

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK חִבְקוּק

ESSENTIAL INTRODUCTORY MATERIAL

I. HIS NAME AND PERSONAL BACKGROUND

A. The Meaning of His Name

1. The name “Habakkuk” (חִבְקוּק) does not appear anywhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures.
2. That reality has led to several conjectures about the meaning of his name — all of which are merely conjectures!
3. Various Suggestions
 - a. “A Garden Plant”
 - i. This is the translation suggested by at least two of the top Hebrew lexicons, HALOT (p. 287) and BDB (p. 287).
 - ii. The apparent reason for this suggestion is that some seem to associate the word with an Assyrian herb known as “*hambakuku*.”
 - b. “To Embrace”

This suggestion assumes that the word Habakkuk is derived from 2 Kings 4:16 where we find the word, חִבְקָה (from חִבַּק). This term means “to embrace.” This appears to be similar to the name Habakkuk. But there is no proof for this, although both Jerome and Luther accepted this understanding.¹
4. In short, we really do not know what his name means. Therefore, we are not able to associate this prophet’s name with the essence of his message, like we have done so far.

B. His Personal Background

We know nothing about the personal background of Habakkuk. If any commentator provides more information than what we are saying, it is pure speculation!

C. Habakkuk’s State of Mind

1. We have a prophet who declares his message to be a burden (*massa*, מַשָּׂא)
2. The meaning of a “burden” something that must be born.” Indeed, this is how the prophet felt after receiving the information we find in his book. It is like a weight on his shoulders that he must carry.
3. Nahum, Habakkuk, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Malachi also have messages that they considered to be a *massa*.
4. Moreover, Habakkuk declares that this is a burden which “he saw” (1:1). Apparently, Habakkuk received such a heavy burden from the things that the Lord showed him, not necessarily from his personal experience.
5. Jewish commentator Abraham Joshua Heschel describes Habakkuk’s thinking in the book by saying that Habakkuk is “A startled, tormented man is Habakkuk. He is distressed at the idea that violence prevails and agonized by the thought that God tolerates evil. He prays, ‘How long?’ He cries, ‘Why?’”²

¹ Robertson, *Habakkuk* (NICOT), 135.

² Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 140.

II. THE PURPOSES FOR HABAKKUK

As with most books of the Bible, the Book of Habakkuk seems to have several purposes in mind. This reminds us that God is a multi-tasker! He is always accomplishing several things at the same time. With that in mind, we can suggest that this book was written:

A. To Warn Judah about the coming of the Chaldeans (The Babylonians)

B. Free to Express Doubts

1. The prophet Habakkuk shows that it is OK for God's people to feel free to express their questions about the mercy of God.
2. This is one of the points of the whole book. During times of duress, many people experience some measure of doubt about God's sovereignty and His love for people. The Book of Habakkuk is a record of one man's expression of such doubts — and this one man happens to be a prophet of God!

C. Free to Walk by Faith

Habakkuk encourages people to walk by faith, rather than by sight. See 2:4 about this one. God proves that He, indeed, can be trusted and He provides us with enough information about Himself to solicit that trust, even during times of duress.

D. To Shine Forth the Sovereignty of God

Without a doubt, the doctrine of God's sovereignty is an integral part of the entire book. God's sovereignty is the only answer to Habakkuk's questions of justice.

E. In Short:

“Habakkuk is concerned with solving a profound theological problem. His message comes as a result of his inquiry and God's answer.”³

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND DATE

A. History! History! and History!

Without a good working knowledge of both ancient Israel's history and the history of the ANE in general, the prophets are virtually impossible to understand. This definitely applies to Habakkuk as well.

B. From Assyria to Babylon

Habakkuk's world saw the beginning of the power of Babylon, who took over from Assyria as the next ANE power.

C. The Chaldeans

1. Rather than speaking about the Babylonians, in 1:6 Habakkuk refers to this next empire as “The Chaldeans (*haKashdim*, הכשדים).” Why does he use that term? Who were these people?
2. According to Eugene Merrill, the Chaldeans were Aramean immigrants [to Babylon], who, with the native stock, created a formidable political entity known as Kaldu (Chaldeans). Eventually this would give rise to the Neo-Babylonian Empire.⁴

³ Freeman, *Introduction*, 252.

⁴ Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 393.

3. However, according to Bill T. Arnold, and other scholars, the Chaldeans were not Arameans at all. He says that they were tribal groups in southern Mesopotamia, as opposed to the Arameans who were in northern Mesopotamia. “They were organized in tribal groups called ‘houses’ and were settled in the swamps and lakes of the lower courses of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.”

As they grew in strength by controlling the trade routes, they became contenders for the Babylonian throne by the middle of the 8th century BCE.⁵

4. In addition, The Chaldeans and the Arameans were both West Semitic and many scholars have assumed they were identical. But the native Assyrian and Babylonian sources constantly distinguished between them.⁶
5. In truth, the precise nature of the tribe of Chaldeans continues to remain quite a mystery, as we can see from the quotes above. It was these mysterious Chaldeans that constituted the leadership of the Neo-Babylonian Empire and were the people group of which Habakkuk speak.

D. Habakkuk’s Turbulent World

Habakkuk lived in this transition between the Assyrian Empire and the new Babylonian (Chaldean) Empire. He knew enough about the Babylonians to portray them perfectly as just as strong, cruel, and power hungry just as their predecessors, the Assyrians.

