OVERVIEW OF HABAKKUK

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Introduction

I. The prophet – We know nothing about Habakkuk apart from what is in the book that bears his name. What is important is that he was a prophet, as 1:1 specifies, meaning that he was an appointed mouthpiece of God.

II. Date – Most scholars are convinced that Habakkuk prophesied at the end of the 7th century B.C., which makes him a contemporary of Jeremiah and Zephaniah. That conclusion is based largely on the fact 1:6 makes clear that God already was "raising up the Babylonians (Chaldeans)."

A. Earliest date

1. Babylonia's new rise began under King Nabopolassar, who reigned from 626-605 B.C. So the prophecy must be dated some time after 626 B.C.

2. More specifically, it seems the prophecy should be dated some time after 609 B.C., the year in which the Judean king Josiah was killed by Pharaoh Neco II. The reason is that the rampant injustice and violence existing in Judah at the time of the prophecy does not fit very well with the social reforms that were in effect during Josiah's reign.

3. The conditions do, however, fit nicely with the reign of Jehoiakim, who succeeded Josiah after the three-month reign of Shallum (throne-name Jehoahaz). Jehoiakim reigned in Judah from 609-598 B.C. He oppressed the people through forced labor (Jer. 22:13) and murder (Jer. 22:17; 2 Ki. 24:4) and persecuted those prophets who opposed him (Jer. 26:20-24). Habakkuk may well have faced some of this pressure himself.

B. Latest date

1. On the other hand, it seems the prophecy should be dated prior to 605 B.C. because that is when Babylonia defeated Egypt in the great battle of Carchemish. After that victory, it was clear that Babylonia would rule over Syria and Palestine. So after that time, the rise of Babylonia was a fait accompli. Babylonia already was established as the dominant power.

2. The statement in 1:5 suggests that Habakkuk is prophesying before that time, when Babylonia's dominance still was unexpected. It was something of which God could say,

"Look at the nations and watch – and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told."

C. As O. Palmer Robertson states in his commentary (NICOT, p. 37): "The net result of this analysis places the prophecy of Habakkuk in the days of the reign of Jehoiakim, probably between the years of 608 and 605. This view in its essence has been adopted by a number of scholars. It appears to satisfy all the various aspects that need to be considered."

III. Circumstances

A. You may recall that the good Judean king Josiah was killed by Pharaoh Neco II near Megiddo in 609 B.C. (2 Ki. 23:29). The people then made Josiah's son Shallum the king, whose throne name was Jehoahaz, but he reigned for only three months before Neco removed him and placed Eliakim, another of Josiah's sons, on the throne, giving him the throne name Jehoiakim.

B. Scripture says of Jehoiakim that "he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" (2 Ki. 23:37; 2 Chron. 36:5). Indeed, he oppressed the people through forced labor (Jer. 22:13) and murder (Jer. 22:13-18a), and he murdered the prophets who opposed him (Jer. 26:20-23). Habakkuk may well have faced some of this pressure himself.

Habakkuk 1:1 – 3:19

I. The Problem of Divine Justice

A. Superscription (1:1) (NIV) - The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.

B. Habakkuk's initial lament (1:2-4) (NIV):

> [2] How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? [3] Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. [4] Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.

1. Habakkuk questions why God has not intervened to deal with the evil, violence, and injustice that is rampant in Judah. He is bothered because this apparent failure to act seems inconsistent with the nature of God. How can an all-knowing, all-powerful, and righteous God simply ignore such a situation? One is tempted to think that he is either unaware, unable, or unjust.

2. This is the question whenever you hear someone say, "How can God _____?" (fill in the blank).

C. God's surprising response (1:5-11) (NIV):

[5] "Look at the nations and watch -- and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do
something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. [6] I am
raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across
the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own. [7] They are a feared and dreaded
people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor. [8] Their horses
are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk. Their cavalry gallops
headlong; their horsemen come from afar. They fly like an eagle swooping to
devour; [9] they all come intent on violence. Their hordes[1] advance like a desert
wind and gather prisoners like sand. [10] They mock kings and scoff at rulers. They
laugh at all fortified cities; by building earthen ramps they capture them. [11] Then
they sweep past like the wind and go on-- guilty people, whose own strength is
their god."

1. God reveals that Habakkuk's dilemma is a false one. It only appears from Habakkuk's limited perspective that God is ignoring the wickedness in Judah.

