Reading Habakkuk 3 in the light of ancient unit delimiters

Habakkuk 3 is one of the most controversial texts in the Hebrew Bible. Diverging opinions have been expressed on literally every facet of the text. Quite surprising though, interpreters are virtually unanimous in their opinion about the structure of the pericope. Apart from a superscript (3:1) and subscript (3:19b) four units are normally demarcated: a prayer (3:2), a theophany (3:3–7), a hymn (3:8–15) and a confession of trust (3:16–19a). Unit delimiters in ancient Hebrew manuscripts demarcate two (3:1–13 and 3:14–19) or three (3:1–7; 3:8–13; 3:14–19) units. This study evaluates this evidence and reads Habakkuk 3 in the light of the units demarcated in ancient manuscripts. It raises awareness of interesting structural patterns in the poem, calls for a rethinking of traditional form critical categories, and opens avenues for an alternative understanding of the pericope.

Introduction

Habakkuk 3 is a controversial text and presents exegetes with challenging interpretational problems covering the whole range of Hebrew Bible methodological issues. Apparently insurmountable text critical problems, as well as literary critical, redaction critical and composition critical issues cause much controversy. The relationship between Habakkuk 3 and other Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern texts has been debated intensively. Ever since the rise of modern critical scholarship these issues have been discussed in a constant stream of publications, but consensus on any one of them seems to be unattainable.

Given the wide range of opinions on all the problem areas indicated above, it is quite surprising that scholars are virtually unanimous in their opinion about the overall structure of the chapter. It is exactly on this issue that ancient Hebrew manuscripts are virtually unanimous in their disagreement with this consensus. The conspicuous disagreement between ancient unit delimiters and modern paragraph divisions in Habakkuk 3 forms the focus of this study. The research question asked in this study is: Would it influence the interpretation of Habakkuk 3 if it is read in the light of the ancient unit delimiters?

The structure of Habakkuk 3: Modern critical opinions

A mere glance at a number of influential commentaries and other studies on Habakkuk 3 makes two things clear: firstly there is a wide consensus about the structure of the pericope, secondly the consensus is largely influenced by traditional form critical classifications of the identified subunits in the pericope. Broadly speaking the chapter is approached from one of two perspectives – either a literary-critical and redaction-historical perspective or a literary perspective. Adherents of the...
former approach recognise various later additions to the chapter whilst adherents of the latter emphasise its literary unity. The result in terms of the description of the structure remains largely the same, summarised as follows by Pfeiffer (2005):


A typical example of the demarcation of the structure of the text from a redaction-historical perspective is provided by Avishur (1994:111–205). Departing from the notation רכש in 1b he classifies Habakkuk 3 as a national lament displaying all the characteristics of the genre, namely:

- a lament about the people’s present plight, accompanied by an invocation or supplication to God to deliver the people from their distress. Incorporated in such lamentations after the invocation to God is a hymn describing God’s mighty deeds … which contrasts the glorious past with the tribulations of the present. (Avishur 1994:113)

The difference between Habakkuk 3 and comparable laments is that the quoted hymn is extraordinarily long (Avishur 1994:113–114). According to Avishur (1994:114) verses 2 and 16 form a ‘framework of prayer and lamentation’ bound together by the repetition of the verb יש_UNS ‘I have heard’ (2a; 16a) and the root מ chai (cf. סים in anger10 in 2d; סים and it trembled’ in 16a; מאי, I tremble’ in 16c).11 The hymn consists of two units ‘which differ from one another thematically and structurally, despite their common theme, God’s mighty deeds’ (Avishur 1994:118). The theme of the first (3:3–6) is the divine revelation at Sinai and is reminiscent of texts like Deuteronomy 33:2–3; Judges 5:4–5 and Psalm 68:8–9. It begins and ends with a reference to mountains (cf. הר פראה the mountain of Paran’ in 3b and הר פראים the everlasting mountains in 6c). The theme of the second (3:8–15) is YHWH’s battle against the sea and rivers. It too, displays a broad chiasitic pattern, beginning and ending with references to the sea and horses (cf. ימי ימי ‘rivers’ in 8ab, ים ‘sea’ in 8c, ים ‘your horses’ in 8d; ים ‘sea’ in 15a, ים ‘waters’ in 15b, ים ‘your horses’ in 15a; cf. Avishur 1994:118–119).


