

Notes on
Habakkuk
2002 Edition
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Introduction

TITLE AND WRITER

The title of the book is the name of its writer.

All we know for sure about Habakkuk was that he was a prophet who lived during the pre-exilic period of Israel's history.¹ The meaning of his name is questionable. It may come from the Hebrew verb *habaq*, which means "to fold the hands" or "to embrace." In this case it might mean "one who embraces" or "one who is embraced." Luther thought it signified that Habakkuk embraced his people to comfort and uphold them. Jerome interpreted it to mean that he embraced the problem of divine justice in the world, the subject of the book.² The simple designation "the prophet" with no other identifying description characterizes only two other prophetic books: Haggai and Zechariah. So Habakkuk is the only book so designated among the pre-exilic Prophets. The content of the book, which includes wisdom literature and a psalm of praise, indicates that Habakkuk was a poet as well as a prophet.

There are traditions about who Habakkuk was that have little basis in fact but are interesting nonetheless. Since the last verse of the book gives a musical notation similar to some psalms, some students concluded that he was a musician and possibly a Levite. The apocraphal book *Bel and the Dragon* mentions him as the son of Jeshua of the tribe of Levi. It records a legend about him that is pure fantasy. Supposedly an angel commanded Habakkuk to take a meal to Daniel, who was in the lions' den a second time. When the prophet complained that he did not know where the den was, the angel picked him up by a lock of his hair and carried him to the spot (*Bel* vv. 33-39). According to rabbinic sources, Habakkuk was the son of the Shunammite woman whom Elisha restored to life (2 Kings 4). The basis for this theory is that Elisha's servant told the woman that she would "embrace" a son (2 Kings 4:16), and Habakkuk's name is similar to the Hebrew word for "embrace."

UNITY

The major challenge to the unity of the book has come from liberal scholars who view psalmic material such as chapter 3 as postexilic. The commentary on Habakkuk found at Qumran does not expound this psalm either. However, the continuity of theme that

¹We know equally little about his seventh-century B.C. contemporaries Nahum and Zephaniah.

²J. Ronald Blue, "Habakkuk," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1505.

continues through the whole book plus the absence of any compelling reasons to reject chapter 3 argue for the book's unity.³

DATE

References in the book help us date it approximately but make it impossible to be precise or dogmatic. The Lord told Habakkuk that He was raising up the Chaldeans (Neo-Babylonians), the fierce and impetuous people who were already marching through the whole earth, and that they would expand their territory even farther (1:6).⁴ This points to a time before 605 B.C. when Babylon defeated the united forces of Egypt and Assyria at the battle of Carchemish and became the major power in the ancient Near East. It may even point to a time before 612 B.C. when the Babylonians (with the Medes and Sythians) destroyed Nineveh. However other references in the book that describe conditions in Judah and the ancient Near East support a date between 608 and 605 B.C. (cf. 1:7-11).⁵ King Jehoiakim ruled Judah from 609-598 B.C., so it was apparently during his reign that Habakkuk prophesied (cf. 2 Kings 23:36—24:7; 2 Chron. 36:5-8). The background to Habakkuk is the decline of the Judean kingdom that began with the death of King Josiah in 609 B.C.

PLACE OF COMPOSITION

Since the Chaldeans were on the rise when Habakkuk wrote, the prophet must have lived in Judah. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had passed out of existence in 722 B.C. with the Assyrian invasion. Thus Habakkuk was a prophet of the Southern Kingdom who lived in times of increasing degeneracy and fear in his country.

AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

The people to whom Habakkuk ministered were Judeans who apparently lived under the reign of King Jehoiakim. During his reign the Israelites were looking for help in the wrong places, Egypt and Assyria, in view of growing Babylonian power. They should have been looking to the Lord primarily, and their failure to do so was one of the burdens of Jeremiah, Habakkuk's contemporary.

Habakkuk's concerns were more philosophical, however. What disturbed him was that the sovereign Lord was not responding to Habakkuk's evil generation and its internal injustices. He voiced his concern to Yahweh in prayer (1:2-4). The Lord replied that He was working. He was raising up a nation that would punish His people for their covenant unfaithfulness (1:5-11). This raised another problem for Habakkuk, which he also took to the Lord in prayer. How could He use a more wicked nation than Judah to punish God's chosen people (1:12—2:1)? The Lord explained that He would eventually punish the Babylonians for their wickedness too (2:2-20). The final chapter is a hymn of praise

³See O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, pp. 212-14.

⁴The first of the Neo-Babylonian kings was Nabopolassar (627-605 B.C.).

⁵See Robertson, p. 37.

extolling Yahweh for His wise ways. The purpose of the book, then, was to vindicate the justice of God so God's people would have hope and encouragement.

LITERARY FORM

This book contains a variety of literary forms. The first part of the book contains a dialogue between Habakkuk and his God that alternates between lament and oracle (1:2—2:5). The second part is a taunt or mocking song that the prophet put in the mouths of the nations that had suffered under Babylon's oppression. It consists of five "woes" (2:6-20). The third part is a psalm, complete with musical directions (ch. 3).

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

"Habakkuk is a unique book. Unlike other prophets who declared God's message to people this prophet dialogued with God about people. Most Old Testament prophets proclaimed divine judgment. Habakkuk pleaded for divine judgment. In contrast with the typical indictment, this little book records an intriguing interchange between a perplexed prophet and his Maker."⁶

"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 [as] 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

MESSAGE⁸

Habakkuk is unusual among the prophetic books in that it tells a story. In this the book is similar to Jonah, which is also the record of a prophet's experience. Jonah gives the account of a prophet's failure to sympathize with God. Habakkuk gives the account of a prophet's failure to trust God. Jonah deals with a problem posed by Nineveh, and Habakkuk deals with a problem posed by Babylon. Habakkuk, like Jonah, also records

⁶Blue, p. 1505.

