it occurs parallel to *רַע*, a combination elsewhere found only in Qohelet (4:8). *מִדְּרוֹךְ* (1:3) is found in Jeremiah 15:10 and Psalm 80:9 but nine times in Proverbs. The combination of *מִדְּרוֹךְ* and *יֵיב* is to be found only in Proverbs 15:18; 17:14 and 26:20-21 and in Jeremiah 15:10. *הִיָּר* (2:5) occurs elsewhere only in Proverbs 21:24. The contrast between the *רַשִּׁי* and *צְדִיק* (1:4) is a favourite subject of wisdom literature, where it occurs at least 59 times.

These general indications of the influence of wisdom upon the book of Habakkuk make it appropriate for the book to be read from a wisdom perspective. However, Gowan did not consistently interpret these influences within the context of the book as such. In the next paragraphs it will be argued that the influence of wisdom upon the book is much more profound. The book can consistently be read from a wisdom perspective.

### 3 STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE BOOK

In approaching the book from a wisdom perspective, the book is read as a literary unit. Whatever the redactional process may have been, in its present form the most striking structural principle in the book is its dialogic surface structure. In the light of the two superscriptions (1:1 and 3:1) the book can be divided into two large textual units. The first (1:2-2:20) can be subdivided into two units (1:2-17 and 2:1-20). The first of these sub-units can be divided into three distinct parts (1:2-4; 1:5-11 and 1:12-17). The second sub-unit can be divided into four parts (2:1; 2:2-3; 2:4-5; 2:6-20). The second large textual unit (3:1-19) can, apart from the superscript (3:1) and subscript (3:19b), be divided into three units (3:2; 3:3-15; 3:16-19). 1:2-17 can be described as a lament by the prophet concerning the absence of Yahweh<sup>5</sup>. 2:1-20 is the answer of Yahweh to the prophet's lament, and 3:1-19 is the reaction of the prophet to Yahweh's answer (cf Prinsloo 1999:520-526; Sweeney 1991:65)<sup>6</sup>.

In Habakkuk 1:1 the book is called נִשְׁמָהּ. Usually this term refers to an oracle of doom against foreign nations (cf Is 13:1, 14:28, 15:1, 17:1, 19:1, 21:1, 21:11, 21:13, 23:1, 30:6; cf Thompson 1993:34). Its usage in Habakkuk is emotive. What can be expected is divine intervention (Naudé 1969:91-100; Bratcher 1985:51)<sup>7</sup>. The rest of the

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<sup>5</sup> The demarcation of this pericope is often disputed. Some exegetes regard 2:1-4 and 2:5-20 as two distinct pericopes (Nowack 1903:283; Van Katwijk 1912:51; Deden 1953:263; Elliger 1956:41; Scharbert 1967:59; Fohrer 1974:42). Others regard 2:1-5 and 2:6-20 as two distinct pericopes (Sellin 1930:399; Brandenburg 1963:139; Deissler 1984:226), while some make the division at 2:5b (Humbert 1944:15; Brownlee 1971:258-259). Van der Woude (1978:31) regards 2:1-20 as one pericope. When all the morphological and syntactic considerations are taken into account, the last seems to be the best possibility (cf Prinsloo 1989:132).

<sup>6</sup> Haak (1992:11-20) has a slightly different demarcation, namely 1:1-4, 1:5-6, 1:7-11, 1:12, 1:13-2:1, 2:2-4, 2:5-20 and 3:1-19. He ignores natural divisions in the text on the one hand (cf his combination of 1:13 and 2:1) and syntactic and semantic units on the other hand (cf his separation of 1:5-6 and 1:7-11). Therefore his demarcation is imprecise.

<sup>7</sup> Habakkuk "sees" (רָאָה) the revelation. Many exegetes concluded from the use of this term that Habakkuk was an extatic visionary (Elliger 1956:25; Boadt 1982:172-173). The term, however, often occurs as a technical term for a revelation from



In 1:12-17 the lament by the prophet is renewed. It again commences with a temporal question (הלא אהה מקדמ יהוה) in 1:2; cf 1:2), followed by למה (1:13; cf 1:3). Yahweh is addressed in traditional terms, normally used to confess that He is the God of the covenant (ציר, יהוה, אלהי, קדשי, and the traditional belief that his people will not die<sup>11</sup> is expressed. This is an ironic confession of faith, because Yahweh's actions contradict every aspect of his being (Van der Wal 1988:482). He is supposed to be the Holy, unable even to look upon wickedness (עינים מראות רע) in 1:3, yet He looks upon the unholy acts of the wicked in silence (צדיק במנוח) in 1:3. The righteous are devoured by the wicked, who do as they please. The pericope ends with a bitter temporal question: Will the wicked forever be allowed to continue their destructiveness (1:17)? This section links up with the lament in 1:2-4 and with the description of the destructive nature of the wicked Chaldeans in 1:5-11. It serves as an intensification of the grief expressed in 1:2-4 and the astonishment in 1:5-11.

