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Habakkuk: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

Habakkuk, the eighth of the Minor Prophets, or the Book of the Twelve, consists of two chapters of prophecy in the form of a dialogue, followed by a public prayer or psalm of the prophet. Some have speculated that these two parts were independent works, but there are enough relationships between them to cast doubt upon this idea. There is no explicit historical context given for the book, and as in the case of several other prophetic books, we are largely dependent upon discerning relevant clues from the relative applicability of the prophecy to different times.

As in the case of other prophecies, we should learn some lessons from the difficulty of dating. The difficulty of dating such books suggests that their presence in the canon is not absolutely contingent upon their situatedness within their historical context. Rather,

such prophecies can speak beyond their times and beyond their initial reference to deal with larger issues of the Lord's justice in history.

A wide range of suggested dates have been given for the book. The principal and strongest historical detail that might help us to date the book seems to be the reference to the rising up of the Chaldeans in chapter 1 verse 6. This would point to the period of the decline of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the rise of Babylon as the most likely focus of the prophecy. However, the prophecy does not reference things such as the destruction of the temple and the removal of the king.

While they definitely don't settle the question, descriptions of the oppression that the righteous are currently experiencing at the hands of the wicked, in places like chapter 1 verse 4, give strength to the case that the power of the Babylonians is already being experienced. If this were the case, then it is most likely that Habakkuk should be dated around the final decade of the 7th century BC, in the period after the death of Josiah and prior to the deportation of 597 BC. This would make Habakkuk a contemporary of Jeremiah and also ministering around the time of Daniel's deportation to Babylon during the reign of Jehoiachin, a politically charged time when Judah became a vassal kingdom of Babylon.

We don't really know much about the identity of Habakkuk beyond this. He is mentioned in the apocryphal story of Bel and the Dragon, which in the Septuagint is said to come from the prophecy of Habakkuk, who is said to be the son of Joshua and from the tribe of Levi. Within that story, Habakkuk provides food to Daniel while he is in the lion's den.

Thomas Renz notes that his name is not attested outside of this book and that it is probably an Akkadian loanword, a term used for a garden plant. The superscription in verse 1 is one of two superscriptions in the book, another is found over the prayer of chapter 3, raising the possibility that the superscription here is for the two chapters of the prophecy in particular, not for the whole book. The prophecy is here described as an oracle that Habakkuk saw, perhaps highlighting the presence of visual elements.

The prophecy itself opens with a complaint of the prophet, in a form familiar from the Psalms and elsewhere, for instance Psalm 13 verses 1-2. The complaint of the prophet is fundamentally one of theodicy. He is impatient with the violence, wickedness and injustice that he sees and with the Lord's failure to act decisively against it.

This is a familiar theme from places like Psalm 37 and 73 or Job 21. Habakkuk has been calling out to the Lord to intervene, yet the heavens seem silent in response. The failure of the Lord to act against wickedness and injustice causes a crisis of effectiveness for the law.

The rule of law depends heavily upon the effectiveness and the speedy enforcement of the law. Where laws cannot be or are not enforced, wrongdoers are emboldened and the

righteous dispirited, as Ecclesiastes chapter 8 verse 11 describes. Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.

Those who reject or ignore the law act unjustly, with seeming impunity and the law consequently comes to be treated by many as a dead letter. Jeremiah prophesying around the same period makes similar complaints. For instance, in Jeremiah chapter 12 verses 1 to 3. Righteous I do, O Lord, when I complain to you.

Yet I would plead my case before you. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive? You plant them and they take root, they grow and produce fruit. You are near in their mouth and far from their heart.

But you, O Lord, know me. You see me and test my heart toward me. Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter and set them apart for the day of slaughter.

On the other hand, the paralysis of the law that Habakkuk speaks of may be something that he is more directly attributing to the outnumbering of the righteous and the overwhelming of the legal system with corruption and contention, preventing justice from being done and leading to many miscarriages of it. While verses 2 to 3 were the words of Habakkuk himself, verses 5 to 11 are a divine word. Commentators most typically regard this as part of a dialogue between the Lord and the prophet within which the entire nation of Judah is also addressed, as the opening imperatives are masculine plural.