⁷Carl E. Armerding, "Habakkuk," in *Daniel-Malachi*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 495-96.

⁸Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:2:272-86.

one major event in the life of the prophet. Most of the other prophetic books record the messages and activities of a prophet over an extended period of years. Habakkuk does contain prophecies, so it is like the other prophetic books in this respect.

The key verse in the book is 2:4: "Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith." This verse suggests the difficulty that Habakkuk faced, and it contains his declaration following his struggle with faith.

Habakkuk is a book in which a man, the prophet, asked questions and received answers. Note, for example, 1:2, which voices the prophet's initial question. Then turn to 3:19, which gives his final affirmation after having received answers. The contrast between these verses is startling. It is a contrast between a wail of despair and a shout of confidence. G. Campbell Morgan observed, "From the affirmation of faith's agnosticism we come to the affirmation of agnosticism's faith."⁹

This is the story of Habakkuk. At the beginning we hear a believer questioning God. The prophet's problem was why God was not doing what He promised to do, specifically delivering His people from the violence with which the Babylonians were threatening them. Every believer faces the same problem sooner or later. Circumstances challenge the promises of God, and we wonder why God does not do something about the situation. Habakkuk wondered how God could use a more wicked nation, Babylon, to discipline the wicked Judahites.

The key verse, 2:4, is similar to the constricted part of an hour-glass. Everything that precedes it leads up to it, and everything that follows it results from it. It is like a doorway through which everything in the book passes.

Let's look at that doorway statement in 2:4. It contains two contrasting viewpoints on all of life. First, we have a swollen, proud, conceited person. Second, we have a person who is full of faith. The first is full of himself or herself, and the second is full of God. The difference is in attitude: great confidence in self or in God. In both cases, we have something hidden and something manifest.

In the case of the proud, his soul or inner man is not straight or right within him. It is not upright or level, but crooked or twisted. His is an unnatural condition. While his inner, hidden condition is crookedness of soul, his outer, manifest condition is conceit or pride. He is wrapped up in himself, and being wrapped up in himself he is wrapped up in a ball, so to speak—all twisted up on the inside. It is interesting that the verse says nothing about the outcome of the proud. We only have a description of him as swollen and twisted.

In the case of the righteous, his soul is right within him. His inner, hidden condition is straight. His outward manifestation of that condition is trust in God. It is interesting, in passing, that there is only one straightness, but there are many kinds of crookedness, perversity. If I asked you to imagine a straight stick, everyone in this room would

⁹Ibid., 1:2:274.

visualize straightness. But if I asked you to imagine a crooked stick, everyone in this room would visualize a different shape of crookedness. A crooked stick may be crooked in a hundred different ways, but there is only one way a straight stick can be straight. Goodness is basically simple, but evil is exceedingly complex. Goodness looks only one way, but evil can take many different forms and shapes.

The central affirmation of Habakkuk is the last part of 2:4: "the righteous will live by his faith." There are three key words in this affirmation: righteous, live, and faith. It is interesting that in the three places where this verse is quoted in the New Testament, in each case a different word receives the emphasis. In Romans 1:17, the emphasis is on "righteous." Paul's concern in Romans was with the righteousness of God and how people can obtain it. In Galatians 3:11, the emphasis is on "faith." Paul contrasted salvation by works and salvation by faith in Galatians. And in Hebrews 10:38, the emphasis is on "live." The writer to the Hebrews stressed the importance of living by faith as a way of life rather than turning back to Judaism and living by the Law. Thus we can see that this statement is packed with meaning. In fact, many people believe that this verse expresses the central theme of the entire Bible.

Now let's relate this to what Habakkuk saw that created a problem of faith for him. He saw the proud flourishing. He saw crookedness all around him in a hundred different manifestations of evil. He also saw the righteous who were trusting in God oppressed, threatened, and persecuted. Specifically, he saw the proud Babylonians, who did not acknowledge Yahweh, gaining more and more power. They appeared to be the ones truly alive. He saw the people of God, who were trusting in Yahweh, losing more and more power. They appeared to be headed for certain death and extinction. And, most disturbing of all, Habakkuk saw God doing nothing.

In the hour of his crisis of faith, God spoke to the prophet and gave him the great truth of 2:4. Faith is the principle that leads to life in spite of all appearances, and pride is destructive in spite of all appearances. Godless people and their plans seem so strong and invincible. Their enterprises, which are in rebellion against God, seem so inevitable and sure to succeed. Nevertheless the one whom God regards as righteous because of his or her trust in Him will live on and not die.

What is God doing? He is causing things to work out in harmony with the principle set forth in 2:4 in spite of appearances. The sovereign of the universe, who often takes centuries to work out His plans, when we want Him to do it in years if not months, holds everything in His grasp. He will fulfill His promises. He will reward faith. He will destroy the crooked and swollen proud.

The last part of the book, which follows 2:4, helps us see the outcome of believing God's revelation in 2:4. Habakkuk reviewed many of the crooked manifestations of evil and announced the final destruction of them all. He also viewed the history of the Israelites as a testimony to the truth of the book's central affirmation, and he trembled as he projected what God had done in the past forward to what He would do to the Chaldeans. The prophet who started out thinking that God was doing nothing ended by praying that

Yahweh would remember mercy when He poured out His wrath. He who thought God had forgotten about the faithful broke out into a song of praise as He realized that he could continue to trust God in spite of appearances.

Habakkuk does not end with a wail but with a song. It does not end with inquiry but with affirmation. It does not end with frustration but with faith: 3:17-18.

There are several lessons of timeless importance that Habakkuk teaches its readers.

