



THE MINOR PROPHET CHALLENGE

The Prophecy of Habakkuk

INTRODUCTION TO HABAKKUK

All introductory material has been excerpted from *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* published by Zondervan Publishing. We highly recommend it for your personal study library.

Author

The opening verse explicitly identifies “Habakkuk the prophet” as the author of the book. The meaning of his name is uncertain. It may be connected with the Hebrew root “to embrace” or with the name of an Assyrian plant called “hambakuku.” The reference in 1:1 to Habakkuk as “the prophet” may imply that he was well known. His “oracle” (1:1) is unusual in that it is not primarily a word directed to the people, but an answer to his own painful question.

Time and Place of Writing

Date: 605-600 B.C.

The only objective evidence for the dating of Habakkuk’s prophetic activity is provided by 1:6. The reference to the Babylonians (lit., “Chaldeans”) as the threatening new world power indicates a period prior to Judah’s subjugation by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. This threat became a reality in 597 B.C., when the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and deported the young king Jehoiachin to Babylon (2Ki. 24:8-17). Habakkuk lived during the period of Jehoiakim’s reign (608-598 B.C.). During this time the Babylonians became the dominating force on the international scene, mercilessly sweeping aside any opposition (1:5-17). The evil reign of Jehoiakim formed a sad contrast to that of his father, the good king Josiah (see Jer. 22:13-19, 25-26). It was a period of spiritual deterioration in which the covenant people increasingly lost their unique character (1:2-4).

Habakkuk appears to have written to the Judahites still living in the promised land (the northern tribes had been taken into captivity in 722 B.C.). The Judahites had committed grave covenant violations, including committing violence against one another and perverting justice (1:2-4), such that God was about to judge them severely by exiling them from the promised land (exile took place in 597 B.C.).

Purpose

To guide Israel toward faith in God during the trials of the Babylonian conquest and exile by displaying the prophet’s personal struggle and resolution.

Finding Christ in Habakkuk

When Paul, in his letter to the Romans, looked for an appropriate text on which to base his understanding of the gospel, he chose Habakkuk 2:4 in the Septuagint the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Ro. 1:17; cf. Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:37-38). Like Habakkuk (ch. 1), Paul was convinced that wickedness and sin are incompatible with God’s holiness and that this tension can be resolved only by divine intervention. The prophetic word to Habakkuk (ch. 2) reveals in principle the way by which God will ultimately deal through Christ with the incompatibility between sin and holiness. The cross of Christ and the final judgment at his return are fulfillments of this revelation. Paul, like Habakkuk, affirmed that true life is possible only in a relationship of total dependence on the Lord. Such dependence, based on the faithfulness of our God, transforms our very existence in this world by filling our lives with joy and hope in the expectation of the final fulfillment of all his promises (ch 3; cf. 2:3). In this way, Habakkuk can be called the great-grandfather

of the Reformation. The key concepts of his preaching, taken over by Paul, deeply influenced men like Luther and Calvin and eventually became key slogans in Reformation faith. Only faith—that persevering and obedient trust in the God of Habakkuk, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—provides the key meaningful existence in the world during this period between Christ’s first coming and his return.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT HABAKKUK

Bothered by A Look Around

When you look around the world, you see suffering and injustice. How does that make you feel? Does it make you ask questions of God? The injustices of the world has caused some of our modern poets, as well as the prophet Habakkuk, to ask questions of God. Therefore, we once again see how the Minor Prophets are very relevant to contemporary life. What sort of feelings and questions arise because of the injustices of the world?

A Hip-Hop Habakkuk?

“Where Is The Love?” by the Black Eyed Peas, on the album Elephunk (2003)

What's wrong with the world, mama
People livin' like they ain't got no mamas
I think the whole world addicted to the drama
Only attracted to things that'll bring you trauma
Overseas, yeah, we try to stop terrorism
But we still got terrorists here livin'
In the USA, the big CIA
The Bloods and The Crips and the KKK
But if you only have love for your own race
Then you only leave space to discriminate
And to discriminate only generates hate
And when you hate then you're bound to get irate, yeah
Madness is what you demonstrate
And that's exactly how anger works and operates
Man, you gotta have love just to set it straight
Take control of your mind and meditate
Let your soul gravitate to the love, y'all, y'all