Renz disputes the dialogic reading, partly on the basis of the plural form, but also because the verses in question don't really seem to answer the complaint of Habakkuk at all, rather they seem to provoke it. The Chaldeans aren't presented as the instrument of the Lord's justice. Indeed, in verse 7 it is their own justice that is the subject.

Renz argues that this section is best read as a citation of an earlier prophecy and that the rise of the Babylonians is in large measure what Habakkuk's earlier complaint is about. Their rise represents an injustice that the Lord seems to be passively tolerating, much to the concern of the prophet. This, Renz maintains, would also make more sense of verses 12 to 17 that follow this section, making the entire chapter a single prayer complaint.

There would be a number of ways to read this section along such lines. Perhaps Habakkuk is loosely summarising earlier prophetic messages. Perhaps he is citing an earlier message delivered through him or some other prophet.

Renz argues that material from Jeremiah, especially chapters 4 and 5, can be seen in the background here. He cites chapter 5 verses 15 to 17 in particular. Behold, I am bringing against you a nation from afar, O house of Israel, declares the Lord.

It is an enduring nation, it is an ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say. Their quiver is like an open tomb, they are all mighty warriors. They shall eat up your harvest and your food, they shall eat up your sons and your daughters, they shall eat up your flocks and your herds, they shall eat up your vines and your fig trees, your fortified cities in which you trust, they shall beat down with the sword.

In the oracle that Habakkuk recounts, the Lord calls for the heroes to attend to the nations and to witness the powerful work that he will accomplish in their days, raising up the Chaldeans. While the Neo-Assyrian Empire had dominated the region for many years, wiping out Israel and reducing Judah to its vassal, under Nabba-pelasa the Babylonians started a revolt against the Assyrians in 625 or 626 BC, through which they successfully secured their rule over most of Babylonia by 620 BC. After this period the Babylonians continued to fight against the Assyrians, who were suffering also from the internal problems of a civil war.

Particularly with the Medes, in the decade or so that followed, they decisively defeated the Assyrians. The Medes defeated Assyria in 614 BC and the combined forces of the Medes and Babylonians defeated Nineveh in 612 BC and Haran in 609 BC. In 605 BC the remnant of the Assyrian forces and their Egyptian allies were dealt a final crushing blow at Carchemish.

It is likely that the 70 years of Babylonian dominance that the prophet Jeremiah spoke of should be dated from this time. In this same year Judah became a vassal of Babylon and some members of the royal family and elite were deported in the fourth year of King Jehoiachin. The oracle declares that the Babylonians will take possession of vast territories across the known world with the dreadful might and absolute authority.

The justice and majesty of Babylon would prevail over all others. Their will and their glory would hold complete and unrivaled sway. They would come with the rapidity and cruel ferocity of the most deadly predator, hungry for their prey.

No force could withstand nor obstacle arrest their onslaught. Kings and rulers and their armies and great fortresses would fall before them helpless. The Babylonians are, however, wicked, marked by the considerable hubris that we see in the book of Daniel for instance, and having great pride in their own strength.

They are guilty, idolaters of their own might, which they trust in over God himself. The rise of such a cruel and guilty nation presents clear problems for Habakkuk. He appeals to the Lord's divine identity.

The guilty Babylonians are vaunting themselves as the greatest power, idolizing their might, usurping rights and titles that belong to God alone as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. They are asserting their justice as the rule over all, against the justice of the

Lord. The people who bear the name of the Lord are in danger of being overwhelmed and extinguished by their power, which would be a further violation of the Lord's right.

The Lord surely would not abandon his people to death as a nation. He must have established the Babylonians for his own purposes of justice. Perhaps he has raised them up simply in order to bring them down and humble them.

With his confidence in the holiness of the Lord, Habakkuk is bewildered by the Lord's failure to act against such a ruthless and guilty people, especially when it was swallowing up people who were more righteous. Even in a time when faithfulness was weak in Judah, there was still righteous persons in the land. They were threatened like everyone else by this proud and wicked nation.

Habakkuk compares human beings to the fish of the sea or the team in crawling things. They are greatly multiplied in their numbers and their great masses, but they lack the ability to defend themselves against the skill of the fisherman, who with his hooks, nets and dragnets is able to catch increasing quantities of them. This catching of fish might make us think of the various deportations from Jerusalem for instance.

