

Habakkuk 3:3-7

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/hab/hab-3/habakkuk-33-7/>

Habakkuk describes the manifestation of the LORD as He comes in great power and inflicts punishment on those who oppose Him.

In the previous verses, Habakkuk stated that he had heard of the LORD's wondrous acts in Israel's past. He asked the LORD to renew His wondrous deeds among His covenant people so that the earth might acknowledge His power, even while they are in exile (vv. 1-2). In the next two sections (vv. 3-7 and vv. 8-15), the prophet provides a detailed description of the report he had heard. These two sections seem to be a reflection of the great deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

As Habakkuk reflected on the activity of God, he stated, *God comes from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran*. The name for *God* used here is not the most common word "Elohim." It is "ēlōah," a relatively rare term that emphasizes *God* as the Creator of the universe (Deuteronomy 32:15). The term "ēlōah" is parallel to the phrase *Holy One* in the second line to emphasize God's separation from and authority over His creation, as well as separation from all evil.

According to Habakkuk, *God comes from Teman and Mount Paran*. The place named *Teman* is a geographical designation that generally signifies "south" (Exodus 26:18). It was considered the principal city of Edom. In the book of Obadiah, *Teman* is used as a synonym for Edom (Obadiah 1:9). Since *Teman* means "south" (Exodus 26:18), it was likely in the far south of Edom (Amos 1:12).

The place called *Mount Paran* was a mountain located in the wilderness of *Paran*, south of the Promised Land. It was the first site where the Israelites encamped after leaving Mount Sinai "in the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth of the month" (Numbers 10:11-13). It is the place where the LORD rose in all His glory like the bright sun to shine on the Israelites during their wilderness journey (Deuteronomy 33:2). It is also the place where Ishmael dwelt (Genesis 21:21). Ishmael was the son of Abraham by Hagar (Genesis 16:4). Perhaps this geographical reference recalls the power of God in delivering Israel from Egypt, trusting that His power and love for Israel is still the same.

After stating the location from which *the LORD* would arrive, Habakkuk added the word "*selah*." The term *selah* occurs in only two books of the Bible: Psalms and Habakkuk. It occurs frequently throughout the book of Psalms (about 71 times) and three times in the third chapter of Habakkuk. It is likely a musical term that indicates a rest to the singers or musicians who performed the song. Each time a musician played a song in ancient times, he paused when he saw the word "*selah*." Perhaps the ancient Israelites paused when seeing the term *selah* to reflect on the meaning of what they heard or read, lifting their hearts in adoration and praise to God for His truth.

As God arrived on the scene, *His splendor covers the heavens*. The term translated as *splendor* is “hôdh” in Hebrew. It refers to God’s magnificent appearance; His manifest presence and glory as seen by men. God’s *splendor* is manifest in His lordship in creation and history. He is “clothed with splendor and majesty” (Psalm 104:1). Because of God’s majestic power, *the earth is full of His praise*. That means that God’s majesty and honor cause people all over the earth to respond to Him with praise (Isaiah 60:18). This might recall the manifestation of God’s presence in the fire and flame when He went before Israel (Exodus 13:21).

The LORD’s *splendor* was also active and visible in His coming: *His radiance is like the sunlight*, meaning that He shined with striking brilliance. Furthermore, *He has rays flashing from His hand*. The Hebrew word translated to English as *rays* can also refer to horns, symbolizing power and strength (1 Samuel 2:10; 16:13). Though these *rays* flashed from God’s hands, *there is the hiding of His power*. The brightness of His *splendor* concealed His *power* just as the brilliance of the sun hides the sun itself.

This could refer to the fact that God’s power is being manifested through human agency. Mere human observation might say “The Babylonians conquered Judah.” But in reality this event is God’s *radiance* that revealed His glory, even while concealing His *power*. Thus, the onlooker would see God’s glory and judgement, but might not recognize it as His power without spiritual insight. Of course this revelation allows anyone who is willing to read and gain such spiritual insight.

As Habakkuk recounts these images that seem to reflect upon the manifestation of God when He delivered Israel and judged Egypt, now this same image of God’s power is coming to Israel to bring judgement upon their Egypt-like behavior.

