

Should sing PHSS 159 “Song of Deborah”
And Psalm 68?

Habakkuk has just heard the LORD say,
“The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.”

One might think that the proper response is to say nothing!
But when all the earth is silent –
the proper response of those who love God is song.

Think of Psalm 62 –
The Psalmist opens:
“For God alone my soul waits in silence.” (v1)
and when his enemies roar and attack, he replies,
“For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence.”

When all the earth is silent before God,
then all the nations are able to hear the song of praise that pours forth from Zion!

Habakkuk 3 is a poetic elaboration of the theme of 2:4 –
“the righteous shall live by his faith.” (Robertson, 214)

The opening and closing lines of the chapter are liturgical markings
designed to help the musicians know how to play and sing.

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.
We don’t know what “according to Shigionoth” means –
but it probably helped the choirmaster (v19).

Andy Deliyannides has noted that Habakkuk moves from complaint to silence to worship.
But there is still a note of complaint in his worship!
After all, the starting point of his song is the plea that God would
“in wrath remember mercy.”

1. “In Wrath Remember Mercy”: Living in the Middle Ages (3:2-3a)

² *O LORD, I have heard the report of you,
and your work, O LORD, do I fear.
In the midst of the years revive it;
in the midst of the years make it known;
in wrath remember mercy.*

As Habakkuk looks out from the walls of Jerusalem –
seeing the vision of the armies of Nebuchadnezzar swarming towards the city –
seeing the doom that Joel had seen – the locust plague of devouring armies;

hearing the earthquake caused by tens of thousands of marching feet –
he beholds the wrath to come,
and he trembles.

He acknowledges that God is just for bringing this judgment upon his city.

He does not plead – like Abraham – what if there are ten righteous in the city? –
after all, he was the one, in chapter 1, who had declared
“the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth.

For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.” (1:4)
If God does not do something – then wickedness will prevail upon the earth.
If judgment never comes – then things will remain like this forever.

And that would be truly intolerable!

The law, weakened by the flesh, is paralyzed.
Righteousness will never come by the law.

But what do we do in these middle ages?

What do we do in the midst of years?
In the years where we do not see God’s mighty deeds?

The key to living in the middle ages is to remember.

Remember – not merely as an intellectual exercise –
but as an act of worship,
where we ask *God* to remember!

After all, those who live in the midst of the years
are longing to see God’s mighty deeds once more.

³ *God came from Teman,
and the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah*

Why is it important that God “came from Teman” and the Holy One from Mt Paran?

Teman is in Edom – you may remember Eliphaz the Temanite from the book of Job.
Prophecies against Edom in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Obadiah
all speak of God’s judgment against Teman.

Likewise, Paran is associated with the wilderness wanderings –
the wilderness of Paran was the first stage of Israel’s trip through the wilderness.

But the key image behind verse 3 is Deuteronomy 33:2 –

which is the opening of Moses’ blessing of Israel:
“The LORD came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us;
he shone forth from Mount Paran;
he came from the ten thousands of holy ones,
with flaming fire at his right hand.”

In other words, when Moses described the coming of the LORD to Israel,
the LORD came from Sinai – from Seir – and from Mt Paran.

Likewise, the opening of the song of Deborah includes a similar picture:

“LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom,
the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes the clouds dropped water.
The mountains quaked before the LORD,
even Sinai before the LORD, the God of Israel.” (Judges 5:4-5)

This is also echoed in Psalm 68:7-8

“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.”

Why Teman (Edom)?

Why Paran?

These regions are outside the Promised Land!

But when did God march from Edom and Paran?

In Numbers 10, when Israel set out from Sinai,
the first place they went was the wilderness of Paran.

And when they set out from the mount of the LORD,

“the ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them three days’ journey,
to seek out a resting place for them.

And the cloud of the LORD was over them by day, whenever they set out from the camp.

And whenever the ark set out, Moses said,

‘Arise, O LORD, and let your enemies be scattered,
and let those who hate you flee before you.’

And when it rested, he said,

‘Return, O LORD, to the ten thousands of Israel.’” (10:33-36)

This is echoed in Psalm 68:1 –

“God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered;
and those who hate him shall flee before him.”

This is a deliberate echo –

as the whole Psalm reflects on how the Exodus prefigures David’s Kingdom.

In v4 David remembers the wilderness:

“Sing to God, sing praises to his name;
lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts;
his name is the LORD; exult before him!”

and in v17 he echoes the “ten thousands of Israel” language:

“The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands;
the LORD is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary.”

The glory of the LORD had appeared at Sinai.