Chorus

People killin', people dyin'
Children hurt and you hear them cryin'
Can you practice what you preach
And would you turn the other cheek
Father, Father, Father help us
Send some guidance from above
'Cause people got me, got me questionin'
Where is the love (Love)
Where is the love (The love)
Where is the love (The love)
Where is the love
The love, the love

It just ain't the same, always unchanged
New days are strange, is the world insane
If love and peace is so strong
Why are there pieces of love that don't belong
Nations droppin' bombs
Chemical gasses fillin' lungs of little ones
With ongoin' sufferin' as the youth die young
So ask yourself is the lovin' really gone
So I could ask myself really what is goin' wrong
In this world that we livin' in people keep on givin' in
Makin' wrong decisions, only visions of them dividends
Not respectin' each other, deny thy brother
A war is goin' on but the reason's undercover
The truth is kept secret, it's swept under the rug
If you never know truth then you never know love
Where's the love, y'all, come on (I don't know)
Where's the truth, y'all, come on (I don't know)
Where's the love, y'all

Chorus

I feel the weight of the world on my shoulder
As I'm gettin' older, y'all, people gets colder
Most of us only care about money makin'
Selfishness got us followin' our wrong direction
Wrong information always shown by the media
Negative images is the main criteria
Infecting the young minds faster than bacteria
Kids wanna act like what they see in the cinema
Yo', whatever happened to the values of humanity
Whatever happened to the fairness in equality
Instead in spreading love we spreading animosity
Lack of understanding, leading lives away from unity
That's the reason why sometimes I'm feelin' under
That's the reason why sometimes I'm feelin' down
There's no wonder why sometimes I'm feelin' under
Gotta keep my faith alive till love is found

Chorus

A Honky-Tonk Habakkuk?

“A Few Questions” by Clay Walker, on the album A Few Questions (2003)

How in this world
Can we put a man on the moon
And still have a need
For a place like St. Judes
And why is one man born

In a place where all they know is war
A guy like me,
Has always been free

And how can two people
Who built a loving home
Try for years
And never have a child of their own
And somewhere out there tonite
There is a baby no ones holding tight
In need of love
To me that don't add up

CHORUS:

But I wasn't there you filled up the ocean
I didn't get to see you hang the stars in the sky
So I don't mean to second guess you
Or criticize what I don't understand
These are just a few questions I have

And why did my cousin
Have to die in that crash
A good kid
Only seventeen
I still wonder 'bout that
It seems unfair to me
Some get the chance to chase their dreams
And some don't
What do I know

CHORUS

Why do I feel like
You hear these prayers of mine
When so many outta be
Ahead of me in line
When you look down on me
Can you see the good through all the bad
These are just a few questions I had

Wait a Minute....Isn't This Backwards?

In some ways, the book of Habakkuk is a backwards prophecy. Usually, God tells a prophet to say something—the book begins with God calling the prophet to say something. Here, Habakkuk will initiate the conversation by asking similar questions to these songs, which is why many know him as the “Questioning Prophet.” The message that he received in his questions drastically changed him and it should change us as well.

Road Map: The Habakkuk Highway

Superscription (1:1): Guy Named Habakkuk (That's ALL!)

We do not have much biographical information on Habakkuk, as we do not know when he lived, what his family was like, or where he lived. It appears he was somewhat contemporaneous to Jeremiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah, as we will see the rise of the Babylonians in his message. The fact that we are not told anything about him (unlike other prophets) should point out to us that his background does not affect his message. The focus is on the message he received.

Complaint 1: How Long Silent at Injustice? (1:2-4)

Though the book begins with a question (1:2), we see that the question is really a complaint, as implied in “How long,” is the idea that it has already been too long. This is very similar to the psalms of lament; Habakkuk’s question is not just intellectual but one where he feels personal hurt. What bothers Habakkuk is that God does not seem to care or do anything about the evil in Judah, as Habakkuk uses six different words to describe his society—violence, injustice, wrong, destruction, strife, and conflict. The people were ignoring the law of God so that it was “paralyzed” and justice was “perverted.” It appears that he is most concerned with the sin in the camp rather than oppression on the people from the outside. How can God allow these things to happen? Does He care? He acted before, why does he not act now? Could God not be as good or powerful as He says?

