

The Book of Habakkuk: An Introduction

John F. Hobbins

ancientbrewpoetry.typepad.com

We know nothing about Habakkuk except that he was a prophet to whom the words of the book named after him are attributed. But that is more than enough. The “I” who speaks in Habakkuk is possessed of a faith that dares to challenge God, wait on God, and trust in God all at the same time. The God who responds to Habakkuk describes a future that is going to get worse, not better. History will remain a theatre of destruction and violence. But the hunter will become the hunted, the wheels of justice will turn, and deliverance will not fail to arrive.

As we shall explore, the book of Habakkuk describes scenes of violence from beginning to end. The agents of destruction vary. The smashing of skulls is constant. Violence calls forth violence. The ultimate avenger the book attends, the terminator of the cycle, is the God whom the prophet addresses. No Age of Aquarius is promised. No pie in the sky. The grasp of history the book encapsulates is realistic and hopeful at the same time.

History is that place where sin abounds. As Paul put it: Οὐ δὲ ἐπλεόνασεν ἡ ἀμαρτία, ὑπερεπέρισσεν ἡ χάρις (Rom 5:20). The present is the same: “where sin increases, grace abounds all the more.”

What is progress? What progress does Habakkuk envision? Walter Benjamin captures the flow of history as understood by faith since Habakkuk and before. Here is Benjamin’s Thesis IX on the concept of history, in German and English translation:

Mein Flügel ist zum Schwung bereit
ich kehrte gern zurück
denn blieb’ich auch lebendige Zeit
ich hätte wenig Glück.

Gerhard [Gershom] Scholem, *Gruß vom Angelus*

Es gibt ein Bild von Klee, das *Angelus Novus* heißt. Ein Engel ist darauf dargestellt, der aussieht, als wäre er im Begriff, sich von etwas zu entfernen, worauf er starrt. Seine Augen sind aufgerissen, sein Mund steht offen und seine Flügel sind ausgespannt.

Der Engel der Geschichte muß so aussehen. Er hat das Antlitz der Vergangenheit zugewendet. Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor uns erscheint, da sieht er eine einzige

My wing is poised to beat,
I would gladly turn back;
though if I stayed for endless days,
hapless I would remain.

Gerhard [Gershom] Scholem, *Greetings from Angelus*

There is a painting by Klee entitled *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted who looks as if he were about to distance himself from something which startles him. His eyes are peeled, his mouth hangs open, his wings are spread.

This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. What appears to us as a chain of events he sees as one single

Katastrophe, die unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft und sie ihm vor die Füße schleudert. Er möchte wohl verweilen, die Toten wecken und das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen. Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her, der sich in seinen Flügeln verfangen hat und so stark ist, daß der Engel sie nicht mehr schließen kann. Dieser Sturm treibt ihn unaufhaltsam in die Zukunft, der er den Rücken kehrt, während der Trümmerhaufen vor ihm zum Himmel wächst. Das, was wir den Fortschritt nennen, ist dieser Sturm.

catastrophe which keeps piling wreck upon wreck; it hurtles all before his feet. He would like to pause, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise which has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm carries him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of wreckage before him grows to heaven. This storm is what we call progress.

The “storm” of which Benjamin speaks is the subject matter of the book of Habakkuk. Never once does the book of Habakkuk pretend that history is progress except insofar as it is a chain of judgments of which the last is more severe than the next-to-last. As the dust of death descends on his surroundings, the prophet’s response is deafening, counter-factual, an embrace of God to which his back is not turned. After protesting disaster and hearing of impending counter-disaster, this is how the book ends (3:16-19):

I heard and my bowels quaked,
my lips quivered at the sound.

שָׁמַעְתִּי וַתִּרְגַּז בִּטְנִי
לְקוֹל צִלְלוֹ שִׁפְתֵי

Rot enters my bones,
I quake where I stand

יָבוֹא רָקֵב בְּעַצְמֵי
וַתַּחַתִּי אֶרְגַּז

while I wait for a day of distress
to visit the people who attack us.

אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹחַ לְיוֹם צָרָה
לְעֹלוֹת לְעַם יְגוֹדְנֹו:

Though the fig tree does not bud
and no yield is on the vines,

כִּי־תֵאָנֶה לֹא־תִפְרָח
וְאֵין יָבוֹל בַּגָּפְנִים

the olive crop fails
and terraces produce no food,

כַּחַשׁ מַעֲשֵׂה־זֵית
וּשְׂדֵמוֹת לֹא־עֲשָׂה אֶכְל

though flocks are cut off from the fold
and no herd is in the yards,

גָּזַר מִמִּכְלָה צֹאן
וְאֵין בָּקָר בְּרִפְתֵּים:

I rejoice in the LORD,
I exult in my saving God.

וְאָנִי בִיהוָה אֶעְלוֹזָה
אֶגִּילָה בַּאֱלֹהֵי יִשְׁעֵי:

My Lord GOD is my strength!
He made my feet like the deer’s
and makes me stride upon the heights.

יְהוָה אֲדֹנָי חִילִי
וַיִּשֶׁם רַגְלִי כְּאַיִלוֹת
וַעֲלֵ בְמוֹתַי יַדְרַכְנִי

Notes

Here and elsewhere, the translation of the Hebrew I offer is indebted to existing versions, in particular: NJPSV; NRSV; REB; NAB; NJB; and TNIV.

Walter Benjamin's 1940 *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* "On the Concept of History" is available online, [here](#). See idem, *Gesammelte Schriften I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974) 691-704. Scholem's poem on the Klee painting, a stanza of which Benjamin quotes, was written for Benjamin's twenty-ninth birthday -- July 15, 1921. In a letter dated September 19, 1933, ten years after Scholem's immigration to Palestine, he sent it to Benjamin again. My translation of the stanza is indebted to that of Richard Sieburth found in *Gershom Scholem, The Fullness of Time: Poems* (Jerusalem: Ibis, 2003). The translation of the rest of Thesis IX of "On the Philosophy of History" is indebted to that of Lloyd Spencer – once available online, but no longer. Spencer's translation depended on earlier translations like that of Harry Zohn, *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol. 4: 1938-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) 392-93.

To be continued.