



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 13 Issue 17

April 27 2014

Introduction to Habakkuk

Thus far in our survey of the Prophets, we've examined nine prophetic books:

1. Joel written to Judah circa 845 BC.
2. Jonah written on account of Nineveh circa 780 BC.
3. Amos written to Israel circa 765 BC.
4. Hosea written to Israel circa 750 BC.
5. Isaiah written to Judah circa 740 BC.
6. Micah written to Judah circa 735 BC.

7. Nahum written to Judah circa 650 BC.
8. Jeremiah written to Judah circa 627 BC.
9. Zephaniah written to Judah circa 622 BC.

We come now to another important prophetic witness which God gave to His people; Habakkuk.

Habakkuk 2:1-4, “I will stand on my guard post And station myself on the rampart; And I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, And how I may reply when I am reproved. Then the LORD answered me and said, “Record the vision And inscribe it on tablets, That the one who reads it may run. “For the vision is yet for the appointed time; It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; For it will certainly come, it will not delay. “Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; But the righteous will live by his faith.”

Of all the prophetic books, Habakkuk is one of the more beloved ones. In what appears to have occurred in a single sitting, Habakkuk went from the depths of anger and disbelief over God’s providences to a humble, quiet acceptance in which he confessed, “I [will] wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise *who* will invade us.” (Habakkuk 3:16b)

This transformation is amazing! At one point we read of a seemingly out of control prophet raging against God, “How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and Thou wilt not hear? I cry out to Thee, ‘Violence!’ Yet Thou dost not save. Why dost Thou make me see iniquity, and cause *me* to look on wickedness?” (Habakkuk 1:2) Though we tend to read these words detached from what they mean, you must see that this is a strong indictment! Habakkuk is angry at God and impatient! He’s had enough and wants answers! But then what could have been as little as half hour later Habakkuk professed, “Though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.” (Habakkuk 3:17b-18). Anguish and trial gave way to peace and contentment!

How does one account for this change? And how do we cultivate such a submissive, godly demeanor in our own lives? This morning we are going to consider this question as we are introduced to this marvelous prophecy!

The Prophet, The Date, and Setting

Habakkuk 1:1, “The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.”

Of the four major and twelve minor prophetic authors Habakkuk is one that we know the least about. Neither his father, tribe, nor hometown is mentioned. In fact, his name isn’t even Hebrew; it comes from an Akkadian word for a plant or fruit tree.¹ The fact that Habakkuk refers to himself as “THE prophet” has led some to believe that he was a professional prophet, one who earned his living formally serving at the temple or royal court. But that is conjecture. All we have when it comes to this man, like Elijah and John the Baptizer, is simply “a voice

crying in the wilderness” and nothing more!

And yet, while we know so little about this prophet, we know a lot about the time in which he wrote. As to the dating of this prophecy, notice a couple of passages:

Habakkuk 1:5-6a, “Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days- you would not believe if you were told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans... (which is another word for the Babylonians!)”

Knowing the history of this era as we do, we place the writing of this prophecy toward the end of the seventh century B.C. Recall the Assyrian capital city of Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BC. In 609 BC the Assyrian empire was then conquered completely and its territory was taken over by the Babylonians. That places the earliest time for the writing of Habakkuk in the range of 612-609 BC.² However, notice further Habakkuk said to God regarding the Babylonian atrocities:

Habakkuk 1:15-16, “*The Chaldeans* bring all of them [men/nations] up with a hook, drag them away with their net, and gather them together in their fishing net. Therefore, they rejoice and are glad. Therefore, they offer a sacrifice to their net. And burn incense to their fishing net; because through these things their catch is large, and their food is plentiful.”

Recognize that in order for Habakkuk to say this, the nation of Babylon had to have been around long enough to get this reputation. Accordingly we conclude that Habakkuk would NOT have been written when Babylon was brand, spanking new (609 BC is too early)!

Habakkuk 2:2, “Then the Lord answered me and said, ‘Record the vision and inscribe *it* on tablets, that the one who reads it may run.’”

