

CHAPTER X

HABAKKUK

THE STRUCTURE OF HABAKKUK

A. A Spiritual Dialogue—Chs. 1, 2.

1—1: 2ff. The Prophet's Complaint.

2—1: 5-11. God's Answer.

3—1: 12-17. The Prophet's Protest.

4—2: 1-5. God's Answer.

5—2: 6-20. Five Woes against the Chaldeans.

(a) ver. 6ff. Their Conquests.

(b) ver. 9ff. Their Rapacity.

(c) ver. 12ff. Their Oppression of the Conquered.

(d) ver. 15ff. Their Humiliation of the Conquered.

(e) ver. 18ff. Their idolatry.

B. A Psalm of God's Intervention—Ch. 3.

The Author.

THERE is no prophet of whom less can be affirmed with certainty than Habakkuk. Not only do we know absolutely nothing about him personally, but dates as far apart as 701 and 330 B.C. have been proposed for him. This late date is based on subjective textual emendation and need not be considered here,¹ but the remaining uncertainty springs directly from the book itself.

The prophet begins (1: 2ff) by complaining about the iniquity and oppression around him. Though it is not stated who the oppressor is, the most natural interpretation is that the prophet is complaining about internal troubles, about the social wrongdoing so often condemned by the prophets. God answers (1: 5-11) by saying that He is doing something which none could anticipate or believe (ver. 5) in that He is on the point of raising up the Chaldeans (ver. 6; this is the force of the Hebrew), who will be God's instruments of punishment.

The prophet then remonstrates with God (1: 12-17), asking how He in His purity can use impure instruments, especially when they are as bad as those they are to punish (cf. 1: 13 with 1: 3f). After some delay (2: 1) God answers him, that in due course it will be seen that "the righteous shall live by his

¹ See Young, p. 263; Rowley: *The Growth of the Old Testament*, p. 117.

faithfulness," but those that are puffed up will perish (2: 2-5). The fate of the Chaldeans is then depicted in five woes (2: 6-20).

In Habakkuk's description of the behaviour of the Chaldeans there is no suggestion that we have to do with prophetic vision; it bears the stamp of being based on what he had heard of them, or even of what he had seen personally. As a result 1: 12-17 and 2: 6-20 can hardly be earlier than 612 B.C., the year of Nineveh's fall, and they may be even later than 605 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar defeated Pharaoh Necho at Carchemish. In contrast 1: 5-11 can be given its obvious meaning only if it is dated at the latest shortly after 626 B.C., when Babylon recovered its independence under Nabopolassar the Chaldean.

If we leave to one side suggestions that have met with little approval, we find that scholars are divided between four different solutions of the difficulty:¹

(1) 1: 5-11 are not really a prediction, but "the prophet throws himself dramatically into the past."²

(2) 1: 5-11 should be placed before 1: 2; they are the oldest part of the book and are possibly quoted by Habakkuk from an earlier prophet. Then 1: 2ff and 1: 12-17 form a continuous passage of complaint against the Chaldeans, there being no mention of unrighteous Israelites.

(3) 1: 5-11 should be placed after 2: 4. Then 1: 2ff represents a complaint against the oppression of Judah by the Assyrians, or perhaps the Egyptians; the prophet appeals to Jehovah (1: 12-17); Jehovah promises deliverance (2: 1-4) through the Chaldeans (1: 5-11), then follow five woes against the oppressor, whether Assyrians or Egyptians. (It is on the basis of this view that a date as early as 701 B.C. had been suggested for the prophecy.)

(4) The simplest explanation, though not entirely free of difficulty, is to refuse to see a normal prophecy in Habakkuk. It is a record not of Habakkuk's messages to the people but of his problems and God's answers. We are not suggesting that he did not prophesy, but that here we have an account of the inner conflict behind his public utterances. If it is so, we may assume the passage of a considerable period of time between 1: 5-11 and 1: 12-17. In this case the book may well extend over a period from at least 626 to 605 B.C. This view is the basis of the following notes.

Habakkuk's Message.

Habakkuk's contribution to our knowledge of God is found mainly in two passages.

¹ See HDB, article Habakkuk; ISBE, article Habakkuk.