Then God gave Moses the instructions for building the tabernacle –
which was designed to be a mountain on its side;
the outer court for the people –
like the foot of the mountain where the people were,
the holy place for the priests –
like the side of the mountain where the 70 elders went,
and the Holy of Holies for the high priest –
like the top of the mountain where only Moses and Joshua went.

But then the glory of the LORD at Sinai left the mountain and filled the tabernacle!

And so now Sinai was (literally) in the sanctuary!

But what does God *do* from his sanctuary?

That’s the heart of Psalm 68 – and also Habakkuk 3.

Psalm 68:18-21 – right after saying that Sinai is in the sanctuary

“You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train
and receiving gifts among men,
even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.

Blessed be the Lord who daily bears us up;
God is our salvation.

Our God is a God of salvation, and to GOD, the Lord,
belong deliverances from death.

But God will strike the heads of his enemies,
the hairy crown of him who walks in his guilty ways.”

I’ve quoted from Psalm 68 at length

because I want you to see what Habakkuk is doing.

If you talk about God coming from Teman and Paran –

then you are invoking the imagery of the glory-cloud
that led Israel through the wilderness.

Habakkuk is remembering the report of God’s presence with his people –

and he is using the ancient story to remind Israel of God’s mighty deeds.

(Many scholars have pointed out that the Hebrew of Habakkuk 3 is more ancient
than Habakkuk 1-2 –

so it is possible that Habakkuk is either weaving in some old poetry,
or at least imitating it in his story-telling
in order to invoke the memory of “olden days.”)

But Deuteronomy 33, Judges 5, and Psalm 68 will stay with us throughout Habakkuk 3,
because just like David had used Deuteronomy 33 and Numbers 10
to explain how the Exodus relates to the Davidic Kingdom,
so also Habakkuk uses all of the above
to explain how Exodus and Kingdom relate to the Exile.

And, in case you hadn't noticed, this is why we sing so many of these OT songs.
The story of Jesus is practically unintelligible if you don't understand
Exodus, Kingdom, and Exile.

Why are so many churches saying that Jesus is about making you feel good?
It's because they have given up on the historical Jesus.
Religion, in the modern world, has nothing to do with objective reality.
It's all about how you feel.

But why does Habakkuk rejoice at the end of his song?
He rejoices, because as he reflects on the *history* of God's dealing with his people,
he remembers God's promises.
And so, even though God has said that the Chaldeans are going to destroy Jerusalem,
even though Exile is coming – and there will be nothing left of God's blessings –

I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

Take the time to learn the story.
Make sure that you have the basic outline clear in your head.
After all, this is the story of your God – and his faithfulness to your fathers.
If we are the seed of Abraham (in Christ),
then this is our family history.

Habakkuk has told us that the “righteous shall live by his faith” –
just like Abraham.
The message that deserves to be inscribed on tablets – like the Ten Commandments –
is that the righteous shall live by his faith –
a faith that *believes* God's promises,
a faith that *trembles* at his warnings,
a faith that *obeys* his commands.

So let's remember the story together!

2. “His Were the Everlasting Ways”: Remembering the Exodus (3:3b-9a)

*His splendor covered the heavens,
and the earth was full of his praise.
⁴ His brightness was like the light;
rays flashed from his hand;
and there he veiled his power.*

The radiance of the LORD shines forth from his heavenly throne throughout all the earth.
There are echoes here from Ex 24:10 –
 when the LORD appeared to the 70 elders on Sinai
and the same language will be used in Ezekiel 1
 when the LORD appeared to Ezekiel by the Chebar canal in Babylon.

I want you to see how the splendor of the LORD includes both the visible –
 his brightness was like the light – rays flashed from his hand –
 but also the audible –
the earth was full of his praise.

When the LORD appears, all the earth *says so*.
Think of Philippians 2 – “every knee will bow, every tongue confess” –
 even the wicked will acknowledge him.

When the great king shows up, everyone bows!

And the reason why is clear in verse 5:

⁵ *Before him went pestilence,
and plague followed at his heels.* ^[a]

When God comes in judgment upon the earth,
 plague and pestilence follow at his heels.

Remember the Exodus?!

 Ezekiel 14:21 identifies sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence
 as the four “deadly acts of judgment.”
 Revelation 6:8 follows that same approach.

Verses 6-7 describe the effect of God’s coming:

⁶ *He stood and measured the earth;
 he looked and shook the nations;
then the eternal mountains were scattered;
 the everlasting hills sank low.
 His were the everlasting ways.*
⁷ *I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction;
 the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.*

When the LORD appears, the earth itself trembles.