E. Our Suggested Date of Writing

1. Unlike many of the other prophets, Habakkuk provides little information to go on. He does not mention any king, which often helps us determine a date.
2. Habakkuk does, however, mention the Chaldeans and their power.
 - a. Herein is our first clue: Habakkuk must have written after the Chaldeans rose to power. This means that he must have written sometime during the waning years of the Assyrian Empire.
 - b. So, let’s begin with sometime after about 630 BCE.
 - c. We know that Babylon (the Chaldeans) were in power from 625 to 539. It seems reasonable to place Habakkuk’s ministry sometime between 609 and 605 BCE.

F. Further Historical Information

To aid the student we are including here list of the kings of the Neo-Babylonian (Chaldean) Empire. **The Neo-Babylonian Empire**



⁵ Bill T. Arnold, “The Baby

⁶ *Ibid.*

IV. FAMOUS VERSES

Another unique feature of the Book of Habakkuk is that it contains some very famous and well-known verses. These stand out in contrast to the difficult subject matter in the book; they provide simple hope in the Lord for the listeners/readers. Here is just a sampling of these well-known verses:

A. Habakkuk 1:3 |

“Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?”

This verse is famous because it states very succinctly the whole of Habakkuk’s philosophical and theological problem in his book, namely, why does God seemingly let the wicked seem to prosper while the righteous suffer?

B. Habakkuk 2:4 |

“But the righteous will live by his faith.”

This statement is repeated in other places in the Scriptures, most notably in Roman 1:17. Coupled with the first part of the verse (which we did not quote here), this brief statement reveals how the righteous person lives in contrast to the proud person.

Martin Luther read this verse in Roman 1:17 and God used it to reveal to him that faith and not works was how to be righteous. From that the Protestant Reformation ensued. So, in many ways, this verse changed history!

C. Habakkuk 2:11 |

“For the stone will cry out...”

This is a famous phrase that people often use here in Israel to speak of the unspoken testimony from the many ruins made of stones, as if the very stones shout out the history behind the ruins. If only they could speak, what stories would they tell? In the context of Habakkuk, the “wall” is a reference to the “house” in the same verse. The “house” is not a particular building, but a dynasty, a family of rulers (in this case Babylonian). In this verse, Habakkuk is saying that the king’s dynasty crumbles despite all the efforts to secure his throne. The stones cry out of the wall because of the wickedness which they practiced in connection with building their buildings, as well as their dynasty.

D. Habakkuk 2:14 |

“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”

Here, Habakkuk is quoting from Isaiah 11:9. Habakkuk uses the statement to show that while people like the Babylonians intended to fill the earth with their pride and glory, some day — in the future — that will come to an end. At that time, the knowledge of the glory of the Lord will fill the earth instead of the pride of arrogant nations. Isaiah uses these words to explain to us when that time will come — in the Messianic Age in the future.

We might also note that Habakkuk refers to another passage from Isaiah: Isaiah 51:17–23 is alluded to in Habakkuk 2:15. Habakkuk uses the cup of wine image to speak of how the Judeans who would be drunk with the cup of God’s anger, yet God promises to take that same cup and give it to their enemies, such as the Babylonians, to drink.

E. Habakkuk 2:20 |

“But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him.”

In the previous verses Habakkuk spoke of the futility of idol worship, mocking both the Judeans who were caught up in it as well as the Babylonians and their pride in Marduk and other related gods. All who rely on the man-made idols serve them in their respective temples. In those temples, people come singing chants, repeating phrases, and calling on their gods for different reasons. All the while, their gods are completely silent.

In contrast, Habakkuk wants all to know that the true God is in His House at all times. He speaks to all mankind from His throne and He expects all mankind to remain silent out of respect to Him and to hear His Word.

V. THINKING THROUGH HABAKKUK

A. The Flow of Habakkuk’s Thought

1. The first two chapters seem like *a dialogue* between Habakkuk and the Lord where the prophet protests to God about what he perceives to be injustices in how God chooses to discipline Israel.

2. *Repetitive Words*

One can discover some of Habakkuk’s flow of thought from the repeated use of some words, like the ones below:

- a. *Righteous and Wicked*

- i. Righteous (*tsaddik*, צדיק) is used 3 times. | 1:4; 1:13; 2:4.

- ii. Wicked (*rash’a*, רשע) is used twice, both in the first chapter amidst his protests. | 1:4, 1:13

- b. *Violence (chamas, חמס)* is used 7 times in 6 verses. | 1:2; 1:3; 1:9; 2:8; 2:17. It is a major part of the prophet’s protests. Why are the wicked permitted to be so violent? *Hamas* occurs six times in Habakkuk (1:2, 3, 9, 2:8, 17 [*bis*]), a frequency exceeded only in the longer Book of Psalms (fourteen times) and); it is therefore a key word in this prophecy.

B. Our Short Outline

We can summarize the message of Habakkuk with this short outline:

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| I. Habakkuk’s 1 st Protest and God’s Response | 1:1–11 |
| II. Habakkuk’s 2 nd Protest and God’s Response | 2:12–20 |
| III. Habakkuk’s Prayer | Chapter 3 |