From this text it is clear that the invasion referenced here by Habakkuk was imminent; it was just around the corner! Now we know that Babylon invaded Judah on three separate occasions:

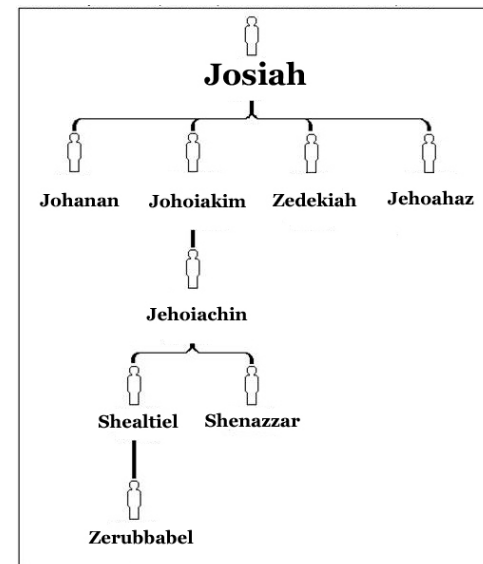
- The first in 605,
- Then 597,
- And lastly in 586 BC.

Now since Habakkuk was NOT written from the perspective of a nation that had *already* been invaded, otherwise the prophet would NOT have had a hard time with another act of discipline against Judah by Babylon we conclude that Habakkuk was written shortly before the first invasion which occurred in 605 B.C. With this it should be obvious that our understanding of Habakkuk’s prophecy will be closely tied to our understanding of the political strife that existed toward the end of Judean history. For that we begin our survey, following the death of King Josiah (609 BC), with the regency of his son, Jehoahaz (609 BC).

2 Kings 23:31, "Jehoahaz was twenty-three years old when he became king, and he reigned three months in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Hamutal the daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah."

Though he was the fourth born son of Josiah, nevertheless upon his father's death, Jehoahaz ascended to the throne of Judah. Yet, Jehoahaz' reign was short-lived, lasting only three months! For whatever reason, Neco (the king of Egypt who killed Josiah) did not like Jehoahaz and so summoned him to the Syrian town of Riblah (cf. v. 33). Here Jehoahaz was captured, put in chains, and brought to Egypt where he died at a young age.

Jeremiah 22:10-12, "Do not weep for the dead or mourn for him, *but* weep continually for the one who goes away [Jehoahaz]; for he will never return or see his native land. For thus says the Lord in regard to Shallum the son of Josiah, king of Judah [that is, Jehoahaz], who became king in the place of Josiah his father, who went forth from this place, 'He will never return there; but in the place where they led him captive, there he will die and not see this land again.'"



Why Jehoahaz was deemed a threat to Egypt we really do not know. Most likely, Jehoahaz looked like his father and so posed a risk of future rebellion. Think of it: the name Jeremiah attributed to him, "Shallum," means, "retribution"! Yet this is pure conjecture. Regardless, after Jehoahaz' three month reign, his older brother, Jehoiaqim (608-598 BC), was placed on the throne.

2 Kings 22:34, "And Pharaoh Neco made Eliakim the son of Josiah king in the place of Josiah his father, and changed his name to Jehoiaqim."

Initially, Judah was placed under heavy tribute to Egypt! Yet things were soon going to change as the Babylonians were on the rise! During the summer months of 608 to 606 BC, Egyptian and Babylonian forces engaged in a variety of skirmishes which basically did nothing. During this time, Jehoiaqim remained subordinate to Egypt. Now as a king, Jehoiaqim was selfish and self-seeking- being totally out of touch with reality and so the difficult days in which his nation lived. During this time of uncertainty, want, and difficulty, he built an extravagant palace with forced labor, in other words, he enslaved his own people (Jeremiah 22:13-19)! Furthermore, he allowed Josiah's reforms to lapse and played into the hands of those who had always opposed them.

As such, during his reign the wicked practices of Manasseh were reintroduced to the people of God. As a result, public morality deteriorated! The strong and powerful were given full license to abuse the poor. As such, one of the MOST important elements of the Covenant, the care of the weak and hurting, was totally neglected!

Habakkuk 1:3-4, “Why dost Thou make me see iniquity, and cause *me* to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises. Therefore, the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted.”

In 605 BC the political landscape changed quite dramatically. The Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, won a decisive victory over the Egyptians at Carchemish! The Egyptian forces retreated to Hamath where they were defeated yet again! Palestine lay vulnerable with no force to resist Babylon. Accordingly, in 605 BC the Babylonians attacked!



Seeing that power was shifting to Babylon, Jehoiakim immediately transferred his allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar; he surrendered! This gave both the Judean king and the nation a vassal status before Babylon (2 Kings 24:1). This meant that not only did Judah have to pay tribute to Babylon, but the Babylonian gods and religion were to be adopted and practiced in Israel- and down went any semblance of covenant loyalty and service to God!