One abiding lesson of this book is that people of faith sometimes have trouble continuing to trust God. If we look at what is happening in our world, we can come up with the same questions Habakkuk voiced at the beginning of the book. But if we continue to listen to the Word of God, we can have peace in our hearts and songs on our lips as we wait for God to reward the righteous with life for their faith. This principle is true on two levels: justification and sanctification. The only way to obtain a proper legal standing before God (justification) is by trusting Him. The only way to continue to live in that righteous standing before God (sanctification) is to continue to trust Him in spite of appearances. We can do so because God has established a flawless record of faithfulness to His promises, and the Bible is the record of that faithfulness. Thus we must live in the light of Scripture rather than in the light of experience. God's promises and covenants are a better indication of reality than circumstances.

We also need to be careful that we do not fall into the category of the proud who are wrapped up in themselves. We too quickly look to the proud of this world, who do not bow before God, for explanations. Rather, we should express our own righteousness by continuing to trust in God in spite of appearances. Today scientific explanations attract more faith than the simple statements of Scripture. Where will our trust be? We dare not join the ranks of the twisted and scoffing mockers whose end is not life but destruction.

Notice, too, how Habakkuk handled his problem of agnosticism. He could have set up a schedule of speaking engagements all over Judah to point out how inconsistent God was in His government of human affairs. Fortunately, instead he took his questions to God in prayer. God responded by giving him answers. The word of God came to Habakkuk. The prophet listened to the Word of God. We can say anything to God in prayer. The best place to take our questions is to God in prayer. And the best place to find answers from God is in His Word. Some people say that God does not speak as He spoke in days gone by. It is truer to say that people do not listen to God as they did in days gone by.

Furthermore, the inner attitude always manifests itself in outward action. This is true whether the inner attitude is pride or faith. What is our outward action betraying about our inner attitude? Are we really trusting man or God?

In 2:3 God said, "Though the vision tarries, wait for it, for it will certainly come." Part of being people of faith is that we wait for explanations, verbal or experiential, that will only come in the future. Someone has said that Christians are people who do not live by explanations but by promises. We must be content with God's promise that one day we

will understand what is now obscure. How God will bring His will to pass is a mystery in large measure. We only have the outlines of His actions in prophecy, though we have some remarkably specific details revealed here and there. Nevertheless for the most part we must be willing to wait. The promise of God is life for those who do. Waiting is the hardest work of all, but like Habakkuk we will be able to sing as we wait if we keep talking to God and listening to God.

OUTLINE

- I. Heading 1:1
- II. Habakkuk's questions and Yahweh's answers 1:2—2:20
 - A. Habakkuk's question about Judah 1:2-4
 - B. Yahweh's answer about Judah 1:5-11
 - C. Habakkuk's question about Babylonia 1:12-17
 - D. Yahweh's answer about Babylonia ch. 2
 - 1. The introduction to the answer 2:1-3
 - 2. The Lord's indictment of Babylon 2:4-5
 - 3. The Lord's sentence on Babylon 2:6-20
- III. Habakkuk's hymn in praise of Yahweh ch. 3
 - A. The introduction to the hymn 3:1
 - B. The prayer for revival 3:2
 - C. The vision of God 3:3-15
 - 1. Yahweh's awesome appearance 3:3-7
 - 2. Yahweh's angry actions 3:8-15
 - D. The commitment of faith 3:16-19a
 - E. The concluding musical notation 3:19b

Exposition

I. HEADING 1:1

The writer described this book as an oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw in a vision or dream. This burden (Heb. *massa'*, something lifted up) was a message predicting judgment on Judah and Babylon.

"Habakkuk's prophecy possesses a burdensome dimension from start to finish."¹⁰

We know nothing more about Habakkuk than that he was a prophet who also had the ability to write poetry (ch. 3).¹¹

II. HABAKKUK'S QUESTIONS AND YAHWEH'S ANSWERS 1:2—2:20

A. HABAKKUK'S QUESTION ABOUT JUDAH 1:2-4

This section is a lament and is similar to many psalms of lament (e.g., Ps. 6:3; 10:1-13; 13:1-4; 22:1-21; 74:1-11; 80:4; 88; 89:46; cf. Jer. 12:4; Zech. 1:12).

- 1:2 In prayer the prophet asked Yahweh "how long" would he have to call for help before the Lord responded (cf. 2:6; Exod. 16:28; Num. 14:11). God hears all prayers because He is omniscient, but Habakkuk meant that God had not given evidence of hearing it by responding to his prayer. He had cried out to the Lord reminding Him of the violence that he observed in Judah, but the Lord had not provided deliverance (cf. Gen. 6:11, 13; Job 19:7).¹² God had apparently not heard, and He certainly had not helped the prophet.
- 1:3 Habakkuk wanted to know why Yahweh allowed the iniquity and wickedness that he had to observe every day to continue in Judah. Destruction, ethical wrong, strife, and contention were not only common, but they were increasing, yet Yahweh did nothing about the situation.¹³
- 1:4 Since God had not intervened to stem the tide of evil, as He had threatened to do in the Mosaic Law, the Judeans were ignoring His law. They did not

¹⁰Robertson, p. 135.

¹¹For further comments on Habakkuk, see the "Writer" section of the Introduction above.

¹²Normally where "justice" (Heb. *mishpat*) and "violence" (*hamas*) are in opposition in the Old Testament, as here, the wicked are Israelites unless they are clearly identified as being others (e.g., Exod. 23:1-9; Isa. 5:7-15).

¹³"Violence" (Heb. *hamas*) occurs six times in Habakkuk (1:2, 3, 9; 2:8, 17 [twice]), and unusually large number of times for such a short book. The Hebrew word means more than just physical brutality. It refers to flagrant violation of moral law by which someone injures his fellowman (e.g., Gen. 6:11). It is ethical wrong, and physical violence is only one manifestation of it.

practice justice in their courts, the wicked dominated the righteous, and perversion of justice was common.

It is clear from the Lord's reply that follows that others in the nation beside Habakkuk were praying these prayers and asking these questions. The prophet spoke for the godly remnant in Judah.

B. YAHWEH'S ANSWER ABOUT JUDAH 1:5-11

Though God had not responded to the prophet's questions previously, He did eventually, and Habakkuk recorded His answer. The form of this revelation is an oracle.