In 2:1-20 the prophet is answered by Yahweh. The bitter question in 1:17 begs for an answer, but again the answer is somewhat unexpected. In typical wisdom terminology, instructions concerning the preservation of the revelation are given (2:2-3, cf the discussion in the next paragraph). It becomes clear that the revelation has an eschatological character. It is meant for a definite time in the future, when God will intervene and bring an end to the suffering of his people (cf Preuss 1978:1-19). A definite way of living is required in the mean time. In verse 2 and 3 this way of living is metaphorically described as "running" and "waiting". Those who hear the revelation, must be steadfast in their pursuit of righteousness and wait faithfully and patiently on Yahweh's intervention (Janzen 1980:68-70). It is stressed that the revelation is a reliable witness to the end and will not disappoint those who "run" and

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<sup>11</sup> It is widely accepted that נמה (verse 12) is one of the so called *tiquone sopherim* and that the text should be emended to read *נמה* (Nowack 1903:279; Cannon 1925:72; Sellin 1930:392; Deden 1953:260; Elliger 1956:34; Horst 1964:174; Rudolph 1975:208-209; Van der Woude 1978:28; Smith 1984:103). According to this view, the use of the first person plural seems unlikely in the context. The abhorring idea that Yahweh could be described as dying, led to the change in the text. It is, however, not necessary to emend the text. Bratcher (1985:143) indicated that there are some major difficulties in the theory that the *tiquone sopherim* provide reliable alternatives for the Massoretic tradition. The first person plural could be seen as a "prayer for life" (Peckham 1986:618; cf Van Katwijk 1912:84; Ehrlich 1968:301, who translates: "du kannst nicht wollen dass wir gänzlich vernichtet werden"; Deissler 1984:224; Van der Wal 1988:482). In the context, נמה serves as an ironic statement. The God, who is Yahweh since times immemorial, who would not let his people die, is absent. The result is that his people are about to die!

“wait” (Van der Woude 1978:35). Through these verses the focus of attention is moved from the distress of the present to the intervention of Yahweh in the eschatological future.

The answer proper is given in 2:4 and expanded upon in 2:5. The previous pericope ended with a bitter question, where the distress of the prophet was described in the most acute terms. 2:4-5 picks up this theme. In the following paragraph more detailed attention will be paid to these verses. The oracle contains a contrast between two groups. On the one hand it is a condemnation of the wicked’s haughtiness<sup>12</sup>. The wicked’s way of life is unacceptable (לֹא יִשְׂרָה in 4b)<sup>13</sup>, such a way of life will not last (לֹא יִנּוּה in 5b)<sup>14</sup>. They became intoxicated by their power (בַּיַיִךְ, cf Janzen 1982:406) and will be deceived by it (בַּוָּגֵד). In contrast to the wicked, the righteous will live, but only if he remains faithful (יֶחֱיֶה בְּאִמּוּנָתוֹ יְהוּה in 4b)<sup>15</sup>. In the eschatological context of 2:2-3, life and death must be seen in the light of Yahweh’s eschatological battle against the enemies of his people. Only those who remain faithful to the end, will really live!

2:4-5 is not only the answer to the question of the prophet in 1:17, but represents the turning point in the book (Gunneweg 1986:400). From now on, the roles are reversed. This is exactly the theme of the five woe-oracles (2:6-20). They should be seen as an expansion of the answer of Yahweh. They are inseparably connected to the answer and are indeed still the words of Yahweh. But now, Yahweh indicates that the deeds of the wicked, described in 1:5-11 and 1:12-17, will be punished. The oppressed people will turn against the wicked. Whatever they have done to the nations, will now be done to them. In 2:20 the whole earth is called upon to be silent, because Yahweh is in his holy temple. In the woe-oracles it becomes clear that Yahweh is not passive and absent, but actively involved in the salvation of the righteous.

