

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Lesson 1, Introduction And Chapter 1

Each of the biblical prophets have their own, unique signature way of presenting their prophecies; the Prophet Habakkuk is no different. His particular way is to mimic a Psalm of lament... perhaps we could even call it a Psalm of complaint.

If we have the dating correct, he was the last of the Minor Prophets to prophesy prior to the Babylonian Exile of the Jews. After the exile we get the prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, in that order. Very little... almost nothing... is known about Habakkuk. The superscription that opens Habakkuk (that is, verse 1) only gives us the prophet's name. Even the exact meaning of his name is uncertain, although the preponderance of scholars has more or less settled on it meaning "to embrace".

There is some conjecture due to the way he words a few verses, and something he says in chapter 3... along with him even speaking about how to sing this psalm-like prophecy... that he was a Levite and worked in the Temple. Verse 19 says:

CJB Habakkuk 3:19 *Yehoveh Adonai is my strength! He makes me swift and sure-footed as a deer and enables me to stride over my high places. For the leader. With my stringed instruments.*

So, those final words are an instruction to the leader of the Levite choir and music director. While this is good evidence that he, indeed, was part of the Levite musicians, it is still too thin to say that he was a Levite musician with any certainty. No matter; Habakkuk had a musical mindset that directly shows up in his writing and dictates his style.

There are many Jewish legends about Habakkuk, which is always the case when an important biblical figure provides nearly no information about himself. None of them are worth considering. What we can gather, however, is that because he prophesies about what he calls "the coming of the Chaldeans (Chaldeans was a very ancient term for the Babylonians), and other parts of

his prophecy speak in a way that seems to describe the circumstances before Nebuchadnezzar obtained victory over the Egyptians at Carchemish that happened in the 4th year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, in the late spring of 605 B.C., that make it most likely he wrote in around 610 to 606 B.C. That is about the best we can do.

At this time, Judah was in decline. They had a pretty bad string of kings, with King Josiah being, perhaps, the one saving grace. But so much damage had been done to the Hebrew faith, and to the economy, and to Judean society in general, that while Josiah did some good things to pause the downward trend, it was only temporary. Habakkuk's era was a very tough one for any Holy Land Jews to live in.

Just as the times we live in now tell us instinctively that something is going to snap sooner than later... and you don't even have to be a God-fearer to feel it... so it was for Habakkuk. Violence was on the rise, immorality reigned, the keepers of the faith... the priests and the for-hire prophets... had become liars and idolaters, greedy for money.

So, when we read Habakkuk the way we might read a psalm of David when he was in danger, or when his life seemed to be collapsing, then we open ourselves to what a real person Habakkuk was and the boldness with which he wrestled with God. In fact, I don't think there's a great deal of difference between Habakkuk's writings as an intensely personal journal versus it being a divine prophecy. In fact, as one who loves the Psalms, the beginning of one Psalm stands out as something Habakkuk could have written himself. I'll quote it to you because this is the context, the tone, and the agony of Habakkuk's communication with Yehoveh.

CJB Psalm 13:1-5 *For the leader. A psalm of David:*

² How long, Yehoveh? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ³ How long must I keep asking myself what to do, with sorrow in my heart every day? How long must my enemy dominate me? ⁴ Look, and answer me, Yehoveh my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death. ⁵ Then my enemy would

say, "I was able to beat him"; and my adversaries would rejoice at my downfall.

If you can hear the struggle in David in these words, then you can begin to grasp the struggle Habakkuk was expressing. Praise was not on his heart; complaint and impatience at God seeming to be so silent, was. We are hearing this man bare his soul, saying things to God that few others would. Sometimes we think that as we are not happy with God, if we but stay silent then God won't know it. That is never the case for the God that sees everything, so what better to do than to bare our souls in prayer and face the music? It's so common among us as God's worshippers to sometimes think to ourselves "why"? Or, "how much longer"? Or "what did I do to deserve this"? While we probably shouldn't, we do, because we're human. All this and more are what Habakkuk expresses to Yehoveh, and it is truly fascinating.

