

HABAKKUK

Outlined Bible

Personal Background

The name *Habakkuk* is an unusual one of uncertain meaning. Some feel it comes from the Hebrew word *Habaq* which means "to embrace" --- thus, his name would signify an "ardent embrace." "At the end of his book this name becomes appropriate because Habakkuk chooses to cling firmly to (embrace) God regardless of what happens to his nation --- 3:16-19" (*Expanded Open Bible*). Jerome preferred the idea of embracing so as to wrestle, "because he wrestled with God." Martin Luther seemed to favor this idea, saying, "It is certainly not unfitting, for in this little book we see a man, in deadly earnest, wrestling with the mighty problem of theodicy (the divine justice) in a topsy-turvy world."

Others have suggested that his name was derived from an Assyrian flower --- *Hambaquu* --- but there is no way to verify this. According to a popular Jewish tradition he was the son of the Shunammite woman, since Elisha told her, "At this season next year you shall *embrace (habaq)* a son" (II Kings 4:16). A second tradition identifies him with the "watchman" of Isaiah 21:6. Further legendary material may be gleaned from the pages of the Apocryphal book *Bel and The Dragon* (vs. 33-42), where an angel carries this prophet by his hair to Babylon to feed Daniel in the lions' den.

Bel and The Dragon 33-42

Now the prophet Habakkuk was in Judea; he had made a stew and crumbled bread into the bowl, and he was on the way to his field, carrying it to the reapers, when an angel of the Lord said, 'Habakkuk, carry the meal you have with you to Babylon, for Daniel, who is in the lion-pit.' Habakkuk said, 'My Lord, I have never been to Babylon. I do not know where the lion-pit is.' Then the angel took the prophet by the crown of his head, and carrying him by his hair, he swept him to Babylon with the blast of his breath and put him down above the pit. Habakkuk called out, 'Daniel, Daniel, take the meal that God has sent you!' Daniel said, 'O God, thou dost indeed remember me; thou dost never forsake those who love thee.' Then he got up and ate; and God's angel returned Habakkuk at once to his home. On the seventh day the king went to mourn for Daniel, but when he arrived at the pit and looked in, there sat Daniel! Then the king cried aloud, 'Great art thou, O Lord, the God of Daniel, and there is no God but thou alone.' So, the king drew Daniel up; and the men who had planned to destroy him he flung into the pit, and then and there they were eaten up before his eyes.

Other than his name, little is known about this prophet. He apparently lived as one of God's called prophets (Habakkuk 1:1) and was not engaged in some secular profession as was Amos (Amos 7:14-15). Some have deduced that the final statement of the book --- "For the choir director, on *my* stringed instruments" (3:19) --- may indicate that he was also a Levite and a member of the Temple choir, or that he was in some other way connected with the Temple worship in Jerusalem. We may also assume with confidence that he was a prophet of the southern kingdom of Judah, and that he very likely lived in Jerusalem.

Date

The only explicit time reference in this prophecy is 1:6, where the Lord says, "I am raising up the Chaldeans" (Babylonians). Actually, the Chaldeans were "a tribe of Semites from southern Babylonia, who, under the leadership of Nabopolassar, became rulers of the Neo-Babylonian empire" (Jack Lewis). This implies a time *prior* to their rise to power (which came after the critical battle of Carchemish in 605 BC). Before this time the Babylonians were not really a world force to be reckoned with. This is why the Lord tells Habakkuk, "Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days you would not believe if you were told" (Habakkuk 1:5).

Habakkuk 1:2-4 (speaking of internal conditions in Judah) points to a time after the reign of King Josiah (640-609 BC). However, during the reign of King Jehoiakim (609-597 BC), especially during the early years of his reign, the conditions do fit. He was a godless king who led the nation down the path to destruction --- II Kings 23:34 - 24:5; Jeremiah 22:18.

"It seems best, therefore, to assign the preaching of Habakkuk to a date shortly before 606 BC, but after the beginning of Babylon's westward move for world conquest" (Gleason Archer). "The probable date for this book is about 607 BC" (*Expanded Open Bible*).

Historical Background

Upon the death of the good King Josiah at Megiddo (609 BC) --- II Kings 23:29 --- his son, Jehoahaz, was made king. He was only 23 years old, and according to II Kings 23:32 "he did evil in the sight of the Lord." He reigned for only 3 months, and then Pharaoh Neco of Egypt deposed him and put his brother, Jehoiakim (also called Eliakim), upon the throne (II Kings 23:33-37). He was 25 years old when he took the throne and he also did evil in the sight of God.

"Within a period of approximately 20 years the Chaldeans swept over Judah in successive waves, and ultimately destroyed the country and took its inhabitants away into captivity in 586 BC" (*Zondervan's Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*). Internally, the people of God were caught up in religious decay and moral bewilderment.

"Looking about him Habakkuk sees a vivid demonstration of prevailing evils. He enumerates those who are proud and secure in their own ways (this list taken from: Schultz, *The Old Testament Speaks*):

The unrighteous aggressors --- 2:6-8

Those who justify their evil ways --- 2:9-11

Those who shed blood for personal gain --- 2:12-14

Those who deceive their neighbors --- 2:15-17

Those who trust in idols --- 2:18-19

The above series of five woes is in the form of a *masal* (a taunt song), and they are basically against: greed and aggression ... self-assertion, exploitation and extortion ... violence ... immorality and inhumanity ... idolatry.

