

The Prophets, Book 13

Habakkuk

Little is known about Habakkuk except for what he tells us in his small book: that he is "Habakkuk the prophet." He tells us this in the first verse of Chapter 1, and again in the first verse of Chapter 3. The meaning of his name is uncertain, and its use is uncommon; it appears in the Bible only twice, and both occasions are in his book. He is one of only two canonical prophets who identify themselves as prophets; the other is Haggai. In light of the hymn that constitutes Chapter 3, and its conclusion, we can infer that he was of the tribe of Levi, and was one of the Temple musicians¹. He was probably a contemporary of Nahum, Zephaniah and Jeremiah.

Habakkuk's book is reminiscent of the Book of Job because of its rich poetic language, and because the first two chapters are a dialogue between the prophet and God about human suffering and justice. The third and final chapter is a hymn (literally) to the faithfulness of God, our need to trust Him, and the ultimate outworking of His perfect justice.

For such a small book, Habakkuk is extremely rich in theological content! Paul quoted Habakkuk 1:5 as he preached in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia, on his first missionary journey². The eternal existence of the LORD (YHWH) is plainly declared: "Art thou not from everlasting...?" (1:12). His statement that God cannot look upon evil (1:13) expresses a fundamental fact, and helps to explain the agonized cry of Jesus from the cross, "...why hast thou forsaken me³?" His statement that "...the just shall live by his faith" (2:4) is quoted three times in the New Testament, and it became the defining declaration of the Protestant Reformation⁴. The last verse in Chapter 2 ("...the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him") has become a familiar part of Christian liturgies. And, in the very last verse, he has given us the word picture of "[He] will make my feet like hind's feet, and He will make me to walk upon mine high places," which has been much used in Christian writing and teaching.

A. Author. The author, as he tells us so plainly, is "Habakkuk the prophet."

¹ The apocryphal book, "Bel and the Dragon," identifies Habakkuk as "Habakkuk the son of Joshua of the tribe of Levi."

² Acts 13:41.

³ In this regard see Psalm 22:1; Matt 27:46; Mk 15:34; and II Cor 5:21 concerning this cry of Jesus from the cross. This pivotal point in human history, this "sin-bearing moment," will be explained in the study guide to Mark 15, Highlight 34, "The Sin-Bearing Moment."

⁴ Romans 1:17, Gal 3:11 and Hebr 10:38.

B. Place and Date. The book was written in Judah, probably in Jerusalem, about 625-600 BC, in the last years of the Southern Kingdom. His message was to the Kingdom of Judah--one of the last it would receive before the end of the era of kings. Within about 25 years after Habakkuk wrote this small book Jerusalem would be conquered, destroyed, its ruins lying in ashes, and its people dead, scattered, or taken away as captives to Babylon.

C. Theme. The theme of Habakkuk is Human suffering and the necessity of trusting in God regardless of dark circumstances. But there is much more packed into this small book: the certainty of God's ultimate judgment on sin; and the promise of the ultimate victory of righteousness over evil--a time when the knowledge and glory of the LORD (YHWH) will fill the Earth as waters cover the sea.

D. Highlights. Highlights of Habakkuk include the following:

1. A Prophecy of Coming Disaster. (Chapter 1)

In powerful poetic language, the prophet (sounding like Job) complains that God's people are the victims of corrupt leaders in Jerusalem, and of the pagans around them. The Lord replies that He uses the pagan Chaldeans to visit judgment upon the Israelites for their own wickedness. In fact, the Lord tells him, it is going to get much worse. He speaks, in powerful poetic language, of the overwhelming power of the Chaldeans. They will conquer Judah with ease, and attribute their victory to their pagan god.

Habakkuk understands, and his acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God is perhaps the richest, most concise revelation of the nature of God in the Bible. He declares, "Art thou not from everlasting [i.e. eternal--with neither beginning nor ending], O LORD [YHWH--the unique, infinitely powerful, self-existent Sovereign] my God [Elohim--the faithful, covenant-keeping Sovereign], mine Holy One [the inexpressibly perfect and pure Sovereign]?"

Still a little puzzled that God would punish the wickedness of His own people, with pagans who are even more wicked, Habakkuk states that God is too pure to look upon (and tolerate) evil, and asks if God is going to allow the Chaldeans to completely conquer Judah and kill all of its people. Like fishermen dragging nets for God's people, will they continue until the nets come up empty?

