

Notes on Habakkuk

2015 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 is that he was a prophet who lived during the pre-exilic period of Israel's history. We know equally little about his seventh-century B.C. contemporaries Nahum and Zephaniah. 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 the latter 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.¹ 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.

The New Testament writers told us nothing about the 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.²

"The precise relationship of the prophets with the temple is one of the most debated elements in Old Testament study."³

The Septuagint addition to the Book of Daniel, the apocryphal *Bel and the Dragon*, mentions Habakkuk in its title 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."

¹See J. Ronald Blue, "Habakkuk," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1505.

²E.g., C. F. Keil, "Habakkuk," in *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 2:49.

³Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 463.

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 continues through the whole book, plus the absence of any compelling reasons to reject chapter 3, argue for the book's unity.⁴

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 throughout the whole earth, and that they would expand their territory even farther (1:6). The first of the Neo-Babylonian kings was Nabopolassar (627-605 B.C.). This reference 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 Scythians) 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 to 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). This is the opinion of most evangelical scholars.⁶ The background to Habakkuk is the decline of the Judean kingdom that began with the death of King Josiah in 609 B.C. Leon Wood dated this book more precisely at about 605 B.C.⁷ Richard Patterson favored a date of composition about 655-650 B.C., during Manasseh's reign.⁸

"On the one hand, Habakkuk announced the Babylonians' rise to prominence as if it would be a surprise (1:5-6). . . . On the other hand, the prophecy seems to assume the Babylonians had already built a reputation as an imperialistic power (see 1:6-11, 15-17; 2:5-17). . . . Perhaps the best way to resolve the problem is to understand the book as a collection of messages from different periods in the prophet's career."⁹

Another writer believed that some of the oracles date from before 605 B.C., while others came after 597 B.C., and that the final form of the book reflects Habakkuk's post-597 B.C. perspective.¹⁰ Ralph Smith believed Habakkuk wrote slightly after Nahum.¹¹

⁴See O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, pp. 212-14; and Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, pp. 127-29.

⁵See Robertson, p. 37; and Charles Lee Feinberg, *Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi*, pp. 11-12.

⁶Patterson, p. 115.

⁷Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 323.

⁸Patterson, pp. 117, 146-47.

⁹Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets*, p. 433.

¹⁰J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, pp. 82-84.

¹¹Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, p. 97.

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.

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 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.

"Until the day God avenges the Babylonians and restores Jerusalem, the just live by faith (Hab. 2:1-4), waiting with confidence for the fulfillment of *I AM's* unailing promise that the wicked will be destroyed (2:5-19) and his legitimate claim to the whole world will be universally acknowledged (3:1-16)."¹²

LITERARY FORM

This book employs a variety of literary forms.¹³ 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

¹²Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 842.

¹³See Patterson, pp. 119-26.

records an intriguing interchange between a perplexed prophet and his Maker."¹⁴

"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."¹⁵

"If Zephaniah stressed humility and poverty of spirit as prerequisites for entering into the benefits of the company of the believing, Habakkuk demanded faith as the most indispensable prerequisite. But these are all part of the same picture.

"Whereas Zephaniah stressed Judah's idolatry and religious syncretism, Habakkuk was alarmed by the increase of lawlessness, injustice, wickedness, and rebellion."¹⁶

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

¹⁴Blue, p. 1505.

¹⁵Carl E. Armerding, "Habakkuk," in *Daniel-Malachi*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 495-96.

¹⁶Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, p. 225.

- 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

MESSAGE

Habakkuk is unusual among the prophetic books in that it tells a story. In this, it 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 *understand* God. Jonah deals with a problem posed by *Nineveh*, and Habakkuk deals with a problem posed by *Babylon*. Habakkuk, like Jonah, also records 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 3:19 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.

"From the affirmation of faith's agnosticism we come to the affirmation of agnosticism's faith."¹⁷

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 an *even more wicked* nation—Babylon—to discipline the wicked Judahites.

The key verse, 2:4, is similar to the constricted part of an hourglass. 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. This verse 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.

¹⁷G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:2:274.

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 a group of people to imagine a straight stick, everyone would visualize a stick that is free of any bends or curves. But if I asked them to imagine a crooked stick, everyone 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 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, and not turning back to Judaism and living by the Law. And in Galatians 3:11, the emphasis is on "faith." Paul contrasted salvation by works and salvation by faith in Galatians. 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. It has been called the John 3:16 of the Old Testament.