So, we're reading what Habakkuk was not just thinking but also what he was tangibly experiencing. He was confused, beaten down, and greatly disturbed by the reality that the way this planet and its inhabitants operates versus the way God says that it should in His Scriptures, doesn't fit. God says to call out to Him, and He'll hear. But what happens when you call out night and day, for months, even years, and there seems to be no response? If anything, things seem to be worsening. I think if one could poll people who have left the faith over the centuries... and especially so in the 21st century... that would probably be the bottom-line reason in nearly all cases.

And yet, somehow, within all this unwelcome reality, Habakkuk hangs on because of his faith. The reality of our experience versus a theological theory we hold, causes us to do one of two different things. Either we disengage... sometimes from the world, sometimes from God, sometimes from both... in the form of denial, or we search for something to grasp hold of that which is above and beyond our earthly experiences and cognition. Something within us that accepts that at the same time evil seems to prevail, we will determine *not* to surrender to mere fate or misfortune but rather we will remember that we do have a human will and we *can* choose to go before God in prayer with these concerns, worries, disappointments, and even complaints. Habakkuk is our example, and his determination was to keep praying, and be on watch for

when God finally does respond such that changes for the good begin to happen.

Because Habakkuk was hardly the first prophet to appear in Israel, he had the history of the many earlier prophets before him to look back upon and to draw some perspective. Each prophet existed in a time in Israel's history when they were facing one particular set of imposing circumstances or another.

Habakkuk's circumstance was that Judah was in crisis. So, Habakkuk was not shy about borrowing words and thoughts from the earlier prophets' oracles when they were facing similar conditions. What Habakkuk was arguing with God about, then, wasn't theology or hypothetical questions, but it was about real, current circumstances that had to be addressed.

Franz Delitzsch, that great German Lutheran Bible scholar of the 19th century, noticed this as well. I don't want us to rush by this as though it were a minor point; grasping this is the difference between processing prophecy as but wispy ethereal thoughts that we cannot identify with, versus entering into the prophecy along with the prophet to see what he sees and feel what he feels, thereby making it real and tangible to us. Delitzsch said this:

His language (Habakkuk's) is classical throughout, full of rare and select words and turns, which are to some extent exclusively his own, whilst his view and mode of presentation bear the seal of independent force and finished beauty. Notwithstanding the violent rush and lofty soaring of the thoughts, his prophecy forms a finely organized and artistically rounded whole.

And, interestingly, because of the many prophets that had come before him, he was quite aware that God was not only the God of Israel but also the God of the whole world. So, what was going on in Judah would in one way or another include every nation. He was knowledgeable of the immorality, the wickedness, the corruption that was happening elsewhere and not just in his homeland. These sorts of things know no geographical boundaries or obstacles. So, as we go through his prophecy, we'll see him deal with God about Jerusalem-centric issues as well as world-centric issues, and they are basically the same ones.

Finally, in response to Habakkuk's pestering prayers, God gave him a vision. Within that vision there was a message. But Habakkuk's only real comfort was that at least there was a response; all wasn't what he necessarily wanted to hear. Near the end of the 3rd chapter, we read this:

CJB Habakkuk 3:16 ¹⁶ *When I heard, my whole body trembled, my lips shook at the sound; weakness overcame my limbs, my legs gave way beneath me. But I wait calmly for the day of trouble, when it comes upon our assailants.*

The assurance God sent was a promise of terror and not comfort. The revelation was full of terrible mystery. We pray to God, but do we *really* want His non-sugar-coated answer? I guarantee you that what he received is not what Habakkuk had in mind. We pray because we want something; we pray for peace, healing, justice, a better outcome, for all sorts of reasons that bring some sort of favor our way. I've heard so many Christians say they wish they had never read the Book of Revelation because of what it plainly says the future looks like. Which is why, I suppose, so many Pastors are determined never to preach on it; too much negativity. One can read those parts of it that speak of the hard-won victory and feel good about it; but the bulk of it is about the horrors that all those living on earth will go through as Armageddon approaches and unfolds. No wonder the Evangelical Church invented the doctrine of the Rapture that has Christians supposedly flying up into the air and away to safety to avoid what God has revealed about those catastrophic times. Just as in Habakkuk's prophecy, God reveals that His people are going to suffer a great deal, right along with the wicked gentile idolaters.

