

HABAKKUK

THE BIG PICTURE – HABAKKUK – “EMBRACE”

- Historical Narrative – “Two important events frame Habakkuk’s prophecy: the great Babylonian (Chaldean) victory over the Egyptians at Carchemish (605 B.C.) and the second Babylonian invasion of Judah (587 B.C.), which ended with the destruction of Jerusalem. The desperate conditions in Judah during these years, arising from internal and external threats, provoked Habakkuk’s struggle with difficult and important theological questions about divine justice.”¹
- Redemption – “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.”²
- Christ – History is the place where sin abounds, but where sin increases, grace abounds all the more (Romans 5:20).
- Kingdom – “In the dark days of Jehoiakim's reign just before the Babylonian Captivity, the Prophet Habakkuk penned an unusual message of hope and encouragement for God's people.”³
- The New Testament Witness – “It is in Habakkuk that the famous assurance that “the just shall live by his faith” first appears (Habakkuk 2:4). This verse was quoted three times in the New Testament and eventually became the watchword of the Protestant Reformation under Martin Luther.”⁴

Modern Christian hymns have been inspired by the words of the prophet Habakkuk. The Christian hymn “The Lord is in His Holy Temple”, written in 1900 by William J. Kirkpatrick, is based on verse 2:20. The fourth verse of William Cowper's hymn “Sometimes a Light Surprises”, written in 1779, quotes Habakkuk 3:17-18.⁵

Though vine nor fig-tree neither,
 Their wonted fruit shall bear,
 Though all the field should wither,
 Nor flocks nor herds be there;
 Yet God the same abiding,
 His praise shall tune my voice,
 For, while in Him confiding,
 I cannot but rejoice.
 — William Cowper, 1779

INTRODUCTION

“Realizing Israel’s iniquity and need for punishment, Habakkuk is perplexed with the moral dilemma of how a holy God could employ the more deplorably wicked Chaldeans to chastise His children. God responds by asserting His sovereign prerogative as to the choice and the timing of His retribution. Though it may appear unreasonable, His way is best.”⁶

This book is an answer to the existence of evil in today’s world. Why is there evil? Habakkuk answers the questions with the more profound statement, “the just shall live by faith” (2:4). Faith believes even when it does not understand. God is not obligated to answer the charges against Him. In fact God expects obedience despite our inability to lay hold of His majestic purposes.

I. WHEN WAS THE BOOK WRITTEN?

A. His historical context

"It is generally accepted that the reference to the Babylonians (1:6) places the book within the seventh century BC (@609 BC)."⁷

“The prophecy is generally dated a little before or after the battle of Carchemish (605), when Egyptian forces, which had earlier gone to the aid of the last Assyrian king, were routed by the Babylonians under Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar and were pursued as far as the Egyptian border (Jer. 46). Habakkuk, like Jeremiah, probably lived to see the initial fulfillment of his prophecy when Jerusalem was attacked by the Babylonians in 597.”⁸

"The conditions would seem to place the prophecy early in the reign of Jehoiakim (609-597)."⁹

Judah is about to fall into the hands of the Babylonians. "Habakkuk was the last of the minor prophets writing to the southern kingdom before the Babylonian captivity in 606 BC, just as Micah was the final prophet to the northern kingdom prior to the Assyrian captivity in 721 BC."¹⁰

"Habakkuk's time of ministry was a period of anxiety and distress. The days of peace, prosperity, and reform of Josiah were gone, and a period of stress and wickedness was present."¹¹

B. His global context

663 The Fall Of Thebes • 612 Nineveh Destroyed • Kings of Israel : Destroyed in 722 BC by the Assyrians • Kings of Judah : Josiah • Prophets Who Were Contemporary With Habakkuk (Judah) : Jeremiah (Judah) • 612 BC: An alliance of Medes, Babylonians and Susianians besiege and conquer Nineveh. • c.612 BC: Babylon, capital of Babylonia becomes the largest city of the

