

INTRODUCTION TO HABAKKUK

(Carl Armerding)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND DATE

Habakkuk's prophecy is set against a background of the decline and fall of the Judean kingdom (ca. 626-586 BC). Although nothing is known of the prophet himself apart from the book bearing his name—the book is not dated in the usual manner (cf. Am 1:1; Zep 1:1; etc.)—the general background of Habakkuk is clear from the internal data. Habakkuk 1:5-11 represents a period before 612 BC, when the Babylonians destroyed the Assyrian capital, Nineveh. More probably, the section predates 605, the year the Babylonians (the Chaldeans [*kasdim*]; 1:6) through Nebuchadnezzar extended their power into Syria-Palestine (2Ki 24:1-7; see Hab 1:5 “you would not believe, even if you were told”). By contrast it is sometimes argued that 1:12-17 and 2:6-20 must reflect a later period when the power and rapacity of the Babylonians had become common knowledge to the prophet. Various solutions have been proposed, but the best seems to be found in taking the sections of the dialogue as broadly representative of Habakkuk's spiritual struggles over a long period of time, possibly beginning as early as 626 and continuing as late as 590 or after.

During this period Judah enjoyed its last bit of prosperity under Josiah (d. 609 BC), and Assyria's wound was revealed as fatal with the ultimate fall of Nineveh. By 605, the short-lived Babylonian Empire had established its dominance over Palestine, with Judah's later kings either in vassalage to the Babylonians or in revolt against that status, usually by engaging in treachery with Egypt (2Ki 24-25). In 586 BC Jerusalem was destroyed and its people taken into exile. Conditions during the life of the prophet would have progressed from excellent—with considerable material prosperity and even promise of spiritual revival in the days of Josiah—to the height of desperation as the net was drawn closer and closer around the hapless capital. There is no direct evidence from the book that Habakkuk lived past the destruction of Jerusalem, though some find such evidence in 3:16-19.

UNITY

The major challenge to unity comes with ch. 3, the psalm. Stylistic shifts from the narrative portions and the older critical tendency to date psalmic material in the post-exilic period have combined to call the authenticity of ch. 3 into question. The failure of the Qumran “commentary” to include an exposition of the psalm has, for some scholars, added weight to the denial of Habakkuk's authorship. Against this is the clear note of continuity of theme in all three chapters and, in general, the lack of any compelling reasons not to accept the book's attribution of the psalm to Habakkuk.

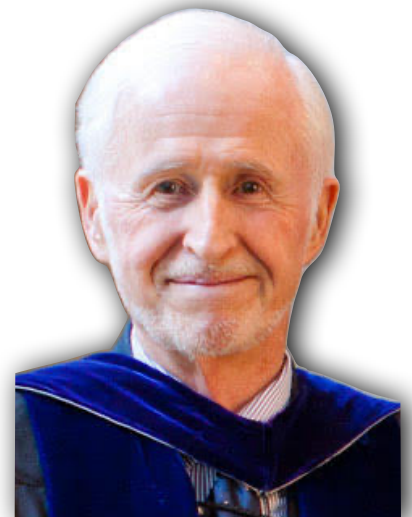
AUTHORSHIP

Nothing is known of Habakkuk except his name, which does not lend itself to attempts at finding a Hebrew meaning (contra Luther et al.). Of his temperament and personal situation, we know only what may be inferred from the book. Literary dependences and early canonical reception leave no doubt that Habakkuk's work was circulated and accepted early, but the details remain lost.

OCCASION AND PURPOSE

Prophecy is a result of revelation given to a person who then proclaims the inspired message to the people. Often such revelation and inspiration are occasioned by conditions in the nation (with the exception of Jonah and Jeremiah 27, prophecy is always proclaimed to Israel, even when about other nations) about which the prophet has been burdened.

Habakkuk is unique among the prophets because he does not speak for God to the people but rather to God about his people and nation. The similarity with the other prophets is in the setting: the people of God, covenantally bound to him since the days of the exodus, have sharply fallen away from those covenantal standards (1:2-4). Violence and law-breaking (covenantal violations) abound, and the wicked seem at least superficially to triumph. According to all that Habakkuk knows about God's holiness and covenant (cf. Dt 26-33, on which Habakkuk seems dependent), Yahweh should have arisen to correct the situation, particularly in response to



believing prayer for change by such a one as Habakkuk.

