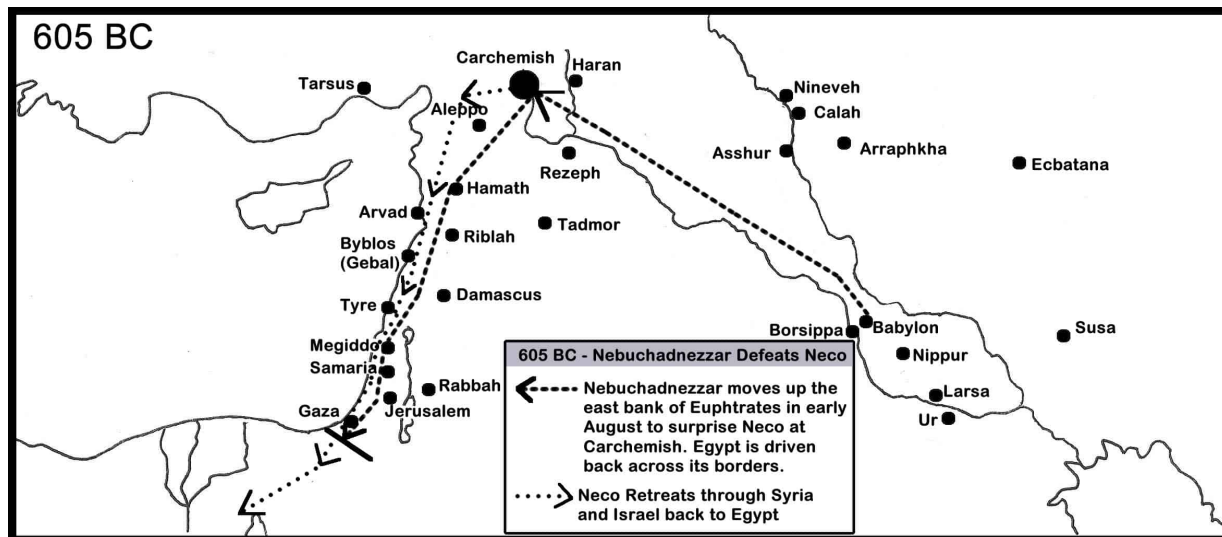


Habakkuk Questions God

Introduction

Thus far in our studies in the Minor Prophets, we have observed God’s thoughts and dissatisfaction being communicated to the people through the preaching of the prophets. In Habakkuk, this pattern is reversed. Habakkuk calls out to God, expressing his struggle with grasping why God would allow the wicked Chaldeans to punish the Jews for their rebellion against God. The Chaldeans were riding a wave of military conquest and were quickly filling the vacuum left by the crumbling Assyrian Empire. They were an evil and brutal people. How could their actions fit into God’s plan? Habakkuk’s writing helps us understand how God works to carry out His purposes.

The biblical record gives us scant information on Habakkuk’s background. We know nothing of his hometown, parents, or other personal history. Most believe he was from Jerusalem. He is mentioned in the Greek writing, *Bel and the Dragon*, as bringing food to Daniel while in the lion’s den. Some speculate

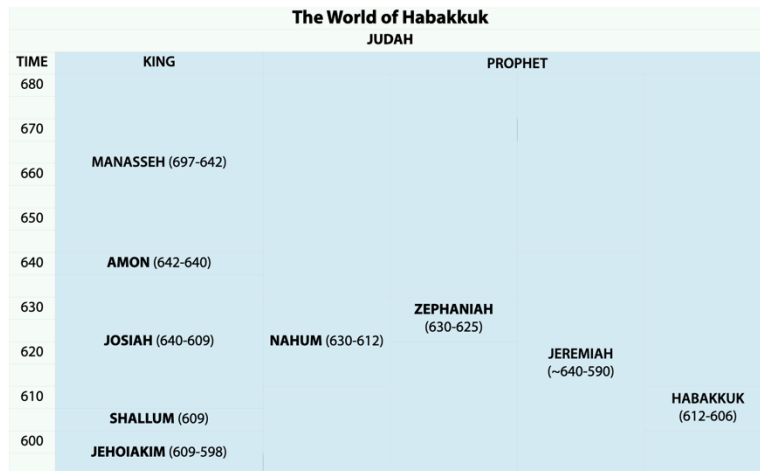


that he was a “professional temple prophet” but this is nothing more than speculation.¹

Habakkuk’s writing has been narrowed to a short period of time, most likely between 612 and 606 B.C. This is a significant period in history. In 612 B.C., the Assyrian army was dealt a decisive and crushing defeat by the Chaldeans in its capital city, Nineveh. The Assyrian king and the remnants of his army escaped to the west (Haran), where they would be pursued by Nebuchadnezzar and destroyed in 609 B.C. After removing the Assyrians, the momentum for world domination and supremacy belonged to the Babylonians. There would be no doubt of their power and status after defeating Egypt and her forces at the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. This defeat allowed Nebuchadnezzar to move his forces southward and westward into the region of Judea. It is most likely that Habakkuk writes before the

Babylonians first invaded Judah in 605 B.C. But as we read his writing, we see the very dark clouds for Judah looming on the horizon. Many try to pinpoint Habakkuk to writing after the defeat of the Assyrians in 609 B.C., but before the Babylonian invasion of 605 B.C.