2. The Just Shall Live by Faith. (2:1-14)

Habakkuk declares that he will be diligent to listen and watch to see what the Lord's answer shall be. The Lord replies, telling Habakkuk to listen to the message and to write it down. Not only is he to record the message, but he is to make it so plain that it can be read and understood by a man while he is running.

The Lord assures Habakkuk that judgment will come at the right time and tells him to wait for it. The wicked are proud, the Lord says, "but the just shall live by

his faith.” Then, in beautiful, powerful, poetic language, He assures the prophet of the judgment to come on the conquering Chaldeans.

Ultimately, the Lord assures the prophet, righteousness and the knowledge of the glory of the LORD (YHWH) will prevail, and will completely cover and fill the World. The ultimate victory of good over evil, and the rule of God in righteousness over all the nations of the Earth, and his glory, shall someday be universal--as complete and unbroken as the water that covers the sea.

3. Judgment on the Chaldeans and the Vanity of Idols. (2:15-20)

After the beautiful promise of 2:14 the LORD returns, very abruptly, to the condemnation of the Chaldeans. Woe is pronounced upon drunkenness, seduction and sodomy, and in remarkably vivid, hard-hitting, unmistakable words! The violence that the Chaldeans inflicted upon Lebanon will also be visited upon them; a part of the horror will be being devoured by fearsome wild beasts smelling blood.

The LORD then points out the foolishness of serving pagan gods made of molten metals, stone, and wood overlaid with gold; they are powerless and have no life in them. On the other hand, the Lord (Adonai, the provider and protector of his people) is a living reality in his Holy Temple, and all should acknowledge Him in silent awe.

4. A Hymn to the Power, Sovereignty and Trustworthiness of the LORD. . (Chapter 3)

Chapter 3 is a hymn to the ultimate power and sovereignty of the LORD (YHWH), and to his faithfulness. This chapter is literally a hymn (psalm), very strongly suggesting that Habakkuk was a Levite, ordained to the ministry of music in the Temple. Verse 1 is a psalmic superscription ("upon Shigionoth")⁵. The word, "Selah," a very psalmic word, is used three times in 19 verses⁶. It is a hymn, a psalm, to the sovereignty, majesty, and power of God, and to his provision for the people of God. It is written in almost shockingly powerful poetic language. It is impossible adequately to describe something infinite; but Habakkuk definitely gives it his very best attempt, in describing God's power and authority (which are limitless). Habakkuk's hymn goes beyond poetic exaggeration and hyperbole; his words hit like sledgehammer blows!

The prophet's psalm concludes by declaring that, even when the fruit trees bear no fruit, when crops fail, and there are no animals for meat and wool, yet he will rejoice in the LORD (YHWH--the infinitely powerful, unique, self-existent

⁵ The phrase, "upon Shigionoth," is a musical, psalmic, expression, the plural of "Shiggaion." "Shigionoth" appears nowhere else in the Bible. Its singular form, Shigaion, also appears only once in the Bible--in the superscription of Psalm 7. The meaning of "shiggaion, thus also the meaning of both words, is uncertain; Strong suggests "a rambling poem."

⁶ The word "Selah" (pause and reflect) is used nowhere in the Bible except in the Books of Psalms, and here in Habakkuk. It does appear also in II Kings 14:7 as a place name; but it is, in Hebrew, a different word.

Sovereign), the God (Elohim--the faithful, covenant-keeping Sovereign) of his salvation⁷. Ultimately, the LORD God is our strength, and He will give us victory--as if we have "hinds' feet on high places," skipping and running, in freedom and strength, on mountains as if they were but mounds in a meadow. The chapter concludes with the very psalmic, "For the chief singer, on my stringed instruments."

NOTE: *In the Bible both "hand" and "arm," in the singular, mean strength. "Horn" or "horns," in both singular and plural, mean power and authority. Thus, in v 4, the use of "horns" and "hand" is an attempt to express both the infinite strength (might) and power (authority) of YHWH, the Holy One.*

⁷ Verse 13 appears to me to be a messianic verse ("with thine anointed," i.e. the Christ). Frances Siewert (The Amplified Bible) renders "thine anointed" as "Your anointed [people Israel]"; but I cannot agree. I suppose only God really knows.