Now let us 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 often 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.

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 the proud.

The last part of the book, which follows 2:4, helps us to 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 forward what God had done in the past, 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 may 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, while 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. And 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. It is interesting that now some of the so-called "assured facts" of science are being called into question by scientists themselves.

Notice, too, how Habakkuk handled his questions. 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 revelation 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. Living by faith means becoming people of prayer and the Word.

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? Where do we turn first for answers? Scripture? I hope so.

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 wisely said that Christians are people who do not live by explanations but by promises.¹⁸ 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 *continue to wait* on God. 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.¹⁹

¹⁸See Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Prophets*, p. 95.

¹⁹Adaped from Morgan, 1:2:273-86.

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."²⁰

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

"Like Haggai and Zechariah in the books that bear their names (Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1) Habakkuk is called *the* prophet. This may mean that Habakkuk was a professional prophet on the temple staff . . ."²¹

These temple prophets led the people in worshipping God (cf. 1 Chron. 25:1).²²

"One of the functions of temple prophets was to give responses to worshipers who came seeking divine guidance: when the problem was stated, the prophet inquired of God and obtained an answer."²³

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

The prophet asked Yahweh two questions and received two answers.

"Whereas former prophets had declared the certainties of God to man, Habakkuk began asking questions of God on behalf of man."²⁴

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 While in prayer, the prophet asked Yahweh "how long" would he have to keep calling 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 by responding to his prayer. He had cried out to the Lord reminding Him of

²⁰Robertson, p. 135.

²¹F. F. Bruce, "Habakkuk," in *The Minor Prophets*, p. 842. Johannes Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, pp. 208, 254, advanced this view.

²²On the subject of prophets who led the people in worship, see Aubrey R. Johnson, *The Cultic Prophet in Ancient Israel*.

²³Bruce, p. 832.

²⁴Smith, p. 103.

the violence that he observed in Judah, but the Lord had not provided deliverance (cf. Gen. 6:11, 13; Job 19:7). Normally 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). God had seemingly not heard, and He certainly had not helped the prophet.

"Not hearing is equivalent to not helping."²⁵

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.

"Violence" (Heb. *hamas*) occurs six times in Habakkuk (1:2, 3, 9; 2:8, 17 [twice]), an 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 fellow man (e.g., Gen. 6:11). It is any ethical wrong, and physical violence is only one manifestation of it. By piling up synonyms for injustice, Habakkuk stressed the severity of the oppression.

"This is not an instance of the earthen vessel finding fault with the potter who made it—an attitude rebuked by Isaiah and Paul. It is to the one who answers back in unbelief that Paul says, 'Who indeed are you . . . to argue with God?' (Rom. 9:20). But there are others who answer back in faith; their words, when they do so, are the expression of their loyalty to God."²⁶

1:4 Since God had not yet 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 practice justice in their courts, the wicked dominated the righteous, and the powerful "perverted . . . justice." These conditions were common in Judah.

"When magistrates permit murder, theft, fornication and the like to go unchecked and unpunished, God calls the whole nation to accounting. The unpunished crimes pollute the land, becoming a growing mortgage against all, upon which God may finally foreclose, driving some inhabitants away, destroying others and permitting different peoples to dwell in the land."²⁷

²⁵Keil, 2:56.

²⁶Bruce, p. 844.

²⁷Robert D. Culver, *Toward a Biblical View of Civil Government*, pp. 93-94.

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.

"The hoped-for response to a lament (*cf.* 1:2-4) would be an oracle of salvation, but here the response is an oracle of judgment."²⁸

1:5 The Lord told Habakkuk and his people (plural "you" in Hebrew) to direct their 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—even if someone had just told them about it!