In the first a few key fishers are hooked. Then the nets and the dragnets come and remove great quantities of the people. The fisherman, confident in his might, gives glory not to the Lord but to his own net and dragnet, praising them for his success.

In the case of the Babylonians this would be praising their own military might and their war machine. Is the Lord going to permit this proud, idolatrous and wicked nation to continue to deny him his glory and to act with impunity against other nations, most especially his own people, without being stopped? A question to consider. What other scriptural examples do we have of figures struggling to understand the Lord's justice in his governing of the nations? The book of Habakkuk has two key sections.

The first two chapters contain a dialogue between the prophet and the Lord and the final chapter a prayer or psalm of the prophet. Habakkuk was distressed by the rise of the Babylonians and the way in which it seemed as though the Lord was passively permitting the guilty to triumph over the righteous. In chapter 1 he made a complaint to the Lord, articulating his dismay at the Lord's apparent failure to act.

Such questions of theodicy continue to be at play in this second chapter where the Lord speaks to Habakkuk's concerns. In chapter 1 the prophet addressed the Lord directly but in verse 1 describes his situation, positioning himself as a watchman at his watchpost, waiting for the Lord's response to his complaint. The prophet is described as a watchman in places like Ezekiel chapter 3 verses 17 to 21 and 33 verses 1 to 9. He scours the horizon looking for approaching dangers and warns the people concerning them.

The prophet depended upon the word that he was given and had to wait to receive

direction from the Lord. Some have suggested a possible dependence of these opening verses upon Isaiah chapter 21 verses 6 to 8. For thus the Lord said to me, Go set a watchman, let him announce what he sees. When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs, riders on donkeys, riders on camels, let him listen diligently, very diligently.

Then he who saw cried out, Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord, continually by day, and at my post I am stationed whole nights. The case for a direct literary dependence is not especially strong although there are certainly parallels between the two passages to be observed. When the word of the Lord comes in verse 2 Habakkuk is instructed to document and to disseminate the vision as an official message, making it plainly legible on tablets so that the messenger could run to proclaim it, to read it not to himself but as a public pronouncement as Francis Anderson makes clear.

We also need to consider what the vision that is to be written is. Is it merely verse 4, verses 4 and 5, the rest of chapter 2, chapter 3 or even chapter 1 verses 5 to 11? From our reading of chapter 1 it seems unlikely that chapter 1 verses 5 to 11 would be the vision in question. The prayer of Habakkuk in chapter 3 while containing visionary elements seems primarily to be Habakkuk's response to the vision rather than the vision itself.

It seems most likely that the vision concerns the rest of the chapter. As Thomas Rennes notes, not that much need rest upon precisely what parts are directly included. He observes that verses 4 and 5 seem to constitute the core message with the rest being exposition and application.

If this is the case then verses 6 to 20 would be involved by implication even if they weren't the revelation more strictly considered. While verse 3 is tricky to understand and commentators differ in their renderings and interpretations of it, read in context it is not that difficult to discern its primary sense. It gives the reason for the immediate proclamation of verse 2. The Lord declares that there is an appointed time for the vision, following this by five terse statements concerning it.

As Marvin Sweeney notes, in addition to referring to a festal occasion, an appointed time could refer to the time that an important event would take place. And O. Palmer Robertson observes that by the time of Daniel the terminology had clearly assumed eschatological connotations. The meaning of the verb in the first of the five statements has been disputed.

While traditionally commonly taken as breathe or pant, providing the sense of hastening, commentators increasingly now hold that the verb means to witness, yielding something like, he witnesses to the end and he will not deceive. What or who exactly is it that witnesses to the end? Again, commentators hold various positions on this question. Many, such as Robertson and Renz, take it to be referring to the vision itself.

However, Anderson makes the case that the pronoun should be understood to refer to the Lord. He is the one whose arrival is expected, not merely the appointed time of the vision. The vision or the coming of the Lord might seem at times to delay, but the Lord or the vision won't be late and the coming of them is sure.

As Anderson remarks, the book of Hebrews uses this verse in a messianic manner, developing its meaning in a way that goes beyond while still being faithful to its original sense. In Hebrews chapter 10 verses 36 to 39 we read, But you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay.

But my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. The core of the vision is given to us in verse 4 and likely also in verse 5. Verse 4 presents us with the contrast between two kinds of persons, between the righteous person and the one who is not.