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<sup>12</sup> Both עִפְלָה and יְהַרְרָה refer to the haughtiness of the wicked described in 1:11 and 1:16-17.

<sup>13</sup> In wisdom literature יֶשֶׁר is often used to indicate the correct way of living (cf Ps 7:1; 11:2; Prov 2:7; 21:3; Job 4:7). When it is stated here that his being is not upright, it is a condemnation of his whole life, not only a moral reprimand (Szeles 1987:31).

<sup>14</sup> The exact meaning of יִנּוּה is controversial and the word is often emended (cf Nowack 1903:284; Sellin 1930:398-399). Most exegetes associate it with the noun נוּה “dwelling place”, which occurs often (cf 2 Sam 7:8; 15:15; Is 32:18; 34:13; Jer 10:25; 50:19; Ezek 25:5; Job 5:3). לֹא יִנּוּה is then understood as a reference to the wicked’s inability to survive (cf Deden 1953:263; Brownlee 1963:323; Emerton 1977:5; Van der Woude 1978:39).

<sup>15</sup> These words echo the emphasis Isaiah of Jerusalem laid on faithfulness (Is 7:9, cf 26:2-3; 28:16; 30:15) and refers to steadfastness in the face of danger and death (Szeles 1987:32-33).

This theme is developed in 3:1-19. It is presented in the form of a reaction of the prophet to the revelation described in 2:1-20. It has a new title (3:1). Habakkuk's words are now called *הַפְּלִיאָה*. *הַפְּלִיאָה* is usually associated with trust in Yahweh (Bratcher 1985:226-227). The use of the word typifies the contents of the pericope and indicates that the focus of the prophet has moved away from the distress, and refocusses on God.

Habakkuk 3:2 is an introductory prayer. As in the opening lament (1:2-4), the prophet addresses Yahweh, but now his perspective has changed. In 1:2-4 he accused Yahweh of being passive and absent, but now he has heard about Yahweh's mighty deeds (*יְהוָה שְׁמוֹעַתִּי שְׁמוֹעַךְ*) and he stands in awe (*פִּילֶךָ יְיָ אֱחָדִי יְהוָה*). What he has heard, is the account of Yahweh's deeds as recorded in 2:1-20. Now he reacts in the way suggested in 2:20. However, the tension in the prophet's situation has not yet been resolved. He has heard the account of Yahweh's deeds; it has been revealed to him, but not yet actualised (Krüger 1987:62). Therefore a prayer follows, namely that Yahweh will make the revelation of 2:1-20 a reality, that he will make it known and show mercy in a time of upheaval (*בְּרִגְוֹן*, cf Rudolph 1975:242; Bratcher 1985:239 and the use of the same word in Job 3:16, 26; 14:1; Is 14:3).

In verses 3-15 a theophany of Yahweh is described. In the context, the theophany is the prophet's recollection of Yahweh's great saving acts in the past. By remembering, the prophet actualises the promised salvation in his own life! Allusions to the Exodus and Sinai traditions occur<sup>16</sup>. The language is archaic<sup>17</sup>. The theophany is described by means of two parallel sections (cf Hiebert 1987:119-140). In verses 3-7 the coming of Yahweh from the South East is described in the third person. In verses 8-15 Yahweh's battle against the forces of chaos is described in the second person. The purpose of Yahweh's theophany is the destruction of the wicked (3:13). This recollection of Yahweh's saving acts in the past becomes a paradigm for his acts in the future, and gives the prophet strength to persevere in the present crisis.

This becomes clear in verses 16-19. As in verse 2, the prophet is the subject of the verbs. This section contains an unqualified confession of trust. Now the prophet realises that he must wait (*אֲנַחֵךְ* in 3:16) for Yahweh's intervention, reflecting the command in 2:2-3. There God's revelation was described as an eschatological intervention. Through his recollection of Yahweh's saving acts in the past, the prophet realised that he must faithfully wait upon Yahweh. But now he is able to do so with confidence. However adverse conditions might be (3:17), he will trust in

<sup>16</sup> Cf the reference to *חֲמִיּוֹת* and *פְּאַרְךָ* in 3:3 and the discussion in Hiebert (1986:84-88); Van der Woude (1978:67); Bratcher (1985:252).