Now the first tribute that was to be paid to Nebuchadnezzar was in the form of people/slaves in which many of the educated, leading, and bright youth of Judah were deported to Babylon. Daniel would have been included in this deportation! It was just prior to the attack of Babylon and this first deportation in 605 BC that Habakkuk approached the Lord as he did in Habakkuk 1 and criticized God for His apparent lack of concern while His people, Judah, dove into sin!

Habakkuk 1:2, “How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and Thou wilt not hear? I cry out to Thee, ‘Violence!’ yet Thou dost not save.”

That is the background for the writing of this prophecy. However, before we look at one of the key themes, I want to remind you of the difficult future which lay before Judah, for it is quite relevant to this theme. We are still looking at the regency of Jehoiakim and we are back in 605 BC. Judah now is a vassal state of Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar has gone home. Yet living in subjection to the Babylonians wasn’t easy for the people of God or their king; it is not easy being a “slave.” Accordingly, when Egypt won a decisive victory over Nebuchadnezzar in 600/599 BC, Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon! Initially Nebuchadnezzar was too busy in his own country to take action against Jerusalem. And so he sent bands of marauders to plunder Judah. (Jeremiah 35:11; 2 Kings 24:2)

By 598 BC, Nebuchadnezzar had addressed the problems which had kept him occupied. Accordingly “in the summer when the kings go to battle,” he marched on Judah. Yet Jehoiakim died before the king arrived. As such his son, Jehoiachin, who had ascended to the throne was left to deal with the impending threat of the Babylonians!

Jehoiachin (598-597 BC)

2 Kings 24:8-9, "Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he became king, and he reigned three months in Jerusalem; and his mother's name *was* Nehushta the daughter of Elnathan of Jerusalem. And he did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father had done."

The death of Jehoiakim did not stop Nebuchadnezzar from coming to Judah. Three months into Jehoiachin's reign, on March 15/16, 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar arrived in Judah and he was in a foul mood! As such, he deposed Jehoiachin and placed his uncle, Zedekiah (Josiah's third born son), on the throne. Nebuchadnezzar then left Judah taking with him 10,000 more exiles of which included Jehoiachin³, his mother (Nehushta), state officials, and many leading citizens. In fact, Ezekiel was part of this exile.

Zedekiah (597-586 BC)

2 Kings 24:18-20, "Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name *was* Hamutal the daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah. And he did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that Jehoiakim had done. For through the anger of the Lord *this* came about in Jerusalem and Judah until He cast them out from His presence. And Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon."

With Zedekiah on the throne, Nebuchadnezzar anticipated that the problems he was having with Judah were finished. Yet such was not to be the case. It is important to note that though the Second Deportation was not large, it was significant in that it removed many of Judah's key personnel and advisors. Accordingly, those who now led the government were ultranationalists lacking in both experience and caution! Furthermore during this time, the false prophets of Judah said that the exile would only last two years!⁴ This played into the hands of the nationalists!

Being young and weak, Zedekiah did not have the strength to oppose all who called for rebellion. As such, in the 588 BC Zedekiah led God's people once again in rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar! This time the Babylonian king responded with an iron fist! He held Jerusalem under siege for one and one half years. During this time, starvation set in and God's people suffered greatly! When the hunger in the city became intolerable such that Judah was at its weakest point, the Babylonians captured the lower city. Not long afterward, Zedekiah fled secretly with his army during the night (Jeremiah 39:4)!⁵

With their king gone, Judah's resolve dissipated and the Babylonians easily conquered the rest of the city. The temple, the palace of the king, and the houses of the rich and powerful were burned. The walls of the city were broken down. The house of the Lord went up in flames as well. Thousands lost their lives! Bodies lay everywhere in the streets! And God's people- naked, wounded, starving, and many ravished- were marched in chains into exile! Only the poorest of the people were left behind! It is with the horrible days of this era in mind that we come to

Habakkuk 1:1 and read this:

Habakkuk 1:1, “The oracle [which is the Hebrew word for “burden”] which Habakkuk the prophet saw.”

Of all the prophets, it was left to Habakkuk to hold the hand of the nation as it died! Talk about a “burden”! Yet Habakkuk did not shrink back from the calling! He faithfully proclaimed the word of the Lord even though it meant that his world would be turned upside down! And my question is, “How? How was he able to stay the course when most others ran?!” The answer involves one of the Key Themes of this Book...

A Key Theme: The Triumph of Faith

Habakkuk 2:1, “I will stand on my guard post⁶ and station myself on the rampart; and I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, and how I may reply when I am reproved.”

Habakkuk has just criticized the Lord a second time for His dealings with His people (Habakkuk 1:12-17)! The prophet now waits for the Lord’s second reply which came in vv. 2-3.