Traditionally the characterisation of the wicked figure here has been seen to focus upon his soul, understanding the Hebrew term *nephesh* in a less physical sense. This is a very common sense that the term has in scripture. However, given the use of the same term in the following verse in a more physical sense in reference to the wicked person's throat, commentators increasingly argue that it should be taken in the same sense here.

A person's throat can be a metonym for various things associated with the sight of the throat, for breath, and hence life or even soul, for swallowing, and hence appetite and even desire, for utterance, and hence speech. As the context has both false and proud speech in verse 3, for instance, and gluttony in verse 5, or the swallowing of the righteous in chapter 1 verse 13, the throat here could be understood in somewhat different ways. Perhaps it refers to the boastful and perverse speech of the proud, or to the immoderate appetite of the devouring oppressor.

Whatever understanding of the throat of the wicked we adopt, it should be coloured by the contrast that verse 4 draws between the righteous, who lives by his faith or faithfulness, and the wicked. Perhaps the contrast is between the restraint and delayed gratification of the righteous, as Rennes suggests, as the righteous patiently wait for the fulfilment of the vision. Alternatively, the contrast might be between the boastful speech of the Much about the meaning of this text is debated, including the reference of the pronoun that is connected to the faith or faithfulness.

Is it the reliability of the vision, the faithfulness of God, or the faith of the righteous person? Anderson, for instance, argues that the point is that the righteous will live by the faithfulness of God. Rennes helpfully notes that less is at stake in these debates than we might initially think, as these different senses are mutually implicatory. He writes, the righteous will live because they faithfully cling to the reliability of the revelation given by

a faithful God.

Further debates concern whether it is the righteous by faith or faithfulness who shall live, underlining the means of the standing of the righteous person before God, or whether it is the righteous shall live by faithfulness, emphasising the means by which the righteous endures. The latter seems to be correct, as the point of the verse is not the means by which someone becomes righteous before God. However, once again, theologically they cash out to much the same thing.

Perhaps a more significant question, at least at first glance, is that of whether we should read the text as referring to faith or to faithfulness. Given the prominence of this verse in New Testament treatments of the subject of justification, many Protestants in particular can be nervous about the possibility of compromising justification by faith alone by the introduction of works through faithfulness. Rennes rightly challenges the sharp division that some have been tempted to draw between faith and faithfulness here, as they are inseparably related.

The faithfulness should not be focused on good works, but upon a determined and continuing trust in the word of the Lord under pressure. It isn't merely the fundamental posture of trust, but the persistence in it that is in view. Of course, reading this verse on its own terms and in its own context, there is a strong argument to be made that the faithfulness in view should be understood in relationship to the Lord and his revelation, rather than to the human response.

What does it mean that the righteous will live by his faithfulness? Is the living primarily referring to the enjoyment of right standing before God, or to the manner of the righteous person's life, or, as Anderson suggests, to enduring through trial, surviving and receiving vindication? I find that the most convincing interpretation. Habakkuk 2.4 is referenced in Romans 1.16-17, Galatians 3.11 and Hebrews 10.38. Especially in Hebrews 10, which we looked at earlier, the sense of persistence in trust is very much in the foreground. Discussion of New Testament uses of this verse are complicated by their use of the Septuagint and other Greek translations, with very loose and free rendering of the original Hebrew text, which may be theologically illuminating explorations of the meaning of the text, without being at all accurate translations of the original text.

As Wren's remarks, Paul might have observed in Habakkuk a double antithesis to genuine faith, both the arrogance of the proud and the shrinking back of those who fail to persevere in faith. Habakkuk 2.4 was not only treated as a key verse by Christians – Anderson, for instance, observes the way that Rabbi Simle in the 3rd century AD saw this verse as expressing the quintessence of true religion, the one law that encapsulated all others, an understanding quite consistent with Paul's uses of this verse in Romans and Galatians. Perhaps it would be helpful to read the New Testament uses of Habakkuk 2.4 as akin to creative developments of a musical theme, which explore its potential.

Hebrews 10 explores the eschatological and even messianic dimensions of the verse. As in the case of Habakkuk, when the times look dark, the wicked seem to be flourishing, and the upright are hard-pressed, the righteous will be distinguished by an unwavering trust in the sure promise of a faithful God, by which they will receive final vindication. A more Christological variation on the theme might even be hinted at in Paul, with Jesus being the righteous one whose unwavering faithfulness leads to vindication, as both the example for and representative of his people.

