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# 1

## INTRODUCTION TO HABAKKUK

The book of Habakkuk was written to people facing change—imminent change—in their political, economic, social, and religious lives. As such, it has a direct bearing upon contemporary society.

In his book *Managing in Turbulent Times*, Peter Drucker points an unerring finger at Western civilization and warns of the “irregular, non-linear, erratic” times facing modern society. He describes the twenty-five years following World War II and shows how a high degree of continuity and productivity characterized the West, as well as the emerging Third World countries. Now, however, an era of rapid change has begun that calls for new strategies—strategies that can anticipate the changes that surely will come.

“A time of turbulence” is a “dangerous time,” he writes.

Its greatest danger is a temptation to deny reality. The new realities fit neither the assumption of the Left nor those of the Right. . . . The greatest and most dangerous turbulence today results from the collision between the delusions of the decisionmakers . . . and the realities [facing us at the present time].<sup>1</sup>

In that respect, there is a remarkable correlation between the situation today and the one that faced Judah in the days of Habakkuk. The peace that had accompanied the reign of Josiah (640-609 B.C.) had allowed the people to enjoy a greater degree of prosperity than had been possible for many years. In a real sense they thought the new era would last indefinitely. The realities that faced them, however, could not have been an-

1. P. Drucker, *Managing in Turbulent Times* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), pp. 4-5.

anticipated by either the political liberals or the religiously-minded conservatives.

The power of Assyria had collapsed. Political supremacy belonged to Egypt. Strong political ties, however, had been established with the emerging kingdom of Babylon. Because she was a vassal of Egypt and a friend of Babylon, it seemed as if nothing could threaten the progress of Judah's prosperity.

The nation owed its prosperity to God's favoring of one man, Josiah (2 Kings 22:1, 12-17). Josiah had led the nation in several notable reforms. Although those reforms touched only the outward observances of the people, God said He would honor Josiah for his faithfulness (2 Kings 22:18-20).<sup>2</sup>

The leaders of the people ignored the spiritual reasons for their material prosperity and thought God's favor could be enjoyed without interruption. J. Gresham Machen once remarked, "America is running on the momentum of a Godly ancestry. When that momentum goes, God help America!" The same could be said of Judah in Habakkuk's day. It was not long before greed and avarice became prevalent. The rich exploited the poor. "Justice" favored the wealthy. Those who were God-fearing found themselves oppressed by an ever-increasing number whose desire for power led them to secure, by one means or another, those positions that met their personal (and often pathological) needs.

It was amid such conditions that God revealed His will to Habakkuk. Turbulent times lay ahead for the Lord's people. The message Habakkuk was told to proclaim was one that would please neither the Left nor the Right. The delusions of the decision makers were to be dashed to pieces before the harsh reality of God's sovereign justice.

#### I. AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

The book of Habakkuk takes its name from its author. Today practically nothing is known of Habakkuk, though much conjecture has arisen about him. It is thought by some that his

2. L. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), pp. 366-73.

name came from the Hebrew word *habhak*, “to embrace” or “the embraced.” Davidson has suggested that his name was “really an abstract noun used in the concrete sense of an object that is embraced and so means ‘darling.’”<sup>3</sup> Luther believed that his name meant “the heartner,” and stated that the prophet was “one who takes another to his heart and [into] his arms, as one soothes a poor weeping child, telling it to be quiet.”<sup>4</sup>

Little information can be gleaned about Habakkuk from either the Septuagint or the Vulgate translations.

Several clues as to the prophet’s identity are to be found in his record of God’s revelation. Those clues are not numerous. Habakkuk did not follow the usual policy of dating his prophecy in the reign of a king (cf. Zeph. 1:1), but he did state that he was a “prophet” (lit. “the prophet”). Inasmuch as the term denoted an official position (cf. Nah. 1:1), he must be accorded a place with the other men and women in the Old Testament who spoke forth the word of the Lord. The reference in 2:2 supports that identity and tacitly intimates that those in the prophet’s time who read what he had written would respond to the message communicated to them.