Habakkuk 2:2-3, “Then the Lord answered me and said, ‘Record the vision and inscribe *it* on tablets, that the one who reads it may run. For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hastens toward the goal, and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay.’”

Talk about a sobering response! God essentially tells Habakkuk, “*Your complaints are noted, but quite ineffective at staving off My judgment! In fact, such horror awaits MY people that to hear of it is to be filled with such horror that any and all will want to run away crazed!*” Then God transitioned into a word of caution:

Habakkuk 2:4a, “Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him...”

The proud and arrogant are not prepared to face this day. It won’t go well with them! IN CONTRAST TO:

Habakkuk 2:4b, “...but the righteous will live by his faith.”

It is this last phrase we want to spend some time on because it is such an important statement/promise. This passage addresses the key to salvation. In Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11, Paul references this text to teach the glorious message of salvation! In fact, Paul quotes this text, “He who is righteous by faith shall live.”

There are only two ways to be “right” before God, to have a perfect standing before the Lord. First you must live a perfect life and have a perfect record. Listen to the words of Christ:

Matthew 5:20, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven."

With this, Jesus placed salvation beyond the scope of most men because if there was a people who could earn salvation, the Scribes and Pharisees were certainly one of them. Their whole life revolved around establishing their right to stand before God (cf. Romans 10:3)! Accordingly, they excelled in righteous living- so much so they'd put any and all of us to shame! In this context, listen to the teaching of Christ: *if your good works don't outdo theirs, you cannot be saved!* In fact, the standard is even higher...

Matthew 5:48, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

The Divine standard isn't just great, it is "perfection"! If you don't have a perfect record of obedience before God, you will perish in your sin! In light of original sin, the fact that all are born guilty of Adam's sin, no mere man can stand before God with a perfect record. No one born by ordinary generation will ever have a right standing before God because of sin. So this brings us to the only other way a person can have a right-standing before God: by the imputation of the perfect record of a perfect Man to your account. This is the point of the gospel, the point of Paul, the point of Habakkuk.

Romans 1:16-17, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it *the* righteousness of God is revealed [given salvifically] from faith to faith; as it is written [in Habakkuk], 'He who is righteous by faith shall live.'"

That most certainly was and is an important truth that God gave to Habakkuk in our text this morning. If a man is going to stand before God not guilty of any sin, they must stand before Him on the basis of the righteousness of another! And so we read...

2 Corinthians 5:21, "He made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

This is such a glorious truth which God had in mind when He gave Habakkuk 2:4 to the prophet. Yet, the immediate context brings with it another important application; the passage addresses the key to preservation.

Again the context of this passage is the horror of siege warfare and then exile! How could a person endure this hardship and still love the Lord?

Habakkuk 2:4b, "But the righteous [we know now what God means by this- the man, made righteous on account of Christ] will live by his faith."

The "living" referenced here in context does NOT immediately have eternity in mind. The usage is ethical- how to live/prosper/grow in the horrible days which were about to come upon the

land. See in contrast to “the proud” whose god is their appetite and whose gain is their physical property, the righteous thrive in harsh circumstances! That is the idea behind the word “live.” The nuance is NOT that of simply getting by/existing, BUT that of thriving, flourishing, and growing! In other words, what we have here is God’s answer for how the genuine servant of Christ might go through a trial unscathed!

- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego endured even when the prospect of their impending doom was sure (Daniel 3:16-18)!
- Joseph could endure the bitter years of imprisonment and slavery and yet faithfully serve the Lord!
- The elders of old could be “...stoned to death, sawn in two, tempted, put to death with the sword.” They could, “...go around in sheepskins, goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, and ill-treated, wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground” and yet NOT shrink back, “...having never received what God promised them” (Hebrews 11:37-38)!

What was their “secret”? They lived NOT by sight BUT by faith! This is the exhortation of Habakkuk. In the face of the nation’s impending doom, the Lord exhorted them through Habakkuk, “As you anticipate a horrible future, ever and always keep in mind that the righteous will live/flourish/endure by his faith!”

What does this mean? The idea behind “faith” here is “trust,” “reliance,” “steadfastness,” or “stubbornness”! In the context of salvation it is “...entrusting ones soul to a faithful Creator in doing what is right” (1 Peter 4:19)! It is stubbornly trusting in God’s character! It is knowing God is good and so not giving up on that assumption regardless of what happens to you! It is stepping out in faith, trusting God for present and future provision! In fact, as a preface to the Hall of Faith as represented and given to us in Hebrews 11, the Hebrew writer quoted Habakkuk 2:4...