world, taking the lead from Nineveh, capital of Assyria. • 609 BC: King Josiah of Judah dies in the Battle of Megiddo against Pharaoh Necho II of Egypt, who is on his way north to aid the rump Assyrian state of Ashur-uballit II. • 609 BC: Jehoahaz succeeds his father Josiah as King of Judah, but is quickly deposed by Necho, who installs Jehoahaz's brother Jehoiakim in his place. • 606 BC: King Ding of Zhou becomes King of the Zhou Dynasty of China. • 605 BC: Battle of Carchemish: Crown Prince Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon defeats the army of Necho II of Egypt, securing the Babylonian conquest of Assyria. • 605 BC: Nebuchadrezzar II succeeds his father Nabopolassar as King of Babylon. • 600 BC: Foundation of Capua. • 600 BC: India – Age of the Mahajanapadas • 600 BC: Foundation of Milan by Celts (approximate date). • 600 BC: Foundation of Marseille by Phocéans (traditional date). • 600 BC: Nebuchadrezzar builds the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

C. His contemporaries

ZEPHANIAH	HABAKKUK	LAMENTATIONS (written by Jeremiah)
Decades before the fall of Jerusalem (c. 630)	Just before the fall of Jerusalem (c. 607)	Just after the fall of Jerusalem (586)
God will judge	God: When will You judge?	God has judged
Preview of trouble	Promise of trouble	Presence of trouble
Declaration	Dialogue	Dirge
Day of the Lord	Dominion of the Lord	Destruction of the Lord
God is in your midst (see 3:15, 17)	God is your strength (see 3:19)	God is your portion (see 3:24)

Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983), 280.

II. WHO WROTE THE BOOK?

“He calls himself “Habakkuk the prophet,” and this is one of only two cases (Haggai 1:1) where one of the canonical prophets so identifies himself.”¹²

“The simple designation “the prophet” with no other identifying description characterizes only two other prophetic books: Haggai and Zechariah. So Habakkuk is the only book so designated among the pre-exilic Prophets. The content of the book, which includes wisdom literature and a psalm of praise, indicates that Habakkuk was a poet as well as a prophet.”¹³

Habakkuk means 'embrace.' (Archer sees the name as having 'an unusual one of uncertain meaning.'¹⁴ "Though Habakkuk is specifically called a prophet, his book resembles the literary style of the Psalms and the Wisdom books. The concluding note in his book, 'for the director of music. On my stringed instruments' (3:19), suggests that Habakkuk may have been a musician of the Levitical office."¹⁵

"Rabbinic tradition has identified Habakkuk as the son of the Shunammite woman (based on the term "embrace," 2 Ki 4:16)."¹⁶

"The interesting note at the end of the book to the effect that the composition had been dedicated to his chief singer might indicate that Habakkuk was a musician as well as a prophet."¹⁷

"Habakkuk was a contemporary of Zephaniah (Nahum and Zephaniah were likely now dead¹⁸ and Jeremiah who predicted the Babylonians invasion and the destruction of Jerusalem."¹⁹

"Little is known about Habakkuk except that he was **a contemporary of Jeremiah** and a man of vigorous faith rooted deeply in the religious traditions of Israel. **The account of his ministering to the needs of Daniel in the lions' den in the Apocryphal book *Bel and the Dragon* is legendary rather than historical.**"²⁰

III. TO WHOM WAS THE BOOK WRITTEN?

Though he was a prophet to Judah, the work itself is "somewhat unique in that it includes no oracle addressed to the nation. It contains, rather, a dialogue between the prophet and God."²¹

Habakkuk is one of three prophets who have prophecies against other nations:

- Nahum--against Assyria
- Habakkuk--against Babylon
- Obadiah--against Edom

These three countries/empires afflicted God's people throughout their history.

IV. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK?

Habakkuk wrote in a time of international crisis and national corruption. Babylon had just emerged as a world power. When the Babylonians rebelled against Assyria, Judah found a brief period of relief reflected in the reforms initiated by Josiah.

The Babylonians would be God's instrument in punishing the nation of Judah in the midst of this Habakkuk asks the question, 'how can God use an ungodly nation to punish God's chosen people?' God's response to Habakkuk is, 'the just shall live by faith.'

Habakkuk knew that Judah must fall, but questioned God as to why Babylon would be His instrument of choice.