<sup>17</sup> Cf the use of *אֱלֹהִים* in 3:3 and the discussion in Dykes (1976:66).

Yahweh (3:18), because it is Yahweh who gives him strength to carry on (3:19).

This summary of the contents illustrates the dialogic character of the book. Progression takes place through the dialogue and results in insight on the prophet's side. In 1:2-4 the prophet laments Yahweh's absence and inability to come to the aid of the righteous. In 1:5-11 it becomes clear that Yahweh is not absent, but works in strange and mysterious ways. This prompts the prophet to intensify his lament (1:12-17), where the distress reaches breaking point. The turning point comes about as a result of Yahweh's answer (2:1-20), where it becomes clear that he is indeed active, taking his people with him on the way to the eschatological end. What he requires is faithfulness from the righteous.

When the prophet again opens his mouth (3:1-19), he is a changed man. Now he understands that God, who has saved before, will do so again. This knowledge gives him the strength to face the problems of the present.

The book of Habakkuk describes the struggle of a righteous man who is coming to terms with God in a wicked and unjust world. His struggle is with God, not about him. Through this struggle, presented in the form of a dialogue, the prophet learns the meaning of faithfulness. Thus, the dialogic surface structure of the book becomes a vehicle for the message.

#### **4 READING HABAKKUK 2:1-5B AS A WISDOM TEXT**

It has already been stated that a turning point is reached in Habakkuk 2:1-20. Up to this point growing despair characterised the attitude of the prophet. The problem confronting the righteous culminates in the desperate question directed to Yahweh in 1:17: Will the wicked be allowed forever to annihilate other nations? This is a concise summary of the theme of the book: Why do the wicked enjoy a carefree life, while the righteous must suffer?

In 2:1-20 Yahweh answers the prophet - and the answer leads to the prophet gaining insight. He no longer focusses upon his trouble, but on Yahweh who is accompanying his people towards his destination. Significantly, exactly at this point, the influence of wisdom can be clearly seen.

Habakkuk 2:1 describes the prophet preparing himself for a revelation from Yahweh. The verse contains a very well known concept, namely that of a watchman on the wall (cf Pss 5:4; 130:5-6). The prophets are often compared to watchmen (cf Hos 9:8; Is 21:6-12; Jer 6:17; Ezek 3:17; 33:2-7). As watchman it was the task of a prophet to inform the people about Yahweh's plans. This verse forms the link between the question of the prophet in 1:17 and the answer of Yahweh in 2:2. Previously he has lodged a bitter complaint against Yahweh, but

now he waits upon a reaction. **הִרְכִּיז** “my protest” in 2:1 occurs twenty four times in the Old Testament, mostly in wisdom literature (cf Prov 1:23, 25, 30; 3:11; 5:12; 6:23; 10:17; 12:1; 13:18; 15:5, 10, 31, 32; 27:5; 29:1, 15; Job 13:6; 23:4; Pss 38:15; 39:12; 73:14). It denotes the rebuke of a father (2 Sam 7:14; Prov 3:12), a teacher (Ps 94:10), or a wise man (Prov 13:20; 15:12, 31; 25:12), who sees that his pupil is on the wrong path and urges him to change his attitude. In a forensic sphere it denotes the protest of the party who is wronged by the attitude of the other party (Ps 38:15; Job 13:6; 23:4; cf Sweeney 1991:70). In the present context, “protest” is a most appropriate translation. In 1:12 the unthinkable has happened: Yahweh uses the Chaldeans as his rebuke (**לְהַרְכִּיז**), as his word which ought to restore order, but in reality causes more chaos. The prophet, as member of the injured party, lodged a bitter complaint (1:12-17) and waits to see how Yahweh will react.

In 2:2 it becomes clear that the waiting of the prophet was not in vain. Yahweh answers, and the answer alleviates the distress of the prophet and discloses that the righteous indeed do have a future. 2:2 commences with a typical messenger formula (cf Hos 1:2; 3:1; Am 1:2, 3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6; 3:12; 5:4; Ob 1). Then two distinct sections follow: 2b-5b is concerned with the message from Yahweh, while 5c-20 is commentary upon that message in the form of five woe-oracles.