The political times of Habakkuk



Josiah, the good king of Judah and great religious reformer who lived during the time of Zephaniah, was killed in 609 B.C at Megiddo as he sought to prevent Egypt from rushing to the aid of the remnants of the Assyrian army who were fighting against Nebuchadnezzar. While the army of Judah had success

in preventing Egypt from coming to the aid of the Assyrians, Egypt then turned on Judah and dominated it for the next four years. After Josiah's death, his son Jehoahaz becomes king, 2 Chronicles 36:2. He became king at age twenty-three, but his reign lasted only three months. Jehoahaz favored the Chaldeans over the Egyptians; and the king of Egypt, Pharaoh Neco, deposed him making him a prisoner at Riblah in Egypt, 2 Kings 23:31. Jehoahaz is also known as Shallum and is mentioned in Jeremiah 22:10-12. In writing about Shallum, Jeremiah writes:

Do not weep for the dead or mourn for him, But weep continually for the one who goes away; 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, 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.'

Pharaoh Neco placed his brother Eliakim on the throne. Eliakim's name was changed to Jehoiakim. Egypt's influence over Judah would soon cease as it met defeat at Carchemish by the forces of Babylon. Jehoiakim reigned for eleven years and did evil in the sight of the Lord, 2 Chronicles 36:5. The writer of Chronicles refers to his actions on the throne as *abominations*, 2 Chronicles 36:8. As Egypt's influence rapidly fades after its defeat at Carchemish in 605 B.C., Babylon invades Judah. Daniel 1:1-2 says:

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the vessels of the house of God; and he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god.

It is during this time that Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were carried to Babylon.

The moral and economic times of Habakkuk

Judah’s slide into the moral abyss rapidly accelerates after the death of Josiah. Even during the short reign of Jehoahaz, he led the nation back into evil. Jehoiakim continued this progression into evil. The writer of Second Kings says, *He did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers had done*, 2 Kings 23:37. Habakkuk gives us some insight to the moral conditions of the time. In chapter one he describes it this way: *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.* (Habakkuk 1:3b-4) It is obvious a large majority in Judah found themselves in moral bankruptcy.

Economically, Judah was being increasingly squeezed. After Josiah’s death, Egypt moved in. Judah’s independence as a nation was no more. Neco deposed Jehoahaz and then initiated heavy tribute to Egypt. 2 Kings 23:35 records: *So Jehoiakim gave the silver and gold to Pharaoh, but he taxed the land in order to give the money at the command of Pharaoh. He exacted the silver and gold from the people of the land, each according to his valuation, to give it to Pharaoh Neco.* 2 Chronicles 36:3 says that Pharaoh asked for one hundred talents of silver and one talent of gold. After Egypt’s defeat at Carchemish, their influence over Judah ended, only to be replaced by the domination of Nebuchadnezzar.

In the third year of Jehoiakim’s reign, Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem. God delivered Jerusalem into his hands. He plundered the temple and carried off young Judean nobles to Babylon for the king’s personal service. Jehoiakim was bound with bronze chains to be carried off to Babylon, 2 Chronicles 36:6, but Nebuchadnezzar then decided to leave him in power as a vassal. Jehoiakim submitted for three years, 2 Kings 24:1. He then began to rebel and was harassed by bands of Chaldeans, Arameans, Moabites, and Ammonites. It was only a matter of time before Judah would be completely absorbed into the Babylonian empire. The historical account in 2 Kings 24:3-5 discusses how God allowed this to happen because the time had come to remove the nation from His sight because of the great sins of the nation. Jeremiah 23:18-26 and 36:30-32 give an interesting perspective on the death of Jehoiakim and the end that was coming upon the nation.

Habakkuk’s message in chapter one

The Organization of Habakkuk 1

REFERENCE	DESCRIPTION
1:1-4	<i>Habakkuk questions God's silence in answering his prayer</i>
1:5-11	<i>God answers: The Chaldeans would be used to destroy Judah</i>
1:12-13	<i>Habakkuk wonders why the righteous must suffer</i>
1:14-17	<i>Habakkuk reasons as to why God should not use the Chaldeans to punish Judah</i>

Habakkuk begins his writing by calling out to God. He had been praying to God and it seemed that his prayers went unanswered. It appeared to Habakkuk that God was not concerned about the situation Judah found itself in. Fearing that God did

not hear him made Habakkuk even more worried. He noticed increasing violence and destruction. The law was ignored; justice was trampled on and perverted.