"The theme of this prophecy concerns the problems of faith in the face of apparent difficulties

hindering the fulfillment of God's promises. These difficulties are grappled with and solved in the light of God's continuing revelation, and the prophet closes in a psalm of joyous trust."²²
 "THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY ... FAITH (2:4)"

"[Habakkuk] learns that the principle upon which God deals with men is that the just shall live in his faithfulness, whereas the proud and wicked shall perish. That is, evil is by its very nature self-destructive, whereas the righteous shall live in his faithfulness (Hab. 2:4, 5-20)."²³

V. SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION

"Along with Zephaniah and Jeremiah, Habakkuk warned of God's approaching judgment through the Chaldeans, (Babylonians). Nineveh, the capital of the once-mighty Assyrian Empire, fell to the Babylonians in 612 BC. Seven years later (605BC) Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon defeated Pharaoh-necho of Egypt at Carchemish (on the Euphrates), then pursued the Egyptians back through Palestine. In so doing, Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem and took hostages, including Daniel (Dan. 1:1), and doubtless would have conquered the city, if word of the death of his father (Nabopolassar) had not reached him, causing to return immediately to Babylon to ascend the throne."²⁴

VI. AN OUTLINE FOR HABAKKUK

"The book abounds in striking expressions and rare words, *e.g.*, the description of the invasion of the Chaldeans (i. 6 *et seq.*); of God as having "eyes too pure to behold evil" (i. 13); of "men as fishes of the sea" (i. 14); of the worship of the fisherman's implements (i. 16); of "the stone that crieth out" (ii. 11); of the folly of idolatry (ii. 18-19). Ch. iii. especially is rich in striking similes (14-15). The book is remarkable also for originality. The author departs from the usual method of the Prophets. In their addresses the nation is central; in Habakkuk's it is God and His government of the world. He attempts to unravel the meaning of God's tolerance of tyranny and wrong. In his questions Habakkuk voices doubts to God, though not against God."²⁵

"The subscription at the end of chapter three may indicate that this was to be part of the liturgical singing done at the Temple."²⁶

"The major thrust of his book is that the holiness of God be properly recognized in his day."²⁷

"The book of Habakkuk contains a single prophecy arranged in two parts. In the first division (chaps. 1-2) there is a dialogue between the prophet and God concerning an announcement of judgment upon the kingdom of Judah at the hands of the Chaldeans. The second section (chap. 3) is a poetic prayer and a theophany of God who comes to judge the world and deliver His people as in ancient times."²⁸

"In many ways the prophecy of Habakkuk is unique. It is especially noteworthy in the style of its approach. Instead of addressing the people directly as a spokesman of the Lord, Habakkuk

imparted God's message by telling them how it first came to him and answered the questions that were rising in his soul. With the possible exception of Daniel, no other biblical author employs this particular technique."²⁹

The book may be divided as follows:

- I. Habakkuk's First Complaint (1:2-4)
- II. God's Response (1:5-11)
- III. Habakkuk's Second Complaint (1:12-2:1)
- IV. God's Response (2:2-4)
- V. Sayings Against Tyrants (2:5-20)
- VI. Hymn About God's Reign (3:1-19)

A. A Dialogue with God: Habakkuk previewed God's discipline of Judah (Chap 1)

1. Habakkuk's distress (vv. 1-4)

You can just hear the pain of the prophet in the verses. "How can a holy God permit ungodliness to go unchecked?"

"Habakkuk was perplexed that wickedness, strife and oppression were rampant in Judah but God seemingly did nothing. When told that the Lord was preparing to do something about it through the "ruthless" Babylonians (1:6), his perplexity only intensified: How could God, who is "too pure to look on evil" (1:13), appoint such a nation "to execute judgment" (1:12) on a people "more righteous than themselves" (1:13)?"³⁰

2. God's disclosure (vv. 5-11)

God responds to Habakkuk's grief and distress. God tells him that Judah would indeed be punished by the Babylonians.

3. Habakkuk's dilemma (vv. 12-17)

How can God use a pagan nation to punish His people? God tells him the Chaldeans would indeed be punished, but only at his appointed time.