From a literary perspective Habakkuk 3 is commonly regarded as a theophany (3:3–15) in two parts (3:3–7 and 3:8–14)12 encapsulated by a first person singular prayer (3:2) and confession of trust (3:16–19a). A separate superscript (3:1a) and musical notations (3:1b, 3b, 9b, 13d & 19b) might be regarded as later additions.13 The study of Hiebert (1986:59–80) serves as a typical example. He emphatically rejects the view that Habakkuk 3 can be described as either a lament or a vision (1986:81)14 and classifies the poem as a ‘song of victory’ (1986:82).16 Hiebert (1986:59) identifies the poetic device of inclusion as the major stylistic feature of the poem. Prominent features constituting the device of inclusion between 3:2 and 3:16–19 are the occurrence of the verb יתכן (3:2a, 16a) and the repetition of the root יתי (3:2d, 16a, 16c; cf. Hiebert 1986:64). Habakkuk 3:16 is an intensification of 3:2, especially of the motif of fear present in 3:2a. Both sections are written from a first person perspective (Hiebert 1986:65). Habakkuk 3:17 should not be regarded as a later addition, but as an expansion of the motif of יתי in turmoil’ in 3:2.17 In similar fashion 3:18–19 complements the content of 3:2 by the prominent occurrence of the divine name יי (cf. 3:2a, 18a, 19a) and first person singular verbal forms (Hiebert 1986:67). Two stanzas can be demarcated in the theophany in 3:3–15. Habakkuk 3:3–7 describes the appearance of God from the southeast and nature’s response to the appearance by means of third person verbal forms (Hiebert 1986:71). The unit has a ‘perfect cyclic, inclusive structure’ (Hiebert 1986:69)18 with geographical names forming the framework for the description of God’s theophany (cf. 3:3 and 7). Habakkuk 3:8–15 describes the preparation of the divine warrior for battle and the battle itself (Hiebert 1986:73), this time by utilising second person verbal forms (Hiebert 1986:75). Again inclusion is present via the repetition of יי ‘sea’ and יסרי ‘your horses’ (cf. 3:8 & 15).19

Three recent studies on Habakkuk, all approaching the book from a literary perspective, have a slightly different view of the poem’s structure.20 Andersen (2001:261–264)21 identifies

7. I use Avishur as example because he has a relatively ‘mild’ view on the growth of the text and focuses on its overall structure.
9. Avishur (1994:113) classifies Psalms 74, 77 and 89 as communal laments quoting from ancient hymns and Psalms 44 and 79 as laments alluding to hymns praising God.
16. Hiebert (1986:118) defines it as ‘a song celebrating an Israeliite military victory as triumph of Yahweh, the divine warrior’. The same genre is present in a number of songs dating from Israel’s early history, notably Exodus 15:1–18, Judges 5, Deuteronomy 33:2–5, 26–29 and Psalm 68.
17. Hiebert (1986:111–115) points to the alteration of perfect and imperfect forms characteristic of the poem as well as the presence of chiasitic patterns to explain his reading of 3:17 as an expansion of 3:2. References to images from nature in this verse should be regarded as part of the devastating influence of YHWH’s theophany.
19. Achtenmeier (1986:53–60) identifies the following units: 3:2; 3:3–15; 3:16–19. She considers the possibility that 3:16 might have been displaced and should be read together with 3:2. Achtenmeier (1986:54). According to her Habakkuk 3 then consists of an autobiographical framework (3:2 and 16) encapsulating a hymn (3:3–15) followed by a confession (3:17–19). The superscript and postscript indicate that the chapter has been used independently in the cult at some stage.
seven units. A title (3:1) and colophon (3:19b) frames a poem consisting of five strophes. An opening invocation (3:2) and closing response (3:16–19a) ‘are more personal and more subjective’ (Andersen 2001:261) and frame a theophany (3:3–15) that can be divided into three strophes. The ‘first account of mighty deliverance (vv. 3–7) is a recital in the third person,’ has the Exodus as historical background, but the ‘stage is cosmic in its expanse’ (Andersen 2001:261). ‘In the middle strophe (vv. 8–11), the mode of address changes to apostrophe in the second person’ and is concerned with YHWH’s combat with ‘cosmic elements,’ evoking ‘memories of stories of creation, but also of the Exodus and the battles of the early days’ (Andersen 2001:262). ‘In the third strophe (vv. 12–15) God is involved in history. The setting is the world (v. 12); the purpose is deliverance (v. 13); the enemy (unnamed) is almost represented as an individual (v. 14)’ (Andersen 2001:262).

Nogalski (2011) classifies Habakkuk 3 as ‘a theophany report put into the framework of a prayer and a prophetic affirmation of trust’ and argues that the passage divides readily into four parts: Habakkuk’s second superscription (3:1); a prophetic prayer and theophany report of God’s advance from the south (3:2–7); a theophany regaling YHWH for his victory over chaos (3:8–15); and a prophetic response (3:16–19). (p. 679)

Nogalski thus combines 3:2 and 3:3–7 into a single strophe, but still retains the form critical distinction between ‘theophany’ (3:8–15) and ‘prophetic response’ (3:16–19).

Mathews (2012:85) engages in a ‘performance approach’ to the book of Habakkuk and consequently provides a ‘dramatic division of the book of Habakkuk into acts and scenes’. Following many modern commentators,22 she classifies Habakkuk 3 as the second major part in the book (‘Act Two – Faith’) consisting of a ‘prelude’ (3:1) and ‘postlude’ (3:19b). She maintains the traditional division of the poem proper into three major parts (3:2; 3:3–15; 3:16–19a) in her identification of ‘Scenes’. She admits that her division is ‘in fact similar to many literary divisions made by commentators.’

The brief overview illustrates the consensus amongst modern interpreters as far as the basic building blocks of Habakkuk 3 are concerned. It also confirms the initial observation that the consensus is based upon the form critical classification of material in the text.

The structure of Habakkuk 3: Ancient perspectives

General orientation

Careful analysis of a number of ancient Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, especially in the intertestamental and early medieval tradition, reveals a different understanding of the structure of Habakkuk 3. It is clear when ancient paragraph markers (petuchot and setumot) are taken into account. Noteworthy is the fact that the units demarcated by the ancient scribes transcend the form critical ‘borders’ set by modern interpreters. Ancient scribes evidently had a different approach to Habakkuk 3.