There are echoes of Judges 5 – the Song of Deborah –
 “the earth trembled...the mountains quaked” (v4-5),
 and also the similar language in Psalm 68.

In the Exodus, God came in judgment against the nations,
 and in the Conquest (in the days of Joshua)
 and in the Kingdom (in the days of David)

the mountains were scattered and the nations were shaken.

The language of the everlasting hills is drawn from Deuteronomy 33:15.

But there it is in the blessing of Joseph –
saying that Joseph will receive the bounty of the everlasting hills.
But just a few years before Habakkuk’s prophecy,
Joseph was dispossessed of the everlasting hills!

The heavens, the earth, and the seas are the three realms of creation.

Verse 3 says that his splendor covered the heavens and the earth was full of his praise.

Verse 6 says that he measured the earth...

Now in verse 8 it speaks of the rivers and the seas:

⁸ *Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD?*

*Was your anger against the rivers,
or your indignation against the sea,
when you rode on your horses,
on your chariot of salvation?*

⁹ *You stripped the sheath from your bow,
calling for many arrows. ^[b] Selah*

In Deuteronomy 33:26, Moses had said,

“There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides through the heavens to your help,
through the skies in his majesty.”

God is a Warrior who comes in wrath and anger against the rivers and the seas.

The sea is often an image of the unbridled power of the nations.

But our God calls for his arrows.

And that sets up the third section of our song:

3. “The Salvation of Your Anointed”: Remembering the Coming of the Kingdom (v9b-15)

You split the earth with rivers.

¹⁰ *The mountains saw you and writhed;
the raging waters swept on;
the deep gave forth its voice;
it lifted its hands on high.*

In the Song of Deborah the earth trembled and the clouds poured out water.

In Psalm 68 the earth quaked, and the heavens poured down rain.

Why?

Because God showed up.

Here the mountains writhe when they see the coming of the LORD –

the raging waters sweep on – and the deep speaks – lifting hands on high –

a gesture of submission and obedience.

The deep often refers to powers that resist the gods of the nations –
but the deep lifts up its hands on high to the LORD

Even

*¹¹ The sun and moon stood still in their place
at the light of your arrows as they sped,
at the flash of your glittering spear.*

Verse 11 weaves together

a reference back to how the sun stood still in Joshua's day (Josh 10)
with echoes of the song of David (2 Samuel 22 – Psalm 18).

Psalm 18 uses all the same language as Dt 33, Judges 5, Ps 68
in order to talk about how God came with power and glory
to rescue his anointed one – David.

When David called upon the LORD to save him

“then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled
and quaked, because he was angry...

He bowed the heavens and came down;
thick darkness was under his feet.

He rode on a cherub and flew; he came swiftly on the wings of the wind...

The LORD also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice,
hailstones and coals of fire.

And he sent out his arrows and scattered them;
he flashed forth lightnings and routed them.

Then the channels of the sea were seen,
and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O LORD,
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.”

Or, as Habakkuk puts it:

*¹² You marched through the earth in fury;
you threshed the nations in anger.*

*¹³ You went out for the salvation of your people,
for the salvation of your anointed.*

*You crushed the head of the house of the wicked,
laying him bare from thigh to neck.^[c] Selah*

Habakkuk remembers the stories of old:

he remembers what God did for David –

he remembers what God did by the hand of Jael (in Judges 5:26)
crushing the head of Sisera with a tent peg.

God had promised that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:16)

and in Psalm 68:21 David said that “God will strike the heads of his enemies.”

But the image that Habakkuk uses is broader:

“laying bare from thigh to neck” suggests the image of Marduk splitting open Tiamat.
When God brings judgment against the Babylonians,
he will split open Babylon the way that Babylon’s god split open his enemies!

Psalm 74:14 speaks of Yahweh crushing the head of Leviathan
[like Marduk split open Tiamat],

and Isaiah 51:9-11 speaks of how the arm of the LORD

“cut Rahab in pieces” and “pierced the dragon” –

and Isaiah explicitly states that this was what God did in the Exodus:

“Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep,
who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain gladness and joy,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

But while Isaiah clearly uses this image of piercing Rahab to speak of the Exodus –
and point forwards to the new Exodus! –

Habakkuk weaves together all these themes,
not so much to remember one particular episode –
as much as to draw together all these themes of God’s total victory.

As he concludes in verses 14-15:

¹⁴ *You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors,
who came like a whirlwind to scatter me,
rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret.*

¹⁵ *You trampled the sea with your horses,
the surging of mighty waters.*

So – what does this memory do?