And, yet, as with a Cancer patient that has been told he has only a year to live at first might push back and deny such a prognosis, eventually most come to acceptance and reconcile with the unpleasant reality. We witness Habakkuk go through a similar process. It is almost as though God is saying: "Ok, you want the unvarnished truth? The harsh reality you keep asking for? You weren't born into a rose garden, and things will not go the way you think they ought to. Neither the world nor Heaven are as you picture them. Trusting in Me comes at a cost, it bears an obligation, and you will be constantly tested. The

journey is much harder than you'd suspect; but the end point is more marvelous than you can imagine."

What we read is Habakkuk's direct encounter with the living, mighty, all-powerful Creator who is anything but dormant and passive. But we also read of what an authentic experience with God looks like. It means putting yourself at risk. It means holding nothing back. I'm sure Habakkuk's first instincts were not to confront God, but rather to hide. How easy it is to say, "may God's will be done". How much harder it can often be to endure that will. It turns out that He is far more in control of our lives than we think we are, and that our well-being isn't necessarily His focus. How utterly helpless we can feel when God's will goes against what we think ought to happen... why justice seems to illude us. And, in these current lives in this present earth, we will eventually learn that the dark forces of evil *do* have great power and *can* cancel out our hopes, no matter how good or righteous... or at least they can during our lifetimes. When facing these perils of merely living, it is our life experiences that teach us how things really are in this present age. Faith might be easy to find, but it can be very hard to maintain long term. All of this is what Habakkuk was grappling with.

As with most of the prophets, some amount of poetry is involved. Habakkuk's is the most beautiful poetry. In the New Testament, Acts, Romans, Philippians, Galatians, and Hebrews all either quote Habakkuk or allude to him. Of course, as we have entered the modern phase of the Messianic era, more and more critical scholars find reason to question the veracity of Habakkuk's account and even who might have written it. It is often referred to as but a collection of miscellaneous oracles that was rendered down to something more coherent by an unknown editor. But the threads that bind the words of Habakkuk together expose the lie to that; this is a fully unified prophecy for which there is no good reason to challenge. It is arranged into 2 distinct parts. Chapters 1 and 2 form the first, that essentially amounts to a contentious conversation between the Prophet and God. Here we will hear of the Judgment God intends to bring upon the Chaldeans (the Babylonians), and how that will involve their overthrow by another world power. Chapter 3 is that second section, which begs God for fulfillment of what He promised in the first section. It is composed very much like a lyric psalm that explains that when the judgment

upon the earth and upon Judah arrives in earnest, it will awaken in many people a determination to know God and to seek His righteousness.

Let's move in, now, to chapter 1.

READ HABAKKUK CHAPTER 1 all

As always in the Prophets and in many other Bible books of the Old Testament, the first verse of the book can rightly be called a superscription used to identity the author, and usually additional info such as a way to place the prophecy in time, perhaps location, and to even supply a brief contextual overview or family lineage. Habakkuk, however, reveals next to nothing other than the author's name. Even so, it does characterize the entire prophecy (all 3 chapters) as an integrated message God gave to Habakkuk to deliver for Him.

The opening word of verse 1 is in Hebrew **massa**. It is usually translated to English in one of 3 ways: prophecy, oracle, or burden. From a general view, this is the Hebrew word for the revelation of a divine message. In literal terms, it means to lift-up in order to carry. When the word is used by a prophet, it becomes a technical term specifically meaning the oracular message given to the prophet by God, and then the prophet pronouncing it. Sometimes, we'll even see that term written down as **massa Yehoveh**, meaning Yehoveh's burden.