² Lanchester: Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah (C.B.) *ad loc.*

(1) Isaiah could explain the triumph of the Assyrian by his being the instrument of God's punishing (Isa. 10: 5f) who should be punished himself, when his work was done (Isa 10: 12). But Habakkuk (1: 13) cannot understand how a pure God can use impure instruments. It is to be noted that he receives no answer to his question. Faith can say as in Ps. 76: 10:

"Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee:
The residue of wrath shalt thou gird upon thee" (as an ornament)

but this is faith. The intellect is faced with moral problems in the Divine government of the universe to which it can find no full solution (see also note on Isa. 45: 7, p. 60).

(2) The centre of the prophecy is obviously the short message (2: 4) to be written so plainly (2: 2) "one may read it at a glance" (Moffatt):

"Behold, his soul is puffed up, it is not upright in him,
But the righteous shall live in his faithfulness (to Jehovah)."

The versions confirm by their variations the impression created by the English translation that the first line has been textually corrupted. Though we cannot now reconstruct it with certainty, its main thought is quite clear from the context.

Young's *Analytical Concordance* shows only two examples of the use of "faith" in the Old Testament, Hab. 2: 4 being one. In each case the correct translation is faithfulness. The Hebrew in his concrete thinking did not speak of faith, but of faithfulness toward God, and this in turn implied faith, *i.e.* trust—where faith in God does not lead to faithfulness, it is vain. The promise through Habakkuk is that the man who shows his trust in God by his faithfulness to God will find God faithful in keeping him, cf. N.E.B. *ad loc.*

Woe to the Oppressor (2: 6-20).

These five woes are a taunt-song (ver. 6; cf. Isa. 14: 4 and p. 51) taken up by the nations against the Chaldeans, though it should be obvious that the last is suitable only if spoken by the prophet himself. As in Amos 1: 3-2: 3 the woes are pronounced against acts that contravene man's sense of the fitness of things.

(1) ver. 6ff condemn the lust of conquest, which sheds blood for the sheer love of conquering.

(2) ver. 9ff take up the rapacity of the Chaldeans.

(3) ver. 12ff develop the previous woe. The squeezing of the conquered peoples was particularly for the rebuilding of

Babylon, which Nebuchadnezzar transformed into one of the wonders of the ancient world (cf. Dan. 4: 30).

(4) ver. 15ff condemn the wanton humiliation of the conquered; the picture of making them drunk is probably metaphorical. Ps. 137: 3 may refer to these wanton insults and cf. Dan. 5: 2.

(5) ver. 18ff—here it is the prophet that mocks Chaldean idolatry. Nebuchadnezzar was a very devout man. It is part of God's irony that Babylon fell to Cyrus partially at least through the treachery of the priests of Merodach.

God Comes to Deliver (Ch. 3).

This chapter is a psalm, which, if the musical rubrics are any guide, was probably taken from some temple collection of psalms. "This psalm may have been appropriated by the editors of the prophetic canon before the Psalter emerged in its present form" (Harrison, p. 935). That it is not dealt with in the *pesher* (commentary) on Habakkuk found at Qumran is no evidence that it was not included in the book at that time. Its addition to the preceding chapters may well be due to an editor who wished to bring together all the extant work of Habakkuk. While we do not think that the psalm has any direct connexion with the preceding prophecy, we see in that a proof rather than the reverse of Habakkuk's authorship. The arguments for a post-exilic date for the psalm seem to be mainly subjective.

As Habakkuk prays for God's intervention in the turmoil around¹ he has a vision of Him coming as He once did at the Red Sea, Sinai, Jordan and in the Conquest; vers. 3-15 are based on the language of Deut. 33: 2; Judges 5: 4f; Ps. 68: 7f. While it is an account of what happened in the past, it is a present reality for the prophet. So we should read present tenses throughout from ver. 3 to ver. 15 as in the R.V. mg., N.E.B.

Though the first effect of the vision on the prophet is inner distress (ver. 16), it then creates in him the confident ability to endure even worse conditions than those he is passing through (ver. 17ff).

¹ Turmoil, rather than wrath—so G. A. Smith II, p. 150.