The Purpose of Habakkuk

"The book of Habakkuk differs from other books of prophecy in one special aspect. Instead of taking Jehovah's message directly to the people, he takes the complaint of the people to Jehovah, representing them in the complaint" (Homer Hailey). Habakkuk is a man of God; a man of faith; who is perplexed by what is happening around him. He doesn't understand *why* God is doing what He is doing. It seems inconsistent with what has been previously revealed.

Therefore, the prophet goes to God and asks some difficult questions, and he receives some answers which greatly puzzle him. Nevertheless, through it all, whether he understands or not, his faith in God never wavers!! "His spirit is deeply troubled How could God permit so much suffering and death? How could God punish His own people, even though they had sinned, by a nation that was even more wicked?" (Hester, *The Heart of Hebrew History*). "How can a righteous God use the wicked Chaldeans to punish His people, which, in spite of their apostasy, is still more righteous than they?" (*Zondervan's Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*).

"Violence and law-breaking 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" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7).

"Why is evil and suffering rampant in our world? Goodness and justice seem to fail! How is it, God, that you are so against wrong but you go on tolerating wrong? God, is what you are doing fair? Is this honestly the moral, ethical thing to do?" (D. Stuart Briscoe). "Habakkuk is a freethinking prophet who is not afraid to wrestle with issues that test his faith" (*Expanded Open Bible*). Such spiritual struggles are not new! "Jeremiah, too, questions and expostulates with God as he struggles with the intractable problem of the prosperity of the wicked --- Jeremiah 12:1-4; 13:17; 15:10-18; 20:7-18" (*New Layman's Bible Commentary*).

The book of Job also discusses the question of why the individual righteous man or woman suffers. This is further discussed in Psalms 37, 49 and 73. In the non-canonical literature, it is discussed in such places as --- IV Ezra 3:29-36 and II Baruch 11:1-7. "How can one justify the facts of life with the doctrine of an all-powerful but just God who is active in history? Events do not seem to bear out the doctrine that sin brings retribution. God seems inactive!" (Jack Lewis). This was the problem with which Habakkuk wrestled!

Habakkuk, however, "was an honest seeker of the truth who went directly to God for the answer" (Hester, *The Heart of Hebrew History*). "While he is a man who has doubts and dares to express them, he does not make the mistake of ruling God out of the picture! Even though he is full of doubt he brings his distress and his doubts about God to God Himself!" (D. Stuart Briscoe). "Where men attempt to think through the age-old problem of evil and seek to relate the grim facts of history to a God of justice and power who holds all in His control, they find themselves drawn to Habakkuk" (*New Layman's Bible Commentary*).

The final conclusion of Habakkuk is that we must allow God to be God, and allow Him to do things His way and in His own good time. Our job is to trust Him and to live by faith! "The righteous will live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4) --- the *key verse* of this entire book!! Although things do not always turn out as we would like, yet we will rejoice in the Lord anyway! (Habakkuk 3:17-19).

"In spite of appearances to the contrary, God is still on the throne as the Lord of history and the Ruler of the nations. God may be slow to wrath, but all iniquity will be punished eventually. He is the worthiest object of faith, and the righteous man will trust in Him at all times" (*Expanded Open Bible*). "Apart from Isaiah (Is. 7:9; 28:16), no other prophet stressed the significance of faith and prayerful trust in such a way as did Habakkuk. The central theme of Habakkuk's prophecy, viz. that the righteous shall live by his faith (2:4), is taken up in the NT, and applied in significant contexts: Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38-39" (*Zondervan's Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*).

"The prophet closes his poems with one of the greatest declarations of faith to be found in biblical literature. The prophet who has raised such searching questions in the early part of the book declares that come the worst of it, he will hold steadfastly to the Lord" (Jack P. Lewis). "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him. Nevertheless I will argue my ways before Him" (Job 13:15).

"The growth of faith from perplexity and doubt to the height of absolute trust is one of the beautiful aspects of the book. Its lesson is for all time!" (Homer Hailey).

HABAKKUK

Summarized Bible

Habakkuk asked God. How long shall I cry for help? Why do you make me see iniquity? Why must I look at injustice? (Hab. 1:1)

The Lord answered I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people

- they are a feared and dreaded people.
- they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor.
- they are never satisfied, gathering unto themselves all the nations and take captive all the peoples.

After Babylon has done the Lord's work, nations and people nearby will taunt Israel saying: (Hab. 2:6-19)

- Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion.
- Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain to set his nest on high, to escape the clutches of ruin!
- Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by crime!
- Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors till they are drunk to gaze on their naked bodies.
- Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!' Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up! 'Can it give guidance? "Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it? Or an image that teaches lies? For he who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak.

But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him." (Hab. 2:20)

Habakkuk prays again; "Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy." (Hab. 3:2)

Key Point from Habakkuk

- The righteous seek justice.
- God uses evil nations to accomplish His purposes.
- People outside God's kingdom recognizes sins of His people and ridicule them.
- God is always merciful even when chastising His people to encourage them to repent and return.