

# Introduction to Habakkuk

Kenneth J. Morgan  
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## Background

### Prophet's Name

The name *חַבְּקֻק*, *Habakkuk*, is unusual, and no one else mentioned in the Bible has this name. Its meaning is uncertain. Many scholars would associate the name with the verb *חָבַק*, *to clasp* or *to embrace* (e.g., Eiselen, *ISBE*, 2:1311; *BDB*, p. 287; Archer, *SOTI*, p. 355; Freeman, *IOTP*, p. 255, Feinberg, *MP*, p. 205; Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 2:49). If this is correct, the name would mean something like *ardent embrace*. Other scholars (e.g., Sellin) have connected it with the Assyrian word *hambaqūqu*, the name of a garden plant as yet unidentified.

### Identification

#### *Habakkuk Himself*

Virtually nothing is known about Habakkuk, and though quoted in the NT (notably Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38), he is mentioned nowhere else in the Bible. Some have suggested on the basis of "my stringed instruments" in 3:19 that Habakkuk was a participant in the temple music and hence a Levite. But this conclusion is not at all certain. Hezekiah, a king from the tribe of Judah, also sang in the temple with stringed instruments (Isa. 38:20).

#### *His Style*

With the possible exception of Daniel, Habakkuk is unique among the prophets. Instead of addressing the people directly, he gives forth God's message by relating how it first came to him in answer to personal questions which he himself had. Chapters one and two present two questions which greatly perplexed the prophet. Writing in prose, Habakkuk gives God's answers to his questions. Then in chapter three, he breaks forth in a glorious psalm. In poetic form, Habakkuk describes a future theophany in terms of God's past work of judgment and deliverance in the exodus, the conquest, and the time of

the judges.

### Date

Liberal scholars have suggested various dates. Some have concluded that the oppressors were the Assyrians rather than the Babylonians and assign a date around 701 to coincide with Sennacherib's invasion during the reign of Hezekiah (716-687). Others, like George Adam Smith, suppose that Egypt under Necho was the oppressor and place the book about 609, when Necho killed King Josiah. Duhm moves the book all the way into the second century and understands Habakkuk to be referring to the impending invasion by Alexander the Great. To support this view, he proposes a textual emendation at 1:6 changing כַּשְׁדִּים (Chaldeans [Babylonians]) to כְּתִים (Greeks). However, there is no textual support for such a change. Even 1QpHb, the Qumran commentary on Habakkuk, supports the MT. Still other critics, in accordance with antisupernatural presuppositions, assume that the "prophecy" was given just *after* the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians in 586. This exigency avoids supernatural prediction of the fall of Jerusalem but not of the subsequent fall of Babylon, also predicted by Habakkuk.

Relying on internal considerations, three views are credible:

1. During the reign of Jehoiakim (609-597), making Habakkuk a contemporary of Jeremiah: Archer, Freeman, Feinberg
2. During the reign of Josiah (640-609): Delitzsch
3. During the early reign of Manasseh (686-642): Keil and early Jewish interpreters

See Freeman, *IOTP*, p. 253, for objections to options b and c. Archer, *SOTI*, p. 356, summarizes the evidence for the first view as follows. According to 1:6-10, the Chaldeans already had an established reputation; this would put Habakkuk after the destruction of Nineveh in 612. If we can conclude that the prediction of the Chaldean subjugation of Judah was intended to have a near fulfillment, then the book can be placed shortly before 605, Nebuchadnezzar's first invasion. Freeman suggests 609-605 as the most likely range, though Archer narrows it to 607-606.

## Basic Theme

According to Archer, *SOTI*, pp. 355-56, "The theme of this prophecy concerns the problems of faith in the face of apparent difficulties hindering the fulfillment of God's promises. The difficulties are grappled with and solved in the light of God's continuing revelation, and the prophet closes in a psalm of joyous trust."

