

# HABAKKUK

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## Introduction to Habakkuk

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### 1. Historical Background and Date

Habakkuk's prophecy is set against a background of the decline and fall of the Judean kingdom (c. 626-586 B.C.). Although nothing is known of the prophet himself apart from the book bearing his name—the book is not dated in the usual manner (cf. Amos 1:1; Zeph 1:1; et al.)—the general background of Habakkuk is clear from the internal data. Verses 5-11 represent a period before 605, the year the Babylonians (the Chaldeans [*kasdim*], 1:6) rose to power (cf. v.5: "you would not believe, even if you were told"), and probably prior to the 612 destruction of Nineveh. By contrast it is sometimes argued that 1:12-17 and 2:6-20 must reflect a period after 612 B.C. (so Ellison et al.), when the power and rapacity of the Babylonians had become common knowledge to the prophet. Various solutions have been proposed, but the best seems to be found in taking the sections of the dialogue as representative of Habakkuk's spiritual struggles over a long period of time, possibly beginning as early as 626 and continuing as late as 590 or after.

During this period Judah enjoyed its last bit of prosperity under Josiah (died 609 B.C.); Assyria's wound was revealed as fatal with the ultimate fall of Nineveh in 612 and the short-lived Babylonian Empire established its dominance over Palestine, with Jerusalem a casualty and its people taken into exile in 586 B.C. Conditions during the life of the prophet would have progressed from excellent—with considerable material prosperity and even promise of spiritual revival—to the height of desperation as the net was drawn closer and closer around the hapless capital. There is no direct evidence from the book that Habakkuk lived past the destruction of Jerusalem, though some find such evidence in 3:16-19 (cf. commentary).

## 2. Unity

The major challenge to unity comes with chapter 3, the psalm. Stylistic shifts from the narrative portions and the older critical tendency to date psalmic material in the postexilic period have combined to call the authenticity of chapter 3 in question. The failure of the Qumran "commentary" to include an exposition of the psalm has, for some scholars, added weight to the denial of Habakkuk's authorship. Against this is the clear note of continuity of theme in all three chapters and, in general, the lack of any compelling reasons not to accept the book's attribution of the psalm to Habakkuk.

## 3. Authorship

Nothing is known of Habakkuk except his name, which does not lend itself to attempts at finding a Hebrew meaning (contra Luther et al.). Of his temperament and personal situation, we know only what may be inferred from the book. Literary dependences and early canonical reception leave no doubt that Habakkuk's work was circulated and accepted early, but the details remain lost.

## 4. Occasion and Purpose

Prophecy is a result of revelation given to a person who then proclaims the inspired message to the people. Often such revelation and inspiration are occasioned by conditions in the nation (with the exception of Jonah and Jer 27, prophecy is always proclaimed to Israel, even when about other nations) about which the prophet has been burdened.

Habakkuk was unique among the prophets because he did not speak for God to the people but rather spoke to God about his people and nation. The similarity with the other prophets is in the setting: the people of God, covenantally bound to him since the days of the Exodus, had sharply fallen away from those covenant standards (1:2-4). Violence and law-breaking (covenant violations) abounded, and the wicked seemed at least superficially to triumph. According to all that Habakkuk knew about God's holiness and covenant (cf. Deut 26-33, on which Habakkuk seemed dependent), Yahweh should have arisen to correct the situation, particularly in response to believing prayer for change by such as Habakkuk. Such correction had not been forthcoming, and the prayers of the righteous and the struggle for justice in the land seemed in vain, with the result that God's program of redemptive history was threatened.

The early part of the prophecy of Habakkuk is a dialogue in which the prophet's questions receive divine answers. Externally, the Assyrians would naturally have been a threat to Judah; and apart from the problem of the future of God's covenant promises, the prophet would have expected Assyria to be "the rod of God's anger." The new element externally is the introduction of Babylonian power, with such awful potential consequences and with no clear vision of when and how Yahweh would continue his commitments to the chosen line. But initially Habakkuk was more concerned with internal injustices and Yahweh's apparent complacency toward the

evil generation. It was God's reply (1:5-11) that catapulted the prophecy onto the international and eschatological level.