"The Apostle Paul, quoting from the LXX on this verse, applies the principle of God's dealings in Habakkuk's day to the situation in the church in his own day (Acts 13:41). No doubt God's work of calling the Gentiles into his church would be just as astonishing as his work of using the Babylonian armies to punish Judah."²⁹

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. The name "Chaldeans" derives from the ruling class that lived in southern Mesopotamia and took leadership in the Neo-Babylonian Empire. The last and greatest dynasty to rule Babylon was of Chaldean origin. Thus "Chaldean" was almost a synonym for "Babylonian." The Chaldeans were Semites, descendants of Kesed, the son of Abraham's brother Nahor (Gen. 22:22). Some modern Iraqis, especially those from southern Iraq, still identify themselves as Chaldeans. 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 into becoming a ruthless and impetuous nation that—by this time—had already "marched throughout" the ancient Near East and conquered several neighboring nations (*cf.* Ezek. 28:7; 30:11; 31:12; 32:12). Thus, Babylonia would be the rod of God's punishment of Judah, as Assyria had been His instrument of judgment of Israel.

"The seventh-century prophets depicted the Lord as the sovereign ruler over the nations."³⁰

²⁸David W. Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, p. 52.

²⁹David W. Kerr, "Habakkuk," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 873.

³⁰Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "A Theology of the Minor Prophets," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 415.

1:7 Many nations "dreaded and feared" the Babylonians, who were a *law unto themselves*. They lived by rules that they made up, 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)."³¹

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," the implements of war in the ancient world, were the swiftest, faster even "than leopards" (hyperbole?), 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), diving from the sky to devour a small animal on the ground (cf. Deut. 28:49; 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 sand before them (cf. Jer. 18:17; Ezek. 17:10; 19:12; Jon. 4:8). This enemy was advancing like a whirlwind, and gathering captives as innumerable as the grains of 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 "heap(ed) up rubble" to "capture" fortifications. They did not need special machines, but used whatever materials they found, with which to build siege ramps to conquer them (cf. 2 Sam. 20:15; 2 Kings 19:32; Ezek. 4:2; 21:22; 26:8-9).³²

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—as "their god"—instead of the true God. This is the reason God would judge them.

³¹Armerding, p. 503.

³²See Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands*, pp. 17, 20, 315.

"Had Habakkuk listened as carefully to the last line of God's answer as he did to the extended description of Judah's chastiser, he might have avoided the second perplexity that gripped his soul, the report of which is contained in the verses that follow (1:12—2:1)."³³

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.³⁴

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

This section is another lament (cf. 1:2-4). It expresses the problem of excessive punishment.

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. With a rhetorical question, Habakkuk affirmed his belief that Yahweh, his God, the Holy One, was "from everlasting" (or antiquity). 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 (i.e., sovereign).

Habakkuk believed the Judeans would not perish completely (cf. 2:1), because God had promised to preserve them forever (Gen. 17:2-8; 26:3-5; 28:13-15; Exod. 3:3-15; 14:1-6; Deut. 7:6; 14:1-2; 26:16-18; 2 Sam. 7:12-29). The prophet, furthermore, 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 (cf. Deut. 32:4, 15, 18, 37).

1:13 Because Yahweh was the "Holy One" (v. 12), 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 slaughtered people who were more righteous than they? Why did the godly remnant in Judah have to suffer with their ungodly Judean neighbors?

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,

³³Patterson, p. 149.

³⁴See D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *From Fear to Faith: Studies in the Book of Habakkuk and the Problem of History*, pp. 15-18.

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.

". . . Habakkuk takes his place beside many others, such as Job (Job 7:16-21; 9:21-24; 12:4-6; 21:1-16, 21-25; 27:1-12), the psalmist Asaph (Ps. 73), Jeremiah (Jer. 11:18-19; 12:1-4; 15:15-18; 17:15-18; 20:7-18), and Malachi (Mal. 2:17), who questioned God as to His fairness in handling the problems of evil and injustice."³⁵

"It is one thing to face the problems that confront everyone who believes in a good and omnipotent God and ask why things are so, or how they can be so. It is something quite different to question the Divine goodness or justice, or the very existence of God, simply because one cannot answer these questions."³⁶

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."³⁷

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 to establish justice.

1:15-16 Babylon was like a fisherman, who took other nations captive "with a hook" and "net," and rejoiced over his good catch. Earlier the prophet compared the Babylonians to hunters (v. 8). 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 line.³⁸ This was an Assyrian practice that the Babylonians continued. In another Babylonian relief, the Chaldeans pictured their major gods dragging a net in which their captured enemies squirmed.³⁹ The Babylonians even worshipped and

³⁵Patterson, pp. 158-59.

³⁶Kerr, p. 875.