So, while the English word burden is correct, in modern English it has the propensity to give us the wrong impression. For us, a burden is usually negative. It's too heavy of a load. It's something we have to bear that isn't pleasant or particularly wanted. But **massa** simply makes this a message that the prophet needs to carry to the person or people God intends to receive it. It is not of itself negative or oppressive. I would much prefer to use the words oracle or prophecy, because for modern English speakers it carries the right tone.

The final point about this superscription of verse 1 to know is that what Habakkuk receives is something seen in a vision. That is, whereas Moses for

instance heard from God audibly, Habakkuk and all the other prophets did not (for the most part) “hear” God audibly as a distinct voice entering through their ears. But, even more, wherever we find the nature of the experience of a vision described, it is nearly always in the context of seeing the Father as present with, and as the head of, the Divine Council in Heaven. Using the most literal Bible version, we find this:

YLT 1 Kings 22:19 *And he saith, 'Therefore, hear a word of Jehovah; I have seen Jehovah sitting on His throne, and all the host of the heavens standing by Him, on His right and on His left;*

YLT Isaiah 6:1-4 *In the year of the death of king Uzziah -- I see the Lord, sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and His train is filling the temple. ² Seraphs are standing above it: six wings hath each one; with two each covereth its face, and with two each covereth its feet, and with two each flieth. ³ And this one hath called unto that, and hath said: 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is Jehovah of Hosts, The fulness of all the earth is His glory.' ⁴ And the posts of the thresholds are moved by the voice of him who is calling, and the house is full of smoke.*

There are other examples, but when in Job, Enoch, and even in the Psalms we get a description of this same kind, the hosts of angels and divine beings God is surrounded by gets the more precise name of Divine Council and speaks of its members as being called **elohim**. So, the point is that the vision is not as though the prophet was watching a movie displaying the various actions and events that the prophecy contains, but rather it is a visual image in his mind of God in Heaven with these other divine beings with Him. Essentially it provides the setting that the speaker, God, is speaking from.

CJB Habakkuk 1:2 *Yehoveh, how long must I cry without your hearing? "Violence!" I cry to you, but you don't save.*

Two quick comments before we delve into verse 2. Although I’m using the CJB, I am changing the word Adonai to Yehoveh. Typically, other English versions will use the word Lord instead of Adonai, but both mean the same thing. However, Adonai is NOT what the Hebrew says; it says YHWH... Yehoveh

(which is how I have decided is the more accurate, though likely not perfect, pronunciation). I've done this in others of the prophetic books I've commented on as well, with the only purpose being to give you what the Hebrew original actually says. But, also, to let you see how many thousands of times God's formal name is actually there in the Old Testament, but it has been covered-up for many centuries with certain agendas in mind.

From Habakkuk's front row seat to what is happening in Judah, verse 2 has him crying out... yet again... to Yehoveh and complaining (maybe in his eyes, informing) God about all the violence among his people that is happening. But God doesn't act. I don't want to go any further until we discuss another matter about Habakkuk in specific, but also biblical prophets in general, that can really help us in our Bible understanding.

The word "theology" is commonly used to describe the contents of the Bible. However, theology is what comes through teachers. Prophets were not seen as teachers. They were watchmen... sentinels... that looked to the horizons and brought warnings, usually of trouble ahead. They were moralists, looking over their fellow countrymen and sort-of constantly measuring their spiritual temperature. So, not only were they **not** teachers of theology, and thus did **not** develop doctrines, they also were not priests whose job was to continue the ritual practices of the Hebrew faith. This is not to say that there isn't much to be learned from the prophets. It's that the interpretation of the divine message they brought... the theology that could be developed from it... was neither the prophet's purpose nor what they did. They simply presented what God showed them in their vision.

When we get to the New Testament and especially to the Epistles, this is where theology becomes the larger thrust. Paul, especially, acted in the role of a theologian at times, who interpreted what he saw and set it down as instructions to various congregations that looked upon him as their chief Rabbi (so-to-speak). Paul was that interpreter of Scripture and teacher of doctrine... or at least that's how Christianity has taken to be (although I would argue against that in many instances of what he had to say).