The Greek Minor Prophets from Nahal Hever

The Greek Minor Prophets scroll found in a cave in Nahal Hever (8HevXIIgr; cf. Tov 1990) dates from the middle of the first century BCE23 and was probably written for Jewish readers (Oesch 1979:304). Unfortunately the text is fragmentary. In the case of Habakkuk 3 petuchot can be identified with certainty before 3:1 and 3:14. The Greek scroll by and large agrees with the Masoretic tradition.

The Twelve Prophets Scroll from Wadi Murabba’at

The Twelve Prophets’ scroll from Wadi Murabba’at (Mur88; cf. Benoit, Milik & De Vaux 1961:199–200 and Plates LXVIII–LXIX) dates from circa 135 CE.24 The fragmentary state of the text makes reconstruction of all the petuchot and/or setumot once present in the Book of Habakkuk impossible. In the case of Habakkuk 3, though, setumot occur before 3:1; 3:8 and 3:14. In this respect Mur88 agrees with the Masoretic tradition.25 As will be argued in the next section it has important implications for the delimitation of units in and the interpretation of Habakkuk 3.

Masoretic Manuscripts and the Biblia Rabbinica

Comparison of a sample of Masoretic manuscripts confirms that ancient Jewish tradition had a different conception of the structure of Habakkuk 3. Although the tradition is not unanimous,26 a clear picture of their understanding of the structure of Habakkuk 3 emerges (cf. Table 1):

TABLE 1: Open and closed sections in Habakkuk 3 in a sample of Jewish manuscripts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before</th>
<th>CL</th>
<th>CP</th>
<th>CA</th>
<th>CC</th>
<th>Curb</th>
<th>BibR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3:1</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:8</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:14</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


25.Oesch (1979:288) indicates that in the case of the Twelve Prophets Mur88 by and large agrees with the Masoretic tradition with one exception. It has an open space before Haggai 3:14 not attested in any of the Masoretic codices.

26.It should come as no surprise. During the long process of the transmission of texts scribes made mistakes (Korpel 2000:5–6). Furthermore allowances should be made for the personal preference of individual scribes. Tov (2000:324) remarks: ‘... scribes must have felt free to change the sense divisions of their Vorlage and to add new ones in accord with their understanding of the context’. Oesch (1979:363) concludes that petuchot and/or setumot were transmitted with greater care in the Torah than in the rest of the books.

From Table 1 it is clear that there are variations as far as the location of delimiters is concerned. In CP and CA no delimiter occurs before 3:8. There are also variations as far as the type of delimiter is concerned. Before 3:1 CL has a petuchah whilst the other manuscripts have a setumah. Before 3:8 CUrb has a petuchah whilst CL, CC and BibR have a setumah. Before 3:14 CL, CP and Curb have a petuchah whilst CA, CC and BibR have a setumah. Nevertheless, the location of the paragraph markers indicates that ancient Masoretic scribes demarcated two (3:1–13 and 3:14–19; cf. CP, CA) or three (3:1–7; 3:8–13; 3:14–19; cf. CL, CC, Curb, BibR) units in the chapter. It defies the modern form critical demarcation of four units.

The petuchot and/or setumot in Habakkuk 3 demarcate large textual units that can be subdivided into smaller units.27 Noteworthy is the fact that the boundaries of the three sections differ from the traditional demarcation of sections in modern commentaries and other studies. Unit delimitation in the ancient manuscripts under discussion poses serious questions to the traditional interpretation of Habakkuk 3.

In Addendum I provide the text of Habakkuk 3, a parallel translation and criteria for unit delimitation.28 Data in ancient Hebrew manuscripts suggest that three major sections can be demarcated in Habakkuk 3, namely 3:1–7; 3:8–13 and 3:14–19. Corroborative data in manuscripts of the Septuagint indicate that 3:1ab can be demarcated as a superscript.29 It displays the characteristics of a typical ‘superscript’ in the Psalter.30 Habakkuk 3:19d is more problematic. The phrase לְפָנִי עַל־מַחַלְתּ לְעַנָּה יָדִי is a subscript, but read it in conjunction with 19c.31

In the light of ancient unit delimiters the following sections can be demarcated (cf. Table 2):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Verses</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3:1</td>
<td>Superscript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3:2–7</td>
<td>God’s awe-inspiring manifestation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3:8–13</td>
<td>Indignant anger...salvation for your people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3:14–19d</td>
<td>Destroying the enemy, worthy of my trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3:19d</td>
<td>Subscript</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

27 For corroborative evidence four manuscripts of the Septuagint have been consulted. All agree that a new section begins at 3:1. In Codex Alexandrinus (1936) and Codex Vaticanus (1907) the transition between 2:20b and 3:1a is marked by a line left open and in Codex Sinaiticus (1922) by a double dot. All four manuscripts also write 3:1ab as a separate superscript. Codex Alexandrinus (1936) and Codex Vaticanus (1907) mark 3:2a as the beginning of a new section by a ‘large’ letter and ekthesis respectively. In both Codex Alexandrinus (1936) and Codex Marcillitum (1890) Habakkuk 3 is written ‘stichometrically’ (every colon begins on a new line, in Codex Alexandrinus marked with a ‘large’ letter). In Codex Vaticanus (1907) and Codex Sinaiticus (1922) the subdivisions of Habakkuk 3 are determined by the occurrence of תְפָלָה in the Hebrew text (cf. 3:3b, 9b, 13d). תְפָלָה is represented in the Greek by προσεύχησις. In each case it is written in the middle of the column, thus dividing Habakkuk 3 into five sections (3:1a; 2a–2b; 3a–9b; 9c–13d; 14a–19d).