A further clue as to Habakkuk’s identity may be gleaned from references in 3:1 and 3:19*d*. The former is a musical ascription, “Shigionoth,” and the latter is a subscription at the end of the book, “For the choir director, on my stringed instruments” (NASB). The references support one another and may intimate that Habakkuk was a Levite and a singer in the Temple.

It is interesting to note the extent to which legend has grown up around the person of Habakkuk. In past times some rabbis have imagined that there was a connection between his name and the words the prophet Elisha had spoken to the Shunammite woman to assure her that she would “embrace a son” (2 Kings 4:16, NASB). Those rabbis have believed that Habakkuk

3. A. B. Davidson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge U., 1905), p. 45.

4. M. Luther, *Lectures on the Minor Prophets*, vol. 19 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. H. C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1974), 2:156.

was the woman's son. Others have seen a link between Habakkuk's vigil of 2:2 and a vigil described in Isaiah 21:6. Those who adhere to that theory are quick to identify the prophet with the watchman appointed to stand upon the walls of Jerusalem and watch for the fall of Babylon.

When consideration is given to extra-biblical traditions, a reference to a man named Habakkuk can be found in the apocryphal book of "Daniel, Bel, and the Snake" (Bel, 33ff.), better known as "Bel and the Dragon." In that account, Habakkuk, while in Judea, made a stew and was carrying it out to the reapers who were in the field. An angel of the Lord was supposed to have appeared to him and said, "Habakkuk, carry the meal you have with you to Babylon, for Daniel, who is in the lion-pit." To this Habakkuk responded, "My lord, I have never been to Babylon. I do not know where the lion-pit is." Then the angel, according to the theory, lifted the prophet up into the air by the hairs of his head and, with the blast of the breath of his mouth, swept him away to Babylon where he miraculously came down above the pit where Daniel was imprisoned. Such a view strains our credulity and is unworthy of serious attention.

The ministry of the prophet was intimately connected with the date of his prophecy, and, while the traditional dating of the book (around 605 B.C.) has been accepted by the majority of liberal and conservative scholars, closer examination of the evidence supports a date a few years earlier.

Although Pusey prefers to date Habakkuk's oracle in the reign of Manasseh (some time before 642 B.C.), such an early date is too soon for the Babylonians to have become well known for the atrocities described in chapters 1 and 2.<sup>5</sup>

At the other end of the continuum is B. Duhm, who is followed by several notable scholars, including C. C. Torrey. By changing the word "Chaldean" (*Kasdîm*) in Habakkuk 1:6 to "Cypriot" or "Greek" (*Kittîm*), Duhm conjectures that Habakkuk's prophecy could not be dated much before 331 B.C. (or between the battles of Issus and Arbela). It should be

5. E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 2:169-72.

pointed out, however, that there is absolutely no warrant for making such a change, and Duhm's theory has not been widely accepted.<sup>6</sup>

In arriving at a more realistic date of Habakkuk's prophecy, it needs to be borne in mind that the Neo-Babylonian empire did not arise to a position of any significance in the ancient Near East until around 625 B.C. That was in the reign of King Josiah (640-609 B.C.), while Assyria was still the leading nation at the time. Unger is inclined to date Habakkuk's prophecy soon after the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C., but there are those who believe that a date a year or two before Nineveh's demise is preferable. If that view is correct, it would make what God revealed to Habakkuk about the Chaldeans even more surprising (cf. 1:5).

A large number of conservative Bible scholars, however, prefer to date Habakkuk's oracle during the reign of Jehoiakim (609-598 B.C.; 2 Kings 24:1-5; 2 Chron. 36:4-8).<sup>7</sup> They do so on the grounds that the events described in 1:2-4 could only have taken place after Josiah was slain at Megiddo (2 Chron. 35:20-27). Josiah was succeeded by Jehoahaz (2 Kings 23:31-33), who reigned for only three months before being deposed by Pharaoh-Neco and deported to Egypt. Pharaoh-Neco placed Eliakim, one of Josiah's sons, on the throne and changed his name to Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:34). It was Jehoiakim who saw the three Babylonian invasions that took place between 605 and 598 B.C.