³⁷Robertson, p. 162.

³⁸W. Rudolph, *Micha-Nahum-Habakuk-Zephanja*, p. 211.

³⁹T. Laetsch, *Bible Commentary: The Minor Prophets*, p. 326.

gave credit to the *tools* they used to make their impressive conquests, rather crediting 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 Habakkuk.

"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.'"⁴⁰

1:17 Habakkuk finished 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's using a nation *that practiced such excessive violence* to judge the sins of His people, that Habakkuk could not understand.

"God can use some very sinful people to cause believers to suffer. This allows learning to take place in two ways: first, learning to stop doing one's own sinful actions; second, realizing that what the evil agent of suffering is doing is not right either."⁴¹

D. YAHWEH'S ANSWER ABOUT BABYLON CH. 2

The Lord gave Habakkuk a full answer to his question about using Babylon to judge the Israelites.

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 (cf. Isa. 21:8, 11; Jer. 6:17; Ezek. 3:17; 33:2-3). 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 people (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).

". . . Habakkuk notes that the Chaldeans have been sent to reprove/correct the Judahites. Similarly he expects and deserves God's correction concerning his doubts and his understanding of the full scope of God's plans for the future."⁴²

⁴⁰Blue, p. 1512.

⁴¹Stephen J. Bramer, "Suffering in the Writing Prophets (Isaiah to Malachi)," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and the Church*, p. 154.

⁴²Patterson, p. 162.

"Only by revelation can the genuine perplexities of God's dealings with human beings be comprehended."⁴³

"Yahweh's response to those who inquire of him is never automatic. They must be willing to wait in order to hear 'what God the LORD will speak' (Ps. 85:9 [8])."⁴⁴

2:2 Yahweh did respond, and told the prophet to "inscribe" a permanent, easy-to-read "record" of "the vision"—which 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, and other messengers, should then "run" to tell their fellow citizens what God's answer was.

"The matter was to be made so clear that whoever read it might run and publish it."⁴⁵

"It [the interpretation of the Lord's command here] could involve passers-by, who will be able to read the message as they go by and then pass the message on informally to those they meet, or it could mean a *herald*, whose specific function will be to spread the message throughout the land (so NEB, NIV)."⁴⁶

Another interpretation is that Habakkuk was to publish the writing so that the reader would know how to "run" (i.e., live according to God's will).⁴⁷

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" (cf. Dan. 12:4).

"The words simply express the thought, that the prophecy is to be laid to heart by all the people on account of its great importance, and that not merely in the present, but in the future also."⁴⁸

"Just as, in human life, the timing of certain actions and events is of crucial importance, so it is also in the divine scheme of things. . . . The apparent lack of divine action, which may cause faith to falter, is in reality only our inability to perceive the timing of divine action."⁴⁹

⁴³Robertson, p. 166.

⁴⁴Bruce, p. 857.

⁴⁵Kerr, p. 876. Cf. Dan. 12:4.

⁴⁶Baker, p. 59. Cf. Feinberg, p. 22; Keil, 2:69.

⁴⁷J. M. Holt, "So He May Run Who Reads It," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83 (1964):301.

⁴⁸Ibid., 2:70.

⁴⁹Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, 2:92-93.

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 had predicted will eventually come to pass, which in the context of Hebrews will be 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.

"Habakkuk now is told the basic guiding principles upon which the operation of divine government unalterably proceeds until the coming of that final appointed time."⁵⁰

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.

"A proud person relies on self, power, position, and accomplishment; a righteous person relies on the Lord."⁵¹

"Spiritually, morally, and ethically the ungodly presumptuously ignore the path of God's righteousness to follow the way of selfish desires in the everyday decisions of life."⁵²

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 for both Jews and Gentiles. 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. In Galatians, Paul was mainly addressing Gentiles. 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 this case, the original readers were primarily Jews. In all three cases, "live" has the broader reference to eternal life, but here in Habakkuk, it is mainly *physical life* that is in view. Thus, this verse is clearly a very important revelation in the Bible—even its essential message.

"It takes three books to explain and apply this one verse!"⁵³

⁵⁰Patterson, p. 176.

⁵¹*The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 1522.

⁵²Patterson, p. 177.

⁵³Warren W. Wiersbe, "Habakkuk," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Prophets*, p. 411.