Larger questions quickly engulf the local concerns, and chapters 2-3 carry us well beyond the last days of Judah to the future. Habakkuk himself was never told when or exactly how it would end, but 2:14, 20 assured him of the ultimate triumph of Yahweh; and the psalm in chapter 3 shows that Habakkuk learned to live in the light of this fact.

## 5. Structure

Habakkuk 1:1-2:5 clearly is a dialogue between God and the prophet in which two stylized complaints are answered by two penetrating replies. The opening complaint (1:2-4) has to do with Judah's moral and spiritual decline and the apparent unwillingness of Yahweh to intervene. The first reply (1:5-11) sets forth the coming destruction of Judah by Babylon as Yahweh's discipline for errant Judah. For the patriotic and nationalistic covenant Israelite, this was hardly a solution: 1:12-17 sets forth the complaint that such a solution would only aggravate the problem of God's working in history and the apparent compounding of injustice. Habakkuk 2:1 leaves the prophet sitting on his spiritual tower awaiting an answer; and vv.2-5, the central message of the prophecy, foresee ultimate justice for the arrogant Chaldean and call for the righteous man, in the intervening years, to live by his faith (or "faithfulness," mg.).

Habakkuk 2:6-20 is a taunt or mocking song put in the mouths of the nations that had suffered at the hand of Babylon. It consists of five "woes," punctuated by a vision of the universal knowledge of God's glory (v.14) and climaxed by a call for reverent submission to the Lord of history, who through all the vicissitudes of history remains seated in his holy temple (v.20). In typical prophetic form the taunt moves from the third to the second person, and the subject matter—with the exception of the fifth woe, which opposes idolatry—deals with a nation arrogantly building its own power at the expense of its less-able neighbors.

Habakkuk 3:1-19 is a psalm, replete with musical directions (v.1: *sigyonot*, ["*shigionoth*"]; cf. Ps 7:1, and v.19: *neginot* ["stringed instruments"]). Because of its unique features, we have left fuller discussion to the commentary.

## 6. Theological Values

Habakkuk's message, the core of which is found in 2:4, forms a basic point in three NT books. Paul, in Romans 1:17, introduced his gospel as one of salvation by faith, as opposed to salvation by works, and cited Habakkuk 2:4 "the righteous will live by his faith"—as OT support for his argument. Galatians 3:11-12 sets forth faith as the antithesis of law or legal salvation, and again Habakkuk 2:4 serves as a proof-text. Finally, in an intriguing passage from Hebrews 10:37-38, Habakkuk 2:3-4 is again quoted; but the context focuses on the pending arrival of the fulfillment of the vision and the identification of the Hebrews with those who have faith and thus persevere under pressure.

The theological value of Habakkuk, however, cannot be limited to a few, though crucial, NT quotations. The prophet asked some of the most penetrating questions in all literature, and the answers are basic to a proper view of God and his relation to history. If God's initial response sounded the death knell for any strictly nationalistic covenant theology of Judah, his second reply outlined in a positive sense the fact that all history was hastening to a conclusion that was certain as it was satisfying.

In the interim, while history is still awaiting its conclusion (and Habakkuk was not told when the end would come, apparently for him prefigured by Babylon's destruction), the righteous ones are to live by faith. The faith prescribed—or "faithfulness," as many have argued that *emunah* should be translated—is still called for as a basic response to the unanswered questions in today's universe; and it is this, a theology for life both then and now, that stands as Habakkuk's most basic contribution.

## 7. Canonicity

Habakkuk was early grouped with the other so-called Minor Prophets in the Book of the Twelve (attested as such in Ecclus 49:10 [c.190 B.C.]), the acceptance of which is never questioned, either in Jewish or Christian circles. Questions of the unity of the book do not seem to have affected its acceptance, and in fact there is no ancient record of a dispute over chapter 3.

## 8. Outline (References in outline are tied to commentary.)

- I. Habakkuk's Initial Lament (1:1-4)
- II. God's First Response (1:5-11)
- III. Habakkuk's Second Lament (1:12-2:1)
- IV. God's Second Response (2:2-20)
  - A. Prologue (2:2-3)
  - B. Indictment (2:4-5)
  - C. Sentence (2:6-20)
- V. The Prayer of Habakkuk (3:1-19)
  - A. Introduction (3:1)
  - B. Prayer (3:2)
  - C. Theophany (3:3-15)
  - D. Response (3:16-19a)
  - E. Epilogue (3:19b)