1:5 The Lord told Habakkuk and his people (plural "you" in Hebrew) to direct his attention away from what was happening in Judah to what was happening in the larger arena of ancient Near Eastern activity. They were to observe something there that would astonish them and make them marvel. They would see that God was doing something in their days that they would not believe if someone just told them about it.

1:6 The Lord urged the prophet and his people to see that He was in the process of raising up the Chaldeans as a force and power in their world.¹⁴ The Neo-Babylonian Empire began its rise to world domination with the accession of Nabopolassar to the throne of Babylon in 626 B.C. This aggressive king stimulated the Babylonians to become a ruthless and impetuous nation that had already marched through the ancient Near East and conquered several neighboring nations (cf. Ezek. 28:7; 30:11; 31:12; 32:12).

"The seventh-century prophets depicted the Lord as the sovereign ruler over the nations."¹⁵

1:7 Many nations feared the Babylonians, who were a law unto themselves. They lived by rules that they made rather than those that were customary at the time. Similarly the Third Reich called error truth and right wrong to suit its own purposes.

"If God's people refuse to fear him, they will ultimately be compelled to fear those less worthy of fear (cf. Deut 28:47-48; [sic] 58-68; Jer 5:15-22)."¹⁶

¹⁴The name "Chaldeans" derives from the ruling class that lived in southern Mesopotamia and rose to take leadership in the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

¹⁵Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "A Theology of the Minor Prophets," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 415.

¹⁶Armerding, p. 503.

The Jews of Habakkuk's day did not believe that God would allow the Gentiles to overrun their nation (cf. Jer. 5:12; 6:14; 7:1-34; 8:11; Lam. 4:12; Amos 6). Yet their law and their prophets warned them that this could happen (cf. Deut. 28:49-50; 1 Kings 11:14, 23; Jer. 4; 5:14-17; 6:22-30; Amos 6:14).

- 1:8 The military armaments of the Babylonians were state of the art. Their horses, implements of war in the ancient world, were the swiftest, faster even than leopards, one of the fastest animals in the cat family. They were more eager to attack their enemies than wolves (cf. Jer. 5:6). Their mounted soldiers swooped down on their enemies as fast and unsuspected as an eagle (or vulture) plummeting from the sky to devour a small animal on the ground (cf. Jer. 5:17; Lam. 4:19). All three of these animals that God used for comparison with the Babylonians were excellent hunters, fast and fierce.
- 1:9 The Babylonians loved violence. The faces of their warriors showed their love for battle as they moved irresistibly forward in conquest. They were as effective at collecting captives from other countries as the sirocco winds from the East were at driving dust before them (cf. Jer. 18:17; Ezek. 17:10; 19:12; Jon. 4:8). This enemy was advancing like a whirlwind gathering captives as innumerable as the sand.
- 1:10 The kings and rulers of the lands they overran were no threat to them. They laughed at them and their fortified cities in contempt (cf. 2 Kings 25:7). They heaped up rubble to conquer fortifications; they did not need special machines but used whatever they found to build siege ramps to conquer them (cf. 2 Kings 19:32; Ezek. 4:2).¹⁷
- 1:11 The Babylonians would sweep through the ancient Near East like the wind and pass on from one doomed nation to the next. Yet Yahweh promised to hold them guilty because they worshipped power instead of the true God. This is the reason God would judge them.

God may seem to be strangely silent and inactive in provocative circumstances. He sometimes gives unexpected answers to our prayers. And He sometimes uses strange instruments to correct His people.¹⁸

C. HABAKKUK'S QUESTION ABOUT BABYLONIA 1:12-17

This section is another lament (cf. 1:2-4).

¹⁷See Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands*, pp. 17, 20, 315. Cf. 2 Sam. 20:15; Ezek. 4:2; 21:22; 26:8-9.

¹⁸D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *From Fear to Faith: Studies in the Book of Habakkuk and the Problem of History*, pp. 15-18.

1:12 Power was not Habakkuk's god; Yahweh was. The Lord's revelation of what He was doing in the prophet's day brought confidence to his heart and praise to his lips. Habakkuk affirmed his belief that Yahweh, his God, the Holy One, was from everlasting. The implication is that Yahweh is the only true God and that history was unfolding as it was because the God who created history was in charge of events (sovereign).

Habakkuk believed the Judeans would not perish completely because God had promised to preserve them forever (2 Sam. 7:16). The prophet now understood that Yahweh had appointed the Babylonians to judge the sinful Judeans. The God who had been a rock of security and safety for His people throughout their history had raised up this enemy to correct His people, not to annihilate them.

1:13 Because Yahweh was the Holy One, Habakkuk knew that He was too pure to look approvingly at evil nor could He favor wickedness. This was a basic tenet of Israel's faith (cf. Ps. 5:4; 34:16, 21). But this raised another, more serious, problem in the prophet's mind. Why did the Lord then look approvingly on the treachery of the Babylonians? Why did He not reprove them and restrain them when the Babylonians slew people who were more righteous than themselves?

The prophet's first question (vv. 2-4) arose out of an apparent inconsistency between God's actions and His character. He was a just God, but He was allowing sin in His people to go unpunished. His second question arose out of the same apparent inconsistency. Yahweh was a just God, but He was allowing terrible sinners to succeed and even permitted them to punish less serious sinners. These questions evidenced perplexed faith rather than weak faith. Clearly Habakkuk had strong faith in God, but how God was exercising His sovereignty baffled him.

1:14 Habakkuk asked the Lord why He had made people like fish and other sea creatures that apparently have no ruler over them.

"This statement probably represents the prophet's most pointed accusation against the Almighty. In recognizing the sovereignty of God among the nations, he must conclude that God himself is ultimately behind this massive maltreatment of humanity."¹⁹

Big fish eat little fish, and bigger fish eat the big fish. The same thing was happening in Habakkuk's world. Babylon was gobbling up the smaller nations, and Yahweh was not intervening in the process to establish justice.