This 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 just shall live by his faith' was the watchword of the Reformation, and they may well be the seven most important monosyllables in all of church history."⁵⁴

"The underlying theme of the book may be summarized as follows: A matured faith trusts humbly but persistently in God's design for establishing righteousness in the earth."⁵⁵

Bruce stated the theme of the book as "the preservation of loyal trust in God in face of the challenge to faith presented by the bitter experience of foreign invasion and oppression."⁵⁶

The Hebrew word *'emunah*, "faith," can also mean "faithful" or "steadfast." It can also mean "integrity."⁵⁷ Did the Lord mean that the righteous will live by his trust in God or by being faithful to God, by being a person of integrity? Scripture elsewhere reveals that both meanings are true: trust and integrity. However, in this context "faith" or "trust" seems to be the primary meaning, since the Babylonians did not trust God, whereas the Israelites did. Both the Babylonians and the Israelites, though, had been *unfaithful* (disloyal or disobedient) 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)."⁵⁸

"The summons is from speculation to action, from questioning to conduct, from brooding to duty. God is attending to His business, and Habakkuk must attend to his. Running the universe is not his task. That burden belongs to God. But Habakkuk has his task, and let him faithfully perform it. Thus he will live in moral sincerity and in moral security that righteous living brings in the midst of external calamities. That is the way for a righteous man to live in an evil world."⁵⁹

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 416.

⁵⁵Robertson, p. 136. Italics omitted.

⁵⁶Bruce, p. 831.

⁵⁷Chisholm, *Handbook on . . .*, pp. 437-38.

⁵⁸Armerding, p. 513.

⁵⁹Raymond Calkins, *The Modern Message of the Minor Prophets*, p. 97.

"This is the first of three wonderful assurances that God gives in this chapter to encourage His people. This one emphasizes God's grace, because grace and faith always go together. Habakkuk 2:14 emphasizes God's glory and assures us that, though this world is now filled with violence and corruption (Gen. 6:5, 11-13), it shall one day be filled with God's glory. The third assurance is in Habakkuk 2:20 and emphasizes God's government. Empires may rise and fall, but God is on His holy throne, and He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords."⁶⁰

2:5 The Lord advanced the thought of verse 4 further. When a person drinks too much "wine," it leads him (or her) to reveal his pride publicly. Here, the "haughty man" is a personification of Babylon. 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. Here, "Sheol" is a personification of death. 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 for Yahweh's indictment of this nation (cf. 1:17).

"*Sheol* is, in the O.T., the place to which the dead go. (1) Often, therefore, it is spoken of as the equivalent of the grave, where all human activities cease; the terminus toward which all human life moves (e.g. Gen. 42:38; Job 14:13; Ps. 88:3). (2) To the man 'under the sun,' the natural man, who of necessity judges from appearances, *sheol* seems no more than the grave—the end and total cessation, not only of the activities of life, but also of life itself (Eccl. 9:5, 10). But (3) Scripture reveals *sheol* as a place of sorrow (2 Sam. 22:6; Ps. 18:5; 116:3), into which the wicked are turned (Ps. 9:17), and where they are fully conscious (Isa. 14:9-17; Ezek. 32:21). Compare Jon. 2:2; what the belly of the great fish was to Jonah, *sheol* is to those who are therein. The *sheol* of the O.T. and *hades* of the N.T. are identical."⁶¹

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. Baker entitled them "the pillager," "the plotter," "the

⁶⁰Wiersbe, p. 416.

⁶¹*The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 954.

promoter of violence," "the debaucher," and "the pagan idolator."⁶² 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.)."⁶³

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?

". . . the ode is prophetic in its nature, and is applicable to all times and all nations."⁶⁴

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 and Babylon would "become plunder for them." This happened when the Medes and Persians rose up (attacked) 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 many" 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 government for itself that it thought would be safe from all calamity (cf. Gen. 11:4; see also Obad.).⁶⁵ It built a strong and rich dynasty ("house") so it would be self-sufficient. Another interpretation is that the secure "nest" in view is the capital city.⁶⁶

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 "many" 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.

⁶²Baker, pp. 62, 64, 65, and 67.

⁶³Blue, p. 1514.

⁶⁴Keil, 2:77.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 83.

⁶⁶Bruce, p. 867.