But such correction has not been forthcoming, and the prayers of the righteous and the struggle for justice in the land seem in vain, with the result that God's program of redemptive history is threatened. In light of this context, it seems more appropriate, from a form-critical standpoint, to think of Habakkuk 1-2 not as a "lament," but more analogous to the "complaint" literature represented by Job, Jeremiah, and some of the psalms (e.g., Ps 12; 73:1-14).

The early part of the prophecy of Habakkuk is a dialogue in which the prophet's questions receive divine answers. Externally, the Assyrians would naturally have been a threat to Judah; and apart from the problem of the future of God's covenantal promises, the prophet would have expected Assyria to be "the rod of God's anger" (Isa 10:5-6). The new element is the introduction of Babylonian power, with such awful potential consequences and with no clear vision of when and how Yahweh will continue his commitments to the chosen line. But initially Habakkuk is more concerned with internal injustices and Yahweh's apparent complacency toward the evil generation. It is God's reply (1:5-11) that catapults the prophecy onto the international and eschatological level.

Larger questions quickly engulf the local concerns, and chs. 2-3 carry us well beyond the last days of Judah to the future. Habakkuk himself is never told when or exactly how it will end, but 2:14, 20 assure him of the ultimate triumph of Yahweh; the psalm in ch. 3 then shows that Habakkuk learns to live in the light of this fact.

STRUCTURE

Habakkuk 1:1-2:5 clearly is a dialogue between God and the prophet in which two stylized complaints are answered by two penetrating replies. The opening complaint (1:2-4) has to do with Judah's moral and spiritual decline and the apparent unwillingness of Yahweh to intervene. The first reply (1:5-11) sets forth the coming destruction by Babylon as Yahweh's discipline for errant Judah. For the patriotic and nationalistic covenantal Israelite, this is hardly a solution; thus, 1:12-17 complains that such a solution will only aggravate the problem of God's working in history and the apparent compounding of injustice. Habakkuk 2:1 leaves the prophet sitting on his spiritual tower awaiting an answer; while 2:2-5, the central message of the prophecy, foresees ultimate justice for the arrogant Chaldeans and calls for the righteous man, in the intervening years, to live by his faith (or "faithfulness", NIV note).

Habakkuk 2:6-20 is a taunt or mocking song put in the mouths of the nations that have suffered at the hand of Babylon. It consists of five "woes," punctuated by a vision of the universal knowledge of God's glory (v.14) and climaxed by a call for reverent submission to the Lord of history, who through all the vicissitudes of history remains seated in his holy temple (v.20). In typical prophetic form the taunt moves from the third to the second person, and the subject matter—with the exception of the fifth woe, which opposes idolatry—deals with a nation arrogantly building its own power at the expense of its less able neighbors. Habakkuk 3:1-19 is a psalm, replete with musical directions (v.1: *sgyōnôt*, "shigionoth"; cf. Ps 7:1, and v.19: *negînôt*, "stringed instruments").

THEOLOGICAL VALUES

Habakkuk's message, the core of which is found in 2:4, is applied to a basic point in three NT books. Paul, in Romans 1:17, introduces his gospel as one of salvation by faith, not works, and cites Habakkuk 2:4, "the righteous will live by his faith," as OT support for his argument. Galatians 3:11-12 sees faith as the antithesis of law or legal salvation, and again Habakkuk 2:4 serves as proof. Finally, in an intriguing passage from Hebrews 10:37-38, Habakkuk 2:3-4 is again quoted; but the context focuses on the pending arrival of the fulfillment of the vision and the identification of the Hebrews with those who have faith and thus persevere under pressure.

The theological value of Habakkuk, however, cannot be limited to a few, though crucial, NT quotations. The prophet asks some of the most penetrating questions in all literature, and the answers he receives are basic to a proper view of God and his relation to history. If God's initial response sounds the death knell for any strictly nationalistic covenantal theology of Judah, his second reply outlines in a positive sense the fact that all history is hastening to a conclusion that is as certain as it is satisfying.

In the interim, while history is still awaiting its conclusion (and Habakkuk is not told when the end will come, apparently for him prefigured by Babylon's destruction), the righteous ones are to live by faith. The prescribed faith—or "faithfulness", as many have argued that *'emûnâ* should be translated, is still called for as a basic response to the unanswered questions in today's universe; it is this, a theology for life, with then, and now, that stands as Habakkuk's most basic contribution.