Something unexpected happens in 2:2-3. What can be expected after the messenger formula is an oracle. Instead, these verses contain instructions about the preservation and publication of the message about to be revealed. It is reminiscent of Isaiah 8:1 and 30:8. There the prophet must write down the revelation of God, and witness that the word of God is trustworthy. The terminology used here in Habakkuk is typical of wisdom literature (Janzen 1980:54-62) and has a definitive eschatological implication expressed by the terms **מָוֶֿעַר** and **קָץ** (cf Ps 75:3; Ezek 21:25, 29, 34; 35:5). By utilising the double strands of prophecy and wisdom, the focus is shifted to the eschatological future, when God will intervene on behalf of his people. These verses provide the answer to the question: “how long?”- posed at the onset of the book. The answer to the question is: “Until the dawn of God’s appointed time!”

The purpose of the inscription is to teach the righteous the correct way of living. The reference to “running” (**לְמַעַן יְרוּץ קוֹרְא בָּו**)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The exact meaning of this phrase is dubious. The prophet is instructed to write the revelation down. Often the phrase is interpreted with the emphasis on the reading - those who read it must be able to do it quickly (cf Van der Woude 1978:34; Deden 1953:262; Horst 1964:176). Syntactically, the emphasis should lie on the running - those who read it, must run. In this context, **יְרוּץ** refers to the correct way of life before Yahweh (Holt 1964:298-302; Janzen 1980:68-70, cf Is 40:31; Jer 8:6, 23:21; Pss 19:6, 119:32, 147:15).

should be interpreted metaphorically. It refers to the correct way of living in the eyes of God (cf Is 40:31; Jr 8:6; 23:21; Pss 19:6; 119:32; 147:15). The phrase is parallel to Isaiah 40:1-31. There an eschatological vision occurs, describing the coming of Yahweh to deliver his people from exile. Verse 31 contains the assurance that those who wait upon Yahweh will receive the ability to run. In the same vein, Habakkuk 2:2 is an admonition to those who hear the message to “run”, to walk in the ways of the Lord without becoming discouraged.

The possibility to become discouraged is very real, because there will be a lapse of time between the revelation of the message and the actual outcome. But in the mean time, Yahweh’s message is a reliable witness. עָרַד in 2:3 is normally taken to be an adverb and translated by “still, yet” (cf Robertson 1990:170). The implication is that the message is not actually meant for the present, but that the prophet must wait upon its fulfillment in the future. However, Janzen (1980:54-62) has argued convincingly that the background of this verse must be sought in the wisdom literature. In Proverbs 6:19; 12:17; 14:5, 25; 19:5, 9 the nouns עַרְוֶה and פִּיֹּאֵר occur in parallelism referring to a witness in court. The nouns are qualified by adjectives derived from either כֹּזֵב “to lie” or אֱמֵן “to speak the truth”. It can not be coincidence that all four of these words occur in 2:2-4. Thus, it seems best to regard עָרַד in this context as an infinitive or participle of עָרַד “to repeat hiph. to witness” and translate it as a noun. The prophet is describing the character of the vision as an eschatological message. It is a witness to the end. מוֹעֵד “end” refers to a specific point in the future, which has been determined by Yahweh (cf Ps 75:3; Dn 10:14; 11:27, 35).

פָּחַח in 2:3 is normally taken to be a qal imperfect 3 masculine singular of פָּחַח I “to breath hiph. to breath against” or פָּחַח II “to wheeze against, to launch forth, to produce” (cf Robertson 1990:171). The interpretation then is that the vision “breathes” (i.e. yearns or hurries) to the end. However, the appearance of פִּיֹּאֵר in conjunction with עַרְוֶה in several passages in Proverbs (cf the discussion above) points in another direction. פָּחַח should rather be taken as a participle of פָּחַח “to pronounce, to witness” (cf Janzen 1980:54-62; Loewenstamm 1980:137-145). The vision speaks about or is a witness to the end (cf Van der Woude 1978:173). קֵץ “consummation” always refers to a termination point (cf Gen 4:3; 8:6; 41:1; Ex 12:41). Here it should be interpreted as an eschatological term. It refers to the end, the time when God will intervene in history on behalf of his people to end violence and destruction (cf Ezek 21:25, 29, 34; 35:5).