2:11 The stones and woodwork ("framework"), 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.

"Although the prophet refers to the construction of a city, his language is probably metaphorical for the construction of an empire."⁶⁷

2:13 This verse is the center of this taunt song structurally. It is significant that it 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 the 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. This prediction 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 as a literal one. Symbolically, 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 (cf. Rev. 17—18).

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

⁶⁷Craigie, 2:98.

"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," just as they had exposed the nakedness of others (v. 15). The Hebrew is more graphic and literally reads, "Drink, yes you, and expose your foreskin," namely, show yourself to be uncircumcised. 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 ("overwhelm") 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.

"The Creator of the world has a concern for what is nowadays called ecology; the cultural mandate that he has given to the human race includes the responsible stewardship of plant and animal life."⁶⁸

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 in fact 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

⁶⁸Bruce, p. 872.

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."⁶⁹

"Famous people are the 'idols' of millions, especially politicians, athletes, wealthy tycoons, and actors and actresses. Even dead entertainers like Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and Elvis Presley still have their followers. People may also worship and serve man-made things like cars, houses, boats, jewelry, and art. While all of us appreciate beautiful and useful things, it's one thing to own them and quite something else to be owned by them. Albert Schweitzer said, 'Anything you have that you cannot give away, you do not really own; it owns you.' I've met people who so idolize their children and grandchildren that they refused to let them consider giving their lives for Christian service.

"Social position can be an idol and so can vocation achievement. For some people, their god is their appetite (Phil. 3:19; Rom. 16:18); and they live only to experience carnal pleasures [including following their favorite sports?]. Intellectual ability can be a terrible idol (2 Cor. 10:5) as people worship their IQ and refuse to submit to God's Word."⁷⁰

"Idolatry begins with deception, encourages deception, and calls for a commitment to deception (see Is. 44:20)."⁷¹

2:19 The Lord pronounced "woe" on those who ignorantly tried to coax their dumb ("mute") 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 what material they were made out of, they were still *only lifeless objects* of art. How foolish it was to look to one of these as one's "teacher" or guide!

⁶⁹Robertson, p. 209.

⁷⁰Wiersbe, p. 418.

⁷¹*The Nelson . . .*, p. 1523.

2:20

In contrast to lifeless idols stands the living and true God. Yahweh lived in His heavenly, "holy 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).

"This contrasts with the frenetic activity of man to create 'speaking' gods, and the tumultuous cries of worshippers to make dumb idols respond. Lifeless idols approached in clamour are silent, while the living God, approached in silence and reverence, speaks."⁷²

"Verse 20 also has another application. Because the idolatry that leads to the neglect and rejection of God is a universal problem, all the earth is to be silent before the living God."⁷³

"Idolatry is essentially the worship of that which we make, rather than of our Maker. And that which we make may be found in possessions, a home, a career, an ambition, a family, or a multitude of other people or things. We 'worship' them when they become the focal point of our lives, that for which we live. And as the goal and centre of human existence, they are as foolish as any wooden idol or metal image."⁷⁴

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."⁷⁵

"The verse provides a bridge to the next major section of the prophecy in that it turns to the positive, looking at God, after the negative, attention to Babylon's sin."⁷⁶

Patterson summarized these five woes in a chart:⁷⁷

⁷²Baker, p. 68.

⁷³Patterson, p. 207.

⁷⁴Craigie, 2:99.

⁷⁵Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 806.

⁷⁶Baker, p. 68.

⁷⁷Patterson, p. 184.

| HABAKKUK'S FIVE WOES (2:6-20) | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| ELEMENT | 1st | 2nd | 3rd | 4th | 5th |
| Invective: | v. 6 | v. 9 | v. 12 | v. 15 | v. 19a |
| Woe to the: | Plunderer | Plotter | Pillager | Perverter | Polytheist |
| Threat: | v. 7 | v. 11 | v. 13 | v. 16 | v. 19b |
| He will be: | Despoiled | Denounced | Destroyed | Disgraced | Deserted |
| Criticism: | v. 8 | v. 10 | v. 14 | v. 17 | vv. 18, 20 |
| Grounded in: | Spoiling of the nations | Scheming against peoples | Surety of the knowledge of God | Stripping of man/nature | Supremacy of God |

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. It is "one of the most moving statements of faith and trust found in Scripture."⁷⁸

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 for singing 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: "a reeling song, *i.e.* a song delivered in the greatest excitement, or with a rapid change of emotion."⁷⁹ 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

⁷⁸Baker, p. 68.

