

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Message:

Faith in God is essential because God's sovereignty is not always readily apparent.

Author:

Many commentators believe that Habakkuk's name was derived from the Hebrew word "habaq" which means "to fold one's hands or embrace." But this etymology is by no means certain.¹ In any case, Habakkuk identifies himself as a prophet (חֲבַקּוּק, see 1:1; 3:1) Other than his name and title, little else is known about Habakkuk. Some have speculated that he was a Levitical musician based on the statement in 3:19. Another tradition identifies Habakkuk as the son of the Shunammite woman who was raised from the dead by Elisha. Proponents point to Elisha's promise "You shall embrace a son" (2 Kgs 4:16) and link it to the supposed meaning of Habakkuk's name "embrace." According to the apocryphal book *Bel and the Dragon*, Habakkuk ministered to the prophet Daniel (*Bel* 33-39).²

Recipients:

It is generally accepted that Habakkuk was written to Judah (the Southern Kingdom). The demise of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. and the reference to an imminent Babylonian threat (1:6; 2:1; 3:16) leave very little doubt regarding the original audience.

Dating:

Although "dates ranging from 700 to 300 have been suggested,"³ most commentators place Habakkuk around 600 B.C. This dating is based on several historical clues. For example, the reference to the Chaldeans (Babylonians) coming in ferocity (1:6) suggests a date prior to the first Babylonian incursion into Judah in 605. Furthermore, the absence of any reference to the strategic city of Nineveh may suggest a date after its destruction in 612 B.C. Some commentators suggest that Habakkuk's portrayal of an immoral Judah best fits a date after Josiah's reforms which ended with his death in 609 B.C. and during the reign of wicked Jehoiakim. Taken together these clues seem to point to a date around 607–605 B.C.

¹ "Some ancient rabbis connected his name to the word חֲבַקּוּק "embrace" in 2 Kgs 4:16. Most modern scholars consider the name to be an Accadian word for a garden plant" (Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*. Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 32 [Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1998], 93.

² "One manuscript of *Bel and the Dragon* says that Habakkuk was the son of Jesus of the tribe of Levi" (Ibid.). In the story, Habakkuk who has made a stew to take to feed some harvesters encounters an angel who lifts him by the hair and carries him from Judah to Babylon where Daniel has been placed in a lions' den for killing a dragon that the people worshipped. Habakkuk feeds Daniel the stew and then is brought back to Judah. But this story appears to be purely legendary.

³ William Sanford La Sor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 449.

Historical Setting:

The times of Habakkuk were characterized by threats from without and corruption from within. The declining Assyrians were giving way to the rising Babylonians. Whatever respite that Judah had briefly experienced during this time of transition between world powers would soon be brought to an end, culminating ultimately in the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and the exile of the people. Josiah's reforms had not lasted beyond his death in 609 B.C. At the same time, Judah was disintegrating within. The country was corrupt socially, morally, and religiously.

Purpose:

Habakkuk wrote to show that God is righteous to judge His people and that uncertain times need to be met by a certain faith. The prophet attempts to accomplish these purposes by detailing his own journey from confusion to confidence. He begins with "why" and ends with worship. God's people throughout the ages have found it to be both a source of warning and a source of hope.

Contribution:

Although much of the content of Habakkuk is not unique, the means that the prophet uses to communicate the content is unique. The majority of the book consists of a dialogue between Habakkuk and Yahweh. This dialogue and its subsequent psalm of praise also provide perhaps the clearest attempt of providing a theodicy⁴ in all the prophet writings.

Habakkuk and the Other Prophets:⁵

ZEPHANIAH	HABAKKUK	LAMENTATIONS
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)

⁴ A theodicy is basically "A vindication of the justice of God in permitting evil to exist." See F. B. Huey Jr. and Bruce Corley, *A Student's Dictionary for Biblical and Theological Studies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 189.

⁵ Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983), 280.

Habakkuk in the New Testament:

Perhaps one of the most significant New Testament quotations from the Old Testament comes from Habakkuk 2:4. This quotation appears in Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; and Hebrews 10:38. As Ellisen notes, “Few verses of the Bible have had such a profound effect in the development of theology and the proclamation of the faith.”⁶ Other references to Habakkuk occur in a quotation in Acts 13:41 of Habakkuk 1:5 and allusions in Luke 13:6 (Hab 3:17); 1 Corinthians 12:2 (Hab 2:18–19); and 2 Peter 3:9 (Hab 2:3).

Literary Issues:

The most distinctive literary feature of Habakkuk is its dialogical form and autobiographical style. The prophet bares his soul to God and the reader through emotive language (e.g., 1:2; 3:16) and arresting imagery (e.g., 3:19).

Some have denigrated the literary artistry of Habakkuk. For example, Carroll defines Habakkuk “As a ragtag of traditional elements held together by vision and prayer. Habakkuk illustrates the way prophetic books have been put together in an apparently slapdash fashion.”⁷ Fortunately, not everyone shares Carroll’s evaluation of the book. Habakkuk is a carefully arranged and unified whole.⁸ The diverse literary forms should not be seen as incompetence but as creativity.