2. The truth of the matter is that God is in the process of addressing the situation. He is raising up the Babylonians to be his agents, and they will take care of the problem of Judean evil and injustice. They will be his instrument of wrath against Judah.

a. The ancient kingdom of Babylonia began a new rise to prominence with King Nabopolassar (626-605 B.C.). In 612 B.C. the Babylonians, assisted by the Medes, destroyed Nineveh, the Assyrian capital. When the Babylonians and their allies took Haran in 610 B.C., the Assyrian Empire was effectively finished. The question at that point was whether Egypt or Babylonia would rule Palestine and Syria.

b. Josiah was killed near Megiddo in 609 B.C. when he confronted the Egyptians who were in route to assist the Assyrians in their effort to regain Haran (2 Ki. 23:29; also 2 Chron. 35:20). Josiah was probably trying to prevent Pharaoh Neco II from coming to the aid of Assyria, fearing Egypt more than the distant Babylonians. As I said, Neco put Josiah's son Eliakim on the throne and renamed him Jehoiakim (2 Ki. 23:31-34; 2 Chron. 36:3-4; Jer. 22:10-12).

c. In 605 B.C., not long after Habakkuk's prophecy, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, while still crown prince, soundly defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish, establishing Babylonia as the undisputed controller of Palestine. That battle is recounted in the Babylonian Chronicle and also is referred to in Jer. 46:2. Nebuchadnezzar became king of Babylonia that same year.

d. Daniel 1:1-2 informs us that King Nebuchadnezzar (or possibly subordinates acting under his orders) came against Jerusalem in 605 (under one way of reckoning the years of a king's reign), presumably because Jehoiakim was pro-Egyptian, and took tribute from Jehoiakim in the form of people and cultic articles. (It seems from 2 Chron.

36:5-8 that Jehoiakim himself was either deported to Babylonia or threatened with deportation. If the former, that deportation must have been temporary.)

e. Some years later, Jehoiakim rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar (2 Ki. 24:1), which led to a massive invasion in 598/597 B.C. Jehoiakim died probably in 598/597 and was succeeded by his son Jehoiakin (2 Ki. 24:6). Jehoiakin promptly (he reigned only three months) surrendered to the Babylonians without a fight in order to avoid complete annihilation of Jerusalem. He, the royal family, and a large portion of the Judean elite were led into exile (2 Ki. 24:14), and more treasures from the temple and royal palace were carried off.

f. Nebuchadnezzar appointed Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah (Mattaniah) to be the new king of Judah. He too eventually rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, which led to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 and further exile of its inhabitants.

3. Habakkuk cannot recognize God's work because it is being done in a time frame and in a manner that doesn't fit his expectations. We simply are not equipped to sit in judgment of God. Whenever circumstances tempt us to doubt the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we can know that we are victims of our finiteness.

D. Habakkuk's second lament (1:12 - 2:1) (v. 12 adapted from J. J. M. Roberts and NIV; remainder from NIV):

> [12] O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, you[1] will never die, will you?[2] O LORD, have you appointed them to execute judgment? O Rock, have you ordained them to punish? [13] Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? [14] You have made people like the fish in the sea, like the sea creatures that have no ruler. [15] The wicked foe pulls all of them up with hooks, he catches them in his net, he gathers them up in his dragnet; and so he rejoices and is glad. [16] Therefore he sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his dragnet, for by his net he lives in luxury and enjoys the choicest food. [17] Is he to keep on emptying his net, destroying nations without mercy? **2:1** I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.

1. God's solution to Habakkuk's first complaint creates an even bigger problem: How can God ignore the greater wickedness of the Babylonians to use them as his instruments to

[1] The original text was probably changed by scribes from "*you* will not die" to "*we* will not die" because they could not bear the thought of speaking of God dying, even if the thought was negated. This is one of the eighteen so-called "corrections of the scribes" that have long been recognized. It is the reading used by the NRSV.

[2] Though the last three clauses of v. 12 do not have an interrogative particle, I agree with Roberts that the context favors continuing the question in these clauses. Note that the following verse is widely understood to contain two questions despite the fact only the first is marked by an interrogative particle.

punish Judah? (vv. 12-13). Since Yahweh is the eternal God (v. 12a-b; see, NRSV), not some lesser deity, Habakkuk questions whether he has missed something (v. 12b-d are best understood as questions per Roberts).

2. To the Babylonians, men are like fish and other rulerless creatures in that they are ruthlessly captured and rejoiced over as a source of luxury. That is why the Babylonians worship the means by which they capture them (vv. 14-16).

3. Habakkuk wants to know if this is the full answer: Is Babylonia just going to continue destroying nations? If so, it just doesn't seem right (v. 17). He vows to wait for an answer (2:1).

II. God's Announcement of an Explanatory Vision (2:2-3) (NIV modified)

> [2] Then the LORD replied: "Write down the vision and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. [3] For the vision awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.

A. God instructs Habakkuk to clearly record the vision he is going to give him (not given until 3:3-15) (2:2).

B. The vision relates to an appointed future time (2:3a-b).

C. The vision will certainly come to pass and must be trusted even though its fulfillment seems delayed (2:3c-e).

III. The Righteous Contrasted With the Arrogant Babylonians (2:4-5) (NIV modified):

> [4] "See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright -- but the righteous will live by his faith {Or faithfulness} -- [5] indeed, wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples.