28 It falls outside the scope of this paper to discuss the text critical difficulties in the text. Major problems have been discussed elsewhere (cf. Prinsloo 2002:88–98).

29 Cf. the remarks in the previous note.

30 Cf. Psalms 6:1; 8:1; 9:1; 12:1; 22:1; 45:1; 46:1; 53:1; 56:1; 62:1; 69:1; 77:1; 81:1.

31 Cf. Psalms 4:1; 6:1; 54:1; 55:1; 67:1; 76:1.

32 Cf. the discussion in note 35 of the Addendum.

### Structural patterns and dominant motifs in Habakkuk’s עֲמֵל

Ancient scribal practices suggest a delimitation of sections with important implications for the interpretation of the text. Contra form critical arguments for the demarcation of two petitions (3:2; 3:16–19) framing a theophany in two parts (3:3–7; 3:8–15), ancient scribes read Habakkuk 3 as a single ‘prayer’.33 Read through their eyes three important characteristics of the text should be noted.

### Inclusio as dominant structural pattern

The importance of inclusio as poetic strategy in Habakkuk 3 has been recognised in the overview of existing approaches to Habakkuk 3. When delimitation criteria in ancient manuscripts are taken as point of departure, the phenomenon becomes the dominant textual strategy in the poem.

Section 1 (3:1) and Section 5 (3:19c), a superscript and subscript respectively, frame the poem proper. Both contain information typical of the superscripts in the Book of Psalms. The phrase וַיהָלַךְ עַל־עָלָמִים ... ‘a prayer of ...’ occurs elsewhere only in superscripts to psalms.34 ‘הַעֲמֵל’ ‘prayer’ characterises the content of the poem in a special manner and includes the whole chapter in the classification. The ‘author’ of the prayer is called בּוֹקֵעַ בְּעַזָּבוֹ הַמֹּסָף ‘Habakkuk the prophet’.35 The following ἐν ισχύτω ἐν εὐφώνῳ ‘Shigyonoth’ (1b) is reminiscent of psalm superscripts with a note about the poem’s melody and/or accompanying musical instrument.36 ἀνάστασις is a hapax legomenon, often regarded as the plural of αἰωνίος (Ps 7:1). Many associate it with the Akkadian noun šegû ‘cry of lamentation,’ and regard it as an indication of the poem’s genre, and consequently classify Habakkuk 3 as a lament (Vander Waoude 1978:60).37 However, the combination ἀνάστασις + noun in psalm superscripts are not associated with the poem’s genre and the content of Habakkuk 3 hardly lends itself to be classified as a lament (Roberts 1991:130). The exact intent of לְקָדוֹשׁ בְּכֶלֶבֶּתּ הַקּוֹדֶשׁ (to the conductor, on my stringed instruments’ in 3:19d remains an enigma. Similar phrases are known from the Psalter, but always in superscripts.38 It is a

33. The purpose of the present study is not to provide a detailed exegetical analysis of Habakkuk 3. In two earlier studies (Prinsloo 2002, 2003) engaged in more detailed exegetical analysis, albeit within the framework of the ‘traditional’ demarcation of units. In a recent publication (Prinsloo 2013) I provide a brief exegetical analysis of Habakkuk 3 following the demarcation of units proposed in the current study.

34. Cf. Psalms 17:1; 86:1; 90:1; 101:2. Andersen (2001:268) remarks: ‘The term τέφελι is a general word for prayer. It appears ... in the title of several psalms, most of which represent personal supplications in times of distress.’

35. Cf. Habakkuk 1:1. Exegesis should honestly acknowledge that this is all that can be said about the prophet (Hwuwyler 2001:248, n. 56) Cf. Sweeney (1992:1–2) and Nagolski (2011:645–649) for speculations about Habakkuk’s identity in Jewish tradition.

36. Cf. Psalms 6:1; 12:1 (‘upon an eight-string lyre’); 8:1; 81:1; 84:1 (‘prayer’ according to ‘Gamth’); 9:1 (‘prayer’ according to ‘the Death of the Son’); Psalms 22:1 (‘prayer’ according to ‘the Doe of the Morning’); 45:1; 69:1 (‘prayer’ according to ‘Lillies’); 46:1; 51:1 (‘prayer’ according to ‘Aalonmoth’); 56:1 (‘prayer’ according to ‘A Dove on Distant Oaks’); 70:1 (‘prayer’ according to ‘The Lily of the Covenant’); 61:1 (‘prayer’ according to ‘upon stringed instruments’); 62:1; 77:1 (‘prayer’ according to ‘León’); 88:1 (‘prayer’ according to ‘Mahalath Leánónth’). For the difficulties in the interpretation of these terms see the discussion ad loci by Hossfeld and Zenger (1993, 2005).