RHETORICAL FEATURES IN HABAKKUK ⁹		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proverb (1:9; 2:6) • Simile (1:8b, 9b, 14; 2:5; 3:4, 14, 19) • Metaphor (1:8a, 9a, 11a, 15-17; 2:16; 3:8-10, 11, 14) • Allegory (2:15-16) • Metonymy (2:5; 3:2, 9) • Merisms (3:7) • Hendiadys (1:15?; 2:2a) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hyperbole (1:6-11; 3:6b, 11) • Paronomasia (2:19; 3:13-14a) • Personification (1:7-11; 2:5-11; 3:2, 5, 7, 10) • Rhetorical Questions (1:12; 2:13, 18; 3:8) • Repetition (1:15b-17) • Synecdoche (3:7) • Alliteration and Assonance (1:6, 10; 2:6, 7, 15, 18; 3:2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjambment (1:13; 2:18; 3:4) • Gender-matched parallelism (2:5; 3:3) • Staircase Parallelism (3:8) • Climactic parallelism (3:2) • Pivot-pattern parallelism (1:17) • Chiasmus (1:2, 3, 4; 2:1, 6, 9, 14, 16; 3:3) • Inclusio (2:4-20)

⁶ Stanley A. Ellisen, *Knowing God's Word* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 255.

⁷ Robert P. Carroll, “Habakkuk,” in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (London: SCM, 1990), 269.

⁸ Barker and Bailey suggest that Habakkuk is a long unified lament. See Kenneth L. and Waylon Bailey Barker, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 272.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 270-71.

Structure:

- I. Superscription (1:1)
- II. Habakkuk's Problem (1:2–2:20)
 - A. Habakkuk's First Question (1:2–4)
 - B. God's First Response (1:5–11)
 - C. Habakkuk's Second Question (1:12–2:1)
 - D. God's Second Response (2:2–20)
- III. Habakkuk's Praise (3:1-19)
 - A. The Prophet Prays (3:1–2)
 - B. The Prophet Praises (3:3–15)
 - C. The Prophet Persists (3:16–19)

Chart

Habakkuk's Problem (1:2–2:20)					Habakkuk's Praise (3:1–19)		
Superscription (1:1)	Habakkuk's First Question	God's First Response	Habakkuk's Second Question	God's Second Response	The Prophet Prays	The Prophet Praises	The Prophet Persists
	1:2–4	1:5–1:11	1:12–2:1	2:2–2:20	3:1–2	3:3–15	3:16–19
Present Work Of God					Past Work Of God		

Expositional Outline of Habakkuk:

- I. **SUPERSCRPTION (1:1)**
- II. **HABAKKUK'S PROBLEM (1:2–2:20)**
 - A. Habakkuk's First Question (1:2–4)
 - 1. God is indifferent (v. 2)–

2. God is inactive (vv. 3–4) –

Before judging and condemning Habakkuk for questioning God note what his concern says about his character.

1. He was concerned about the evil of his day and was grieved about sin. **Are you?**
2. He understood the power & sovereignty of God (notice who he calls in v. 2). **Do you?**
3. He prayed persistently (“How long... will I call for help,” v. 2). **Do you?**

B. God’s First Response (1:5–11)

1. Look I am working (v. 5) –
2. Look at what is to come (vv. 6–11) –

C. Habakkuk’s Second Question (1:12–2:1)

1. The prophet addresses God again (1:12-17)
2. The prophet awaits God’s answer (2:1)

D. God’s Second Response (2:2–20)

1. The Word of the Lord (vv. 2–5) –

THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF “that the one who reads it may run”

1. Write the message large enough to be easily read.
2. Write the message with clarity so that the message would be understood.
3. Write the message so that people will carry the message to others.

2. The woes of the Lord (vv. 6–20) –

HABAKKUK'S FIVE WOES (2:6-20)¹⁰					
Element	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Invective:	v. 6	v. 9	v. 12	v. 15	v. 19a
Woe to the:	Plunderer	Plotter	Pillager	Perverter	Polytheist
Threat:	v. 7	v. 11	v. 13	v. 16	v. 19b
He will be:	Despoiled	Denounced	Destroyed	Disgraced	Deserted
Criticism:	v. 8	v. 10	v. 14	v. 17	vv. 18, 20
Grounded in:	Spoiling of the nations	Scheming against peoples	Surety of the knowledge of God	Stripping of man/nature	Supremacy of God

III. HABAKKUK'S PRAISE (3:1–19)

A. The Prophet Prays (3:1–2)

1. The introduction (v. 1) –

2. The intercession (v. 2) –

B. The Prophet Praises (3:3–15)

1. The appearances of God (vv. 3–4)

2. The acts of God (vv. 5–15)

¹⁰ Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 184.

- C. The Prophet Persists (3:16–19)
1. The fear of the prophet (v. 16) –
 2. The faith of the prophet (vv. 17–18) –
 3. The following of the prophet (v. 19a) –
 4. The final instructions (v. 19b) –

Honesty (in his relationship with God)
Asking (the questions on his heart)
Believing (God's justice and holiness)
Answers (received from God)
Knowledge (that God is the great
King)
Understanding (God's purposes)
KeeP (waiting patiently in faith)

–Peter Head

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