Some scholars have questioned the text of verse 5. The reference to wine as a traitor might recall Proverbs 20.1, wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise. However many commentators have seen the reference to wine here as strange and jarring in the context. Some early renderings of this verse refer to wealth rather than to wine.

The context seems to be condemning presumption and greed. As Renz maintains though, wine here could be seen as a poetic development of this condemnation. Wine betrays those given to it.

Their greed and gluttony will be their literal downfall, as intoxicated by their drinking of the wine, they can no longer stand. The image of drinking and becoming drunk upon wine might evoke a number of elements of scriptural imagery, the cup of the Lord's judgement on the nations, the bloodthirstiness of a violent nation, and gluttony and proud excess more generally. Is wine being personified as an arrogant man, similar to Proverbs 20.1, an understanding that the ESV seems to follow? Is the claim rather that wine betrays the arrogant man, which would certainly be true.

More likely the reference to the arrogant man should not be directly connected to the wine. Rather the claim is that wine is treacherous and that the arrogant man will not endure, contrasting the arrogant man with the righteous, who shall live. The wicked are compared to Sheol and death, with a cavernous and insatiable hunger for destruction, a gluttonous appetite that gorges itself on the nations.

The contrast then seems to be between the greed and arrogance of the Babylonians and the righteous, whose determined trust in the Lord's faithfulness and the certainty of the fulfilment of his word declared in his vision, will lead to their vindication and life. The rest of chapter 2 consists of a series of five oracles of woe. These should be connected with the vision that proceeds, unpacking the judgement that will fall upon the proud and voracious Babylonians, showing how their condemnation will proceed from their character.

The five woe sayings will be the words of the nations that the Babylonians have devoured, declaring her downfall. The increase of Babylon had been achieved through violence and injustice and such gain could not long endure. Babylon's debt would soon have to be paid and its violence returned upon its own head.

The more excessive its appetite for conquest and blood, the more Babylon accumulated creditors, who would rise up against her, demanding repayment for her transgressions. They would plunder Babylon as she had once plundered them. The second saying concerns the treacherous prophet of evildoers.

They pursue evil in order to make their own dwelling secure, to be like the eagle, whose nest cannot be reached by predators. However, as they had built their house with wickedness and violence, the very stones and beams of their houses would bear witness against them, securing their condemnation. Babylon conceived of itself as a great building project, the construction of a vast empire and power structure.

We should naturally recall the story of Babel, which is important in the characterisation of Babylon in the book of Daniel, for instance. However, the means of Babylon's building was iniquity and bloodshed. All such endeavours are doomed to futility by the Lord.

All of the efforts of a cruel people like the Babylonians will ultimately be utterly in vain. In the end, it is the purpose of the Lord which alone will prevail. Verse 14 recalls Isaiah chapter 11 verse 9. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

Gain through evildoing is short-lived, and any edifice founded upon it is unsound. Yet those who commit themselves to the building of the kingdom of the Lord will find that their labour is not in vain. Babylon ministered the cup of wrath to the nations that it attacked, communicating a violent and degrading intoxication, by which these nations were stripped of their dignity and made to collapse in their drunkenness.

However, the cup of wrath would return to Babylon's own hand, and they would be forced to drink. We encounter the underlying imagery of this fourth woe in more overt form in Jeremiah chapter 25 verses 15 to 17. Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me, Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.

They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them. So I took the cup from the Lord's hand and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it. In that passage, after all of the other nations have drunk, the cup is placed in the hand of the king of Babylon, and he is made to drink.

Babylon would suffer the same violence that it had inflicted upon others, not merely upon peoples, but also the violence that it had brought upon land and beast. The final woe gets to the heart. In chapter 1 verse 11 the Babylonians were described as people who treated their own might as their God.

This was illustrated in verse 16 of that chapter, in the fisherman who sacrificed to his nets and offered to his dragnets. Babylon is given to and driven by the vanity and

emptiness of idolatry, trusting in non-living images of its own creation and its own might. Yet there is no future for idols and their worshippers.

They will all be put to shame. The objects of Babylon's worship would be powerless to help them in the day of the Lord's judgment. Their idolatry would ultimately spell their doom.

