

## Habakkuk 3: A Model Psalm

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### Overview

Psalms is an important book for us to understand, since it is quoted more than any other book in the NT. It is also cited frequently in later OT books (e.g., Isaiah).

We begin by studying the structure of a single psalm, and for this purpose, it's helpful to begin with an example that's not in the book of Psalms, Habakkuk 3. This Psalm has two things to teach us that we can take back into the book of Psalms: it clearly shows the framework of an individual Psalm, and it shows the importance of the context for interpreting a Psalm. Later we'll come to understand the structure that ties all the Psalms together into a book

### The Framework of a Psalm

Habakkuk 3 has three parts: heading, body, and dedication. Table 1 (chart) shows these pieces in Habakkuk 3, the song of Hezekiah in Isaiah 38 (another isolated poem), and Psalm 3.

The heading of the Psalm gives information about its *authorship*, in three ways. First, it describes the kind of composition: a prayer, a writing, a psalm, a song, praise, inscription, instruction, or joyful shout. Second, it lists the author. Third, it may describe specific circumstances under which it was written. The heading can provide valuable information to help us interpret the psalm. For example, if we understand who wrote it and under what circumstances, we should read it in light of that person's history as recorded elsewhere in the Bible.

Next comes the *body* of the psalm, the actual poem.

	Hab 3	Isa 38	Psa 3	Alternatives	
<b>Authorship</b>	<b>Category</b>	1 A prayer	9 The writing [Michtab; cf. Michtam "inscription"]	1 A Psalm	Psalm, Prayer, Song, Praise, Michtam, Maskil, Shiggaion
	<b>Author</b>	of Habakkuk the prophet	of Hezekiah king of Judah,	of David,	David, Asaph, sons of Korah, Solomon, Moses, Ethan, Heman
	<b>Circumstances or Purpose</b>	upon Shigionoth.	when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness:	when he fled from Absalom his son.	Various; 18 in all
<b>Use in Worship</b>	<b>Body</b>	(vv. 2-19a)	(vv. 10-20a)	(vv. 2-8)	
	<b>Assignment</b>	19b To the chief singer [musician]	20c in the house of the LORD.	Psa 4:1 To the chief Musician	
	<b>Musical Instruction</b>	on my stringed instruments. [Neginoth]]	20b therefore we will sing my songs [Neginoth] to the stringed instruments all the days of our life	on Neginoth	Neginoth, Jeduthun, Gittiith, Muthlabben, Nehiloth, Sheminith, Alamoth, Aijeleth Shahar, Mahalath, Altaschith, Jonathelemrechokim, Shushaneduth, Shoshanim, Shoshanimeduth

Table 1: The Structure of a Psalm

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Third, we have instructions for its *use in worship*. This part identifies the psalms that were composed for temple worship, as opposed to those that might have been more personal in nature. In addition, the tune names often have meanings, which may point to the events that they were composed to commemorate, and thus provide additional context.

The same pattern appears in the prayer of Hezekiah recorded in Isaiah 38, and many times in the Psalms. For concreteness, consider the first Psalm ascribed to David, Psalm 3. We notice one difference: as recorded in our version, not a single Psalm ends with the dedication to the chief musician. But many of the Psalms *begin* with this legend, sometimes followed by authorship information. Throughout Scripture, chapter divisions are secondary, and it is likely that in the Psalms whoever inserted them did not recognize the distinctive nature and proper position of the headings and the musical instructions.<sup>1</sup>

Not every psalm has all three parts, and the contents of these parts varies somewhat from psalm to psalm, but it is useful to recognize this structure. In general (Table 2, chart), every psalm that has a closing also has an opening, though 64 psalms have openings but no closings.<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to what you will sometimes hear, there is no good evidence that the heading and dedication were not part of the original psalm, and we will consider them as part of the authoritative text.

