Adam Clarke Commentary Habakkuk 3

Adam Clarke:

Introduction
The prophet, being apprised of the calamities which were to be brought on his country by the ministry of the Chaldeans, and the punishments which awaited the Chaldeans themselves, partly struck with terror, and partly revived with hope and confidence in the Divine mercy, beseeches God to hasten the redemption of his people, Habakkuk 3:1, Habakkuk 3:2. Such a petition would naturally lead his thoughts to the astonishing deliverance which God vouchsafed to the same people of old; and the inference from it was obvious, that he could with the same ease deliver their posterity now. But, hurried on by the fire and impetuosity of his spirit, he disdains to wait the process of connecting these ideas, and bounds at once into the midst of his subject: â€œGod came from Teman,â€• etc., Habakkuk 3:3. He goes on to describe the majesty and might which God displayed in conducting his people to the land of promise, selecting the most remarkable circumstances, and clothing them in the most lofty language. As he goes along, his fancy becomes more glowing, till at length he is transported to the scene of action, and becomes an eyewitness of the wonders he describes. â€œI beheld the tents of Cushan in affliction,â€• Habakkuk 3:4-6. After having touched on the principal circumstances of that deliverance which he celebrates, he returns to what passed before them in Egypt; his enthusiasm having led him to begin in the midst of his subject, Habakkuk 3:7-15. And at last he ends the hymn as he began it, with expressing his awe of the Divine judgments, and his firm trust in the mercy and goodness of God while under them; and that in terms of such singular beauty, elegance, and sublimity, as to form a to proper conclusion to this admirable piece of Divinely inspired composition, Habakkuk 3:16-19. It would seem from the title, and the note appended at the end, that it was set to music, and sung in the service of the temple.

Verse 1
A prayer of Habakkuk - upon Shigionoth - See the note on the title of Psalm 7 (note), where the meaning of Shiggaion is given. The Vulgate has, pro ignorantiis, for ignorances, or sins committed in ignorance; and so it is understood by the Chaldee. The Syriac has nothing but merely, A prayer of Habakkuk. And the Septuagint, instead of Shigionoth, have Î¼ÎµÏ„Î± á¿³Î´Î·Ï‚ , with a hymn, which is copied by the Arabic.
I suspect that the title here given is of a posterior date to the prophecy. It appears to interrupt the connection between this and the termination of the preceding verse. See them together: -

Habakkuk 2:20: â€œBut the Lord is in his holy temple:
Be silent before him, all the earth.
Habakkuk 3:1: O Lord, I have heard thy speech:
I have feared, O Lord, thy work.
As the years approach thou hast shown;
As the years approach thou makest known.
In wrath thou rememberest mercy.â€•

The prophet may here refer to the speech which God had communicated to him, Habakkuk 1:1-11, 2:4-20, and the terror with which he was struck, because of the judgments denounced against Jerusalem. I have followed the version of Apb. Newcome in this first verse. The critical reader may consult his notes, and the various readings of Kennicott and De Rossi.

Verse 2
In the midst of the years - ×‘×§×¨×‘ ×©× ×™×• (bekereb shanim), â€œAs the years approach.â€• The nearer the time, the clearer and fuller is the prediction; and the signs of the times show that the complete fulfillment is at hand. But as the judgments will be heavy, (and they are not greater than we deserve), yet, Lord, in the midst of wrath - infliction of punishment - remember mercy, and spare the souls that return unto thee with humiliation and prayer.

Verse 3
God came from Teman - Bp. Lowth observes: â€œThis is a sudden burst of poetry, in the true spirit of the ode; the concealed connection being that God, who had formerly displayed such power in delivering the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, might succor their posterity in a like wonderful manner.â€• Hence the prophet selects the most striking facts of that first deliverance; and to decorate and render them impressive, brings forth all the powers of his genius, in all the strength and elegance of his language. â€œWhat crowns the sublimity of this piece,â€• says Bp. Lowth, â€œis the singular elegance of the close; and were it not that antiquity has here and there thrown its veil of obscurity over it, there could not be conceived a more perfect and masterly poem of its kind.â€• See, for more particulars, his twenty-eighth Prelection.
I shall endeavor to show the facts in the deliverance from Egypt, to which the prophet refers.