38. It is a ‘prayer’ characterised by its content and the characteristics of a typical ‘superscript’ in the Psalter. It displays the characteristics of a typical ‘superscript’ in the Psalter. It is a...
liturgical notation, but its exact implication is no longer clear to modern readers.

In spite of uncertainties regarding the interpretation of individual words, the notion that Habakkuk 3:1 classifies the content of the entire chapter as a הֶלְסָלָה should be taken seriously. In psalm superscripts the content of a הֶלְסָלָה carries undertones of thankfulness, joy and trust in spite of dire circumstances (Bratcher 1985:226–227). In its current literary context Habakkuk 3:1 marks a change in the mood of the book from 1:1’s קְפָרָה with its undertones of prophetic protest and divine response in Habakkuk 1–2 to unconditional trust and faithful devotion in Habakkuk 3 (Prinsloo 1999:520).

The three sections of the poem proper (2 [3:2–7]; 3 [3:8–13]; 4 [3:14–19]) are characterised by elaborate inclusions. In Section 2 (3:2–7) 1 singular qtf verbal forms in 2a (‘I heard;’ and 7a (‘I saw’) constitute the first inclusio and frame the observation of God’s appearance from the south-east, described in 3:3–7. The object of the verbs in 2a is God’s ‘repute’ (שָׁתָם) and his ‘work’ (מִלְחָמה) whilst the object of the verb in 7ab is the ‘tents of Kushan’ (קְשַׁנ) and the ‘tent curtains of the land of Midian’ (מִדְיָן) and they are ‘under iniquity’ (אֵילָה) (רֹאשׁ כֲּלָא) and ‘trembling’ (דָּעִים). Careful observation of God’s triumphant march from the south-east leads to a change in the perspective of the poet, from the ‘tumour’ (וֹי [2d]) he is experiencing to the ‘trembling’ (רֹאשׁ [7b]) of the dwelling places of the enemy. The repetition of the root רָכַב in 2d and 7b constitutes a second inclusio. Reference to place names associated with the south-eastern regions of Palestine in 3:3 and 3:7 constitutes a third inclusio:

A fourth inclusio is constituted by temporal phrases in 3:2 and 3:6. The phrase הָעָסְכֶנּוּ ‘in the midst of years’ occurs twice in an urgent prayer (cf. 3:2bc). God should ‘call to life’ (חִיָּהוּ) and ‘make known’ (כִּדְתֶנּוּ) his ‘repute’ (רָכַב) and ‘work’ (עָשָׂב) (cf. 3:2cd). The poet heard about it and feared (cf. 3:2a), but he does not observe it in the reality of his present circumstances. By recalling God’s mighty appearance from the south-east as warrior (3:3) clouded in brilliant light (3:4) amongst his head of his warriors (3:14a) and ‘tents of Kushan’ and the ‘tent curtains of the land of Midian’.

Section 3 (3:8–13) is characterised by the following inclusions: The first inclusio is constituted by the repetition of the root רָכַב in 3:8 and 3:13. The similarity between the actions of YHWH described in 3:8 and 3:12–13 constitutes a second inclusio. Apart from ‘salvation,’ 3:8 contains two other motifs, namely ‘anger’ and ‘riding upon:

A third inclusio is constituted by the repetition of the noun רָכַב in 3:9 and 12. In 3:9 YHWH ‘cleaves the earth with rivers’ and in 3:12 he tramples ‘the earth in indigination.’ YHWH’s acts of salvation thus have an effect upon and become apparent on earth.

Section 4 (3:14–19) is characterised by two inclusions. The first is constituted by the 1 singular pronominal suffix in 3:14 and five 1 singular suffixes in 3:19:

A fourth inclusio is formed by the 1 singular verbs and suffixes in 3:16 and 18, all again framed by the 1 singular suffixes in 3:14 and 19:

Footnote 38 continued...

The single occurrence of a 1 plural pronominal suffix in the entire poem points to the poet being a representative for a group of people, identified in 3:14c as ‘the poor in hiding’.

Again the contrast between the situation of the prophet in 3:16 and 18 is emphasised by the inclusio.
Inclusio is a dominant feature in the overall structure of the poem. It is especially apparent in the repetition of the verbal form יִשָּׁמֵעֵן ‘I heard’ in Section 2 (3:2a) and Section 4 (3:16a) and the repetition of the root יְָה in Section 2 (יִשָּׁמֵע ‘in turmoil’ in 3:2d; יִשָּׁמֵע ‘they are trembling’ in 7b) and Section 4 (יִשָּׁמֵע ‘my body trembled’ in 3:16a; יִשָּׁמֵע ‘I tremble’ in 3:16c).