The only sure and firm reality worthy of trust is the Lord himself, the living God, unrivaled in the heavens. Before him all of the earth must submit. The prophet may have been troubled by the rise and the seeming triumphs of the wicked Babylonians, but he and his faithful compatriots must hold on to faith in a determined confidence in the steadfastness of the Lord and the certainty of his promise.

Vaunting tyrants would be laid low, but the word of the Lord would ultimately endure. A question to consider. Rereading Romans chapter 1 verses 16 to 17, Galatians chapter 3 verse 11 and Hebrews chapter 10 verses 36 to 39 in the light of Habakkuk and its original context and message, are there any dimensions of the message of these New Testament passages concerning Christ, the gospel and faithful believers that might come into clearer view? The book of Habakkuk has two main sections.

The first two chapters contain the prophet's complaint and the Lord's response, assuring him that the proud Babylonians will not endure, but that those who trust in his word will live. The third and final chapter is set apart from the others and introduced by another superscription. Chapter 3 is the prayer of the prophet.

It could be understood as the prophet's response to revelation that he has received. The book that began with his prayer of complaint ends with his prayer of petition and confession. The relationship between the prayer and the rest of the book is worth considering, especially as many commentators have argued that they are independent works, a position held not least because the Habakkuk commentary found among the Dead Sea Scrolls only comments on chapters 1 and 2 of the book.

As Francis Anderson argues, however, having such material as part of a prophetic book isn't strange. We have a similar prayer in Jonah chapter 2, for instance. As for its absence from the Habakkuk commentary, the commentary that we have was not an original and is quite possibly incomplete.

He goes on to observe the presence of shared vocabulary with the rest of Habakkuk, supporting its integrity as a book. Besides, whatever position we arrive at concerning the prehistory of the text, its unity within the canon should be our primary point of departure. Habakkuk chapter 3 is an incredibly difficult and much debated text in the Hebrew, with numerous suggested emendations and contrasting readings.

The passage is introduced to us as a prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. Various proposals

for the meaning of the term Shigionath have been advanced. Some, for instance, have noted its similarity with the superscription of Psalm 7. It is likely that it is the name of the tune, or perhaps some other form of musical direction, but we can do little more than speculate.

We should read the beginning of the prayer of Habakkuk against the backdrop of the rest of the book. Habakkuk was dismayed by the oracle that he quoted in chapter 1 verses 5 to 11. However, in chapter 2 the Lord responded to his complaint, revealing the doom of the proud Babylonians.

We should read this prayer as the prophet's response to the Lord's fuller disclosure of his purpose and justice in that situation, and as a petition for the Lord to fulfil his word. The posture of Habakkuk before the Lord has noticeably shifted to one of more pronounced humiliation before his majesty. He has heard of the great deeds of the Lord in the past, yet faced with current trials, feels keenly the need for the manifestation of the Lord's saving faithfulness once again, pleading with the Lord to show compassion to his people in the midst of his judgement upon them.

The prayer draws heavily upon theophanic imagery, describing the glorious advent of the Lord. Timan and Mount Peran are both places associated with the land of Edom, south of Judah. This is not the only description of the Lord coming from the land of Edom in scripture.

We find other ones in places like Deuteronomy chapter 33 verse 2 in Moses' blessing of Israel. Also in the Song of Deborah in Judges chapter 5 verses 4-5 Even Sinai before the Lord, the God of Israel. As Anderson observes, the imagery of the Lord's coming from the south is described like the rising of a glorious and dreadful sun, much as in the imagery of Deuteronomy chapter 33.

The Lord led a triumphal march as he went before his people in their first entry into the land, accompanied by splendour in the heavens and wonders and worship upon the earth. The movement began in the region of Midian, Kushan and the land of Midian being referenced in verse 7. Kushan is an unusual word. It seems likely that this is the Kush that is associated with Moses through his Midianite wife, Zipporah, not the Kush that is in the region of Sudan.

The Lord comes flanked by destroyers, by pestilence before him, plague behind him, and fire in his hand. Anderson proposes that given what we know about the four destroyers elsewhere in scripture, in places like the book of Ezekiel, we should probably imagine the sword on his other hand. This description of the Lord on his war path into the land should remind us of various places in the Psalms.

Psalm 68 verses 6-8 for instance. God settles the solitary in a home. He leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.

