

WRITER

Habakkuk was a prophet of Judah. His name means “love’s embrace” or “he who embraces.” We are told nothing concerning his life. From the statement made in 3:19, we might conclude that Habakkuk was a Levite of the temple in Jerusalem who was involved in the instruments that were played during the sacrifices. Some have suggested that he was the son of the Shunammite woman whom Elisha restored to life (2 Kg 4:16-37). Though there are many suggestions concerning the identity of this prophet, there is no clear statement of his identity outside what is revealed in this book. Nevertheless, since Israel accept this book as inspired prophecy, so do we.

BOOK

The ministry of Habakkuk took place during the reigns of Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim (612–605 B.C.). He was contemporary with Jeremiah, Huldah and Zephaniah. Determining the date of the book depends a great deal on who the “wicked” are of 1:4. Since there is no historical clue within the book concerning the date of writing, then we are left to our deductions concerning the date. We would conclude that the northern kingdom had already gone into Assyrian captivity, and thus Judah, the southern kingdom, was under the threat of same judgment. If this is the case, then the “wicked” of 1:4 would refer to the Babylonians and their oppression of Judah and Jerusalem, which oppression eventually led to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. And since 1:6 states that God would raise up the Chaldeans (the Babylonians), it seems that Habakkuk’s ministry took place prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. If so, he was one of the last prophets to the independent nation of Israel.

BOOK

God’s prophets usually delivered the message of God to His people. However, Habakkuk was given a message that he was to deliver to God Himself. Habakkuk assumed

the position of the people in offering a complaint to God concerning the suffering of man. Habakkuk approached God with the complaint as to why the peoples' prayers were going unanswered. They were suffering and needed relief from the wicked. He also questioned why God would use the unbelieving Babylonians to bring judgment on His people. In reference to the suffering of His people, Habakkuk questioned the work of God through unbelieving nations. He wondered how a just God could use unbelievers to discipline His people. He questioned why the righteous have to suffer so much at the hands of the unrighteous who prosper in their oppression of the righteous. As with Job's complaint concerning the same matter, God gave no answer. At the end of the book, Habakkuk, as well as Job, simply had to trust in God that He had all things under control.

Throughout the book, Habakkuk questions God for answers concerning the suffering of man. If God is all good and benevolent, then he wondered why He would allow His people to suffer. If He is all-powerful (omnipotent), he wondered why He did not take the suffering away. In the case of Judah, God allowed the suffering to come through the Babylonians. Habakkuk is thus inspired by the Holy Spirit to make these complaints in order that we better understand the work of God in relation to His creation, especially in relation to His people (See comments Jb). As with Job, his complaint was centered around why the righteous suffer.

The answer to Habakkuk's question was answered with history. Israel had lost their identity as God's people. They had turned to idolatry. God knew, and the repentant remnant that would come from captivity would find out, that the only way to cleanse the people of idolatry was captivity. Once the faithful journeyed through the darkness of captivity, repenting of their idolatry, then they would understand why they had to suffer the captivity of the unbelievers. Thus God did not give Habakkuk an immediate answer to his question, knowing that in time the people would understand that the captivity was necessary in order to reestablish the identity of Israel for the coming of the Messiah.

The historical background of the book lies in the fading effects of the reformation of the southern kingdom through the efforts of Josiah. Josiah had repented of the idol worship of Judah. However, the transformations that he initiated did not last. He tore down the idols, but the idolatry was still in the hearts of the people. After his death, his reforms were reversed and Judah continued in its digression into apostasy. Judah had followed the wayward path of her northern sister. God had allowed the Assyrians to conquer the northern kingdom of Israel, and at the time of Habakkuk's ministry, He brought the threat of the Babylonians to the door of the southern kingdom.

The northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722/21 B.C. The Assyrian Empire fell to the Babylonians in 612 B.C. Led by their King Nebopolassar, the Babylonians were expanding their empire to the west. In 609 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar, the son of Nebopolassar, finished the Assyrians at the battle of Carchemish. After the battle of Carchemish, the sons of Josiah, Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim, wickedly reigned, and thus continued the digression of Judah into apostasy. The social environment of Judah, specifically Jerusalem, was built on lawlessness. The poor were oppressed by the rich. There was strife and tyranny in the air, and the people lived in a morally degraded society that was patterned after the idol religiosity that they had created for themselves. It was a time that made Judah ripe for termination. The people were thus coming to the time when God would pour out judgment on them through the hands of unbelievers. It was a time when the righteous of Judah were suffering as a result of the turmoil of the nations, as well as being oppressed by the rich of their own people. They simply needed to be patient until God brought justice.

Complaints And Answers

(1:1 - 2:4)

Outline: (1) Habakkuk's complaint (1:1-4), (2) God's answer (1:5-11), (3) Habakkuk questions God's answer (1:12-17), (4) God's answer (2:1-4)

Chapter 1

HABAKKUK'S COMPLAINT

1:1-4 Burden: The burden, or “oracle,” (Ob 1) that Habakkuk saw was not directed to the people of God, as was the traditional audience of the prophets. The burden was given to Habakkuk in order to offer a complaint to God concerning the suffering of His people that was brought on them by the unbelievers. We would conclude, therefore, that the message of God to Habakkuk was given for us in the sense that God wanted us to offer to Him the complaints that are revealed in this book. Since we would have these same complaints, then God inspired Habakkuk to approach Him with the complaints that we would have concerning suffering. What we must understand, however, is that the suffering that was brought on the people of God by the unbeliever in this historical setting of the book was caused by the apostasy of God's people. God was just, therefore, in that He had warned them that if they turned from Him, He would turn them over to the nations. Not only would God turn them over to the oppression of the nations, He would turn them over to themselves. Because they had rejected the moral and civil laws of God, the rich among them were oppressing the poor. Therefore, they had no justification for their complaints. **How long:** The Bible student must keep in mind that during this period of history, national independent Israel was in the twilight of its existence. God's people had turned to idolatry. They would not repent. It was time to take the remnant of the people in Palestine, Judah, out of the land in order to bring forth a repentant remnant that would eventually identify again the people of God. So in answer to Habakkuk's question of “how long,” the answer would be until God had accomplished His purpose of purifying His people through captivity in order that the Messiah be brought into the world in fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham (Gn 12:1-3). This purification of the people would take place only through captivity. **The wicked:** There are several possibilities as to who “the wicked” were in their oppression of the people of God. Since the Assyrians had conquered Samaria in 722/21 B.C., the reference could be to the As-

syrians as they sought to expand their conquests into Judea. These aspirations were stymied when God caused the death of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers outside the walls of Jerusalem during the reign of Hezekiah. Another possibility in identifying the wicked would be taken from verse 6, a reference to the Chaldeans (the Babylonians). Since Habakkuk was contemporary with those prophets who were proclaiming that God's judgment was coming on the southern kingdom by the approaching Babylonians, we would assume that the Babylonians would be in the mind of the prophet. Jeremiah had identified the Babylonians as the empire that would be God's proxy judge against Jerusalem. And since Habakkuk was contemporary with Jeremiah, we would conclude that the Babylonians were the oppressors of God's people at this time in history. We must also keep in mind that the Babylonians began to oppress the southern kingdom as early as 606 B.C. when the first captives of the southern kingdom were taken into Babylonian captivity. Daniel and Jehoiachin were taken in the 606 B.C. captivity. **Wicked surround the righteous:** In the context, Habakkuk spoke for the righteous few within Israel who had not given themselves over to idol worship and wicked living. Not only were the unbelievers oppressing God's people, but also the rich within the society of Israel. The righteous in this statement, therefore, would refer to those who were oppressed as citizens of national Judah, as well as being oppressed locally by the rich of the Judean society (See comments of Mc). We would conclude that Habakkuk was speaking primarily to those of his own people, for the wickedness was all around him. He lived in a morally degraded society. **Justice goes forth perverted:** Through bribery, the unrighteous twisted judgments for their own benefit.