Verse 3 is directly tied to verse 2.

CJB Habakkuk 1:3 *Why do you make me see wrongdoing, why do you permit oppression? Pillage and cruelty confront me, so that strife and discord prevail.*

For Habakkuk, it's all gone wrong. The beautiful ideal of Israel has been lost. Wickedness has pervaded Judah as much as it has the nations. Habakkuk is frustrated, a bit confused, and feels as though God has abandoned Him. Yet, he's not about to turn tail and run. He continues to turn to God, but now he demands some answers; he just won't accept the divine silence any longer.

Habakkuk has some questions (complaints) that he wants God to respond to. The first is at the beginning of verse 2 when he asks, "how long?". Then, he wants to know "why?". Let it be clear to us that the Prophet has no doubts about God's ability to do something to correct and deliver His people from their wickedness; the question is why *hasn't* He done anything? The very fabric of Judean society was torn and tattered. People had become mean, selfish, greedy, and downright evil and harmful in their actions. He had given up any hope of some new leader or king riding to their rescue. Either Yehoveh would intervene Himself, or nothing would be changed from this destructive trajectory they were on.

Does this not sound like this present world? I think for those of us who have lived for many decades, it is so disheartening and even frightening to see the speed at which all the things our society held dear and assigned great value to have been destroyed and replaced with chaos, self-interest, pleasures of any kind and at any cost, and lawlessness and violence raging out of control. Things which were the height of immorality for us ...shameful in every sense... are now accepted as normal and glorified as "good". I will go to my eternal rest pounding the table that we could (and should) directly transfer what Habakkuk and the other Minor Prophets were saying about Israel and Judah in their era, to what we in the West are experiencing today. And I promise you, what God told His prophets that He was going to do about it will be brought about in our very near future.

Do you not wonder sometimes at God's seeming silence over human affairs in this world? It is most difficult to understand if we're honest about it. It's all right and true that God says that someday He's going to deal with it all, but I'm not sure that makes day-to-day living and enduring much easier. All that kept Habakkuk together was His determined faith, and folks that all we have. So, the more we try to figure it all out, the less helpful it is. The Psalmist says: "Be still and know that I am God". Hang on to that. Count on it, in the same way Habakkuk did. But, no, it is not wrong to beseech God in prayer to do something or to notice the suffering and degradation of the world and speak of it, and Habakkuk is a wonderful biblical example of this.

CJB Habakkuk 1:4 *Therefore Torah is not followed; justice never gets rendered, because the wicked fence in the righteous. This is why justice comes out perverted.*

The CJB is the only popular English Bible that translates this verse correctly from the Hebrew. All other Bibles say: "Therefore the law is not followed". Let me assure you, it is the word Torah that is present in the original Hebrew... not law. Hebrew Roots and Messianic folks, nothing could be more validating for us than to seek to return to obedience to the Torah, and nothing could be more damning to the Christian institutions in general than what this verse opens with. Not following the Torah is the crux of the entire problem. Why? Because in it God sets out His laws and commands, creates an absolute moral and ethical code, expresses His love for His worshippers, and unequivocally says how that love ought to be reciprocated to Him in the form of our obedience. To not do that turns our faith beliefs and practices into a humanly contrived religion.

Franz Delitzsch had something quite profound to say about this, that I must admit, still didn't seem to affect his own personal religious practices as a good Lutheran. He said, regarding this section of Habakkuk:

Torah is "the reveled law in all its substance, which was meant to be the soul, the heart of political, religious, and domestic life."