O God, when you went out before your people, when you marched through the wilderness, the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain. Before God, the one of Sinai, before God, the God of Israel. The theophanic imagery of the Lord's marching into battle and the earth quaking and melting before him is used elsewhere in the Psalms.

Psalm 97 verses 1-5. The Lord reigns. Let the earth rejoice.

Let the many coastlands be glad. Clouds and thick darkness are all around him. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around. His lightnings light up the world. The earth sees and trembles.

The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. The shaking of the world order as the Lord comes is more than just generic theophanic imagery. It recalls the way that as the Lord first led his people into the land, the world order really was turned upside down.

The Lord overturning the old order and re-founding it by his presence and providence. Again we see this in the Psalms. In Psalm 114 for instance.

When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became his sanctuary, Israel his dominion. The sea looked and fled. Jordan turned back.

The mountains skipped like rams. The hills like lambs. What ails you, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back.

O mountains, that you skip like rams. O hills, like lambs. Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water.

The cosmic imagery throughout this prayer accents the Lord's remaking of the world by his coming, presenting his past actions and leading his people in a way that reminds the reader that in such mighty deeds he was acting as the creator ruling in his creation, with no force or power sufficient to oppose or to resist him. Verses 8-15 have a symmetrical structure, flanked by the horses of the Lord in the opening and closing verses and having other concentric or paralleled elements within. It depicts the Lord as a chariot-riding warrior, employing among other things the imagery of cosmogonic myth, but using it to characterize the Lord's leading his people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

By playing with the imagery of ancient Near Eastern creation myths and the conflict with the chaotic sea, Baal and Yam or Majuk and Tiamat, the prayer presents the exodus as a new creation event. We might also appreciate an ironic contrast between the Lord, the great warrior advancing before his people with his war chariots, and Pharaoh and the

pursuing Egyptians with theirs. The Lord acts with anger and with might, not against the rivers and the sea, but against the pagan nations.

The rivers, the mountains, the raging waters, the deep, the sun and moon, all recall the foundations and the fundamental elements of the creation. The Lord is once again dividing and exerting his mastery over the elements to establish his heavens and his earth. In the exodus the Lord acted to deliver his anointed people, crushing the head of the house of the wicked.

Such head crushing should recall Genesis 3.15 and the promised crushing of the head of the serpent. In scripture enemies of the people of God are frequently characterized as serpent-like, not least Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Psalm 74.13-14. You divided the sea by your might.

You broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan. You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.

Psalm 89.9-10. You ruled the raging of the sea. When its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass.

You scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. The Egyptians had thought that they would be able to storm, scatter and devour the Israelites, pursuing them to the Red Sea. However, in dividing the waters and then crushing the heads of the Egyptians within them, the Lord both brought about a new sort of creation, bringing a new symbolic dry land up from the Gentile waters and also defeated the old enemy, the dragon, crushing his head as promised.

In verse 16 Habakkuk returns to the language of verse 2, referring to his hearing of the great deeds of the Lord. The theophanic splendour and dread of the Lord's coming overwhelms the prophet. However, his response is to wait as he was instructed to do back in chapter 2 verse 3. The Lord would avenge his people and he would act for their deliverance once more.

However, in the interim, Habakkuk will have to be patient and persevere in trusting the Lord. In verses 17-19 Habakkuk makes a climactic confession. The confession makes extensive use of parallelism with each statement followed by a counterbalancing synonymous statement.

When the land denies man its bounty, when farmers lose their flocks and herds and their crops are destroyed, life becomes progressively more challenging, necessities gradually being stripped away. In such desperate and dark times it might be easy to abandon faith in the Lord. However, now Habakkuk's response is to rejoice in the Lord.

The Lord has delivered his people before and he will deliver them again. Habakkuk might feel himself to be placed on uncertain terrain, his foot about to slip. Yet the Lord will,

even on such treacherous terrain, make his steps sure, making him like the deer, who can run even on the most dangerous of heights.

As Psalm 18 verse 33 puts it, he made my feet like the feet of a deer and set me secure on the heights. The prayer concludes with musical directions, suggesting that Habakkuk's prayer of petition and confession was one in which a larger worshipping community was invited to participate. A question to consider, what do you think are the main factors that led to the Prophet's change of perspective?