GOD'S ANSWER

1:5-11 God told Habakkuk to look around at the nations. He reassured Habakkuk that He was working among the nations. He was in control, and thus international events among the nations were not out of control. **Wonder and be astonished:** Reference could either be to the Assyrians whom God brought down to Jerusa-

lem during the reign of Sennacherib when 185,000 of his soldiers were killed by God in one night. Or, what could be in the mind of God was His judgment on His people through the proxy of the Babylonians whom He would raise up to terminate the southern kingdom of Israel.

I am raising up: The Babylonians were at first subject to the Assyrians who were north of Babylon. Nabopolassar, the first king of the Babylonians, was subject to the Assyrians, while ruling over the Babylonians to the south of Nineveh. However, he formed an alliance with other peoples, specifically the Scythians to the north of Assyria, and then rose up in rebellion against the Assyrians. Nineveh fell in 612 B.C. as a result of this rebellion. Nebopolassar's son, Nebuchadnezzar, succeeded his father as king of the Babylonian Empire. It was during this time that Habakkuk voiced his complaints to God concerning the subjection of the people of God to the sufferings that came from the international turmoil of the time, for the Israelites in the land of Palestine passed from the oppression of the Assyrians to the oppression of the Babylonians. **Justice ... proceed from themselves:** The Babylonians became a law unto themselves, and thus determined their movements among the nations according to their own idol gods. Since they determined their laws for themselves, then such laws were in conflict with the laws of God. **Leopards:** They laid in wait to conquer. **Wolves:** They were fierce, and thus ravaged those they conquered. **Eagle:** They were eager to sweep down on their prey. **East wind:** As the hot east wind would dry up the moisture of the land, so the Babylonians would come from the east and dry up the land by taking the people of a land into captivity. **Heap earthen mounds:** They would build mounds against the cities they would conquer. No nation was able to stand against them. Since they were able to take the supposedly impregnable city of Nineveh which was one of the most fortified cities of the ancient world, then there would be no city that would be able to withstand their attack. **Ascribing his power to his god:** God would be using the Babylonians as a proxy to eventually bring judgment on Judah. What the Babylonians did not realize was that God was empowering them in or-

der that they conquer the Assyrians, and thus march toward Jerusalem. All that the Babylonians accomplished, they thought they did on their own power. What they did not understand, however, was that God was working through them to bring national Israel to an end in the land of Palestine. The Babylonians gave credit to their own gods for what they militarily accomplished, when in reality their accomplishments were the work of God. Habakkuk's complaint was based on his inability to understand why God would work through the unbelieving Babylonians in order to oppress His own people.

HABAKKUK QUESTIONS GOD'S ANSWER

1:12-17 *We will not die:* Habakkuk trusted in God that His people would not be banished from existence as many peoples had in the past. They would continue, regardless of the suffering that they would endure at the hands of the unbelievers. *Established them for correction:* God had raised up the Babylonians for the discipline of His people. *Too pure to look upon evil:* God is holy, and thus He cannot look on that which is unholy. However, Habakkuk's question is how could God look on the unholy nation of the Chaldeans in order to accomplish His work of disciplining His holy nation. *More righteous than he:* Habakkuk would have in mind the oppressed righteous of Judah, not the nation itself. As a nation, Judah had become unrighteous. It was because of their unrighteousness as a nation that God allowed the Babylonians to extend their conquests even to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Unfortunately, because of their national apostasy, the righteous within the nation had to suffer also. The righteous few were the victims of the unrighteous religious leaders and civil leadership of the nation. *Fish:* God's people had become like helpless fish that were caught and piled in heaps at the will of the fisherman. *Their net:* The Babylonians gave credit to their own gods (the net) for the captivity of the many people whom they had taken into captivity. What they did not realize was that God had raised them up as a warrior nation in order to bring judgment on Judah and Jerusalem.

