

Habakkuk 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Habakkuk chapter 1. The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw. O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you, violence, and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?

Destruction and violence are before me, strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted. Look among the nations and see, wonder and be astounded, for I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own.

They are dreaded and fearsome, their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves. Their horsemen press proudly on, their horsemen come from afar. They fly like an eagle swift to devour. They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. Then they sweep by like the wind and go on. Guilty men, whose own might is their God. Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. You who are of purer eyes than to see evil, and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he? You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. He brings all of them up with a hook. He drags them out with his net. He gathers them in his dragnet, so he rejoices and is glad. Therefore he sacrifices to his net, and makes offerings to his dragnet, for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich. Is he then to keep on emptying his net, and mercilessly killing nations forever? Habakkuk, the eighth of the minor prophets, or the book of the twelve, consists of two chapters of prophecy in the form of a dialogue, followed by a public prayer or psalm of the prophet. Some have speculated that these two parts were independent works, but there are enough relationships between them to cast doubt upon this idea. There is no explicit historical context given for the book, and as in the case of several other prophetic books, we are largely dependent upon discerning relevant clues from the relative applicability of the prophecy to different times. As in the case of other prophecies, we should learn some lessons from the difficulty of dating. The difficulty of dating such books suggests that their presence in the canon is not absolutely contingent upon their situatedness within their historical context. Rather, such prophecies can speak beyond their times, and beyond their initial reference, to deal with larger issues of the Lord's justice in history.

A wide range of suggested dates have been given for the book. The principal and strongest historical detail that might help us to date the book seems to be the reference to the rising up of the Chaldeans in chapter 1 verse 6. This would point to the period of the decline of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the rise of Babylon as the most likely focus of the prophecy. However, the prophecy does not reference things such as the destruction of the temple and the removal of the king. While they definitely don't settle the question, descriptions of the oppression that the righteous are currently experiencing at the hands of the wicked, in places like chapter 1 verse 4, give strength to the case that the power of the Babylonians is already being experienced. If this were the case, then it is most likely that Habakkuk should be dated around the final decade of the 7th century BC. In the period after the death of Josiah and prior to the deportation of 597 BC, this would make Habakkuk a contemporary of Jeremiah and also ministering around the time of Daniel's deportation to Babylon during the reign of Jehoiakim, a politically charged time when Judah became a vassal kingdom of Babylon. We don't really know much about the identity of Habakkuk beyond this.

[4 : 17] He is mentioned in the apocryphal story of Bel and the Dragon, which in the Septuagint is said to come from the prophecy of Habakkuk, who is said to be the son of Joshua and from the tribe of Levi. Within that story, Habakkuk provides food to Daniel while he is in the lion's den.

Thomas Wrens notes that his name is not attested outside of this book and that it is probably an Akkadian loanword, a term used for a garden plant. The superscription in verse 1 is one of two superscriptions in the book. Another is found over the prayer of chapter 3, raising the possibility chapters of the prophecy in particular, not for the whole book. The prophecy is here described as an oracle that Habakkuk saw, perhaps highlighting the presence of visual elements.

The prophecy itself opens with a complaint of the prophet, in a form familiar from the Psalms and elsewhere. For instance, Psalm 13 verses 1 to 2. How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? The complaint of the prophet is fundamentally one of theodicy. He is impatient with the violence, wickedness and injustice that he sees, and with the Lord's failure to act decisively against it. This is a familiar theme from places like Psalm 37 and 73 or Job 21. Habakkuk has been calling out to the Lord to intervene, yet the heavens seem silent in response. The failure of the Lord to act against wickedness and injustice causes a crisis of effectiveness for the law. The rule of law depends heavily upon the effectiveness and the speedy enforcement of the law. Where laws cannot be or are not enforced, wrongdoers are emboldened and the righteous dispirited, as Ecclesiastes chapter 8 verse 11 describes. Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. Those who reject or ignore the law act unjustly with seeming impunity, and the law consequently comes to be treated by many as a dead letter. Jeremiah prophesying around the same period makes similar complaints. For instance, in Jeremiah chapter 12 verses 1 to 3,

Righteous are you, O Lord, when I complain to you. Yet I would plead my case before you. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive? You plant them, and they take root. They grow and produce fruit. You are near in their mouth and far from their heart. But you, O Lord, know me. You see me and test my heart toward me. Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and set them apart for the day of slaughter. On the other hand, the paralysis of the law that Habakkuk speaks of may be something that he is more directly attributing to the outnumbering of the righteous, and the overwhelming of the legal system with corruption and contention, preventing justice from being done, and leading to many miscarriages of it. While verses 2 to 3 were the words of Habakkuk himself, verses 5 to 11 are a divine word. Commentators most typically regard this as part of a dialogue between the Lord and the prophet, within which the entire nation of Judah is also addressed, as the opening imperatives are masculine plural. Renz disputes the dialogic reading, partly on the basis of the plural form, but also because the verses in question don't really seem to answer the complaint of Habakkuk at all. Rather, they seem to provoke it. The Chaldeans aren't presented as the instrument of the Lord's justice. Indeed, in verse 7, it is their own justice that is the subject.

