

Habakkuk - Introduction & Background

Title

Like most OT books, the Book of Habakkuk derives its name from its central character. The Hebrew title of the book is *Habaqquq*. This name comes from the Hebrew verb *habaq*, which means, "embrace." Thus, the prophet's name means "one who embraces" or "clings." The prophet's resolve to cling to or embrace the Lord despite the coming days of adversity (3:16-19) make the meaning of his name and title of his book appropriate. The LXX entitles the book *Ambakouk*. The Vulgate, deriving its name from the LXX, entitles it *Habacuc*. The English title is adopted from the Vulgate's title.

Authorship

Habakkuk is named as the book's author two times (1:1; 3:1). The only information the book provides about Habakkuk is that he was a prophet (1:1; 3:1) and perhaps a priest. This latter piece of information is hinted at through the closing inscription that says "To the chief musician, with my stringed instruments." Other than these scant pieces of information, virtually nothing else is known of Habakkuk. Although some extra-canonical works, such as *Bel and the Dragon* and *Lives of the Prophets* (chapter 12), indicate that Habakkuk ministered to Daniel in the lion's den, the historicity of these accounts is questionable.

Some have challenged the unity of the book on the grounds that the musical instruments spoken of in the third chapter came on the scene late in Israel's history. Thus, critics date this section of the book in the third century. However, Geisler notes, "But these arguments are fallacious because levitical music existed long before Habakkuk's time; David originated much of the levitical music (1 Chr 25 and Amos 6:5). Further, it is only natural for someone within the levitical tradition (like Habakkuk) to be interested in music and psalms (Cf. 'Shigionoth' in Hab 3:1 with the title of Ps 7)." Constable also observes, "The major challenge to the unity of the book has come from liberal scholars who view psalmic materials such as Hab 3 as post-exilic...However, the continuity of the theme that continues through the whole book plus the absence of any compelling reasons to reject Hab 3 argue for the book's unity." Furthermore, "Questions of the unity of the book do not seem to have affected its acceptance, and in fact there is no ancient record of dispute over Hab 3."

Date

Lack of overt chronological markers as well as the book's failure to mention any specific kings makes the dating of the book a challenge. Some have suggested that the book's portrayal of Judah's rampant covenant violations (1:3-4) indicates that it was written during

the reigns of the evil kingships of Manasseh or Ammon. However, because Hab 2 describes the Chaldeans in such vivid terms, the book could not have been written during the days of Manasseh or Ammon when Assyria rather than Babylon was the world power. Furthermore, the book's portrayal of Judah's covenant violations also indicates that it could not have been written during the reforming reign of the good king Josiah.

On the other hand, the book could not have been written after the first Babylonian deportation in 605 BC since the Babylonian invasion was portrayed as an imminent threat. The fact the temple was still standing (2:20) and the prophet vowed to trust in God despite the future difficult days (3:16-19) also verify that the book was written prior to the Babylonian incursions. Thus, the prophet wrote after the death of Josiah (609 BC) but before the first Babylonian deportation (605 BC). Therefore, a date of 609–605 BC for the composition of the book would not be far from wrong.

This time period makes Habakkuk a contemporary of both Jeremiah and Zephaniah. Because Habakkuk ministered at the end of Josiah's reign and during the kingship of Jehoiakim, who was the first of Judah's last three evil kings, he is often called "the prophet of transition." His ministry covered the tail end of the waning Assyrian empire and the beginning of Babylon's rise to power. Some date the book during the Greco era of Alexander the Great on the grounds that they understand the term Chaldeans (*Kasdim*) as referring to *Kittim* or the Cypriots of Macedonia. However, there is no reason to make this emendation since *Kasdim* means Chaldeans.

Recipients and Place of Writing

The Book of Habakkuk is unusual in that it does not represent a divine oracle to the nation. However, it is safe to say that the concerns that Habakkuk expressed in his dialogue with God represented those of the entire nation of Judah. Thus, the entire dialogue is recorded for the benefit of Judah in order to alleviate these concerns. The book's various liturgical expressions (3:1,3,13,19) reveals that the book as a whole was meant to be used in Judah's temple services. Because of Habakkuk's prediction of Babylon's impending invasion, it is likely that Habakkuk not only lived in Judah but also composed his book from this locale.