⁷⁹Keil, 2:93.

him with awe. Reception of divine revelation resulted in the fear of the Lord, as it always should.

Habakkuk called on God to stir up ("revive") the "work" that He said He would do in judging Babylon, namely: to bring it to life.⁸⁰ 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, by shortening the period of her suffering. This verse contains the only petitions in Habakkuk's prayer: that God would preserve life, provide understanding, and remember mercy. Some readers have seen it as an encapsulation of the book's message. It also expresses the theme of the psalm.⁸¹

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 rising 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 idea is not that the Lord would rise over these eastern places, but that when He arose over His people, they would see Him as they saw the sun rising in the east—like they saw Him on Mt Sinai when He gave them the Law.⁸²

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.⁸³

The Holy One's "splendor" covered "the heavens" like the sun after sunrise. The self-manifestation of His glory filled "the earth" with "His praise" (fame). "Glory" (Heb. *hod*) describes primarily kingly authority (e.g., Num. 27:20; 1 Chron. 29:25; et al.), and here it has particular

⁸⁰Ibid., 2:94.

⁸¹Ibid., 2:92.

⁸²Ibid., 2:97-102.

⁸³Blue, p. 1518.

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 accompaniments, the results and evidences of His searing holiness.

"Plague and pestilence, as proceeding from God, are personified and represented as satellites; the former going before Him as it were, as a shieldbearer (1 Sam. xvii. 7), or courier (2 Sam. xv. 1); the latter coming after Him as a servant (1 Sam. xxv. 42)."⁸⁴

"In the ancient Near East, important people were accustomed to being accompanied by attendants (cf. 1 Sa. 17:7; 2 Sa. 15:1)."⁸⁵

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 make the permanent mountains shatter and the ancient hills collapse. He always causes these repercussions 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. The terms "Midianite" and "Cushite" both described Moses' wife (Exod. 2:16-22; 18:1-5; Num. 12:1), so they may be synonymous here as well. Perhaps this is a reference to Yahweh parting the Red Sea. It is small wonder that these tribes trembled, since His glance can also 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.

⁸⁴Keil, 2:101.

⁸⁵Baker, p. 71.

"From start to finish, Israel's God is shown to be the victor over all individuals and nations and the champion of those who follow in His train."⁸⁶

- 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. Another view is that the "rivers" refer to the rivers of the earth generally, and the "sea" refers to all the seas (cf. Nah. 1:4; Ps. 89:10; Job 38:8).⁸⁷ He was demonstrating His power for the "salvation" of His people, as a Divine Warrior riding His chariot.

"In Canaanite mythology, Baal had confronted the personified god Yam (sea), alternatively called Judge River. Israel borrowed this motif but dropped any idea that natural phenomena are personified deities. Yahweh is presented as having engaged in combat with the sea at creation or at other unspecified periods (cf. Jb. 26:12-13; Pss. 29; 89:9-10)."⁸⁸

"The horses and chariots of salvation upon which the Lord is pictured as riding are not the angels, but the elements—the clouds and the winds. See Psalm 104:4."⁸⁹

- 3:9 He pulled His powerful "bow" out, and prepared to use it. He called for many arrows ("rods of chastisement") to shoot at His enemies (cf. Deut. 32:40-42). This is a notoriously difficult phrase to translate.

"God had enlisted weapons and pledged them on oath for the destruction of his enemies."⁹⁰

"In the ancient Near East, warriors would sometimes empower their weapons with a magical formula. The Lord is depicted here as doing the same (see also Jer. 47:6-7)."⁹¹

"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, 19).

⁸⁶Patterson, p. 238.

⁸⁷Keil, 2:103.

⁸⁸Baker, p. 72. See M. D. Coogan *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, pp. 75-115.

⁸⁹Feinberg, p. 35.

⁹⁰Robertson, p. 234.

⁹¹Chisholm, *Handbook on . . .*, p. 442. See also R. D. Haak, *Habakkuk*, p. 95.