		Closing?	
		Yes	No
Opening?	Yes	53	64
	No	2 (10, 43)	31

Table 2: *Openings and Closings of the Psalms*

## Importance of the Historical Context

The second lesson we can learn from the psalm of Habakkuk is the relation between a Psalm and its historical context. We do not always have this information, but eighteen Psalms do contain a historical note in the opening, and in some other cases we can make an educated guess from the name of the tune in the closing, or from details in the body of the Psalm. Habakkuk shows us how understanding the setting can enhance our understanding of the Psalm.

### ***The Theme of the Book***

We know nothing about Habakkuk other than what we can learn from this book, but its content presumes a time after the rise of the Chaldeans (the Babylonians), and before the destruction of Jerusalem, probably in the late seventh century (620-610 BC), in between Isaiah and Jeremiah.

The first two chapters of the book are a conversation between Habakkuk and the Lord (Figure 1, chart). Habakkuk asks a question, the Lord responds, he asks another question, and the Lord responds again.

Habakkuk's first question reflects his concern, as a righteous Israelite, with the corruption he sees in the nation:

- 1 This insight is due to James W. Thirtle, *The Titles of the Psalms: Their Nature and Meaning Explained*. Frowde: London, 1904. Online at [https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted\\_hildebrandt/OTeSources/19-Psalms/Text/Books/Thirtle-PsTitles/Thirtle-PsTitles.pdf](https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/OTeSources/19-Psalms/Text/Books/Thirtle-PsTitles/Thirtle-PsTitles.pdf). The thesis is supported and further supported by Bruce K. Waltke, "Superscripts, Postscripts, or Both," *JBL* 110/4 (1991) 583-596
- 2 Psalms 10 and 43, which have closings but no openings, probably should be connected with the previous psalms 9 and 42, respectively, which do have openings.

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1:2 O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! 3 Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention. 4 Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.

The Lord's response is that he is going to deal with this problem, by sending the Chaldeans to punish the nation:

1:5 Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvellously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you. 6 For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwellingplaces that are not theirs.

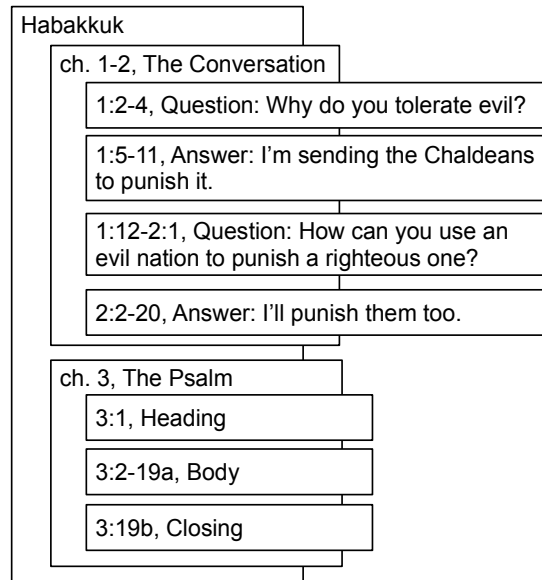


Figure 1: The Structure of Habakkuk

This is not the answer Habakkuk wanted, and leads to his second question. In spite of Israel's wickedness, they are not as wicked as the pagan Chaldeans. How can God use a more wicked nation to punish a less wicked one?

1:12 Art thou not from everlasting, O LORD my God, mine Holy One? we shall not die. O LORD, thou hast ordained them for judgment; and, O mighty God, thou hast established them for correction. 13 Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?

God responds to this complaint in ch. 2, declaring five woes against Babylon for her sins. God will use Babylon to chastise his people, but then bring judgment on Babylon for her own sin.

The message of Habakkuk, writing about 620 BC with reference to Babylon, recalls what the Lord said through Isaiah against Assyria about 730 BC:

Isa 10:5 O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. 6 I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. ... 12 Wherefore it shall come to pass, *that* when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks.

The prophecy ends with a call to bow down in reverent silence before the sovereign Lord:

Hab 2:20 But the LORD *is* in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him.