¹⁹Robertson, p. 162.

1:15-16 Babylon was like a fisherman who took other nations captive with hook and net and rejoiced over his good catch.²⁰ Babylonian monuments depict the Chaldeans as having driven a hook through the lower lip of their captives and stringing them single file, like fish on a string.²¹ This was an Assyrian tradition that the Babylonians continued. In another Babylonian relief, the Chaldeans pictured their major gods dragging a net in which their captured enemies squirmed.²² The Babylonians even gave credit to the tools they used to make their impressive conquests rather than to Yahweh (cf. v. 11). They had as little regard for human life as fishermen have for fish. That God would allow this to continue seemed blatantly unjust to the prophet.

"Idolatry is not limited to those who bring sacrifices or burn incense to inanimate objects. People of position, power, and prosperity often pay homage to the business or agency that provided them their coveted status. It becomes their constant obsession, even their 'god.'"²³

1:17 Habakkuk concluded his question by asking the Lord if the Babylonians would continue to carry on their evil practices without sparing anyone. Yahweh's policy of not interfering with Babylon's wickedness baffled Habakkuk more than His policy of not interfering with Judah's wickedness. It was Yahweh using a nation that practiced such excessive violence to judge the sins of His people that Habakkuk could not understand.

D. YAHWEH'S ANSWER ABOUT BABYLON CH. 2

1. The introduction to the answer 2:1-3

2:1 Habakkuk compared himself to a sentinel on a city wall watching the horizon for the approach of a horseman. He purposed to watch and wait expectantly for the Lord to reply to this second question, as He had the first, so he could report it to his brethren (cf. 3:16). He prepared himself for a discussion with the Lord about the situation as well as for the Lord's answer that he expected in a vision or dream (cf. Job 13:3; 23:4).

"Only by revelation can the genuine perplexities of God's dealings with human beings be comprehended."²⁴

²⁰Earlier the prophet compared the Babylonians to hunters (v. 8).

²¹W. Rudolph, *Micha-Nahum-Habakuk-Zephaniah*, p. 211.

²²T. Laetsch, *Bible Commentary: The Minor Prophets*, p. 326.

²³Blue, p. 1512.

²⁴Robertson, p. 166.

2:2 Yahweh did respond and told the prophet to make a permanent record of the vision that He would give him on tablets (of clay, stone, or metal; cf. Exod. 31:18; 32:15-16; Deut. 9:10; 27:8). Having received and recorded the vision, Habakkuk should then run to tell his fellow citizens what God's answer was.

2:3 The vision Habakkuk was about to receive concerned events to take place in the future. Though it was a prophecy that would not come to pass immediately, it would materialize eventually. Habakkuk was to wait for its fulfillment because it would indeed come at the Lord's appointed time.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews quoted this verse (Heb. 10:37). He used it to encourage his readers to persevere in their commitment to Jesus Christ since what God has predicted will eventually come to pass, namely, the Lord's return.

2. The Lord's indictment of Babylon 2:4-5

Having prepared the prophet for His answer, the Lord now gave it. What follows must be that revelation.

2:4 Proud Babylon was not right in doing what she did but was puffed up with pride and evil passions. In contrast, the righteous one will live by his faith (cf. Gen. 15:6). By implication, Babylon, the unrighteous one, would not live because she did not live by faith (trust in God) but by sight and might. She sought to gratify her ambitions by running over other people rather than by submitting to God's sovereignty.

This verse appears three times in the New Testament. Paul quoted it in Romans 1:17 and emphasized "righteous." Faith in God results in righteousness. He used it again in Galatians 3:11 but to stress "live." Rather than obtaining new life by obeying the Mosaic Law, the righteous person does so by faith. The writer of Hebrews also quoted this verse in Hebrews 10:38, but his emphasis was on "faith." It is faith that God will reward in the righteous. In all three cases "live" has the broader reference to eternal life, but here it is mainly physical life that is in view. Thus this verse is clearly an important revelation in the Bible, even its essential message. It is the key verse in Habakkuk because it summarizes the difference between the proud Babylonians and their destruction with the humble faith of the Israelites and their deliverance. The issue is trust in God.

"The underlying theme of the book may be summarized as follows: A matured faith trusts humbly put persistently in God's design for establishing righteousness in the earth."²⁵

²⁵Ibid., p. 136. Italics omitted.

The word "faith" (Heb. *emunah*) can mean "faithful" or "steadfast." Did the Lord mean that the righteous will live by his trust in God or by being faithful to God? Scripture elsewhere reveals that both are true. However in this context "faith" seems to be the meaning since the Babylonians did not trust God whereas the Israelites did. Both the Babylonians and the Israelites had been unfaithful to God.

"The discrepancy between 'faith' and 'faithfulness' is more apparent than real, however. For man to be faithful in righteousness entails dependent trust in relation to God (e.g., 1 Sam 26:23-24); such an attitude is clearly demanded in the present context of waiting for deliverance (2:3; 3:16-19)."²⁶

- 2:5 The Lord advanced the thought of verse 4 further. When a person drinks too much wine it leads him to reveal his pride publicly. The Babylonians were known for their consumption of wine (e.g., Dan. 5). Wine makes a person dissatisfied with his present situation and possessions, and he often leaves his home to find more elsewhere (cf. Prov. 23:31-32). The proud person is never satisfied, like death that consumes people every day and never stops. Babylon was similar, opening wide its jaws to consume all peoples. The proud person also seeks to dominate others, and this too marked Babylon. These were the evidences of Babylon's pride and the basis of Yahweh's indictment of this nation (cf. 1:17).

