Praying Prophets

The focus of my project lies on prayers in a prophetical context. It is based on the assumption, that certain theological themes, questions and problems are mainly discussed in speeches directly addressed to God. Therefore the following questions need to be discussed: Who included these prayers into the prophetical writings and at which point of the literary growth of these texts? What kind of theology is transported through this process? But also: What does talking about "prayer" mean (from a formal point of view)? What belongs to this sort of speech? Does a prayer have to address God coherently? Or is it sufficient if e.g. certain phrases are framing a text?

If the latter is true, the book Habakuk can as a whole be regarded as a prayer. Habakuk is the only biblical book that addresses YHWH already right in the beginning and that ends with a hymn. This is the reason why it seems to be a good starting point for the investigation. The described mixture of forms is already found in the first chapter which shall now be observed.

Observations in Habakuk

Due to a change of speakers and/or directions of speaking Hab 1:2-17 is often understood as a kind of dialog between God and petitioner. Actually Hab 1:2-17 can be divided into three parts, marked by these changes and it is possible to read them as hints for literary criticism.[1] But reading closely we do not find a dialogue: The questions asked are not answered but sharpened. Hence the first chapter of Habakuk is better understood as a kind of "dramatic prayer" posing a question which decides over the essence of theology: It is the question whether God is (still) God.

Opening section: **Hab 1:2-4** opens with a conventional lament (vv2-3; Pfeiffer). The juxtaposition of the two questions (3: לָמָּה; 4: עַד־אָנָה) is not exclusively limited to this text. However the juxtaposition underlines the severity of the opening section. While Hab 1:2 concentrates on the suffering of the lamenting person caused by the *absence of a relationship* between humankind and God, Hab 1:3 focuses on the suffering and *calamity surrounding* the praying person caused by God. The two questions are followed by a concluding remonstrance (v4).

- The description of the evil is not particularly creative but it is striking and seems to cite different prophetic books. The violence-cry (אֶזְעָק אֵלֶיךָ חָמָס) and the last four terms used to describe the situation (שֹׁד; חָמָס; רִיב; מָדוֹן) are allusions to the confessions of Jeremiah (Jer 15:10a; 20:8a). The utterances about the weakness of Torah (תָּפֻוג תּוֹרָה) and about the suppression of judgement (וְלֹא־יֵצֵא לָנֶצַח מִשְׁפָּט) cancel the promise of Isa 42:1.3.
- YHWH appears as passively tolerating this reduction of his power and might. (In v4b we can observe that a later redactor was not willing to accept this attack on YHWH's divinity:

[1] The nucleus of 1,5-11* may originally have been autonomous (cf. Pfeiffer, 140).

In his moderating addition the emergence of judgement is not stopped but corrupted – and the blame for this is placed on the wicked.)

This first part pronounces heavy questions towards God using known prophetic material and psalmistic speech at the same time and through this it elaborates a specific sort of theological speech as prayer.

The tremendous nation hardly questions God's power and might (1:5-11): In Hab 1:5 the verbs of 1:3a are repeated (רְאוּ// תַרְאֵנִי and הַבִּיטוּ// תַּבִּיט). This formal connection stresses the contrast. Instead of a positive promising answer (Heilsorakel) the following verses announce a tremendous (וְהִתְמַהְמָהוּ תְּמָהּוּ) and incredible (v5bβ) future. The often cited scheme of "punishment for the wicked - salvation of the just" cannot be found in this proclamation. Even a personal answer for the personal prayer is lacking.

- Action and speech of YHWH are limited (v6aα). The bitter and impetuous nation (vv6ff.) takes the biggest part of the action. 1:6b.7 present this nation not only as being a threat to the praying person and his people, but they also show a further decrease of YHWH's power and might, and this suggests a decrease of YHWH's divinity. One hint for this interpretation is the description of the occupied land in v6b.
  The breadth of the earth (מֶרְחֲבֵי־אֶרֶץ) mostly indicates the good and broad place in the presence of YHWH (cf. Ps 31:8). The dwellings (מִשְׁכְּנוֹת) may – admittedly in the context of prayers and psalms – point at the dwellings of YHWH, the temple (Ps 46:5; 84:2).
- v7 brings into play terms which are mostly (or even only) used for YHWH or the Day of YHWH: (שְׁאֵתוֹ; אֵימָם; נוֹרָא). By repeating terms from v4 it is stressed that the suppressed judgement of YHWH is contrasted by the emerging judgement of the enemy.
- vv8-10 describe the superiority of the nation, that allows them to laugh at the legal order. The description ends in v11 with the observation, 'their own might is their god.'

Using again psalmistic speech and motifs the growth of the foreign and terrifying nation, that has initially been caused by God, is described as a threat to his sovereignty.

Questions are getting deeper (1:12-14.15-17): The latter observation and the description of the enemy as being nearly divine prepare the ground for the question in v12. It is the central problem of the whole prayer, questioning God's divinity, asking whether YHWH is (still) the eternal and personal god.

- In vv12aγ[2] -13a the speaker tries to give an orthodox answer on his own, which forces him to ask even more seriously (v13b). This underlines the severity of the questioning of YHWHs divinity. The petitioner is not able to find a solution on his own. Traditional theology has come to an end.

[2] With BHS understood as לא תמות.

- The subsequent verse (v14) articulates (corresponding v4) a concluding remonstrance, which describes the relation between humankind and God as well as the relatedness of humankind and legal order. Both are drawn as being effectively inexistent from the beginning.
- This creational depravity of humankind in vv15-17 becomes the opportunity for the invasion of the foreign nation. At this point Hab 1 seems to leave no further chance for any (good) relationship between God and humankind.

The end of the chapter in 1:14-17 does not even leave hope for a new start of the relationship between God and humanity. However it is not the end of the book.

Outlook: The rejoicing in Hab 3:18 suggests that an answer to the problem, *whether God is (still) God,* is given in the subsequent chapters. The famous word in Hab 2:4 has been understood as a solution. But this verse does not seem to be sufficient.

To answer the question about God's divinity it is better to look at the theophany in Hab 3, in which YHWH is presented as a fighting and prevailing deity. But do these parts really fit together? Or is the answer intentionally lacking? I'll have to work this out by time.

Comparable prayers, that attack YHWH in an (unprecedented) way are e.g. found in Isa 63f. or in the confessions of Jeremiah. Contrastive to these prayers are the more 'orthodox' prayers in Isa 12, Jon 2, Dan 9 etc. Do we find examples for two (or even more) lines of theological argumentation in them? Are they deliberately opposing? Or are all these texts just incidental products of a late mixture of prophecy and prayer? These are questions for my further investigation.

LITERATURE

PFEIFFER, H., Jahwes Kommen von Süden. Jdc 5, Hab 3, Dtn 33 und Ps 68 in ihrem literatur- und theologiegeschichtlichen Umfeld, FRLANT 211, Göttingen 2005

WITTE, M., Vom Glauben in der (End-)Zeit. Ein exegetischer Spaziergang durch das Buch Habakuk, in: Linde, G. u.a. (Hg.), Theologie zwischen Pragmatismus und Existenzdenken, Marburg 2006, 323-337

PERLITT, L., Die Propheten Nahum, Habakuk, Zephanja, ATD 25,1, Göttingen 2004

GERLACH, M., Die prophetischen Liturgien des Alten Testaments, Bonn 1967.

JÖCKEN, P., Das Buch Habakuk. Darstellung der Geschichte seiner kritischen Erforschung mit einer eigenen Beurteilung, BBB 48, Bonn 1977

ALEXA F. WILKE

awilke@theologie.uni-goettingen.de