Chapter 2

GOD'S ANSWER

2:1-4 *Myself on the ramparts:* After Habakkuk had given his previous complaints to God, he positioned himself in a place of prayer in order to wait for God's reply. He felt that he had established a case before God, and thus wanted to see how God would reply. ***When I am corrected:*** Habakkuk knew that his complaint was from himself on behalf of the faithful few. He thus concluded that because God was so working in a way that allowed His people to suffer, then there was something that he did not understand. He thus waited for an explanation of what God was doing. Nevertheless, as a man, he at least felt that there was some justification for his complaint concerning the suffering of the righteous at the hand of the unrighteous, who seem to prosper in all they do. He went to a place of solitude in order to wait for God's answer. ***Vision:*** God's answer to Habakkuk came by revelation in a vision. ***Write:*** What he saw was to be written for all, not just Habakkuk. Since the people would not understand why God was working through unbelieving nations until after the captivity, Habakkuk's complaint needed to be written for the returnees from captivity. ***May run:*** Though the message that he was to write would certainly spur one to flee from the approaching Chaldeans, reference here was probably to those who would initially read the message. They would run to broadcast it to others. Since so many had the same complaint that Habakkuk expressed, then they too needed to know the response from God. ***Appointed time:*** The vision related to things in the future. Its fulfillment was coming without delay. ***It will not tarry:*** The urgency of proclaiming the vision was based on the fact that it would come to pass. In personifying the vision, God instilled urgency that the vision will speedily run to all concerned. The historical events to which the vision pointed were coming to a culmination in fulfillment. The end of national independent Israel was near. The final captivity of the people was to begin, but would last only seventy years according to the prophecy of Jeremiah (Jr 25:11). ***The just will live by his faith:*** See Rm 1:17; Gl 3:11; Hb 10:38.

This would be the foundation upon which the message of the book rests. Regardless of the historical calamities in which men must live, those who are of God walk by their faith in the fact that God has all things under control (See comments Rm 8:28).

The Five Woes

(2:5-20)

Outline: (1) Woe to the plunderer (2:5-8), (2) Woe to the greedy (2:9-11), (3) Woe to the deceitful worker (2:12-14), (4) Woe to the exploiter (2:15-17), (5) Woe to the idolater (2:18-20)

WOE TO THE PLUNDERER

2:5-8 Wine betrays him: The thoughts of verses 5 & 6 probably refer to the woes that follow. The Chaldeans of the previous context would be as one drunken with wine. There is personification on the effects of wine, which effects refer to the behavior of the Babylonians in their conquests of nations. The context, therefore, is not specifically about the evils of wine, but the metaphorical application of the evils of wine in reference to the Babylonians. **Does not stay at home:** As the drunkard is one who is rarely at home in order to assume his responsibilities of his household, so the Chaldean army is always on the roam, seeking nations to plunder. The drunkard cannot have enough wine. Neither can the Babylonian Empire expand too far in their conquest of other nations. As death is never satisfied with enough dead, so the Chaldeans were never satisfied with enough conquests. **Parable against him:** The nations taunt the oppressing Chaldeans for their ruthless passion to conquer other nations. **Woe to him:** Woe is to the Chaldeans who would increase their empire through the plunder of other nations. They are uncaring and unmerciful. The Chaldeans are as one who loans money with excessive interest. They victimize those they conquer by extracting heavy tribute. However, those from whom they exacted tribute would in the future plunder them. They would reap what they had sown (See Is 33:1).

WOE TO THE GREEDY

2:9-11 This is a song of taunt. It is a song against the

arrogance of the Babylonians in their conquest of others for the sake of their own aggrandizement. Babylon was not an empire that developed because of the ingenuity or productivity of the people. It was an empire that grew through the plunder of other nations. Babylon fed off that which others had accomplished. Through their covetousness, the Babylonians built their own houses. **Nest on high:** Though the Babylonians felt secure in their own military power, they would be brought down. They had ignored the principle of retribution. They were a nation that generated great animosity, which animosity among the nations would eventually build to the point that others would rise up against them. In fact, in their latter years of existence, there was so much resentment within the Babylonian kingdom that the Medes and Persians easily overcame the city of Babylon with little resistance. **Stone ... beam:** Those materials that they had acquired through plunder would eventually cry out for revenge.