These "problems of faith" are two in number:

1. How can a holy God permit unholiness in Judah to go unchecked (1:2-3)?

Answer: God will indeed deal with sin in Judah. Already he is raising up the Chaldeans to be his instrument by which he will punish his people.

2. How can God permit a nation more wicked than Judah to triumph over his people (1:13)?

Answer: God recognizes the sin of Chaldea; in time it too shall be punished. Evil by its very nature is always self-destructive. In the meantime, however, the just man lives by faith or trust in God, despite apparent anomalies in God's government of the world. In the end God's righteousness will be vindicated. Feinberg calls Habakkuk "the prophet of faith."

In his prayer in chapter three, Habakkuk is concerned that in chastisement God do two things: (1) revive his work and (2) remember mercy (3:2). The word translated "mercy" here is חַסְדִּים, a Piel infinitive construct; the adjective form of this root is parallel to the very significant חַסְדִּים in Ps. 40:11 (EV); 103:4; Hos. 2:2; Jer. 16:5; etc. And as it turned out, it was only because of God's חַסְדִּים that any of his people were spared in the Babylonian conquest (Lam. 3:22-23). Following verse 3, then, the prophet affirms his faith that God will vindicate his righteousness in a glorious future theophony.

Three-fold theme:

1. God is sovereign.
2. We do not always understand God's ways.
3. We must trust in the Lord whatever the circumstances.

## Outline With Interpretive Comments

### I. The problems of faith (1:1-2:20)

A. How can a holy God permit unholiness in Judah to go unchecked? (1:1-12)

1. Superscription (1:1)
2. The question raised (1:2-4)
3. The question answered (1:5-11). The sin will be judged; God is preparing the Chaldeans as his rod of punishment.

B. How can God permit a nation more wicked than Judah to triumph over his people? (1:12-2:20)

1. The question raised (1:12-2:1)
2. The question answered (2:2-20)
  - a. The believer is to trust humbly and patiently in God for the appointed vindication of his righteousness (2:2-5)
  - b. Judgment pronounced on Babylon in five woes (2:5-20)
    - (1) Woe for continual plundering (2:5-8)
    - (2) Woe for covetousness and self-exaltation (2:9-11)
    - (3) Woe for tyrannical oppression of captive peoples (2:12-14)
    - (4) Woe for shameful treatment of weaker nations (2:15-17)
    - (5) Woe for idolatry (2:18-20)

### II. The prayer of faith and unshakable trust (3:1-19)

A. Request for revival and preservation (3:1-2)

B. The great future theophony of God portrayed in terms of the past (3:3-15)

1. The splendor of the theophony (3:3-4)
2. The purpose and effect of the theophony: judgment and deliverance (3:5-15)

C. The prophet's meditation upon the vision (3:16-19)

1. Fear at the coming judgment (3:16)
2. Joy at the coming salvation of God and the vindication of

his holiness (3:17-19)

## **Important Passages and Problems**

A. It is alleged by certain critics that portions of chapters one and two, written by a preexilic Habakkuk, have been rearranged by a later redactor (editor). See Freeman, *IOTP*, pp. 256-57, for details.

B. Critics uniformly challenge the authorship of chapter three because it is a psalm and thus distinct in style from the rest of the book. Two main arguments are used: (1) it is assumed that musical terms in psalms are late; (2) 1QpHb, the peshar commentary on Habakkuk from the Dead Sea Scrolls, contains only chapters one and two. Both Archer and Freeman answer these arguments.

C. Hab. 2:4 became the great rally cry of the Reformation: "The just shall live by faith." This verse is quoted three times in the NT: Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38. It is possible that in each of these quotations, a different word is emphasized (*just, live, faith*).

D. Two other major Scriptures deal with the general theme of why God allows certain apparent anomalies: Job (the suffering of the righteous) and Psalm 73 (the prosperity of the wicked).

## **Bibliography**

Archer, Gleason L., Jr. *A Survey of Old Testament* Introduction. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.

Feinberg, Charles. *The Minor Prophets*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1976.

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