Historical Background

Ongoing tensions between Assyria and Babylon began when Sennacherib of Assyria destroyed Babylon in 689 BC and his son Esarhaddon presided over the area. Meanwhile the reforms ushered in through Josiah's reign proved themselves to be temporary. After his death at the hands of the Egyptians in 609 BC at the valley of Megiddo, Judah returned to rampant covenant rebellion prompting Habakkuk to cry out for divine intervention (1:3-4). Josiah's son Jehoahaz then ruled over the nation for a brief three-month period before his authority was usurped by the king of Egypt (2 Chr 36:1-4). This deposition then led to the eleven year wicked reign of Jehoiakim.

In 626 BC, Nabopolassar ascended to the throne over Babylon. Under his leadership, Babylon reasserted its independence from Assyrian domination. The fall of the Assyrian capital Nineveh at the hands of the Babylonians in 612 BC revealed the weakness of the Assyrian empire. Babylon's role as the next world empire was all but solidified at the battle of Charchemish in 605 BC. Here, Babylon, under the leadership of Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar, defeated the Egyptians who had come to assist the Assyrians. Babylon then began to exert its newfound power upon the chosen people. The first deportation to Babylon took place during the reign of Jehoiakim in 605 BC. This deportation was then followed by the second deportation under the brief three-month kingship of Jehoiachin in 597 BC. During Zedekiah's kingship, Nebuchadnezzar then came against Jerusalem in 588 BC. The Babylonian king ultimately destroyed the city and the sanctuary in 586 BC. Jeremiah had earlier described this Babylonian captivity as inevitable. Thus, the prophet had exhorted the nation to submit to this captivity so as to avoid unnecessary grief.

Structure

The twofold structure of the book revolves around Habakkuk's two complaints or questions accompanied by God's answer to each and Habakkuk's concluding praise to God.

Habakkuk first questions why God passively allowed rampant covenant rebellion in Judah (1:2-4). God answers by explaining that He will use the Chaldeans or the Babylonians (Is 13:19; 47:1,5; 48:14; Ezek 23:23; Hab 1:6) to discipline Judah (1:5-11). Habakkuk then questions how a perfect God could use the even more wicked Chaldeans to discipline Judah (1:12-17). God answers by explaining His future plans to destroy Babylon (2:1-20). Such future judgment will come because of the five divine woes against Babylon.

Habakkuk should trust God to bring about this result in His way and in His timing. This newfound insight causes Habakkuk to explode into praise and adoration of God (3:1-19). Thus, the book consists of Habakkuk's dialogue with God (1-2) and Habakkuk's praise to God (3).

The book also yields an upward progression in Habakkuk's faith. This progression is captured on the following chart:

Beginning of the book	End of the book
Mystery	Certainty
Questioning	Affirming
Complaint	Confidence
Wondering	Worship
Restlessness	Rest
Problem	God's person
Complaint	Consolation
Barren	Blessing

Thus, Blue appropriately summarizes as follows. "What begins with a question mark ends in an exclamation point. The answer to Habakkuk's 'Why?' is 'Who!' His confusion, 'Why all the conflict?' is resolved with his comprehension of who is in control: God!"

Message

God's people should trust in Him in the midst of the appearance of injustice because He will sovereignly bring about His perfect purposes in His timing and manner.

Purposes

Habakkuk composed his book in order to accomplish several purposes. First, the book was written to show the righteous remnant within Judah that God does punish sin and the means that He uses to do so. Second, the book was written to show the remnant how they should live by faith in the midst of the coming adversity. Third, the book was written to explain the issue of judgment from the divine viewpoint. Fourth, the book was written to deal with Judah's pride by revealing to them that they must trust in God in spite of the appearance of injustice. Fifth, the book was written to remind Judah that God retained His sovereign control over a world that seemed out of control.

Theological Themes

Numerous theological themes recur throughout the Book of Habakkuk. First, the book makes great contributions to the field of theology by revealing many important attributes of God.¹⁰ Such attributes include His holiness (1:12; 3:3), immutability (1:12), sovereignty (1:5; 3:6,12), mercy (3:2), and omnipotence (3:1-19). The book also depicts God as deliverer (3:13,19), director of history (2:3), intervener in history (1:4ff), attentive to prayer, the one who will establish His kingdom (2:14), and the one who holds all people accountable (2:20). Second, the book explains that the just shall live by faith in uncertain times (2:4; Gal 3:11; Rom 1:17; Heb 10:38). Third, the book reiterates that God retains His goodness and omnipotence even in the midst of the presence of evil and the appearance of injustice. Fourth, while God's justice is sometimes delayed, it is never denied. God will usher in His justice in His way and in His timing.