### **An Overview of the Psalm**

With this background, let's consider the Psalm as a whole.

The main clues to the structure are changes in grammatical person and in the theme being

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discussed (Table 3, chart). The order is chiasmic in theme, with Habakkuk’s emotional state on the outside and history on the inside, but an alternation in the audience being addressed.

The opening says that the Psalm is “upon Shigionoth.” This word appears only here and in the singular in the heading to Psalm 7, in which David laments the treachery of Cush the Benjamite.

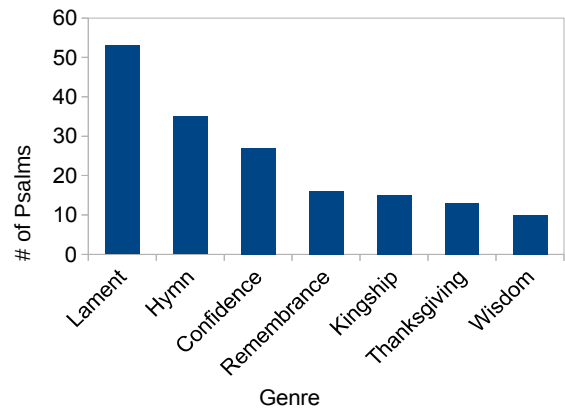
Psa 7:1 <Shiggaion of David, which he sang unto the LORD, concerning the words of Cush the Benjamite.> O LORD my God, in thee do I put my trust: save me from all them that persecute me, and deliver me: 2 Lest he tear my soul like a lion, rending it in pieces, while there is none to deliver.

*Table 3: The Structure of Habakkuk's Psalm*

		Addressed to ...	
		The Lord	The Readers
Theme	Habakkuk's fear and faith	3:2	3:16-19
	The Lord's past actions	3:8-15	3:3-7

The underlying verb שָׁגָה can mean “stumble, stagger,” and the heading may refer to a singer whose faith staggers under the apparent injustices of life. That certainly fits Habakkuk’s attitude in this psalm.

The Psalms fall into a limited set of genres or types, including lament (53), hymn (35), confidence (27), remembrance (16), kingship (15), thanksgiving (13), and wisdom (10) (Figure 2, chart). These total to more than 150, because some psalms combine multiple genres. Habakkuk’s psalm combines lament (which itself moves into confidence), and remembrance.



*Figure 2: Modern Genres of the Psalms*

### Opening Lament, 3:2

The psalm starts with a lamentation: the writer tells the Lord about some problem that he has. This is the most common category of Psalm.

**2 O LORD, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid:**--“Thy speech” can only be what God has just said to him in answer to his questions in ch. 1-2. God has commanded all the earth to be silent before him, and Habakkuk reports that he has certainly been brought up short by it.

Sometimes we think that we should never be upset by God’s word. Habakkuk’s confession shows the real-life impact of God’s declarations of judgment. Sometimes the right response starts with humbling ourselves before the Lord in fear.

**O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy.**--It is healthy to fear before the Lord, but as God’s children we can always call on him for help. Habakkuk asks for God’s mercy, which here is רַחֵם, Strong 7355, compassion. This is the first of the attributes that God declares to Moses in Exodus 34,

Exo 34:6 The LORD, The LORD God, **merciful** and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth,

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It describes the attitude of pity that a superior being has toward someone who is suffering. As justification for his plea, Habakkuk asks the Lord to “revive thy work.” In the past, God has done merciful things for his people, and now the prophet prays that he will intervene in the future as he has in the past. Thus he sets the stage for the two historical sections in vv. 3-7 and 8-15.

### Recollection to the People, 3:3-7

Another important category is the psalm of remembrance, where the poet recalls God’s mighty acts of deliverance in the past. The center two sections of Habakkuk 3 are remembrance. The first is addressed to his hearers, while the second is addressed to God.