It is emphasised in the expression וְלֹא יִכְזָב that the message about to be received is reliable. Contrary to the opinion of the prophet expressed in the lament (1:2-4 and 1:12-17), Yahweh is not untrustworthy. He is still accompanying his people on their journey

towards his destination. But it is and remains his destination. Therefore, the righteous can not force him to change his plans. They must be prepared to run (2:2) towards God's destination and to wait (חָכַח in 2:3) upon his intervention. This verb does not signify passive waiting, but a specific conduct toward the future. Especially noteworthy is the appearance of the same verb in Isaiah 8:1-4 and 30:8-11. Isaiah is instructed to write his message down as a reliable witness. In Isaiah 8:16-18 the message is bound up and sealed amongst Isaiah's disciples. Now Isaiah will wait upon Yahweh (חָכַחְיָהוּ), who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, he will hope in him (וַיִּקְרַיֵּהוּ). In Isaiah 30:18 it is Yahweh who waits (חָכַחְהוּ) to be gracious to Israel. All those who wait for him (חָכַחְהוּ) are blessed. The parallels with Habakkuk 2:2-3 can not be ignored (Janzen 1980:72-78). Waiting does not imply lack of action. On the contrary, it points towards trust in Yahweh who anxiously waits to show mercy upon his people.

The message proper follows in 2:4-5b. Much controversy surrounds the interpretation of these verses and major textcritical emendations are normally proposed<sup>19</sup>. However, the Masoretic text is in order and the meaning is clear (Sweeney 1991:74-77). The oracle displays the characteristics of a wisdom maxim (cf Jöcken 1977b:327) where the fate of two opposing groups is spelled out (cf Gen 15:6; Lev 25:18; 26:3; Is 7:9; Jer 18:4; Ezek 18:9; Pss 7:1; 11:2; Prov 2:7; 21:3; Job 4:7). This passage contains the heart of the message revealed to the prophet. It is impossible to dislodge 5ab from 4abc, because the particle כִּי has a connective function. At 5c a break occurs - the subject matter changes from haughtiness to a metaphorical description of the insatiable appetite of the wicked.

Careful analysis of the message discloses a concentric structure on syntactic and semantic level. It can be schematised in the following manner:

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<sup>19</sup> Much has been written about these verses, especially since quite a number of textcritical problems exist. It is impossible to give a full description of all the proposals (cf Prinsloo 1989:133-142). Suffice to say that these verses are emended on a large scale. When examined critically, not one of the numerous proposals are satisfactory. This can lead to no other solution but that much more attention should be paid to the Masoretic text.

	הנה עפלה	4a	A	Behold - arrogant,
	נפשו בו	4b	B	not acceptable is his innermost being.
	וצדיק באמונתו יהיה	4c	C	But the righteous - because of his faithfulness he will live.
	ואף כי־היין בוגד גבר יהיר	5ab	A1	Beware - wine deceives an arrogant man,
	ולא ינדה	5b	B1	he will not succeed.

The A and A1 elements are both positive statements. Both contain a condemnation of the wicked, using synonyms to describe him as an arrogant man. The B and B1 elements are both negative statements. Both describe the wicked as someone who will not prevail, whose life will not be successful. In the C element in the centre a sharp contrast with the surrounding statements occurs. The *צדיק* receives the promise of life. The double condemnation of the wicked stands in sharp contrast to the life promised to the righteous. By occupying the centre of this concentric construction, 4c becomes the focal point, not only of this message, but of the book Habakkuk as such.

This oracle also points towards the eschatological future. In the present crisis the righteous can take heart in the fact that the wicked, now rampant, is doomed. He is arrogant, he does not acknowledge the supremacy of God but does his utmost to ensure his own future (cf 1:11; 1:16). But all is in vain, because Yahweh has already pronounced judgement. The righteous, on the other hand, will live. However, a condition is set - he will live only if he remains faithful. Faithfulness is the key to the future. The same word occurs in key passages in Isaiah of Jerusalem. It is an important theme in his theology that only the faithful have any hope for the future (cf Is 7:9; 26:2-3; 28:16; 30:15). This is the very heart of Habakkuk's message to troubled people in troubled times.

The reference to wine in 5a has puzzled exegetes for a very long time and the text is almost always emended. But no emendation is necessary. "Wine" is sometimes used in the Old Testament as metaphor for the lust for power. Especially instructive is the occurrence of the same image in connection with the Babylonians in Jeremiah 51:7-8. There Babylon is the golden goblet in the hand of Yahweh, all the peoples have to drink his wine, but the next moment Babylon lies shattered, beyond repair. Here, Habakkuk's condemnation of the wicked is virtually the same. The wicked could be described in terms of an arrogant man, while it is true that he will not endure.