- 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). Another view is that the "arrows" and "spear" do not refer to lightning, but simply to God's agents of judgment generally.⁹²
- 3:12 The Lord had "marched throughout the earth" like a cosmic giant subduing Israel's enemies. He had "trampled" hostile "nations" as an ox does when it treads grain. Verses 12 through 15 view God's power as seen by the enemy.⁹³
- 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 the Davidic kings generally, or more than one of these.

"If the reference be to a past event (as a pattern) in the head out of the house of the wicked man, then allusion may be to one of the kings of Canaan. However, if the prophet is speaking of the future, and this is the more probable, then the king of the Chaldeans is meant."⁹⁴

"The first half of the verse provides the key to understanding the relationship of this chapter to the rest of the book. Rather than ignoring wrongdoing (1:2-4), or allowing oppression of his people to go unpunished (1:12-17), God remembers his covenant and acts on their behalf. The whole purpose of the psalm and of God's theophany is to indicate the continued presence of gracious care coupled with divine judgment. Here we have God's answer to Habakkuk's complaints (1:12-17)—his people will be saved."⁹⁵

The Lord had also destroyed the leaders ("struck the head") of many evil nations ("the house of evil") that opposed the Israelites, beginning with Pharaoh. He had disabled their nations as thoroughly as if someone had slit a body open from bottom to top, or tore a building off its foundation. "Selah." In the future, God would do this to the Chaldean dynasty.

- 3:14 The Lord used His enemies' own weapons to kill their leaders ("the head") in retribution (cf. Judg. 5:26). Israel's enemies had "stormed in(to)" the Promised Land with great enthusiasm "to scatter" God's people, like those who "devour" (destroy) "oppressed" people "in secret."

⁹²Keil, 2:108-9.

⁹³Patterson, p. 246.

⁹⁴Feinberg, p. 37.

⁹⁵Baker, pp. 74-75.

"The enemies are compared to highway murderers, who lurk in dark corners for the defenseless traveller, and look forward with rejoicing for the moment when they may be able to murder him."⁹⁶

- 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). This section closes with the motif with which it opened (3:8), namely: the crossing of the Red Sea.

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

- 3:16 Habakkuk "trembled" all over as he waited for 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.

"Over the years, I've often leaned on three verses that have helped me wait patiently on the Lord. 'Stand still' (Ex. 14:13), 'Sit still' (Ruth 3:18), and 'Be still' (Ps. 46:10). Whenever we find ourselves getting 'churned up' within, we can be sure that we need to stop, pray, and wait on the Lord before we do some stupid thing."⁹⁷

- 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; Phil. 4:4, 10-19).

"The words 'rejoice' and 'exult' each have the cohortative [*sic* cohortative] attached. This is the strongest possible way to say that one is determined to rejoice in the Lord regardless of what does or does not happen. Faith means loving and serving God regardless of circumstances."⁹⁸

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

⁹⁶Keil, 2:111.

⁹⁷Wiersbe, p. 422.

⁹⁸Smith, p. 117.

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* typify Judah when the Babylonians overthrew the nation (cf. Lam. 2:12, 20; 4:4, 9-10; 5:17-18).

"It is right and proper to voice appreciation of God's goodness when he bestows all that is necessary for life, health, and prosperity. But when these things are lacking, to rejoice in God for his own sake is evidence of pure faith."⁹⁹

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 sure-footedly as the hoofs of a gazelle enabled it to navigate precipices (cf. Deut. 32:13; 33:29; 2 Sam. 22:34; Ps. 18:32-33, 39).

This statement of strong confidence sharply contrasts with the prophet's doubts and fears from 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."¹⁰⁰

"In a world in which sometimes there is unjust, undeserved suffering, the prophet understood that God's plan is bigger than merely his own life. And therefore he was willing to commit his life to the Lord and to keep on trusting."¹⁰¹

Essential elements in true prayer that are obvious in Habakkuk's prayer include humiliation, adoration, and petition.¹⁰²

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.

⁹⁹Bruce, p. 893.

¹⁰⁰Blue, p. 1522.

¹⁰¹Bramer, p. 155.

¹⁰²Lloyd-Jones, pp. 58-67.

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).

"Habakkuk teaches us to face our doubts and questions honestly, take them humbly to the Lord, wait for His Word to teach us, and then worship Him no matter how we feel or what we see."¹⁰³

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.

¹⁰³Wiersbe, p. 422.

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