The next five verses remind his readers of God’s past works of deliverance. The poem describes God’s glory as his people marched triumphantly from Mount Sinai. “Paran” is in the neighborhood of Sinai:

Deu 33:2 And he said, The LORD came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; he shined forth from mount Paran, and he came with ten thousands of saints:

Seir describes the land of Edom, for which Teman is another name. The paragraph describes Israel’s unhindered march through the wilderness toward the promised land.

### Recollection to the Lord, 3:8-15

Next Habakkuk speaks to the Lord again. v. 8 should be translated, “Did it burn, O Lord, against the rivers, your wrath against the rivers?” He recalls specific acts of God at the exodus and conquest. Vv. 8, 10, 15 describe the parting of the Red Sea and the Jordan. V. 11 recalls the battle of Gibeon in Joshua 10:

Jos 10:12 Then spake Joshua to the LORD in the day when the LORD delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon. 13 And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies.

The point of these remembrance sections is that the God who has faithfully cared for his saints in time past will not abandon them now, whatever their circumstances may be.

### Final Confidence, 3:16-19

These verses begin by reminding us of Habakkuk’s fear from v. 2. He explains that fear: that he must sit quietly while the invader comes through the land.<sup>3</sup> But vv. 17-19 tell how he has resolved the issue in his mind, based on his remembrance of God’s past interventions for his people. Even though the land must suffer the deprivations of war and exile (v. 17), he will find his joy in the Lord who has historically delivered his people. He has shifted his focus from circumstances to the Lord.

This is a very valuable lesson to learn. Too many believers in western countries think that their comfort and security is an inalienable right, which they can expect to continue indefinitely. Their trust is in their circumstances, like the immature attitude expressed in Psalm 30,

Psa 30:6 And in my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved.

Sometimes the Lord mercifully removes their prosperity to correct their error:

3 See Notes for discussion of the second half of v. 16.

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Ps 30:7 LORD, ... thou didst hide thy face, and I was troubled.

The godly attitude finds its confidence, not in circumstances, but in the Lord himself. Psalm 16 describes the attitude of the Messiah facing death, as Peter explains in Acts 2. Note his confidence:

Psa 16:8 I have set the LORD always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

Habakkuk is learning the lesson that Paul expresses to Timothy,

1Ti 6:17 Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy;

God does bless us richly, and we should give thanks to him for his bounty, but the focus of our confidence must be the Lord himself, and not his gifts:

Phi 4:11 I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. 12 I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. 13 I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

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### Notes

#### ***Last clause of 3:16***

Hab 3:16 אֲשֶׁר אֲנוֹחַ לְיוֹם צָרָה לְעַלּוֹת לְעַם יְגוֹדְנוּ:

There are two main families of interpretation. Each must deal with a challenge from the text.

1. אֲשֶׁר functions as a relative to לְעַם, as suggested by the conjunctive *merekha* on the latter word: “a people who attack us.” This people is the target of the צָרָה that is to come up: “I will wait for the day of trouble to reach the people who attack us.” This interpretation honors the accentual division, but requires an adversative sense for אֲשֶׁר, because the first half of the verse describes Habakkuk’s fear at the prophesied judgment on Israel. I can’t find a parallel for such an adversative use of אֲשֶׁר.
2. The עַם is Israel, and the final verb functions again as a relative clause, but this time as the subject to עָלָה. Now לְעַלּוֹת is parallel to יוֹם צָרָה: “the day of trouble, when the one who attacks us reaches the people [of Israel].” This reading also favors the common reference of עַם to Israel; we might have expected the Chaldeans to be described with גּוֹי. Now אֲשֶׁר can have its otherwise attested causal sense, explaining the fear that Habakkuk faces, and אֲנוֹחַ has the sense of “must rest.” “I must sit quietly while these bad things happen to Israel.” KD favor this sense, which appears to be in the mind of the AV translators. The challenge is that the disjunctive *tipcha* on לְעַלּוֹת does not reflect the phrase structure of the verse, since the final accentual clause contains both the subject and the object of עָלָה.

On balance, the second appears to be the less difficult rendering.