The reasons advanced for dating Habakkuk's prophecy in the time of Jehoiakim are based on passages in the book of Jeremiah that describe essentially the same conditions as those found in 1:2-4 (cf. Jer. 11:10ff.; 14:7, 10-12, 20; 20:8). Although a date toward the end of Josiah's reign is possible, God's words in 2:2-3 intimate an event shortly before 605 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem and carried off certain

6. B. Duhm, *Das Buch Habakkuk* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1906), p. 20.

7. C. L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets* (Chicago: Moody, 1976), p. 205; F. E. Gaebelin, *Four Minor Prophets* (Chicago: Moody, 1970), pp. 145-46; R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), pp. 932-37.

of the people (cf. Dan. 1:1). A date around 608-606 B.C. thus seems highly likely.

## II. THE UNITY OF THE BOOK

Some biblical scholars have claimed that Habakkuk could not have written the three chapters ascribed to him (and there are those who believe he wrote only 1:5-10 and 14-17). Such a negative approach to the text yields nothing of value, and there are relatively few who deny Habakkuk's authorship. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it was found that the "Habakkuk Commentary" ended at chapter 2. This added fuel to the fire of those who had claimed that Habakkuk could not have written chapter 3. Chapter 3, however, did not suit the Essene commentators' hermeneutical purpose, and so the omission of chapter 3 from their copy of the book can be accounted for quite easily. The poem that makes up chapter 3 is a triumphal climax to the problem posed in the first two chapters. When studied in light of the context of the prophet's faith (2:4), it is seen to reach its zenith in a joyful shout of confidence in the LORD as the God of Habakkuk's salvation (3:18).

The criticisms advanced against the literary unity of the book have all been answered, and W. F. Albright has silenced many criticisms by stating that, in his opinion, chapter 3 is an integral part of Habakkuk's prophecy.<sup>8</sup> Habakkuk showed that God controls the destinies of men and peoples, and is Himself governed by discernable principles of morality and righteousness. In the book, therefore, God's justice was vindicated, and an accurate view of history was made possible by demonstrating God's involvement in human affairs.

## III. THE THEME OF THE BOOK

Habakkuk centered his prophecy on a question that all of God's people have asked at one time or another: Why do the

8. W. F. Albright, "The Psalm of Habakkuk," in *Studies of the Old Testament Prophecy Presented to T. H. Robinson*, ed. H. H. Rowley (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1950), pp. 2, 9.

wicked flourish while the godly are oppressed?<sup>9</sup> In a real sense, therefore, the book of Habakkuk constitutes a theodicy, or a defense of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of evil. It also illustrates the ways in which the just may live by their faith. That concept, as Gaebelein points out, constitutes one of the most dynamic ideas in world history.<sup>10</sup>

In developing his theme, Habakkuk structured his material around two dialogues, with a concluding psalm of praise.

In the first dialogue (1:1-11), the prophet voiced his complaint over the sins of God's people and God's apparent indifference (1:1-4). He described graphically and yet concisely the unscrupulous conduct of those who oppressed the godly. He also described the violence that had come to characterize Judean society. In the midst of that description of lawlessness, Habakkuk asked why God had caused him to look upon such affliction and yet seemed to be indifferent to his prayers.

In answer to His servant's complaint (1:5-11), God showed Habakkuk that He was not indifferent to the plight of His people. In fact, He had been at work raising up the Chaldeans, whom He would use to chasten His people. Their conquest was soon to begin (605 B.C.).

That response to his prayer caused Habakkuk further agony of heart, leading to the second dialogue (1:12—2:20). God's plan of action seemed to contradict the prophet's theology (1:12-17). The prophet had looked upon God as an eternally holy Person who must judge the unjust and acquit the righteous. Why, then, did God seem to be involving Himself in a compromising situation? The Chaldeans were far more wicked than Judah, and much more in need of judgment. How could God justify chastening Israel at the hands of those who were more culpable? As Habakkuk wrestled with that dilemma, he waited upon the Lord to reveal His will to Him (2:1).