Response 1: God Will Use Ruthless Babylonians (1:5-11)

God tells Habakkuk that He is doing something surprising about injustice in Judah—raising up the Babylonians/Chaldeans (1:5). Note, though, how that works—God is raising them up! (1:6a). The fact that this is a surprise seems to imply that the Babylonians have not become prominent at the time of Habakkuk’s ministry. However, as they are described in 1:6b-11, they are described as a “ruthless,” “dreaded” people, ones bent only on destruction. This army would judge those who are oppressing Judah. They are the answer to Habakkuk complaint about the nation of Judah—but their conquering Judah brings up a new question, which is why God would raise up a ruthless people to take care of unrighteousness. If that is bothering you.....it bothers Habakkuk as well!

Complaint 2: Historic, Pure God Tolerates This? (1:12-2:1)

Before getting to the heart of his second complaint, Habakkuk remembers who God is. He is a God “from everlasting” (1:12), which is probably a reference to the things that God has done for Israel in the past. Habakkuk also notes that God is pure and cannot look on evil or tolerate (1:13a). If these two things are true, then how can God tolerate the evil? How can the evil swallow the righteous, who will also be destroyed in the rise of the Chaldeans (1:13b)? God does not seem to care about the nations, as the Babylonians destroy the other nations without any mercy (1:14-17). How can God take care of injustice by helping an unjust people prosper? After bringing his complaint, Habakkuk will wait for an answer like a

watchman waiting on a wall, ready to give a rebuttal if needed (2:1). Habakkuk's first complaint was about God's inactivity, now it was about his activity!

Response 2: Wait Faithfully—Babylon Destroyed (2:2-20)

Revelation: Live By Faith (2:2-5)

God calls attention to His response, telling Habakkuk to write down what He says, so this seems to be a key part of the message to the original audience as well as us (2:2)! What God says will come to pass, even if one has to wait a long time for it (2:3). Essentially, justice is affirmed as the wicked will perish but the righteous will live (2:4-5). One is to wait faithfully while God works out His plan, as God's promise serves as proof until the action takes place.

The NT uses 2:4b ("The righteous shall live by his faith") in Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38. However, what does this mean in the message of Habakkuk? This passage is paired against the judgment of the unjust (2:4a). Therefore, the message of "the righteous shall live by his faith" is that innocent people (the same word is used in 1:4, 13) will physically survive in spite of the affliction by the Babylonians on the basis of his steadfastness (faithfulness, as opposed to simple "faith") to God's law; "innocent folk would not be the target of his judgment" (Robert Chisholm, Handbook to the Prophets, 438). The idea is that the people should remain faithful to God's law in times of trial because He will deliver them. One sees a very similar use of the verse in Hebrews 10:38. However, Paul seems to use this verse as proof-text for justification by faith. Is he using it right? One must remember that a righteous lifestyle is based upon a commitment to God; believing Him by taking Him at His word; belief and keeping God's laws go together. Judgment will come upon those who are not "faithful" to God because they do not trust in Him. Essentially, Habakkuk urges people to believe God in spite of what they might see right now, which is faith. Therefore, this verse is a perfect example of faith being the instrument through which we receive salvation; spiritual deliverance comes to those who live by faith.

Babylon Destroyed, LORD Known (2:6-20)

After urging people to trust in the LORD and wait for the fulfillment of His promise, He gives them a specific promise—the Babylonians will be destroyed and justice will ultimately be served! The destruction of Babylon is described in five stanzas, the first four of which start with "woe," which was a cry of mourning at funerals. This section features much description of the atrocities of the Babylonians. The first woe (2:6b-8) describes how Babylon built their empire on plundering other nations and doing violence to the world; the tables will turn and the nations will plunder them. The second woe (2:9-11) discusses how the judgment that will come on Babylon has come upon them because of their behavior, cutting off people and getting gain unjustly. The third woe (2:12-14) tells of the Babylonians building their kingdom through bloodshed, which will ultimately mean that their kingdom will pass away while the glory of

the LORD will fill the earth. Babylon's glory will turn to shame because they have killed people and lands, according to the fourth woe (2:15-17). The last stanza (2:18-20) discusses the idolatry of the Babylonians, which will prove to be their ruin, as their gods will not help them, while the living LORD of Israel will stand in glory.