Teman - This was a city, the capital of a province of Idumea, to the south of the land of Canaan. Numbers 20:21; Jeremiah 49:7.

Paran - Was a city which gave its name to a province in Arabia Petraea. Genesis 21:21; Deuteronomy 33:2.

Selah - This word is not well known; probably it means a pause or alteration in the music. See it in the Psalms, and its explanation there.

His glory covered the heavens - His glory when he descended on Mount Sinai, and in the pillar of fire by night.

The earth was full of his praise - All the land was astonished at the magnificence of his works in behalf of his people. Instead of praise, some translate splendor. The whole land was illuminated by his glory.

Verse 4
He had horns coming out of his hand - ×§×¨× ×™×• (karnayim), rays. His hand - his power - was manifested in a particular place, by the sudden issuing out of pencils of rays, which diverged in coruscations of light, so as to illuminate the whole hemisphere. Yet â€œthere was the hiding of his power.â€• His Majesty could not be seen, nor any kind of image, because of the insufferable splendor. This may either refer to the lightnings on Mount Sinai or to the brightness which occasionally proceeded from the shechinah or glory of God between the cherubim, over the mercy-seat. See Capellus and Newcome. If lightnings are intended, the dense cloud from which they proceeded may be meant by the â€œhiding of his power;â€• for when the lightnings burst forth, his power and energy became manifest.
Probably from this the Jupiter Keraunos or Jupiter Brontes of the heathens was borrowed; who is always represented with forked or zigzag lightnings in his hand.

Verse 5
Before him went the pestilence - This plague was several times inflicted on the disobedient Israelites in the wilderness; see Numbers 11:33; Numbers 14:37; Numbers 16:46; and was always the proof that the just God was then manifesting his power among them.

Burning coals event forth at his feet - Newcome translates, â€œAnd flashes of fire went forth after him.â€• The disobedient Israelites were consumed by a fire that went out from Jehovah; see Leviticus 10:2; Numbers 11:1; Numbers 16:35. And the burnt-offering was consumed by a fire which came out from before Jehovah, Leviticus 11:24.

Verse 6
He stood, and measured the earth - ×•×¨×¥ (erets), the land; he divided the promised land among the twelve tribes. This is the allusion; and this the prophet had in his eye. God not only made a general assignment of the land to the Hebrews; but he even divided it into such portions as the different families required. Here were both power and condescension. When a conqueror had subdued a country, he divided it among his soldiers. Among the Romans, those among whom the conquered lands were divided were termed beneficiary; and the lands beneficia, as being held on the beneficence of the sovereign.

He beheld, and drove asunder the nations - The nations of Canaan, the Hittites, Hivites, Jebusites, etc., and all who opposed his people. Even his look dispersed them.

The everlasting mountains were scattered - Or, broken asunder. This may refer to the convulsions on Mount Sinai; and to the earth quake which announced the descent of the Most High. See Exodus 19:18. â€œGod occupied the summit of the eternal Mount Sinai; and led his people over the eternal mountains of Arabia Petraea; and this sense is preferable to the figurative one, that his ways or doings are predetermined front everlasting.â€• - Newcome.
The epithets ×¢×“ (ad), and ×¢×•×œ×• (olam), eternal, and everlasting, are applied to mountains and immense rocks, because no other parts of nature are less subject to decay or change, than these immense masses of earth and stone, and that almost indestructible stone, granite, out of which Sinai appears to be formed. A piece of the beautiful granite of this mountain now lies before me. This is a figurative description of the passage of the Israelites through the deserts of Arabia, over mountains, rocks, and through the trackless wilderness; over and through which God, by his power and providence, gave them a safe passage.
The following beautiful piece from the Fragments of Aeschylus will illustrate the preceding description, and please the learned reader.
Î§Ï‰Ï•Î¹Î¶Îµ Î¸Î½Î·Ï„Ï‰Î½ Ï„Î¿Î½ Î´ÎµÎ¿Î½, Î°Î±Î¹ Î¼Î· Î´Î¿Î°Îµ