Communication patterns

If Habakkuk 3 is read as a single psalm it is an interesting pattern in the text’s flow of communication becomes discernible. In Section 2 (3:2–7) there is a ‘two-way’ and ‘mixed’ communication pattern. In the introductory prayer (3:2), the pattern is ‘I → you’: two 1 singular qal verbal forms introduce the section,42 whilst no less than five 2 masculine singular forms are used in the prophet’s direct address to YHWH.43 In the description of God’s triumphant march from the south-east (3:3–7) the communication pattern is ‘he → I’ with strong emphasis on 3 masculine singular forms referring to God. He is the subject of five verbal forms and eight 3 masculine singular suffixes also refer to him.44 A single 1 singular verbal form (יִשָּׁמֵע ‘I see’ in 7a) involves the poet in the awesome appearance of YHWH from the south-east and recalls the 1 singular forms in the introductory prayer, thus framing the third person description of God’s ‘coming’ in 3:3–6.

In Section 3 (3:8–13) the communication pattern is ‘one-way’ and ‘singular.’ The focus is entirely on YHWH’s actions and the effect it has upon creation and the description is entirely in the second person. It is illustrated by seven 2 masculine singular verbal forms and ten 2 masculine singular pronominal suffixes.45 This ‘singular’ pattern, framed by two sections with a ‘mixed’ pattern, ensures that 3:8–13 receives special emphasis.46

In Section 4 (3:14–19) the flow of communication is again ‘two-way’ and ‘mixed.’ In a short introductory description of YHWH’s attack on the enemy (3:14–15) the flow of communication is ‘you → I’: YHWH’s actions against his enemies are described by means of two 2 masculine singular verbs and one 2 masculine singular pronominal suffix.47 The actions of the enemies are directed against the poet, referred to by means of a 1 singular pronominal suffix (יִשָּׁמֵע ‘to scatter me’) in 14b. This introductory section is reminiscent of the opening prayer (3:2) and of the 2 masculine singular forms in Section 3 (3:8–13). In the longer prayer and expression of confidence (3:16–19) the flow of communication is ‘I → he’ with emphasis upon the poet’s reaction upon YHWH’s victory over the wicked. It is expressed by means of five 1 singular verbal forms, ten 1 singular pronominal suffixes and one 1 singular independent personal pronoun.48 Twice a positive action of YHWH towards the poet is mentioned by means of 3 masculine singular verbal forms.49 Thus 3:16–19 is reminiscent of the communication pattern in 3:3–7, there with emphasis on YHWH’s action, here with emphasis upon the poet’s reaction.

Communication patterns in Habakkuk 3 enhance the dominant occurrence of inclusio in the poem in general and it’s various building blocks in particular. In 3:2 and 3:8–15 YHWH is addressed directly in the second person, whilst he is addressed indirectly in the third person in 3:3–6 and 3:16–19, thus creating an abab pattern in addressing YHWH or God in the poem. However, first person forms referring to the poet, transforms the parallel pattern in addressing YHWH to an intricate chaotic pattern framing 3:8–13. Section 2 (3:2–7) is framed by 1 singular forms in 3:2a and 3:7a. Section 3 (3:14–19) is framed by 1 singular forms in 3:14b, 3:16 and 3:18–19. In Section 2 the 1 singular forms frame a short prayer addressed to YHWH in the second person (3:2bcd) and a long description of God’s triumphant march from the south-eastern desert (3:2–6). In Section 4 the 1 singular suffix in 3:14b links up with the 1 singular verb in 3:7a. In 3:7 the poet ‘sees’ the dwelling of the enemy ‘under iniquity’ and ‘trembling’. In 3:14 the enemy is destroyed by YHWH as they ‘storm to scatter me,’ whilst the first person forms in 3:16 and 18 express a confession in the ultimate power of YHWH framing 3:17, expressing the most dire and precarious living conditions. Section 3 is the only section without any first person references, the only section exclusively reserved for 2 masculine singular forms referring to YHWH, and the section where it becomes clear that YHWH and his retinue (3:2–6) is actually marching from the south-east to destroy the enemies of his people. Habakkuk 3:8–13 thus becomes the heart of the poem, culminating in the complete destruction of the wicked in 3:13.

YHWH the warrior and personal prayer or confession as focal points

If Habakkuk 3 is read as a single psalm the motif of YHWH as warrior becomes the dominant focal point present in all three main sections of the poem,50 whilst first person prayer and/or confession becomes a second focal point in 3:2–7 and 3:14–19. In 3:2–7 the prayer motif is present in the poet’s urgent prayer that YHWH’s ‘fame’ and ‘work’ should be made a reality in his present dire circumstances. The poet proceeds to do just that when he recalls the great theophany of God in the south-eastern desert when Israel was born as a nation (3:3–7). Habakkuk 3:7 makes it clear, though, that the poet is involved in remniscenting this salvific appearance

42. For the verbal forms, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (3a); יִשָּׁמֵע (6a). For the pronominal suffixes, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (3c); יִשָּׁמֵע (5a); יִשָּׁמֵע (6b). For the personal pronouns, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (6a); יִשָּׁמֵע (6b). For the personal pronouns, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (6a); יִשָּׁמֵע (6b). 43. For the verbal forms, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (8c). For the pronominal suffixes, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (13a); יִשָּׁמֵע (13c); יִשָּׁמֵע (13d). For the personal pronouns, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (13a); יִשָּׁמֵע (13b). 44. For the verbal forms, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (8d); יִשָּׁמֵע (9a); יִשָּׁמֵע (12a); יִשָּׁמֵע (12b); יִשָּׁמֵע (13a); יִשָּׁמֵע (13c); יִשָּׁמֵע (13d). For the personal pronouns, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (13a); יִשָּׁמֵע (13b). 45. The second person forms of course imply the involvement of the poet, but as a mere spectator, a reporter on the events transpiring before him. Mathews (2012–151) remarks that the poet ‘does not express his emotions but merely reports the events.’