Beginning in verse five, God answers Habakkuk. God informs him that the Chaldeans were being raised up as an instrument of punishment. God is always at work behind the scenes carrying out His purposes. This would have been “news” to many of the Jews who would have had a hard time understanding that

God controlled and influenced events in other nations. Having announced that the Chaldeans would be the tool used to punish Judah, God begins to describe the power and might of the enemy. The army led by Nebuchadnezzar was on the offensive. His forces conquered capital after capital and became *dreaded and feared* as they moved throughout the known world, 1:7. Their army is described in 1:8. This was a nation that enveloped the entire Middle East and carried off their captives to Babylon *like sand*, 1:9. The leader of the Babylonians is described in verses ten and eleven. He scoffed at opposing kings and officials of state. Enemy fortifications were dismissed as insignificant. As they took out nation after nation, they are compared to as the wind. But God said they would be held guilty because they counted on the strength of their gods, 1:11.

God’s reply in 1:12-13 stuns Habakkuk. How could God, who is totally separated from evil, raise up a treacherous and despicable nation to punish *Those more righteous than they*, 1:13? How could God use such an evil nation to punish even the righteous few in Israel? Should the innocent suffer along with the guilty? James E. Smith summarizes Habakkuk’s complaint in a very good way. “Habakkuk’s puzzlement grows out of two basic concerns: a devastation of Judah which he perceives to be disproportionate to the sin being punished and God’s employment of an agent who was more wicked than those being chastised.”²

Habakkuk's Reasoning As to Why God Should Not Use Babylon

REFERENCE	DESCRIPTION
1:14	<i>Nations powerless against Babylon's aggression</i>
1:15	<i>Babylon was a brutal nation</i>
1:16	<i>Babylon worshipped its military power</i>
1:17	<i>Babylon continually pursued aggression with enemy nations</i>

In the final verses of chapter one Habakkuk lists out his thoughts on why he felt God should not use Babylon as an instrument to punish Judah. In verse fourteen, people in nations are compared to innocent sea

creatures that are often swept up in a net by a fisherman. These small creatures are powerless to stop what happens to them and have no one to look to for security and protection. Likewise, the Chaldeans had moved across the known world in a conquest that the masses of people were powerless to stop. The example of a fisherman is built upon in the next verse, and Habakkuk uses his words to describe the total brutality of the enemy. While conquering the nations, the Chaldeans are pictured as having a hook in their hand. As people were led away to Babylon, the Chaldeans were famous for driving a hook through the lips and leading them off to a life of slavery and misery. They rejoiced in inflicting pain and suffering on their victims. In Habakkuk’s reasoning, how could God allow this to happen? The Chaldeans attributed all their success to their military (the fishing net) and glorified anything that enabled them to gain more power, 1:16. Habakkuk’s final reasoning against Babylon being used as an instrument by God is their continual aggression toward others. They *slayed nations without sparing*, 1:17. Would God continue to allow this to go on uncontrolled for a long period of time?

Thoughts on Habakkuk’s questions

How can a just God allow evil to exist? We often find ourselves with more questions than answers on this subject. God tells us, *‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord.*

'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts,' Isaiah 55:8-9. It seems that Habakkuk *really* wrestled with the age-old question of why the innocent suffer while the ungodly prosper. As he asks these questions, he determines to wait patiently for the answer of God. Habakkuk is a person each one of us can identify with. His questions on the justice of God are ones that all righteous people may ask from time to time. May we look to the pages of God's word for our answers. *Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law,* Psalm 119:18.

For Discussion

1. What is the primary message of Habakkuk?
2. Describe Habakkuk's background.
3. When did Habakkuk write his message?
4. Describe the political turmoil of Habakkuk's day.
5. Who was Shallum and what happened to him? See Jeremiah 22:10-12.
6. What was Eliakim's name changed to and by whom? Describe the character of Eliakim.
7. Describe the economic conditions of Habakkuk's day.
8. Describe the moral conditions of Habakkuk's day.

9. How did God's delay in answering Habakkuk affect him?

10. Read 1:2-4. What is the complaint of Habakkuk?

11. Read 1:5-11. How does God answer? What would surprise Habakkuk and the Jews?

12. Read 1:12-13. Describe Habakkuk's follow-up questions to God.

13. Read 1:14-17. What are Habakkuk's four reasons as to why God should not use Babylon to punish Judah?

14. How can you identify with Habakkuk?

(Endnotes)

- 1 Hubbard, David Allan. *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, An Introduction and Commentary*. p. 45.
- 2 Smith, James E. *The Minor Prophets*. p. 444
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