In revealing His will to Habakkuk, God showed that His righteousness would be vindicated in the downfall of the Chaldean (or Babylonian) empire. His answer was in three parts.

9. M. F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 2:1895.

10. Gaebelein, *Four Minor Prophets*. p. 141.



First there was reassurance that He was in control of the situation (2:2-3). Then there was recognition on the part of God of the wicked character of the Chaldeans and of the faithful character of the righteous remnant (2:4). Finally, there was divine reason for the judgment of the Chaldeans (2:5-20). That reason included indictments for five distinct sins: proud ambition (2:5-8), covetousness (2:9-11), ruthlessness and cruelty (2:12-14), debauchery (2:15-17), and idolatry (2:18-19).

Finally, God's holiness was vindicated, and the prophet was able to reconcile his theology with God's actions (2:20).

Habakkuk devoted chapter 3 to praise. The prophet's vision of God's plan and purpose had been broadened. It included not only the immediate future but also the fuller scope of God's dealings with His people as well as with the nations of the earth. In the final section, therefore, Habakkuk consoled his people, who were suffering from violence and injustice, and encouraged them with the same confidence God had inspired in him. He reviewed God's faithfulness by drawing illustrations from Israel's past history (3:3-15).

In the conclusion (3:16-19), Habakkuk caught a glimpse of the glorious faithfulness of God and brought it into living focus so that he and those in Jerusalem with him would rely upon the Lord during the coming time of tribulation (see especially 3:16, 19). In doing so, he showed that trials and perplexity were not incompatible with trust in God.

#### IV. OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

##### I. The Complaint of Habakkuk (1:2—2:20)

###### Introduction (1:1)

###### A. The First Dialogue (1:2-11)

###### 1. God's Inactivity in Israel's Affairs (1:2-4)

###### a. God's Indifference to Habakkuk's Prayers (1:2)

###### b. God's Indifference to Israel's Sin (1:3-4)

2. God's Revelation of His Activity (1:5-11)
  - a. His Intention to Chasten His People (1:5)
  - b. His Instrument to Chasten His People (1:6-11)
    - (1) Foreview of Israel's Destruction (1:6-7)
    - (2) Preview of the Chaldean's Despotism (1:8-11)
- B. The Second Dialogue (1:12—2:20)
  1. God's Righteousness in Israel's Chastisement (1:12—2:1)
    - a. The Instrument of God's Choice (1:12-13a)
    - b. The Consistency of God's Plan (1:13b-17)
    - c. The Dilemma of God's Prophet (2:1)
  2. God's Righteousness in the Chaldean's Downfall (2:2-20)
    - a. His Warning to Israel (2:2-4)
      - (1) Declaration of God's Vision (2:2)
      - (2) Recognition of God's Will (2:3)
      - (3) Provision for God's People (2:4)
    - b. His Punishment of the Chaldeans (2:5-19)
      - (1) For Their Ambition (2:5-8)
      - (2) For Their Covetousness (2:9-11)
      - (3) For their Ruthlessness (2:12-14)
      - (4) For Their Debauchery (2:15-17)
      - (5) For Their Idolatry (2:18-19)
  3. His Holiness Vindicated (2:20)
- II. The Prayer of Habakkuk (3:1-19)
  - A. Prayer for God's Future Intervention (3:1-2)
  - B. Praise for God's Past Intervention (3:3-15)
    1. Praise for God's Person (3:3-4)
    2. Praise for God's Power (3:5-15)
  - C. Response to God's Faithfulness (3:16-19)
    1. The Prophet's Concept of Himself (3:16)
    2. The Prophet's Appraisal of the Situation (3:17)
    3. The Prophet's Confidence in God (3:18-19)
      - a. The Prophet's Rejoicing (3:18)
      - b. The Prophet's Rest (3:19)