To summarise: Habakkuk 2:4-5b contains the heart of the message revealed to the prophet; indeed, the heart of the book Habakkuk. The most outstanding characteristic of this message is the contrast between

the destiny of the righteous and the wicked. The wicked is designated as an arrogant man, and arrogance will not endure. The righteous, on the other hand, will live, but only if he remains faithful to Yahweh. In the light of the eschatological context (cf. 2:2-3), this message clearly is meant as a comfort to those who suffer because they are exploited by wicked people. God is accompanying the world towards his destination; he is leading all men towards their destiny. The destiny of the wicked is destruction; the destiny of the righteous life.

The five woe-oracles follow in 2:5c-20. Woe-oracles often occur in the Old Testament (cf. Is 1:4, 24; 3:9, 11; 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22: 6:5; 10:5; 17:12; 18:1; 28:1; 29:1, 15; 30:1; 31:1). A series of woe-oracles only occur in Isaiah (5:8-23) and Habakkuk (2:5c-20). The origin of woe-oracles remains a point of contention amongst exegetes. Westermann (1967:194-198) looks for a cultic setting. Clifford (1966: 459-60) and Otto (1977:73-107) propose funeral rites as setting. Others (Gerstenberger 1962:261; Whedbee 1971:80-110) seek the setting in wisdom circles. Woe-oracles are concerned with social injustices and are therefore also influenced by juridic terminology. A precise determination of the setting is not possible. It is sufficient to conclude that the woe-oracles in Habakkuk have been influenced by wisdom and forensic terminology. Their function in the context of the book is to condemn the wicked conqueror. In the woe-oracles the emphasis falls upon the reversal of roles. What was done by the wicked, will also be done to them.

## **5 THEODICY AND THE REVERSAL OF FORTUNES**

In the previous section, it has been suggested that the turning point of the book (2:2-5b) is profoundly influenced by wisdom terminology. On the level of the overall structure and theological thrust of the book, it is equally true that the book is influenced by typically wisdom phenomena. This can especially be seen in the following features:

The theme of the book is theodicy (Thompson 1993:53). The book is concerned with the question why Yahweh, if he really is righteous, allows the wicked to gain the upper hand over the righteous. The antithesis between the fate of the righteous and the wicked, so typical of wisdom literature (Gunnweg 1986:408; Thompson 1993:45), forms the focal point of the book. Parallels for Habakkuk can be found in literature such as Job and Psalm 73, where the problem of the suffering innocent is discussed (Gunnweg 1986:408; Keller 1973:166). The most striking feature is the reversal in the roles of Yahweh, the righteous and the wicked - a popular theme in texts with a wisdom perspective (Loader 1986:117-118). In 1:2-4 Yahweh is passive. He does not hear and does not help. Apathetically Yahweh looks upon the distress of his people, his voice has become silent. The result is total chaos in society. The wicked

have gained the upper hand. The righteous have no hope. This state of affairs is intensified in 1:5-11. Now it becomes clear that Yahweh is not passive, but actually on the side of the wicked. The use of פִּשְׁדִּים intensifies the grotesque might of the wicked. Yahweh is helping those who annihilated his people! Thus the פִּשְׁדִּים become representatives of all wicked forces in the world. The problem confronting the prophet is stated in acute terms. It is even more so in 1:12-17. Yahweh is supposed to be the God of the covenant, his people supposed to be living. Actually God is passive, his people dying! The wicked destroy the righteous, they do exactly as they please and seemingly will be able to do so ad infinitum. The distress of the prophet has reached its climax in the question of 1:17.

2:1-20 represents a turning point. God answers and stresses the need for a correct way of living on the side of the righteous, because the answer has an eschatological character. It will not have immediate effect. In 2:4a-5b the actual turning point is reached. The wicked, arrogant and haughty, will not survive. The righteous, on the other hand, will live if they remain faithful. At this point the roles are reversed. Yahweh reveals himself as the mighty God who accompanies his people to the end. The wicked, apparently indestructible in 1:2-17, will perish. And the beleaguered righteous, apparently about to be destroyed in 1:2-17, will live if they remain faithful. This reversal of roles is emphasised in the woe-oracles. The nations will turn against the wicked invader, and Yahweh will destroy him.