Renz argues that this section is best read as a citation of an earlier prophecy, and that the rise of the Babylonians is in large measure what Habakkuk's earlier complaint is about. Their rise represents an injustice that the Lord seems to be passively tolerating, much to the concern of the prophet.

[8 : 09] This, Renz maintains, would also make more sense of verses 12 to 17 that follow this section, making the entire chapter a single prayer complaint. There would be a number of ways to read this section along such lines. Perhaps Habakkuk is loosely summarizing earlier prophetic messages.

Perhaps he is citing an earlier message delivered through him or some other prophet. Renz argues that material from Jeremiah, especially chapters 4 and 5, can be seen in the background here. He cites chapter 5 verses 15 to 17 in particular. Behold, I am bringing against you a nation from afar, O house of Israel, declares the Lord. It is an enduring nation. It is an ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say. Their quiver is like an open tomb. They are all mighty warriors.

They shall eat up your harvest and your food. They shall eat up your sons and your daughters. They shall eat up your flocks and your herds. They shall eat up your vines and your fig trees, your fortified cities in which you trust. They shall beat down with the sword.

In the oracle that Habakkuk recounts, the Lord calls for the heroes to attend to the nations and to witness the powerful work that he will accomplish in their days, raising up the Chaldeans.

[9 : 24] While the Neo-Assyrian Empire had dominated the region for many years, wiping out Israel and reducing Judah to its vassal, under Nava Pallasa, the Babylonians started a revolt against the Assyrians in 625 or 26 BC, through which they successfully secured their rule over most of Babylonia by 620 BC.

After this period, the Babylonians continued to fight against the Assyrians, who were suffering also from the internal problems of a civil war, particularly with the Medes. In the decade or so that followed, they decisively defeated the Assyrians. The Medes defeated Assur in 614 BC, and the combined forces of the Medes and Babylonians defeated Nineveh in 612 BC, and Haran in 609 BC. In 605 BC, the remnant of the Assyrian forces and their Egyptian allies were dealt a final crushing blow at Carchemish. It is likely that the 70 years of Babylonian dominance that the prophet Jeremiah spoke of should be dated from this time. In this same year, Judah became a vassal of Babylon, and some members of the royal family and elite were deported in the fourth year of King Jehoiakim. The oracle declares that the Babylonians will take possession of vast territories across the known world with the dreadful might and absolute authority. The justice and majesty of Babylon would prevail over all others. Their will and their glory would hold complete and unrivaled sway. They would come with the rapidity and cruel ferocity of the most deadly predator, hungry for their prey. No force could withstand nor obstacle arrest their onslaught. Kings and rulers and their armies and great fortresses would fall before them helpless. The Babylonians are, however, wicked, marked by the considerable hubris that we see in the book of Daniel, for instance, and having great pride in their own strength. They are guilty, idolaters of their own might, which they trust in over God himself.

The rise of such a cruel and guilty nation presents clear problems for Habakkuk. He appeals to the Lord's divine identity. The guilty Babylonians are vaunting themselves as the greatest power, idolizing their might, usurping rights and titles that belong to God alone, as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

[11 : 35] They are asserting their justice as the rule over all, against the justice of the Lord. The people who bear the name of the Lord are in danger of being overwhelmed and extinguished by their power, which would be a further violation of the Lord's right. The Lord surely would not abandon his people to death as a nation. He must have established the Babylonians for his own purposes of justice. Perhaps he has raised them up simply in order to bring them down and humble them. With his confidence in the holiness of the Lord, Habakkuk is bewildered by the Lord's failure to act against such a ruthless and guilty people, especially when it was swallowing up people who were more righteous. Even in a time when faithfulness was weak in Judah, there were still righteous persons in the land. They were threatened like everyone else by this proud and wicked nation. Habakkuk compares human beings to the fish of the sea or the teeming crawling things. They are greatly multiplied in their numbers and their great masses, but they lack the ability to defend themselves against the skill of the fisherman, who with his hooks, nets and dragnets is able to catch increasing quantities of them. This catching of fish might make us think of the various deportations from Jerusalem, for instance. In the first, a few key fishers are hooked. Then the nets and the dragnets come and remove great quantities of the people.

The fisherman, confident in his might, gives glory not to the Lord, but to his own net and dragnet, praising them for his success. In the case of the Babylonians, this would be praising their own military might and their war machine. Is the Lord going to permit this proud, idolatrous and wicked nation to continue to deny him his glory and to act with impunity against other nations, most especially his own people, without being stopped?

A question to consider. What other scriptural examples do we have of figures struggling to understand the Lord's justice in his governing of the nations?