3. The Lord's sentence on Babylon 2:6-20

The Lord pronounced taunts or mocking statements on the Babylonians announcing that they would receive judgment for their sins. This taunt song consists of five stanzas of three verses each. Five woes follow. Each woe is "an interjection of distress pronounced in the face of disaster or in view of coming judgment (cf. Isa. 3:11; 5:11; 10:5; et al.)."²⁷

Judgment for exploitation 2:6-8

- 2:6 Because of the Babylonians' sins it was inevitable that the righteous would taunt and mock them. They would pronounce woe on them for increasing what was not theirs just to have more and for making themselves rich by charging exorbitant interest on loans. How long would this go on, they asked themselves (cf. 1:2). When would God judge Babylon?
- 2:7 Those from whom Babylon had stolen would surely rise up and rebel when they woke up to what was going on. Then they would turn the tables

²⁶Armerding, p. 513.

²⁷Blue, p. 1514.

and Babylon would become plunder for them. This happened when the Medes and Persians rose up and overthrew Babylon in 539 B.C.

- 2:8 Babylon would suffer the same punishment it had inflicted on other nations (cf. Prov. 22:8; Gal. 6:7). Its survivors would loot it because it had looted other peoples. Babylon's pillaging had involved human bloodshed and ethical wrong ("violence") done to the land of Canaan and to the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants.

Judgment for self-exaltation 2:9-11

- 2:9 Babylon used its unjust acquisitions to build a secure place for itself that they thought would be safe from all calamity (cf. Gen. 11:4). It built a strong and rich dynasty (house) so it would be self-sufficient.

Saving to protect oneself from large future expenses is not wrong in itself, but to build a fortune so one will not have to trust in anyone else is saving with the wrong attitude (cf. James 5:1-6).

- 2:10 It was shameful for the Babylonians to destroy other peoples (cf. vv. 5, 8). By doing so they were sinning against themselves. That is, they were doing something that would eventually bring destruction on themselves.

- 2:11 The stones and woodwork taken from other nations to build the Babylonians' fortresses and palaces would serve as visual witnesses to the sinful invasions that brought them to Babylon. They would testify to the guilt of the Babylonians in the day that Yahweh would bring Babylon to judgment. Ostentatious buildings and cities make statements about their builders.

Judgment for oppression 2:12-14

- 2:12 The Babylonians could expect distress because they had built their cities at the expense of the lives of their enemies. We speak of "blood money" as money obtained by making others suffer, even shedding their blood. Babylon was built with "blood money" and the blood, sweat, and tears of enslaved people. It was a town founded on injustice; without injustice it could not have become what it had become.

- 2:13 This is the center of this taunt song structurally. It is significant that this verse focuses on almighty Yahweh, the Judge. His assessment was that the Babylonians' hard work was in vain; all their labor would amount to nothing. Their works would turn out to be fuel for fire that would burn them up, the fire of His judgment (cf. Jer. 51:58).

2:14 Rather than the earth being filled with the glory of Babylon, it will one day be filled with knowledge of God's glory, as comprehensively as the waters cover the sea (cf. Num. 14:21; Ps. 72:19; Isa. 6:3; 11:9; Jer. 31:34). This has yet to be. It refers to the ultimate destruction of Babylon in the eschatological future (cf. Rev. 16:19—18:24).

The Babylon in view in the Book of Habakkuk was mainly the Neo-Babylonian Empire, but ever since Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) "Babylon" had a symbolic meaning as well. It represented all ungodly peoples who rose up in self-reliance to glorify themselves and reach heaven by their own works. God destroyed the Neo-Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C., but what Babylon represents will continue until God destroys it when Jesus Christ returns to the earth to set up His new order in the Millennium.

Judgment for rapacity 2:15-17

2:15 God would judge Babylon because the Babylonians had deceived their neighbor nations with the result that they were able to take advantage of them. The Babylonians had behaved like a man who gets a woman drunk so she will lose her self-control and he can then undress her. That the Babylonians took advantage of their victims sexually is implied in the illustration as is their love for wine.

2:16 As they had made their neighbors drunk, so the Lord would give them a cup of judgment that would make them drunk. Yahweh's right hand is a figure for His strong personal retribution, giving back in kind what the person being judged had given (cf. Isa. 51:17-23; Jer. 25:15-17; Lam. 4:21; Matt. 20:22; 26:42; 1 Cor. 11:29). Having swallowed the cup's contents the Babylonians would disgrace themselves rather than honoring and glorifying themselves as they did presently. Their future disgrace contrasts with Yahweh's future glory (v. 14). They would expose their own nakedness as they had exposed the nakedness of others (v. 15). Nakedness involves vulnerability as well as shame (cf. Gen. 9:21-25). The Lord pictured Babylon as a contemptible, naked drunk who had lost his self-control and the respect of everyone including himself.

2:17 Babylon's violence (ethical and moral injustice) would come back to cover him because he had rapaciously stripped Lebanon of its vegetation and animals. However bloodshed in Lebanon's main town and the slaughter of its inhabitants was an even more serious crime. "Lebanon" is probably a synecdoche for Israel, as it is elsewhere (cf. 2 Kings 14:9; Jer. 22:6, 23), and "the town" most likely refers to Jerusalem.

Judgment for idolatry 2:18-20

2:18 Habakkuk, like other prophets, saw through the folly of idolatry and exposed it (cf. Isa. 41:7; 44:9-20; 45:16, 20; 46:1-2, 6-7; Jer. 10:8-16). An idol carved by human hands cannot help its maker because anyone who creates is always greater than his creation. Images really become teachers of falsehood since their existence implies a lie, namely, that they can help humans. An idol-carver trusts in his own handiwork by making it. Idols cannot even speak much less provide help (cf. Rom. 1:22-25).