ÎŸÎ¼Î¿Î¹Î¿Î½ Î±Ï…Ï„á¿³ ÏƒÎ±Ï•Î°Î¹Î½Î¿Î½ Î°Î±Î¸ÎµÏƒÏ„Ï„Î±Î½Î±Î¹Â·
ÎŸÏ…Î° Î¿Î¹ÏƒÎ¸Î± Î´ â€˜ Î±Ï…Ï„Î¿Î½Â· Ï€Î¿Ï„Î¿Î½ Î¼Î¿Î½ á½¡Ï‚, Ï€Ï…Î¸Î¿Ï• Ï†Î±Î¹Î½Î¿Î¼Ï„Î±Î¹
Î‘Ï€Î»Î±ÏƒÏ„Ï„Î¿Î½ á½•Ï•Î¼á¿ƒ Ï€Î¿Ï„Î¿Î½ Î´ â€˜ á½‘Î´Ï‰Ï•, Ï€Î¿Ï„Î¿Î½ Î´Î¼ Î³Î½Î¿Ï†Î¿Ï‚,.
ÎšÎ±Î¹ Î¸Î·Ï•Î¹Î½ Î±Ï…Ï„Î¿Ï‚ Î³Î¹Î½Î¿Ï„Î¹ Ï€Î±Ï•Î¼Î¼Ï†Î¼Ï•Î·Ï‚,
Î‘Î½Î¼Î¼á¿³, Î½Î¼Ï†Î¼Î¹ Ï„Î¼, Î°á¾³ÏƒÏ„Ï•Ï•Î±Ï€á¿ƒ, Î²Ï•Î¿Î½Ï„á¿ƒ, Î²Ï•Î¿Ï‡á¿ƒ.
á½™Ï€Î·Ï•Î¼Ï„Î¼Î¹ Î´ â€˜ Î±Ï…Ï„á¿³ Î¸Î±Î»Î±ÏƒÏƒÎ±, Î°Î±Î¹ Ï€Î¼Ï„Ï•Î±Î¹,
ÎšÎ±Î¹ Ï€Î±ÏƒÎ± Ï€Î·Î³Î·, Ï‡ â€˜ á½‘Î´Ï„Ï„Î¿Ï‚, ÏƒÏ…ÏƒÏ„Î¼Î¼Î¼Î¼Î±Ï„Î¿Â·
Î¤Ï•Î¼Î¼Î¼Î¹ Î´ â€˜ Î¿Ï•Î· Î°Î±Î¹ Î³Î±Î¹Î± Î°Î±Î¹ Ï€Î¼Î»Ï‰Ï•Î¹Î¿Ï‚,
Î’Ï…Î¸Î¿Ï‚ Î¸Î±Î»Î±ÏƒÏƒÏ…Ï•Î·Ï‚, Î°Ï‰Ï•Î¼Ï‰Î½ á½‘Ï´Î¿Ï‚, Î¼Î¼Î³Î±,
ÎŸÏ„Î±Î½ Î¼Ï€Î¹Î²Î»Î¼Ï´á¿ƒ Î³Î¿Ï•Î³Î¿Ï½ Î¿Î¼Î¼Î±Ï´Î¼Ï€Ï€Î¿Ï„Î¿Ï….
Aeschyli Fragm.
Confound not God with man; nor madly deem
His form is mortal, and of flesh like thine.
Thou knowâ€˜st him not. Sometimes like fire he glows
In wrath severe; sometimes as water flows;
In brooding darkness now his power conceals
And then in brutes that mighty power reveals.
In clouds tempestuous we the Godhead find;
He mounts the storm, and rides the winged wind;
In vivid lightnings flashes from on high;
In rattling thunders rends the lowering sky;
Fountains and rivers, seas and floods obey,
And oceanâ€˜s deep abyss yields to his sway;
The mountains tremble, and the hills sink down,
Crumbled to dust by the Almightyâ€˜s frown.
When God unfolds the terrors of his eye,
All things with horror quake, and in confusion lie.
J. B. B. Clarke.

Verse 7
I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction - Cush is Arabia. The Arabians dwelt in tents, hence they were called Scenitae. When the Lord appeared on Mount Sinai, the Arabs of the Red Sea abandoned their tents, being terror-struck; and the Midianites also were seized with fear. See the desolation wrought among this people by Phinehas, Numbers 31:1, etc., on account of their having enticed the Israelites to idolatry, Numbers 25:1, etc. Either Cush and Midian lay contiguous to each other; or, these names are poetically used to express the same place.