A. The Babylonians, with their arrogant spirit, consider themselves above God's judgment. In the pride of their present strength, they have no thought of being accountable to God (2:4-5).

B. The righteous, on the other hand, will not be similarly deceived about the Babylonians' future. They will "live" by faith in God's character and in his word, however things may appear, trusting that the Judge of all the earth will do right (2:4c; see, Gen. 18:25) and do what he says. They will conduct themselves according to that faith, live consistently with it, and be given life because of it.

C. We must live by similar faith. We must not allow circumstances or appearances to shake our faith in God's character or his word. God is who he says he is and will do what he says he will do, even when it doesn't look like it. If we trust in him throughout our lives, we will be given eternal life in the consummated kingdom. Tremper Longman III and Raymond Dillard write in *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 413:

> Although we live in a present evil age (Gal. 1:4), "the righteous will live by faith" (Gal. 3:11). Faith is "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Heb. 11:1). The ancients were commended for their believing God when the circumstances all conspired to say that such faith would not be rewarded (Heb. 11:2-40). We too are called to that same life of faith, for God will yet come as Divine Warrior and will vindicate his name (Rev. 19:11-16).

IV. Fate of Babylonians to Which They (and the Unrighteous) Are Blind (2:6-20) (NIV):

> 6 "Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying, "'Woe to him
> who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion! How long
> must this go on?' 7 Will not your creditors suddenly arise? Will they not wake up
> and make you tremble? Then you will become their prey. 8 Because you have
> plundered many nations, the peoples who are left will plunder you. For you have
> shed human blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them. 9
> "Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain, setting his nest on high to
> escape the clutches of ruin! 10 You have plotted the ruin of many peoples,
> shaming your own house and forfeiting your life. 11 The stones of the wall will cry
> out, and the beams of the woodwork will echo it. 12 "Woe to him who builds a city
> with bloodshed and establishes a town by injustice! 13 Has not the LORD
> Almighty determined that the people's labor is only fuel for the fire, that the
> nations exhaust themselves for nothing? 14 For the earth will be filled with the
> knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. 15 "Woe to him
> who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk,
> so that he can gaze on their naked bodies! 16 You will be filled with shame instead
> of glory. Now it is your turn! Drink and let your nakedness be exposed! The cup
> from the LORD's right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover
> your glory. 17 The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, and
> your destruction of animals will terrify you. For you have shed human blood; you
> have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them. 18 "Of what value is an idol
> carved by a craftsman? Or an image that teaches lies? For the one who makes it
> trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak. 19 Woe to him who
> says to wood, 'Come to life!' Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!' Can it give guidance?
> It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it." 20 The LORD is in his
> holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.

A. The nations will taunt them over their judgment (2:6-19)

B. For Yahweh is not like an idol; he is on his throne (2:20) and will judge Babylonia for its evil.

C. Thus, Habakkuk's second dilemma is also a false one. God is not ignoring the greater wickedness of the Babylonians. He is perfectly aware of their evil and their arrogance. They will receive their due, but first they will serve God's purpose regarding Judah.

V. Prayer for God to Bring About the Judgment Described (3:1-2) (NIV):

> [1] A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On *shigionoth*. [Probably a literary or musical term.] [2] LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, LORD. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy.

VI. The Promised Vision of God's Judgment on Babylonians (3:3-15) (NIV):

> [3] God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory covered the heavens and his praise filled the earth. [4] His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand, where his power was hidden. [5] Plague went before him; pestilence followed his steps. [6] He stood, and shook the earth; he looked, and made the nations tremble. The ancient mountains crumbled and the age-old hills collapsed -- but he marches on forever. [7] I saw the tents of Cushan in distress, the dwellings of Midian in anguish. [8] Were you angry with the rivers, LORD? Was your wrath against the streams? Did you rage against the sea when you rode your horses and your chariots to victory? [9] You uncovered your bow, you called for many arrows. You split the earth with rivers; [10] the mountains saw you and writhed. Torrents of water swept by; the deep roared and lifted its waves on high. [11] Sun and moon stood still in the heavens at the glint of your flying arrows, at the lightning of your flashing spear. [12] In wrath you strode through the earth and in anger you threshed the nations. [13] You came out to deliver your people, to save your anointed one. You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness, you stripped him from head to foot. [14] With his own spear you pierced his head when his warriors stormed out to scatter us, gloating as though about to devour the wretched who were in hiding. [15] You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the great waters.

VII. Habakkuk's response (3:16-19) (NIV):

> [16] I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. [17] Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, [18] yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. [19] The Sovereign LORD

is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.

A. Physically (3:16a) – He is physically shaken by the vision.

B. Spiritually - By God's power, he will wait patiently in peace despite the circumstances (3:16b-19).

VIII. Historical Fulfillment – Of course, the Babylonian Empire fell swiftly in 539 B.C. when Cyrus the Great, who was prophesied in advance by name, led the Persian armies against it.