Unique Characteristics

The Book of Habakkuk boasts several outstanding characteristics. First, the book is atypical of a prophet since prophets normally delivered a divine message from God to the people. By contrast, the Book of Habakkuk represents a dialogue between God and the prophet. This dialogue was recorded for the benefit of the nation. This seems evident from the book's liturgical notations (3:1,3,9,13,19) as well as the likelihood that Habakkuk's concerns represented those of the entire nation. Second, the book is also atypical of a prophet by focusing upon Judah's and Habakkuk's concerns rather than following the normal covenant lawsuit format. In other words, the book does not stress covenant loyalty so covenant discipline can be averted.

Third, the book is also atypical of a prophet since God was the usual instigator of communication to the prophet. Here, this order is reversed as Habakkuk begins the communication process. Fourth, the book was one of the most popular among the Jews. Such popularity is evidenced by the fact that "a complete commentary on its first two chapters has been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls." Fifth, "Hab 3 is a great psalm of praise, scarcely equaled anywhere else in the OT." Sixth, the presence of 2:4 is unique because of this verse's impact upon Pauline (Gal 3:11; Rom 1:17), NT (Heb 10:38), Lutheran, and Wesleyan theology.

Genre

The dominant genre of the book is poetry. However, multiple sub-genres are also presented in the book. These include lament psalm (1), praise psalm (3), dialogue (1-2), prophetic woes (2:6-19), and prophetic oracles (1-2).

Christ in Habakkuk

There are no direct messianic prophecies found within the book. However, 2:14 seems to describe the millennial conditions that Christ will usher in upon His return. Also, "the word 'salvation' appears three times (3:13,18) and is the root from which the name 'Jesus' is derived (Cf. Matt. 1:21)."

Outline

I. Habakkuk's dialogue with God (Hab 1:1—2:20)

- (1) First question and answer session (1:1-11)
 - (A) Habakkuk's question: How can God permit Judah's covenant unfaithfulness? (1:2-4)
 - (a) Title (1:1)
 - (b) Habakkuk's distress (1:2-4)
 - (i) Unanswered prayer (1:2)
 - (ii) Judah's covenant violations (1:3-4)
 - (B) God's answer: God would use Babylon to judge Judah (1:5-11)
 - (a) Judgment to come through the Babylonians (1:5)
 - (b) Babylonians described (1:6-11)
- (2) Second question and answer session (Hab 1:12—2:20)
 - (A) Habakkuk's question: How can God use the less righteous Babylon to judge Judah? (1:12-17)
 - (a) Babylonians' iniquity (1:12-13)
 - (b) Babylonians' injustices (1:14-15)
 - (c) Babylonians' idolatry (1:16-17)
 - (B) God's answer: Babylon was merely a divine instrument that would be divinely judged and Habakkuk should trust in the sovereignty of God who would rectify all things in His time and way (2:1-20)

- (a) Habakkuk awaits God's answer (2:1)
 - (i) His patience (2:1a)
 - (ii) His teachability (2:1b)
- (b) God tells Habakkuk to record the vision (2:2-3)
 - (i) The vision's perspicuity (2:2)
 - (ii) The vision's certainty (2:3)
- (c) Habakkuk exhorted to live by faith (2:4-5)
 - (i) The righteous (2:4)
 - (ii) The self-righteous (2:5)
- (d) Five woes against Babylon (2:6-19)
 - (i) Stealing (2:6-8)
 - (ii) Exploitation (2:9-11)
 - (iii) Violence (2:12-14)
 - (iv) Drunkenness leading to immorality (2:15-17)
 - (v) Idolatry (2:18-19)
- (e) Concluding exhortation: worship God (2:20)

II. Habakkuk praises God (Hab 3:1-19)

- (1) His prayer for God to intervene in history in order to accomplish His sovereign purposes (3:1-2)
 - (A) Introduction (3:1)
 - (B) Prayer for intervention (3:2a)
 - (C) Prayer for mercy (3:2b)
- (2) His praise of God (3:3-15)
 - (A) God's appearance (3:3-7)
 - (B) God's actions (3:8-15)
- (3) His decision to wait upon God and trust in Him despite coming difficulties (3:16-19)
 - (A) Rest despite scarcity (3:16-17)
 - (B) Rejoicing because of his salvation (3:18-19)