The theme of God's victory over the wicked reaches its climax in 3:1-19. In the theophany (3:3-15) the prophet recalls God's saving acts in the past. He, who has destroyed the enemies of his people in the past, will do so again. The pericope ends with an unconditional confession of faith. Even under the most adverse conditions, the prophet will be joyful and glad, because the Lord is his Saviour. The reversal of roles is now complete. God has shown himself as Saviour, therefore the righteous will live, while the wicked will perish.

When all the evidence is taken into account, the semantic structure of the book can be described as antithetically-concentric (Prinsloo 1999:529). Chapter 1 represents one pole, namely despair. Chapter 3 represents the opposite pole, namely trust. In 1:2-17 the despair of a righteous man who suffers because the wicked has gained the upper hand, is described. 3:1-19 describes the trust of a man whose perspective has shifted away from the wickedness towards God. The change in perspective is brought about by 2:1-20. There it becomes clear that God is on the way to the appointed end - with the world and with his people. Those who are arrogant will perish, those who remain faithful, will live. From despair to trust through faithfulness. Thus the theme of the book could be summarised. And exactly this theme is the subject of at least

two other representatives of the so called skeptical wisdom, namely Job and Psalm 73 and of two other corpusses of literature profoundly influenced by wisdom, namely the book of Esther and the story of Joseph.

## **6 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF HABAKKUK**

Reading Habakkuk from a wisdom perspective has profound implications for the interpretation of the book. It firstly has implications for the dating of the book. The dating of the book remains a mystery, in spite of numerous publications. Proposals vary from the time of the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib (701 BC) to Maccabean times (200 BC)<sup>20</sup>. The majority of exegetes are of the opinion that the book should be placed during the reign of Jehoiakim (605 BC). However, not one of the proposals gives an entirely satisfactory answer to the many questions raised by the book. If the book were read from a wisdom perspective, intertextual material makes it clear that the book could be read against the background of the late pre-exilic or early exilic context (Prinsloo 1989:264). According to McKane (1970:19) skeptical wisdom developed late in the pre-exilic period. The crisis of the the exile accelerated the rise of skeptical wisdom. Habakkuk belongs to this broad movement (cf. Loader 1986:121).

Reading Habakkuk as a wisdom document has implications for one of the most perplexing questions presented by the book, namely the identity of the righteous and the wicked. Especially the identity of the wicked has been the subject of a long and heated debate in the research history of the book<sup>21</sup>. Here proposals range from the Assyrians to Antiochus Epiphanes<sup>22</sup>. However, in wisdom literature the righteous and the wicked are representatives of a way of life (Ps 1), a code of conduct and an attitude towards Yahweh. It is exactly in the skeptical wisdom where the relationship between Yahweh and these two groups becomes problematic. Seemingly, Yahweh ignores the plight of the righteous and enhances the prosperity of the wicked (Ps 73). It gives rise to the theodicee problem, one of the central themes in skeptical wisdom. As has been illustrated above, this is also the theme of Habakkuk. By reading Habakkuk from a wisdom perspective, the central theme of the book receives attention, and not a theoretically constructed historical Sitz im Leben. The reference to the Chaldeans in 1:6 determines the

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<sup>20</sup> Cf Prinsloo (1989:15-29) for an overview of the various proposals.

<sup>21</sup> Jöcken's discussion of the Forschungsgeschichte of the book (1977a) clearly illustrates that the identity of the wicked lies at the heart of all the interpretational problems presented by the book.

<sup>22</sup> Cf Prinsloo (1989:15-28) for an overview of the proposals.

broad historical framework, namely the crisis caused by the exile. But the central problem touched upon by the book is not concerned with the Chaldeans *per se*, but with the power of the wicked and Yahweh's unwillingness or even inability to curb their power. The Chaldeans are simply the example *par excellence* of the wicked's unbridled power.

## 7 CONCLUSION

The little book of Habakkuk certainly contains many unique features within the corpus of the prophetic books. One of the unique features is the profound influence of wisdom motifs and themes upon the book. It has been argued that these features make it possible to consistently read the book from a wisdom perspective. Such a reading provides an explanation for the uniqueness of the book. Habakkuk has its origin as a message for the exilic community who lost all faith. The cataclysmic events caused by the rising of the Chaldeans is not Yahweh's final word to his people. The faithful will have a future. What Yahweh has done in the past, he can and will do again. Therefore, there is hope for the righteous.

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