Verse 8
Was the Lord displeased against the rivers? - Floods; here is a reference to the passage of the Red Sea. The Lord is represented as heading his troops, riding in his chariot, and commanding the sea to divide, that a free passage might be left for his army to pass over.

Verse 9
Thy bow was made quite naked - That is, it was drawn out of its case; as the arrows had their quiver, so the bows had their cases. A fine oriental bow and bow-case, with quiver and arrows, are now before me; they show with what propriety Jehovah is represented as taking his bow out of its case, in order to set his arrow upon the cord, to shoot at his enemies. It is not the drawing out, or making bare the arrow, that is mentioned here; but the taking the bow out of its case to prepare to shoot.
This verse appears to be an answer to the questions in the preceding: â€œWas the Lord displeased,â€• etc. The answer is, All this was done â€œaccording to the oaths of the tribes;â€• the covenant of God, frequently repeated and renewed, which he made with the tribes, to give them the land of the Canaanites for their inheritance.

Thou didst cleave the earth with rivers - Or, â€œThou didst cleave the streams of the land.â€• Or, â€œThou cleavedst the dry land into rivers.â€• This may be a reference to the passage of Jordan, and transactions at Arnon and the brook Jabbok. See Numbers 21:13-15.
In this verse we have Selah again, which, as before, may signify a pause, or some alteration in the music.

Verse 10
The mountains saw thee - This is the continued answer to the questions in Habakkuk 3:8. These are figures highly poetic, to show with what ease God accomplished the most arduous tasks in behalf of his people. As

soon as the mountains saw him, they trembled, they were in pangs. When he appeared, the sea fled to right and left, to give him a passage. â€œIt uttered its voice.â€• The separation of the waters occasioned a terrible noise. â€œAnd it lifted up its hands on high.â€• Its waters, being separated, stood in heaps on the right hand and left. These heaps or waves are poetically represented here as the hands of the sea.

Verse 11
The sun and moon stood still - This was at the prayer of Joshua, when he fought against the Amorites. See Joshua 10:11-12 (note), and the notes there.

At the light of thine arrows they went - I think we should translate: -
By their light, thine arrows went abroad; By their brightness, the lightning of thy spear.

Calvin very justly remarks that the arrows and spears of the Israelites are called those of God, under whose auspices the people fought: the meaning is, that by the continuation of the light of the sun and moon, then stayed in their course, the Israelites saw how to continue the battle, till their enemies were all defeated.

Verse 12
Thou didst march through the land - This refers to the conquest of Canaan. God is represented as going at the head of his people as general-in-chief; and leading them on from conquest to conquest - which was the fact.

Thou didst thresh the heathen in anger - Thou didst tread them down, as the oxen do the sheaves on the threshing-floor.

Verse 13
Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people - Their deliverance would not have been effected but through thy interference.

For salvation with thine anointed - That is, with Joshua, whom God had anointed, or solemnly appointed to fill the place of Moses, and lead the people into the promised land. If we read, with the common text, ×ž×©×™×—×š (meshichecha), â€œthy anointed,â€• the singular number, Joshua is undoubtedly meant, who was Godâ€˜s instrument to put the people in possession of Canaan: but if, with several MSS. and some copies of the Septuagint, we read ×ž×©×™×—×™×š (meshicheycha), â€œthy anointed ones,â€• the Israelites must be intended. They are frequently called Godâ€˜s anointed, or Godâ€˜s saints. The sense is very far-fetched when applied to Jesus Christ.

Thou woundedst the head out of the house of the wicked - This alludes to the slaying of the first-born through all the land of Egypt. These were the heads of the houses or families.

By discovering the foundation unto the neck - The general meaning of this clause is sufficiently plain: the government of these lands should be utterly subverted; the very foundations of it should be razed. But what means unto the neck, ×¢×“ ×¦×•×•×¨ (ad tsavvar)? Several critics read ×¢×“ ×¦×•×¨ (ad tsar), â€œUnto the Rock,â€• that on which the house is founded: and this very intelligible reading is obtained by the omission of a single letter, ×• (aleph), from the word ×¦×•×¢×¨, This conjecture has been adopted by Newcome, though unsupported either by MS. or version. But is the conjecture necessary? I think not: read the verse as it ought to be read, and all will be plain. â€œThou hast wounded the head even unto the neck, in the house of the wicked, by laying bare the foundation.â€• The whole head, neck, and all are cut off. There was no hope left to the Egyptians, because the first-born of every family was cut off, so that the very foundation was laid bare, no first-born being left to continue the heirship of families.