"Modern people in their sophistications may regard themselves as free from the obvious folly of idolatry. What educated, self-respecting person would be deluded into expecting special powers to emanate from the form of an antiquated Idol? Yet the new covenant Scriptures make it plain that covetousness *is* idolatry (Eph. 5:5). Whenever a person's desire looks to the creature rather than the Creator, he is guilty of the same kind of foolishness. An insatiable desire for things not rightly possessed assumes that things can satisfy rather than God himself. Whenever a person sets his priorities on the things made rather than on the Maker of things, he is guilty of idolatry."²⁸

2:19 The Lord pronounced woe on those who ignorantly tried to coax their dumb idols, wood or stone perhaps overlaid with gold or silver, to speak (cf. 1 Kings 18:26-29). No matter what they looked like or out of what material they were made they were still only lifeless objects of art. How foolish it was to look to one of these as one's teacher or guide!

2:20 In contrast to lifeless idols stands the living and true God. Yahweh abode in His heavenly temple, not in the works of human hands. Therefore all the earth, everything in it, should be quiet before Him out of respect and awe (fear; cf. v. 1; 3:16). There is no need to try and coax Him to come to life or to speak (cf. v. 19). The implication of Yahweh's majestic sovereignty is that He would take care of Babylon; the Israelites did not have to concern themselves with that (cf. 3:16).

"God sometimes uses evil people to accomplish His larger purpose in life. But He never condones evil, and those who do evil He holds accountable for their actions."²⁹

²⁸Robertson, p. 209.

²⁹Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 806.

III. HABAKKUK'S HYMN IN PRAISE OF YAHWEH CH. 3

Having received the revelation that Yahweh would destroy Babylon, Habakkuk could understand that He was just in using that wicked nation to discipline Israel. Babylon would not go free but would perish for her sins. Israel's punishment, on the other hand, was only temporary (cf. 2 Sam. 7:16). This insight led Habakkuk to write the prayer of praise that concludes the book.

This hymn is similar in language and imagery to Deuteronomy 33, Psalm 18:4-19, and Psalm 68. Its structure is chiasmic, as indicated by the headings below.

A. THE INTRODUCTION TO THE HYMN 3:1

Habakkuk's prayer is hymnic in form, like many of the psalms (cf. Ps. 16; 30; 45; 88; 102; 142), and it apparently stood apart from the rest of the book at one time, as this title verse suggests. "Shigionoth" may be the title of the tune that the prophet and later Israelites used to sing this song. But the Hebrew word is the plural form of the same word used in the title of Psalm 7, but nowhere else. "Shiggaion" evidently means a poem with intense feeling. So another view is that the Israelites were to sing it enthusiastically. The intense feeling, in both contexts where the word occurs, is a vehement cry for justice against sin.

B. THE PRAYER FOR REVIVAL 3:2

The prophet acknowledged that he had received the Lord's revelation (cf. 2:1). It was essentially a revelation of Yahweh, His justice, sovereignty, and power, and it had filled him with awe. Reception of divine revelation resulted in the fear of the Lord.

Habakkuk called on God to stir up the work that He said He would do in judging Babylon. He asked God to make it known to His people "in the midst of the years," namely, the years between Judah's judgment and Babylon's (cf. 2:6-20). God undoubtedly did this in part through the Book of Habakkuk. While God was preparing Babylon for His wrath, Habakkuk asked Him to remember Israel by extending mercy to her. This verse contains the only three petitions in Habakkuk's prayer: that God would preserve life, provide understanding, and remember mercy.

C. THE VISION OF GOD 3:3-15

Habakkuk moved from petition to praise in his prayer. He recalled God's great power and pardon in bringing the Israelites from Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. Since God had done this, Habakkuk was confident that He could and would deliver the Israelites from the Babylonians and reestablish them in the land.

1. Yahweh's awesome appearance 3:3-7

3:3 The prophet pictured Yahweh as arising over His people like the rising sun, appearing over Teman, a large town in Edom, and Mt. Paran, the mountain opposite Teman (cf. Deut. 33:2-4). These locations were to the east of the Israelites as they exited Egypt.

The name for God used here, "Elohim," is in the singular, "Eloah," perhaps stressing the essential unity of God who is the Holy One. "Selah" is another musical notation meaning "to lift up" (cf. vv. 9, 13). It probably indicates a place where the singers of this song were to pause. This pause may have been to modulate the key upward, to increase the volume, to reflect on what was just said, to exalt the Lord in some other way, or to raise an instrumental fanfare.³⁰

The Strong One's splendor covered the heavens like the sun after sunrise. The self-manifestation of His glory filled the earth with His fame. "Glory" (Heb. *hod*) describes primarily kingly authority (e.g., Num. 27:20; 1 Chron. 29:25; et al.), and here it has particular reference to Yahweh's sovereignty over creation and history. This is evidently a description of the Lord's appearance on Mt. Sinai to the Israelites' forefathers. Moses used similar terms to describe His coming then (cf. Deut. 33:2).

3:4 The radiance of the Holy One's glory was like the sunlight. Power seemed to flash from His fingertips as rays (lit. horns) of light stretch from the rising sun (cf. Exod. 34:29-30, 35). In spite of this, most of His power remained concealed.

3:5 As God moves through the earth, like the sun, He burns up what is in front of Him and chars what He leaves behind. Pestilence (lit. burning heat) and plague (i.e., devastation) are the results and evidences of His searing holiness.

3:6 Standing like the sun at its zenith, God surveyed the whole earth. His downward look, like sunrays, caused the nations to tremble. His glance was enough to cause the permanent mountains to shatter and the ancient hills to collapse. He always causes these reactions since His ways are eternal. What a contrast He is to lifeless idols (cf. 2:18-19)!

3:7 Habakkuk saw the semi-nomadic Ethiopians and Midianites, who lived on both sides of Mt. Sinai, trembling with fear because they witnessed something of Yahweh's power.³¹ Perhaps this is a reference to Yahweh

³⁰Blue, p. 1518.

³¹The terms Midianite and Cushite both described Moses' wife (Exod. 2:18-22; 18:1-5; Num. 12:1), so they may be synonyms here.

parting the Red Sea. It is small wonder that these tribes trembled since His glance can cause mountains to melt (v. 6).