As the LORD marched forward in judgment, He used natural forces to demonstrate His *power*: *Before Him goes pestilence, and plague comes after Him*. The term *pestilence* (“debher” in Hebrew) denotes a fatal epidemic disease that often comes upon men and domestic animals (Exodus 9:3; Jeremiah 27:13). The term *plague* is “resheph” in Hebrew. Like the term *pestilence*, it denotes a deadly disaster, and it is contagious. In Deuteronomy, God listed it as one of the consequences of disobedience to the covenant to which His people had agreed. It was a stated provision Israel had agreed to if they disobeyed His covenantal laws (Deuteronomy 32:24). God also judged Egypt with pestilence (Exodus 8-10; Deuteronomy 8:19-20).

As the LORD advanced with all His *power* and glory, *He stood and surveyed the earth*. That means that He paused to evaluate the situation before attacking the enemy. After His thorough examination, *He looked and startled the nations*, meaning that He startled them and made them to fear. The nations were in panic mode as the all-powerful God caused *the earth* to tremble, to move from one direction to another. *Yes, the perpetual mountains were shattered, and the ancient hills collapsed*. This could refer to Babylon’s conquering of Judah, where other nations quake, wondering if they are next. But it could also refer to God causing the fall of Babylon, as He predicted in Habakkuk 2:8. The unexpected fall of such a mighty empire would naturally cause other nations to tremble.

The *mountains* and *hills* symbolize stability, durability, and security (Deuteronomy 33:15). They are the “enduring foundations of the earth” (Micah 6:2; 1 Chronicles 16:30). But God’s power caused a reversal of order. Before Him, the *mountains* broke into pieces and the *ancient hills* collapsed. Though *mountains* and *hills* may appear to be stable and unchanging, they are as mere vapor before God. Indeed, God is incomparable. He alone is truly permanent. He remains the same. *His ways are everlasting*, and His actions are always consistent with His character. Humans tend to consider what they observe in the world to be permanent, but only God is permanent. This world will perish, and be replaced by a new earth (2 Peter 3:13).

As Habakkuk looked to the south, where the LORD was coming, he noticed the effects of the LORD’s presence on two people groups. Using two parallel lines, he said, *I saw the tents of Cushan under distress, the tent curtains of the land of Midian were trembling*. The prophet used the first person pronoun to refer to himself as he described what he *saw*. The verb translated *I saw* reminds the reader of the prophetic vision Habakkuk had in the previous chapter. God gave a vision to the prophet and instructed him to record it so that anyone “who reads it may run” (Habakkuk 2:2).

Therefore, as the prophet reflected upon the vision, he *saw the tents of Cushan under distress*. The *tents of Cushan* refer to the people who dwelt in them, not *the tents* themselves. Likewise, *the tent curtains of the land of Midian* refer to the people of *Midian* who lived in them. Midian was the home of Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses. It was the land where Yahweh appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and disclosed His name (Exodus 3:1-2). At the time of this writing, the area of Midian is the oldest known archeological evidence of the name “Yahweh.”

The place called *Cushan* is probably a name for a subgroup of Midianites. It is likely in the vicinity of Edom and *Midian*, south and southeast of the Dead Sea (see map on side). The *land of Midian* is a region southeast of Israel settled by the descendants of *Midian*, one of the sons of Abraham (Genesis 25:2).

According to the prophet, the LORD would come from the south. Habakkuk predicted the route the LORD would take as He came from His holy mountain to judge Israel. The Babylonians attacked Israel from the north. So this description of God coming from the south likely refers to God’s divine judgement. As set forth in the first two chapters, God’s divine judgement would be poured out upon Judah, through the invasion of the Babylonians. Then His judgement would be poured out upon the Chaldeans/Babylonians.

As He passed by the people of *Cushan* and *Midian*, they trembled in terror. This might refer to the people of *Cushan* and *Midian* who trembled as God led Israel from Egypt. In like manner, the nations who watch God’s sovereign hand move upon nations will tremble at the ramifications of mighty empires being thrown down. They also might gain insight from God’s sovereign hand, and repent of their evil deeds (Habakkuk 2:4).

Biblical Text

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And the Holy One from Mount Paran. *Selah*.**

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And the earth is full of His praise.
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He has rays *flashing* from His hand,
And there is the hiding of His power.
⁵ Before Him goes pestilence,
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