Verse 14
Thou didst strike through - The Hebrew will bear this sense: â€œThou hast pierced amidst their tribes the head of their troops,â€• referring to Pharaoh and his generals, who came like a whirlwind to fall upon the poor Israelites, when they appeared to be hemmed in by sea, and no place for their escape. If we follow the common reading, it seems to intimate that the troops of Pharaoh, in their confusion (for God shone out upon them from the cloud) fell foul of each other; and with their staves, or weapons, slew one another: but the head of the villages or towns, i.e., Pharaoh was drowned with his army in the Red Sea.

Verse 15
Thou didst walk through the sea - There was no occasion to hurry across; all was safe, for God had divided the waters: and his terrible cloud had removed from before, and stood behind them, so that it was between them and the Egyptians. See Exodus 14:19, Exodus 14:20.

Verse 16
When I heard, my belly trembled - The prophet, having finished his account of the wonders done by Jehovah, in bringing their fathers from Egypt into the promised land, now returns to the desolate state of his countrymen, who are shortly to be led into captivity, and suffer the most grievous afflictions; and although he had a sure word of prophecy that they should be ultimately delivered, yet the thoughts of the evils they must previously endure filled his soul with terror and dismay; so that he wishes to be removed from earth before this tribulation should come, that his eyes might not behold the desolations of his country.
When he (Nebuchadnezzar) cometh up unto the people, (the Jews), he will invade them (overpower and carry them away captive) with his troops.

Verse 17
Although the fig tree shall not blossom - ×ª×¤×¨×— (tiphrach), â€œshall not flourish,â€• shall not put forth its young figs, for the fig tree does not blossom. The young figs appear as soon as the old ones are ripe, as I have often had occasion to observe.
This verse most nervously paints the desolate state of the land of Judea during the captivity. In its hemistich form, it may be translated thus: -
For the fig tree shall not flourish,
And there shall be no fruit on the vines;
The fruit of the olive shall fail,
And the fields shall supply no food:
The flocks shall be cut off from the fold,
And no herds shall be found in the stalls:
Yet in Jehovah will I exult;
I will joy in the God of my salvation.

The Vulgate has: -
Yet I in the Lord will rejoice,
And will exult in Jesus my God.

The Targum countenances this version: - -
×•×•× ×• ×'×ž×™×ž×¨×• ×"×™×™ ×•×'×•×¢ (veana bemeimra dayai abua), â€œBut in the Word of the Lord will I rejoice,â€• i.e., the personal, substantial Word of Jehovah.
These two verses give the finest display of resignation and confidence that I have ever met with. He saw that evil was at hand, and unavoidable, he submitted to the dispensation of God, whose Spirit enabled him to paint it in all its calamitous circumstances. He knew that God was merciful and gracious. He trusted to his promise, though all appearances were against its fulfillment; for he knew that the word of Jehovah could not fail, and therefore his confidence is unshaken.
No paraphrase can add any thing to this hymn, which is full of inexpressible dignity and elegance, leaving even its unparalleled piety out of the question.

Verse 19
The Lord God is my strength - This is an imitation, if not a quotation, from Psalm 18:32-33 (note), where see the notes.

Will make me to walk upon mine high places - This last verse is spoken in the person of the people, who seem to anticipate their restoration; and that they shall once more rejoice in the hills and mountains of Judea.

To the chief singer on my stringed instruments - This line, which is evidently a superscription, leads me to suppose that when the prophet had completed his short ode, he folded it up, with the above direction to the master singer, or leader of the choir, to be sung in the temple service. Many of the Psalms are directed in the same way. â€œTo the master singer;â€• or, â€œchief musician;â€• to be sung, according to their nature, on different kinds of instruments, or with particular airs or tunes.
(Neginoth), × ×'×™× ×•×ª which we translate stringed instruments, means such as were struck with a plectrum, or excited by some kind of friction or pulsation; as violins and cymbals or tambourines are. I do not think that the line makes any part of the prophecy, but merely the superscription or direction of the work when it was finished. The ending will appear much more dignified, this line being separated from it.