46. For the verbal forms, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (14a); יִשָּׁמֵע (15a). For the pronominal suffix, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (15a).

47. For the verbal forms, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (16a). For the pronominal suffixes, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (16a). For the personal pronouns, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (18a). 48. For the pronominal suffixes, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (16b); יִשָּׁמֵע (16c); יִשָּׁמֵע (16d); יִשָּׁמֵע (18a). 49. For the personal pronouns, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (18b). For the personal pronouns, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (18c). 50. For the personal pronouns, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (18d). For the personal pronouns, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (18e). For the personal pronouns, cf. יִשָּׁמֵע (18f).
of God in the distant past, because he ‘saw’ the dwelling places of Israel’s enemies ‘under iniquity’ and ‘trembling,’ remembering God’s theophany at Sinai as his ‘age old ways’ (3:6e). It is God’s ‘nature’ to get into motion, to travel his highways to the ends of the earth when his people are in trouble. Inclusio and communication patterns artfully create two focal points in 3:2–7. The framing of God’s triumphant appearance from the south-east (3:3–6) enhances the dominant motif of God as warrior. The first person singular frame (3:2 and 7) at the same time focuses attention on the poet’s present plight, urgent prayer, and certainty that ultimately God’s is the guarantee that his people will be saved again.

In 3:8–13 the motif of YHWH as warrior becomes a clear reality in a direct address, an eyewitness report of YHWH’s triumphant victory over the wicked. The poet disappears into the background and YHWH and his great salvific deeds are described in the second person. Here a frame is created by rhetorical questions in 3:8 and the clear answer to the questions in 3:12–13 – YHWH’s anger is directed against the people, ‘the head of the wicked house’ (3:13c) and his intervention is ultimately, aimed that the salvation of his people. The centre (3:9–11) confirms YHWH’s victory over all powers of chaos past and present (Nogalski 2011:685).

In 3:14–19 the theophany motif is briefly present in 3:14–15, again as an eyewitness report referring to YHWH’s deeds in the second person. Habakkuk 3:14–15 links up with the mythological language in 3:8 with references to יַשָׁע יָשֹׁשִׁיע (3:8d, 15a), thus ensuring a strong link between Sections 3 (3:8–13) and 4 (3:14–19). However, the first person motif of Section 2 returns in 3:14b, where it becomes clear that the speaker is experiencing dire circumstances, because the enemy is storming the υπερβολικά εύρηκα (3:14c) ‘to scatter me’ and rejoicing ‘as one who devours the poor in hiding’ (3:14c). In those circumstances, as the poet recalls the triumphant march of God the warrior from the south-east (3:2–6) and the annihilation of the enemy by YHWH the warrior (3:8–13) ‘in the midst of years’ (3:2b, 2c), urgent prayer evolves into a great confession of unconditional trust in YHWH in spite of dire living conditions (3:16–19).

Conclusion

Unit delimitation in ancient manuscripts prompts the interpreter to reconsider the traditional form critical approach to Habakkuk 3 (Prinsloo 2009:218). Ancient unit delimiters transcend the neat borders between units demarcated on form critical grounds and indicate that Habakkuk 3 can be read as a single prayer containing the dominant theme of YHWH the warrior, coupled with a second theme, namely the personal involvement of the poet in the events of his day, expressed by means of urgent prayer (3:2), careful observation (3:7), negative experience (3:14) and, in the end, deferential awe and joyful confidence in the presence of YHWH (3:16–19).

Reading Habakkuk 3 as a single הַלֵּל נְתַנָּה has important implications for the interpretation of the poem in the context of the book of Habakkuk. In a previous publication (Prinsloo 2001) I focused on intertextual links between the poem and other hymnic passages in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Ex 15:1–18; Dt 33:1–3; Jdg 5:4–5; Pss 18:8–16; 68:8–9; 77:17–20; 144:5–6). I argued that 3:3–6 and 3:8–13, 15 might contain archaic hymnic passages incorporated by the poet in 3:2, 7, 14, 16–19 in a new composition. Theophanies hinting at the Sinai and exodus experiences of Israel’s distant, mythical past are applied to the poet’s present circumstances. The focus of the present study does not allow for a detailed exposition of this observation. Others, however, argued that the insertion of so-called ‘ancient’ hymnic passages in different contexts of the Hebrew Bible are indicative of the interpretation of surrounding material by later exegetes. Mathys (1994) remarks that:

mit den Psalmen, die sich am Ende von Prophetenbüchern finden, habe die Gemeinde auf deren Verlesung geantwortet… Das hieße auch, daß der Prozeß ihrer Kanonisierung eingesetzt hat … Diese fassen die Bücher, in denen sie stehen, zusammen und interpretieren sie … Interpretation, Verallgemeinerung, Zusammenfassung, Kanonisierung – dafür eignen sich Gebete, Psalmen und Doxologien in besonders ausgezeichneter Weise. (p. 318)

Reading Habakkuk 3 as a single הַלֵּל נְתַנָּה hints at the possibility that this text can be interpreted as a later generation’s appropriation of Habakkuk 1–2 into their present circumstances.