2. Yahweh's angry actions 3:8-15

Habakkuk now changed from describing the manifestation of God and the inanimate and animate reactions to it to a description of His acts on the earth.

3:8 With rhetorical questions Habakkuk affirmed that Yahweh was not angry with the (Nile and Jordan) rivers and the (Red) sea when He transformed them. He was demonstrating His power for the salvation of His people, as a divine warrior riding His chariot.

3:9 He pulled His powerful bow out and prepared to use it. He called for many arrows to shoot at His enemies (cf. Deut. 32).³²

"God had enlisted weapons and pledged them on oath for the destruction of his enemies."³³

Selah. Think of that.

The prophet envisioned the rivers as God's instruments in dividing portions of the earth.

3:10 Habakkuk personified the mountains and described them as shaking when they saw the Lord. Torrential rainstorms that resulted in flooding swept by Him (cf. Gen. 7:11, 19-20). The sea lifted up its waves like hands in response to His command (cf. Ps. 77:15-17, 20).

3:11 The sun and moon stood still at His word (cf. Josh. 10:12-13), and they paled when He sent forth flashes of lightning like arrows and shining spears (cf. Deut. 32:23, 42).

3:12 The Lord had marched through the earth like a cosmic giant subduing Israel's enemies. He had trampled hostile nations as an ox does when it treads grain.

3:13 He had gone forth as a warrior to save His people and to deliver His anointed one. This may refer to Moses in his battles with Israel's enemies, or it may refer to a coming anointed one: Cyrus (cf. Isa. 45:1) or Messiah (cf. Ps. 2:2; Dan. 9:26), or more than one of these. The Lord had also smitten the leaders of many evil nations that opposed the Israelites, beginning with Pharaoh. He had disabled their nations as thoroughly as

³²This is a notoriously difficult phrase to translate.

³³Robertson, p. 234.

when someone slits a body open from bottom to top or tears a building off its foundation. Selah.

- 3:14 The Lord used the weapons of His enemies to slay their leaders in retribution. Israel's enemies had stormed into the Promised Land with great enthusiasm to scatter God's people, like those who kill oppressed people in secret.
- 3:15 Yahweh had trodden down the Red Sea as though He rode through it on cosmic horses causing it to surge away and leave a dry road for His people to tread out of Egypt (cf. v. 8).

D. THE COMMITMENT TO FAITH 3:16-19A

- 3:16 Habakkuk trembled all over as he awaited the day of Babylon's invasion of Judah, the day of her distress. He could do nothing but wait patiently for the Babylonians to grow stronger and for judgment to come on Israel. It is a terrible feeling to know that calamity is coming but that one can do nothing to prevent it. He could endure the prospect because he remembered that the omnipotent God of Israel had consistently defended her in the past and promised to do so in the future. Earlier when the prophet heard about the powerful Babylonians, he wanted to talk with God (2:1). But now having been reminded of the infinitely more powerful Yahweh, he had nothing more to say (cf. Job 42:1-6). God would handle the Babylonians. All Habakkuk had to do was wait.
- 3:17-18 Even though everything would get worse in Judah, Habakkuk determined to praise Yahweh and to rejoice in the God who would save him (cf. Ps. 18:46; 25:5). The prophet pictured the worst of circumstances by using a variety of rural metaphors drawn from plant and animal life. Taken together they have the effect of saying that no matter what bad thing may happen, Habakkuk, and hopefully all Israel, would trust God. Even though the prophet felt weak physically, he was strong in faith spiritually. Thus he would live (cf. 2:4). Many of these bad conditions did mark Judah when the Babylonians overthrew the nation (cf. Lam. 2:12, 20; 4:4, 9-10; 5:17-18).
- 3:19a Sovereign Yahweh, Habakkuk's master, was the source of His strength, even though the prophet's legs shook (v. 16). He enabled his servant to walk through the perilous valley he faced as surefootedly as the hoofs of a gazelle enabled it to navigate precipitous places (cf. Deut. 32:13; 33:29; 2 Sam. 22:34; Ps. 18:32-33, 39).

This statement of strong confidence contrasts with the prophet's doubts and fears out of which he spoke at the beginning of this book (1:2-4). A

revelation from God, and Habakkuk's decision to believe what God revealed, turned his attitude around.

"Habakkuk was about to 'go under' when he started this book. Destruction, violence, strife, conflict, injustice, and wickedness were all he could see. But he cried out to God and his cry did not go unheeded. The Lord not only answered his complaint but also provided the confidence needed to lift him from the quagmire. Habakkuk started in the pits, but ended on the mountaintop. His journey was not exactly an easy one, but it was certainly worth it."³⁴

Essential elements in true prayer that are obvious in Habakkuk's prayer include humiliation, adoration, and petition.³⁵

E. THE CONCLUDING MUSICAL NOTATION 3:19B

The final footnote to this book gives direction to the choir director who used this chapter as part of Israel's formal worship. Habakkuk specified the use of stringed instruments to accompany the singing undoubtedly because they set the proper mood.

The book opened with a dialogue between Habakkuk and Yahweh in which the prophet vented his fears and the Lord responded in love (ch. 1). Then it proceeded to a dirge in which the Lord explained the wickedness of the instrument that He would use to judge Judah, the Babylonians, and promised their ultimate destruction (ch. 2). It closes with a doxology in which Habakkuk praised God and recommitted himself to faith in and faithfulness to Yahweh as he anticipated hard times to come (ch. 3).

This book can be a great help to people who are discouraged about their present circumstances and or can see nothing good coming in the future. It helps us adjust our attitude from one of pessimism and even despair to optimism and rejoicing. The crucial issue is whether we will listen to God and believe Him, namely, exercise faith.

³⁴Blue, p. 1522.

³⁵Lloyd-Jones, pp. 58-67.

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