In the midst of the judgment on Babylon, the glory of the LORD will shine in all the earth (2:14). The end of the LORD's response in some ways mirrors the end of Habakkuk's complaint. However, now the whole earth stands in silence before God as He sits in His temple of glory, with no rebuttal to be made (2:20).

Psalm of Response: Stand Awe'd, No Matter What (3:1-19)

Prayer in Awe of Greatness (3:1-2)

Instead of another conversation between Habakkuk and the LORD, we see a prayer of response. What prompted this prayer? Seeing the acts of the LORD in the past prompts him to want to see these acts renewed in the present (3:2).

God the Victorious Warrior (3:3-15)

The psalm now unfolds with a view of God coming in victory, a view that sees God in all of His splendor and glory. The enemy here is the sea, which might point back to the Exodus account but also serve as a symbol for evil and hostile forces of all types, as the water was an uncontrollable force. Ultimately, the LORD comes as a victorious warrior to deliver His people (3:14). This powerful warrior is the protector of His people. He will act for them in due time.

Rejoicing in Good, Bad Times (3:16-19)

Because Habakkuk stands in awe of what God has done in the past, he will wait for it to be renewed in the present. He might experience physical suffering or suffering in the community, but he will continue to rely on God and trust in Him. In bringing this to Habakkuk's situation, he sees that God is doing something, as He always has, and that He calls Habakkuk to trust in Him in spite of what it might look like. This is not just a prayer of Habakkuk, though, as it was given to the director of music for public worship—it should be our response to the message of Habakkuk!

Why God Wanted Us to Eavesdrop!

The book of Habakkuk teaches us that suffering and injustice should bother us. Habakkuk is not rebuked for being bothered for these things. He is not told that there is no suffering or evil in the world. We should not easily sweep the injustices of the world under the rug but affirm that they exist. However, seeing the injustices of the world should remind us of the promises and activity of God rather than cause us to doubt His goodness or existence.

Perhaps the central teaching of this book is that God is not silent. To Habakkuk, it seemed that God was not doing anything and what He was doing was wrong but He was bringing His sovereign plan to fruition. There are times in our lives when we are questioning whether God is hearing us and doing anything, but the message of Habakkuk reminds us that God is constantly at work, doing things even when it seems like He is silent; He is

working out His plan in ways we do not expect. Christ promised that he would return, but that was over 2,000 years ago. We live in a time where we constantly see war and suffering. Has God abandoned the world? Absolutely not! He is at work, doing something. Christ even promised that these things would be happening all the way to the end. However, God does not work in spite of these situations, but ultimately through them—like in the story of Joseph!

Therefore, our response must be to believe that God is active in all circumstances. We show that we believe that God is active by worshipping Him even when He seems silent or when things do not seem to be right. Worshipping Him and trusting Him does not mean that we “enjoy” suffering or deny that there is any such thing as suffering. Instead, we acknowledge it and endure it, looking to the promises of God and His faithfulness in the past.

In reflecting on this book as a Christian, one sees the cross of Christ as proof that God is moving and working even when He does not seem to be. Christ’s death on the cross was the biggest injustice in the history of humanity and the moment at which God seemed most silent. However, it was also the moment that perfectly displayed the justice of God and the central point in His plan for our salvation! The cross of Christ gives us reason to worship God in all circumstances.

While we wait for Christ to return, we know that God is doing things. In the meantime, we are called to worship Him, even when we are not sure what He is doing. That is the challenge from this Minor Prophet.

WHY IT MATTERS—DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

When have been some times in your life where you felt like God was silent or acting unjustly but looking back you see that he was doing something? What did you learn from these situations?

Of Habakkuk’s two complaints, which bothers you more—God’s inactivity/silence or God’s “unjust” activity? Why?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how much would you say that suffering and injustice bothers you? How about our church community as a whole?

Knowing that God works even through suffering and injustice, how should we respond to the suffering and injustice in the world? Why?

Who are people you know that are going through times of suffering and pain right now? How can you minister to them in light of the truth of Habakkuk?

Respond to Habakkuk in prayer; in addition to your personal response, pray for those we know who are going through tough times (injustice, suffering, etc.)