The reference to יַשָּׁע ‘the poor’ (3:14) and יִשָּׁע יִשָּׁע ‘who are attacking us’ (3:16) points to the poet of Habakkuk 3 being a member of a specific social group in the late Persian and/or early Hellenistic period who regarded themselves as the true Israel and as the actual recipients of YHWH’s salvific intervention in and promises to his people.50 The poet appropriates YHWH’s promise to the prophet Habakkuk at the time of the Chaldean onslaught on and devastation of Jerusalem to his own predicament as a marginalised ‘poor’ in a wicked and hostile environment. For him the:


In Habakkuk 3 unit delimitation indeed ‘calls for a profound re-evaluation’ of the chapter’s structure and ‘the classification of sections and indeed the interpretation’ of the pericope (Prinsloo 2009:219).

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Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.


51 Cf. also Nogalski (2011:683) for a discussion of possible intertextual links between Habakkuk 3 and the anti-Edom utterances in Isaiah 34:5–7 and 63:1–6.
Addendum 1

Addendum 1 continues on the next page →
All Hebrew manuscripts consulted regard 3:1–7 as a section.

The Septuagint aids modern interpreters in the endeavour to combine lines and some manuscripts of the Vulgate demarcate 3:1ab as a separate superscript.

The poem proper thus consists of 27 lines, 8 tricola and esp. 57–80) for a discussion of the system and a critical evaluation of the function of the accents. In Habakkuk 3:1–19 the end of cola are demarcated by: 1b; 2d; 3d; 4c; 5b; 6e; 7b; 8e; 9c; 10d; 11c; 12b; 13d; 14c; 15b; 16e; 16d; 17b; 17a; 16d; 17f; 19d.

Sixty-six cola which combine to form 29 lines can be demarcated. Eight of the 29 lines are tricola (4abc, 6d; 8b; 8a; 9a; 10a; 11b; 13a; 13c; 14a; 16b; 16d; 17b; 17a; 19b).

3. All Hebrew manuscripts consulted regard 3:1–7 as a section.

4. All Hebrew manuscripts consulted regard 3:1–7 as a section.

5. In Habakkuk 1 and 2 corroboration material in 1QpHab and manuscripts of the Septuagint aid modern interpreters in the endeavour to combine lines to form strophes. As already indicated, manuscripts of the Septuagint differ in their treatment of Habakkuk 3, writing the text either 'stichometrically' or using the apparently musical notation כח (translated in Greek as διάψαλμα) and esp. 57–80) for a discussion of the system and a critical evaluation of the function of the accents. In Habakkuk 3:1–19 the end of cola are demarcated by:

TABLE 1a (Continues ...): Habakkuk 3: Text, translation and delimitation.

Footnotes to Addendum 1 continue on the next page →
17. In 8a the interrogative particle at the beginning of the colon confirms that a new strophe commences.
18. In 9a the emphatic repetition of the root עֹר at the beginning of the colon confirms that a new strophe commences.
19. The change of subject is indicative of the beginning of a new stanza.
20. In 10a the occurrence of two verbal forms at the beginning of the colon confirms that a new strophe commences.
21. In 11a the unusual syntax confirms that a new strophe commences.
22. The change of subject is indicative of the beginning of a new stanza.
23. In 12a the unusual syntax confirms that a new strophe commences.
24. In 13a the occurrence of Perfect verbal forms following upon the Imperfect forms in 12ab suggests the beginning of a new strophe.
25. Hebrew manuscripts consulted regard 3:14–19 as a section. It is also the case in the Septuagint SBAQW.
26. The change of subject is indicative of the beginning of a new stanza.
27. In 14a the unusual syntax confirms that a new strophe commences.
28. In 15a the unusual syntax confirms that a new strophe commences. Some manuscripts of the Vulgate mark 15a as the beginning of a new paragraph.
29. The change of subject is indicative of the beginning of a new stanza.
30. In 16a the occurrence of two verbal forms at the beginning of the colon confirms that a new strophe commences.
31. The change of subject is indicative of the beginning of a new stanza.
32. In 17a the occurrence of the deictic particle כי confirms that a new strophe commences.
33. In 18a the occurrence of the pronoun אני in an emphatic position at the beginning of the line confirms that a new strophe commences. Some manuscripts of the Vulgate mark 18a as the beginning of a new paragraph.
34. In 19a the emphasis upon יהוה at the beginning of the colon confirms that a new strophe commences.
35. Ancient Hebrew and Greek manuscripts do not regard 3:19d as a separate unit. The Septuagint did not regard it as a subscript but relates it to the preceding 3:19c, evidently relating the Hebrew לְנַעֲצָה and נַעֲצָה ‘conquer,’ a meaning not attested in Biblical Hebrew. In the Septuagint Habakkuk 3:19c reads as follows: 

ἐπὶ τὰ ὑψηλὰ ἐπιβιβᾷ με

19c He mounts me upon high places

tοῦ νικῆσαι εἰς τὴν ὁδὸν νίκην

19d that I may conquer by his song

It is demarcated as a separate section here because of parallels in the Book of Psalms where it clearly functions as part of the superscript.