

(Wk 6) Habakkuk

Background

Habakkuk is the eighth of the twelve minor prophets. Habakkuk, like Nahum and Jonah, does not explicitly state the historical setting of the prophet's work, nor his home town. Thus, once again, we struggle to piece together that setting from internal clues. The main clues are that Habakkuk mentions an invasion by Babylon (1:6). To pinpoint the time more precisely we will review the general history:

- 722 BCE the Assyrians expand and captured the Northern Kingdom and surrounded Judah/Jerusalem.
- 663 BCE Assyria defeats Egypt (sacking of Thebes)
- 650s? BCE Assyria begins to fall apart: Ashurbanipal's brother rebels and rules the Babylonian region & Egypt revives
- 640-609 BCE Josiah, king of Judah engages in a sweeping religious reform returning to mono-YHWHism (2 Kings 22:3-23:25, 2 Chron 34:1-35:19).
- 609 BCE - Josiah was killed in a battle north of Israel when Judah joined forces with Egypt and Assyria against the invading Babylonian-Mede alliance.
- 609-589 BCE – Jehoahaz (followed Josiah) is replaced by Egypt's puppet Jehoiakim. Egypt uses Judah as a buffer against the threat of Babylon.
- 605 BCE Nebuchadnezzar took the throne in Babylon and conquered Philistia. Judah decided to cast their lot with Babylon instead of Egypt and paid tribute monies to them.
- 601 BCE - Egypt was successful in repelling Nebuchadnezzar, Judah decided to switch allegiances from Babylon to Egypt. That decision was a miscalculation and led directly to Judah's demise.
- 598 BCE - Jehoiakim died and was replaced by Jehoiachin who was taken into Babylonian captivity.
- 586 BCE - The rest of Judah was captured under Zedekiah

Although we do not know exactly when Habakkuk wrote, it seems likely that his comments on Babylon coming are a reference to the ultimate exile of Judah in 598-586 BCE and thus that he was writing during the reign of Josiah, Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim. It is a time of turmoil, difficult political circumstances, shifting alliances, and economic disaster.

Cross References

This period of Biblical history is also covered in 2 Kings 22-25, 2 Chron 34-36, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Ezekiel (is taken to Babylon with captives), Obadiah, and Nahum (prophet to Nineveh)

Reading Outline

Habakkuk chapters 1-2 are typical prophetic material and chapter 3 fits the description of a Psalm. To understand Habakkuk we have to decide if the author is talking about internal or external acts of injustice in 1:1-4. I understand Habakkuk to complain about the injustice WITHIN Judah and so, this complaint becomes a reason for God sending Babylon (1:6)

Hab 1:1-4

Habakkuk complains to God about the injustice within Judah. He cries out about the "violence!" and wonders why God isn't doing anything about it. By asking this, Habakkuk is NOT asking, "Why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer?" Nor is he asking, "Why is there evil?" Instead Habakkuk is expressing his frustration with the situation and asking God to be God, "...not leaving sin unpunished"

Hab 1:5-11

God answers Habakkuk but the answer is not what Habakkuk will expect because God's methods are "surprising." God says to Habakkuk, "I am not delaying, I am working on the situation." The surprise is that God's answer to the situation is to destroy all of Judah using the godless nation of Babylon (2:6)

Hab 1:12-2:1

After hearing God's plan, Habakkuk first expresses his confidence in God and his somewhat hopeful "we will not die" (1:12). Then Habakkuk goes on to wonder why God chooses to use wicked nations to bring judgment upon those more "righteous." He ponders the fact that men (perhaps like Habakkuk and common citizens) are mere fish caught in the throws of political nets. One nation goes against another, then must be punished by yet another, and on and on. In the end, Habakkuk expresses his allegiance to God and his trust in God's ways saying, "I will stand at my watch" and "I will look to see what he will say to me"

Hab 2:2-20

God's answer to Habakkuk's complaints and ponderings is to reveal something for an "appointed time" in the "end" (2:2-3). God begins his response by contrasting those who are ruled by self-interest and those who are ruled by faith saying, "the righteous will live by faith" (2:4). In this response to Habakkuk, God declares that although Babylon brings judgment to Judah, Babylon will also be judged for his injustice and pride.

There are five "woes" stated to enumerate the sin and "pride" of Babylon. Those five "woes" are:

- They steal and use extortion
- Expand their kingdom with unjust gains
- They use bloodshed and crime to capture cities
- He gets nations "drunk" so he may bring them to shame (tricks them)
- Trusts in idols made with his own hands

The final statement of the chapter declares the righteous alternative, "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him." This is the end of complaints, the final declaration of God's sovereignty, the final expression of trust in the ways of God and the reliability Habakkuk has in God's action and character. There is nothing else to say, all that remains is to worship God.

Hab 3:1-15

The writings now turn to worship using a Psalm like prayer with instructions for the musical instruments. In this Psalm Habakkuk expresses the character of God mentioning:

- God's awesome deeds
- Asks God to remember "mercy in the midst of wrath"
- The might and power of God that is greater than the earth, the nations and nature.
- The prayer says that God came out in battle on the earth....to deliver his people! (3:13)

Hab 3:16-

The prayer / song / poem becomes very personal for Habakkuk. He hears God's vision declaring the surprise of God's judgment against all Judah which shakes Habakkuk to the bone and causes him to tremble. Yet, in the midst of this terrifying realization of what the immediate future holds, Habakkuk declares "I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us" (3:16) and "I will rejoice in the Lord" (3:18) because the "Lord is my strength" (3:19)

Key Themes

- God's sovereignty over all nations and all creation.
- God's faithfulness to his people
- God's sense of time is different from man's impatience
- Trust in God's character