WOE TO THE DECEITFUL WORKER

2:12-14 This same judgment statement is made of Jerusalem (Mc 3:10) and Jehoiakim (Jr 22:13,17). These are condemnations of those who build at the expense of the lives of others. **Fuel for the fire:** All the labors that the Babylonians put into the building of their empire would eventually go up in smoke. All their labors will have been in vain once the empire came to an end. The futility of their means of building an empire is illustrated throughout history. Nations that are built on the blood of others come to an end. There has always been an end to barbaric empires. Only those nations that are built on the eternal principles of God endure throughout the ages. However, once these nations forsake the moral principles of God, as did Israel, they too will come to an end. Israel was restored as a remnant to the land of Palestine only when she repented in captivity. **Filled with the knowledge:** There is possibly Messianic meaning in the statement of verse 14 (See comments Dn 2 & 7).

WOE TO THE EXPLOITER

2:15-17 The effects of wine in the hands of the drunk-

ard are carried on into this woe in order to describe the folly of the Chaldeans. The effects of strong drink cause one to become insensible. In his drunkenness he becomes the center of attraction of those who pity his senseless behavior. As the one who gives drink to his neighbor in order to make him drunk, so the Chaldeans metaphorically made their neighboring nations intoxicated in order to expose their nakedness. And once exposed, they were subjected to conquest and plunder. **Drink and be exposed:** It was now judgment day for those who had poured out their oppression on others. As they exposed the nations to defeat, so the Babylonians would suffer calamity because of the judgment of God. **The cup:** This would be the cup of the Lord's wrath that would be poured out on those who ravaged others. It was a time for retribution on those who had caused tribulation for others. **Lebanon:** The Babylonians had cut down the forest of Lebanon in their conquest of the land of Palestine (See Is 14:8).

WOE TO THE IDOLATER

2:18-20 **What profit is the graven image:** The message here is a taunt of the idols that were made by the hands of men. The trust of men in such senseless and speechless creations of one's hands is indicative of the religious depravity of the people. The folly of the idol worshiper is in the fact that his senseless idol responds only to that which the worshiper already has in his own mind. The idol worshiper is thus speaking to himself. That which he requests is answered from within himself. The answers of the idol are only the imagination of the idolater. The ridicule of the idols in this context, therefore, is actually a pronouncement of the foolishness of the idolater. **The Lord is in His holy temple:** The fact that God exists in His realm reassures the faithful that He is working all things together for His purpose. And since He is working, then the faithful must be reassured that all things are working together for good for those who love God (Rm 8:28). Though the faithful Israelites might not understand why they were going through suffering, they must trust that God was working. And when God is

working, the righteous must have faith that He is doing that which is right. The righteous Israelite would eventually understand the reason for their suffering once the people had transitioned through the captivity. Unfortunately, the immediate recipients of the words of Habakkuk who received this message, would never personally realize God's answer, for they would have all died by the end of the captivity. But we on this side of the captivity understand the reason for the suffering of the captivity. And in understanding the reason, we can endure suffering at the hands of the unbelievers until we are delivered from this world (See comments Rm 8:28; 1 Co 10:13; Rv 21:4).

A Hymn Of Praise

(3:1-19)

Outline: (1) Prayer for restoration (3:1,2), (2) Vision for a future (3:3-16), (3) Walk by faith (3:17-19)

Chapter 3

PRAYER FOR RESTORATION

3:1,2 This is a psalm of supplication. Habakkuk prayed for the intervention of God in the affairs of the nations. He realized that God's work among the nations was for the benefit of His purpose with His people. The prayer, therefore, is that God take action. **Shigionoth:** The exact meaning of this word is not known. Some have suggested that reference was to stringed instruments, or it may have been some other musical term. **Afraid:** Fear of God is a motive for obedience. One responds to the word of God, knowing that all things are working according to His purpose. Therefore, one must walk in the direction of His word in order to walk according to the purpose of God. The problem with Israel was that they no longer feared God, and thus were walking out of harmony with His word and plan. **Revive Your work:** Israel had gone astray from God to the point that God could no longer use them as the nation through whom to bring the Messiah and Savior into the world. God had to reform Israel, which He did through captivity. The repentant remnant that came forth out of captivity when the Medo-Persians

conquered the Babylonians, was a different Israel than the one that went into captivity (See comments Er and Ne). After the captivity, God's work was revived, and thus the promises made to the fathers could be fulfilled (See Gn 12:1-3). **Remember mercy:** This would be Habakkuk's resignation to the work of God, and thus he calls on God to remember His faithful remnant. God's mercy would involve the restoration of His people from captivity. They would return to Palestine, but never again to have autonomous possession of it.