B. A Dirge from God: Habakkuk pronounced God's destruction of Babylon (Chap 2)

1. Habakkuk's anticipation: 'Watch' (2:1)

2. God's admonition: 'Write' (2:2-5)

Write down what you will see that all may be warned. "The answer to this [questions raised in chapter 1] was given in Habakkuk 2:4, which showed that human arrogance carries within itself the seeds of its own ruin, whereas the man of faith is assured of an existence pursued in the light of divine favor."³¹

3. Habakkuk's annotation: 'Woe' (2:6-20)
 - a. Woe for Intimidation / Browbeating (vv. 6-8)
 - b. Woe for Intemperance / Excess (vv. 9-11)
 - c. Woe for Iniquity / Evil (vv. 12-14)
 - d. Woe for Indignity / Injury (vv. 15-17)
 - e. Woe for Idolatry (vv. 18-20)

- C. A Doxology to God: Habakkuk praised God's design of creation (Chap 3)
 1. Habakkuk's Prayer for Mercy (3:1, 2)
 2. God's Presence of Majesty (3:3-15)
 3. Habakkuk's Peace in Ministry (3:16-19)
 - a. The soul of the prophet is revived (v. 2)
 - b. The eyes of the prophet are reassured (vv. 3-16)
 - c. The heart of the prophet is rejoiced (v. 18)
 - d. The feet of the prophet are renewed (v. 19)

VII. KEY DOCTRINAL IDEAS IN HABAKKUK

"The major theme of Habakkuk is trying to grow from a faith of perplexity and doubt to the height of absolute trust in God. Habakkuk addresses his concerns over the fact that God will use the evil Babylonian empire to execute judgment on Judah for their sins."³²

The purpose of the book, then, was to vindicate the justice of God so God's people would have hope and encouragement. "Until the day God avenges the Babylonians and restores Jerusalem, the just live by faith (Hab. 2:1-4), waiting with confidence for the fulfillment of *I AM*'s unfailing promise that the wicked will be destroyed (2:5-19) and his legitimate claim to the whole world will be universally acknowledged (3:1-16)."³³

- A. God may do as He pleases with the nations of the world

"Habakkuk is the only prophet to devote his entire work to the question of the justice of God's government of the world. In the Bible as a whole, only Job delivers a more pointed challenge to divine rule."³⁴

- B. God does not answer to any one

APPLICATION

- God has a purpose for evil, are you willing to submit under His perfect will?
- Are you willing to believe God even when you do not understand His will?
- May today be marked by a glad submission under His sovereign purposes.

¹ <http://www.nccbuscc.org/bible/habakkuk/0>

² http://ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com/ancient_hebrew_poetry/2009/03/the-book-of-habakkuk-an-introduction.html

³ J. Ronald Blue, "Habakkuk," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty – Old Testament, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 1507.

⁴ <http://www.icr.org/books/defenders/5257/>

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Habakkuk

⁶ *The Criswell Study Bible* on Habakkuk.

⁷ J. Ronald Blue, "Habakkuk," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty – Old Testament, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 1506.

⁸ <http://www.biblica.com/niv/study-bible/habakkuk/>

⁹ Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 254.

¹⁰ *Willmington's Guide to the Bible*, 198.

¹¹ Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 325.

¹² <http://www.icr.org/books/defenders/5257/>

¹³ <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/habakkuk.pdf>

¹⁴ Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 355.

¹⁵ J. Ronald Blue, "Habakkuk," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty – Old Testament, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 1506.

¹⁶ <http://bible.org/article/introduction-book-habakkuk>

¹⁷ Eugene H. Merrill, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1966), 294.

¹⁸ Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 325.

¹⁹ Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 251.

²⁰ <http://www.biblica.com/niv/study-bible/habakkuk/>

²¹ <http://www.biblica.com/niv/study-bible/habakkuk/>

²² Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 356.

²³ Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 251.

²⁴ *The Criswell Study Bible* on Habakkuk.

²⁵ G. A. Smith, "The Twelve Prophets," ii. 130 *et seq.* <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6976-habakkuk-book-of>

²⁶ <http://bible.org/article/introduction-book-habakkuk>

²⁷ Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 325.

²⁸ Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 251.

²⁹ Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 358.

³⁰ <http://www.biblica.com/niv/study-bible/habakkuk/>

³¹ Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 937.

³² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Habakkuk

³³ <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/habakkuk.pdf> Also sighting Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 842.

³⁴ <http://www.nccbuscc.org/bible/habakkuk/0>