Hebrews 10:36-38a, “For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay. But My righteous one shall live by faith...”

Hebrews was written at a time when persecution was quite severe throughout the Roman Empire- when being a Christian meant you could be arrested and executed on account of Christ. In the case of a Christian being arrested, God’s people faced an ethical dilemma. The only way a brother or sister in Christ would be able to eat in prison or be clothed or cared for is if a Christian brother or sister attended them. See, prison in the ancient world wasn’t like what it is today. Rome didn’t feed their prisoners or clothe them. If a prisoner was going to survive, he had to have help from the outside. Yet if a person was in prison because they loved Christ AND you tended them, you likewise could be arrested on account of your faith!

This raised a sticky question: Do you risk being arrested yourself to care for a brother or sister in Christ? Do you allow yourself to be harmed that good may come to another in the body? Amazingly, the body of Christ to whom Hebrews was written did! How so? According to Hebrews

it was because they trusted God to provide for them! They embodied Habakkuk 2:4b and “lived by/acted out of faith” (v. 38)!

Hebrews 10:34, “For you showed sympathy to the prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property [notice their faith/trust/reliance], knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one.”

Do you understand that in the midst of trial and difficulty, Christians (“the just”) will flourish (“will live”) on account of an uncompromising reliance upon God (“by faith”)?! That was the point of John when he wrote 1 John 5:4.

1 John 5:4, “...this is the victory that has overcome the world- our faith.”

As John anticipated the trials and difficulties of life (Patmos still awaited him), he knew the key to thriving and not shrinking back: It was faith/trust/reliance upon Christ in the darkest hours when there seems to be no light! How is it that Abraham could trust God over the course of thirty years to fulfill a promise of a child when now his body was as good as dead?

Romans 4:20, “Yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God.”

In fact, that is exactly what Habakkuk did by the time his conversation with God ended. Notice how he ends this prophecy:

Habakkuk 3:18b, “I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.”

That was the glorious tool God gave His people facing extinction in 605 BC! That was the tool our brothers and sisters in times past used to overcome this world! That must be our undying confidence and conviction today!

Do you understand? We have been made for another world/existence! Accordingly today, seize that existence by faith and overcome any and all mountains that stand in your way- knowing that if the mountain collapses upon you, Christ will be there to wipe your tears! O. Palmer Robertson put it this way:

In this hour of Israel’s greatest crisis, the prophet Habakkuk declares essentially a single message: the person of faith “... shall live” (Habakkuk 2:4)... he shall receive the blessings of the covenant, if only he will continue to believe no matter how bleak may appear the events of history. It is a message for the ages. If under these circumstances the covenant promises of God hold true to the one who believes, God’s work of redemption can never fail.
(Robertson, 1990 , p. 14)

Bibliography

Robertson, O. P. (1990). *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company.

End Notes

¹ Akkadian speakers were intimately involved in the life of Israel at this period.

² Though Babylon re-emerged as a people “with whom to do” around 627 BC, nevertheless they were not a legitimate nation until the conquest of Assyria! Prior to this time, they would have been viewed as a warring, factious people.

³ The preservation of Jehoiachin is significant for he was in the line of Christ. In time, Jehoiachin was shown special favor by the Babylonian King Evil-Merodach (~561 BC) such that Jehoiachin was removed from prison into the royal palace of Babylon (2 Kings 25:27–30; Jeremiah 52:31–34). Jehoiachin’s eldest son, Shealtiel, the father of Zerubbabel, was born in 598 BC. This is the line of Christ!

⁴ Jeremiah said that it would last 70 (Jeremiah 28:3, 11)!

⁵ The Babylonians pursued Zedekiah and caught him, deserted by all his troops, in the plain of Jericho (Jeremiah 39:5). They took him bound to Riblah, where Nebuchadnezzar had retreated. There Zedekiah’s sons were killed with him watching. Then his eyes were gouged out, and he was carried away to Babylon in chains (Jeremiah 39:6-7).

⁶ Three earlier instances of prophets who had to “stand in waiting” as did Habakkuk for God’s self-revelation may be noted: Moses hid in the cleft of the rock and “stood in waiting” to see God’s glory pass before him (Exodus 33:21–23). Balaam went aside to “stand in waiting” for the revelation that God might bring to him (Numbers 23:3). Elijah was commanded to go to the mountain and “stand in waiting” for the revelation of God that would come (1 Kings 19:11). In similar fashion, Habakkuk situates himself on a watchtower to “stand in waiting” for the revelation that shall come from God.

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About the Preacher

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