VISION FOR A FUTURE

3:3-16 God is pictured as coming from Teman and Paran in order to deliver His people (Compare Jg 5:4). He comes in a great storm cloud, causing the earth to shake and tremble. The symbolism is probably from the time when God delivered Israel from Egyptian captivity. When God takes action to accomplish His work, the heavens tremble and the earth shakes. The cataclysmic picture of the natural world in this scene is the height of imagery that depicts the greatness of God. If the coming of God causes such a disturbance in His creation, then certainly He has the power to deliver His people. **My stomach trembled:** Habakkuk's response to the overwhelming revelation of God's power and work was only natural. He physically and emotionally collapsed at the awesome vision. In the book of Job, God asked Job to consider all the wonders that He had created. Job concluded that since God could create such great things, then certainly He could control all that exists. The vision here is similar. If God's presence can cause such disturbance in the things that He created, then certainly He can control all that man does on the earth. **Rest in the day of trouble:** The awesomeness of God's power brings reassurance to the hearts of the faithful. It brings comfort in that the suffering can resign themselves to the fact that God is in control of all things. In the midst of the international turmoil that was prevalent in the history of Israel, Habakkuk was reassured that God was in control of the events that were transpiring. Trouble would come upon Judah in the end. However, trouble would come

upon the Babylonians, which trouble would lead to their end. And the end of the Babylonian Empire meant the freedom of the captives.

WALK BY FAITH

3:17-19 These verses are a climax to the message of the book. Habakkuk was confident because of his faith. In the face of either a hostile environment, or turbulent international affairs, he would stand firm in the Lord. These are words of one who through faith had transcended the affairs of this world. They are the words of one who would not allow his environment to determine his spirit (See comments Ph 4:4). Habakkuk's faith was his victory (1 Jn 5:4).

Commentary by Roger E. Dickson

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ABBREVIATIONS

OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis - **Gn**, Exodus - **Ex**, Leviticus - **Lv**, Numbers - **Nm**, Deuteronomy - **Dt**, Joshua - **Ja**, Judges - **Jg**, Ruth - **Rt**, 1 Samuel - **1 Sm**, 2 Samuel - **2 Sm**, 1 Kings - **1 Kg**, 2 Kings - **2 Kg**, 1 Chronicles - **1 Ch**, 2 Chronicles - **2 Ch**, Ezra - **Er**, Nehemiah - **Ne**, Esther - **Et**, Job - **Jb**, Psalms - **Ps**, Proverbs - **Pv**, Ecclesiastes - **Ec**, Song of Solomon - **Ss**, Isaiah - **Is**, Jeremiah - **Jr**, Lamentations - **Lm**, Ezekiel - **Ez**, Daniel - **Dn**, Hosea - **Hs**, Joel - **Jl**, Amos - **Am**, Obadiah - **Ob**, Jonah - **Jh**, Micah - **Mc**, Nahum - **Nh**, Habakkuk - **Hk**, Zephaniah - **Zp**, Haggai - **Hg**, Zechariah - **Zc**, Malachi - **Ml**

NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew - **Mt**, Mark - **Mk**, Luke - **Lk**, John - **Jn**, Acts - **At**, Romans - **Rm**, 1 Corinthians - **1 Co**, 2 Corinthians - **2 Co**, Galatians - **Gl**, Ephesians - **Ep**, Philippians - **Ph**, Colossians - **Cl**, 1 Thessalonians - **1 Th**, 2 Thessalonians - **2 Th**, 1 Timothy - **1 Tm**, 2 Timothy - **2 Tm**, Titus - **Ti**, Philemon - **Pl**, Hebrews - **Hb**, James - **Js**, 1 Peter - **1 Pt**, 2 Peter - **2 Pt**, 1 John - **1 Jn**, 2 John - **2 Jn**, 3 John - **3 Jn**, Jude - **Jd**, Revelation - **Rv**

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