When Habakkuk remembers the mighty deeds of God –
how does this make him feel?

4. “I Will Quietly Wait”: Taking Joy in the Hope of God’s Promise (v16-19)

¹⁶ *I hear, and my body trembles;
my lips quiver at the sound;
rottenness enters into my bones;
my legs tremble beneath me.*

Stop for just a minute to get verse 16 into your head:

my body trembles – quakes – I am shaking because of this word.
my ears tingle – quiver – at the sound.

Rottenness enter into my bones;
my legs tremble beneath me.

This is not a pretty picture.
When Habakkuk sees the vision of God's glory,
he is left tottering and trembling –
unable to stand on his own two feet!

The vision of the glory of God tends to have this effect on people!
We think that we like the glory of God.
But when you see God for who he is,
the sight does not result in “warm fuzzies”!

Then again, “warm fuzzies” don't give you the sort of courage you need for the dark days ahead.
The glory of God leaves Habakkuk weak in the knees –
now *that's* comforting!
Because that kind of God can *do something* about marauding armies:

*Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble
to come upon people who invade us.*

What Habakkuk sees is that God will hear –
God will answer –
and so therefore he can wait quietly for God to accomplish what he has promised.

¹⁷ *Though the fig tree should not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,*

The language comes from Deuteronomy 33:28 –
“So Israel lived in safety, Jacob lived alone, in a land of grain and wine,
whose heavens drop down dew.
Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD,
the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph!”

But now the fig tree does not blossom.
There is no fruit on the vines – there is no wine.
There is no oil – for the produce of the olive fail.
And the fields yield no bread.
The flock is cut off – and there is no herd in the stalls.
As we saw in Joel, this means not only is there no food,
but there is no *worship* either.

But the righteous one will live by his faith!

That was true for Abraham, who received the promise, but who would never possess the land –
But it was also true for Israel in the wilderness, waiting for God for 40 years –
It was true for Joshua when God brought Israel into the Promised Land –
And it was true for David through the long years of Saul’s oppression –
and all these, who lived by faith,
could say with Habakkuk:

¹⁸ *yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.*

¹⁹ *GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the deer's;
he makes me tread on my high places.*

To the choirmaster: with stringed^[d] instruments.

But then came the day when the fig tree did not blossom.

“In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry.
And seeing a fig tree by the wayside,
he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves.
And he said to it, “May no fruit ever come from you again!”
And the fig tree withered at once.” (Matthew 21:18-19)

Both Matthew and Mark connect the cleansing of the temple with the withering of the fig tree.
Jesus pronounces the covenant curse upon Israel – symbolized by the fig tree.
Judgment is coming upon Israel – the fig tree will not blossom –
and will never bear fruit again!

But as Jesus pronounces the covenant curse upon Jerusalem
he could not have helped but see what would come next:
because his own trial was approaching.
Jesus himself would take upon himself the curse that we deserved.

You might think that it stops there.
We would like to say that because Jesus has taken the curse,
therefore we have it easy.
But that is not how Paul says it.

Why does Paul endure “countless beatings,” stonings, shipwrecks,
frequent journeys, “danger from rivers, danger from robbers,
danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city,
danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;
in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst,
often without food, in cold and exposure.” (2 Cor 11:23-28)

These are the covenant curses of Deuteronomy –
that have now fallen upon Paul!

Paul will explain in Colossians 1:24 –

“I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake,
and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions
for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”

It is not as though Christ’s atoning work is incomplete.

In one sense, the incarnation and the atonement are utterly inimitable!
No one else can be the high priest who offers the once-for-all sacrifice!

But if Christ is the true Israel – the seed of Abraham to whom the promise was made –
then our union with Christ makes us partakers in his sufferings,
that we might also be partakers of his glory.

Why do we suffer?

Because the only way to be joined to the *life* of the Son of God
is to be first united to him in his *death*.

As Paul says in Philippians 3:

⁷ *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.*

⁸ *Indeed, I count everything as loss*

because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish,

in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him,

not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law,

but that which comes through faith in Christ,

the righteousness from God that depends on faith—

¹⁰ *that I may know him and the power of his resurrection,*

and may share his sufferings,

becoming like him in his death,

¹¹ *that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

And so he says to the Philippians:

“*Rejoice in the Lord always*”

After all, “the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” (Romans 16:20)

If you have been united to the Son of God – the seed of the woman –

then you may rejoice in the midst of trials –

knowing that the Divine Warrior has already overthrown Satan,

and will return once more to save those who eagerly wait for him!