How very right that statement and understanding is. Israel (Ephraim/Israel) had essentially abandoned the Torah in favor of some hybrid set of doctrines, customs, and pagan worship practices. They reimagined and redefined God's principles and His well-documented worship practices, and the priests who were to stand between God and the people taught them how to become idolators and heretics instead of faithful Torah followers. They were exiled because of it. Judah was now in the same place their brother kingdom had been and were about to suffer the same fate because of it. The religious leadership were the main culprits. As Solomon once said, "there is nothing new under the sun". So, it ought not to surprise us that the Constantinian Church leadership is doing what Israel's religious leadership did and of course denies it and only doubles down on their ever-evolving populist teachings as each decade passes. The result: the people fall away from the faith, and from God, and society that depends on God's principles being upheld crumbles. Pretty bleak assessment? You bet it is. God's prophets never showed up wearing happy faces. They had some hard, serious things to say that they knew would not be well received.

Because the Torah is where the boundaries and terms of Godly justice is laid out, then since knowing the Torah and observing it is long-gone, then so is righteous justice. The wicked (those in power) control the righteous, and so their manmade justice systems pervert what true justice is. Now comes Habakkuk's complaint: God seems to be doing nothing about it. So, men continue to practice sin with impunity, and much of it is applauded as good. Clearly all this wickedness is irreconcilable with the righteousness of God. So, why does God look upon it and let it go unpunished?

CJB Habakkuk 1:5 ***"Look around among the nations! What you see will completely astound you! For what is going to be done in your days you will not believe, even when you are told."***

God responds to Habakkuk in verse 5. Look around, watch, and be astounded. He tells Habakkuk. The verb tenses of this verse help us to understand that God is really telling Habakkuk's entire community to pay attention... not only Habakkuk. The thing is this: Habakkuk is not just an interested citizen, he's a prophet. His personal struggle cannot be separated from the problems, and

fate Judah is facing. A Prophet is somewhat like a Mediator in that he is to make intercession for his community on God's behalf. Yes, he suffers just as his fellow citizens do, but he still has a role to play as being God's voice to that community.

Intellectual honesty demands we see Habakkuk's approach to God as something we probably find distasteful if not irreverent. Back in verse 3, Habakkuk lays a lot of blame at God's door. "Why do **you** make me see wrongdoing? Why do **you** permit oppression?" Even more, just as Yeshua, Jeremiah, Job and so many others, Habakkuk also felt a sense of desertion. Who could forget those heart-rendering words that Yeshua uttered moments before He died?

CJB Matthew 27:46 *At about three, Yeshua uttered a loud cry, "Eli! Eli! L'mah sh'vaktani? (My God! My God! Why have you deserted me?)"*

There existed among several of these biblical characters who were feeling abandoned that God had not fulfilled His covenant promises. This sort of disillusionment and frustration is something not new for Habakkuk; we find it throughout the Bible. I would submit that this will eventually come home to bother most Believers as an unavoidable consequence of our trust and faith in God and His justice that simply (more often than not) does not match well with the way that things go in our lives. What Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Job, Habakkuk and so many more tell us is that it is not some unforgivable sin to be upset when all doesn't go as we think God ought to have it go. It is not an unforgivable sin to go before God and ask Him for some answers. In fact, when our souls get so tormented with what we are experiencing, what else ought we do than to go to God for some resolution?

God's response to Habakkuk is actually a bit hollow. He doesn't really address any of the complaints head-on. In fact, some scholars see no connection between verses 2 -4 and verse 5 because of this indirectness. Perhaps there is another lesson here. Taking our troubles, laments, and complaints to God doesn't mean He is going to respond to us point by point. Perhaps the response is more about taking our eyes off those immediate pain-points to looking at the much larger picture and purposes of the Lord. God, it seems to

me, might even be inviting Habakkuk to look at everything the way God sees it. For instance: in all that injustice and violence that is happening in Judah, is that not actually God's justice at work? That is, if Israel is going to violate the covenant, and is going to disregard God's Torah, then is it not justice that violence, lack, and oppression are proper punishments? Especially since in His covenant with Moses, that is precisely how God says He will deal with Israel on many of these matters of direct disobedience to the covenant terms.

We'll pause here and continue with verse 5 next time.