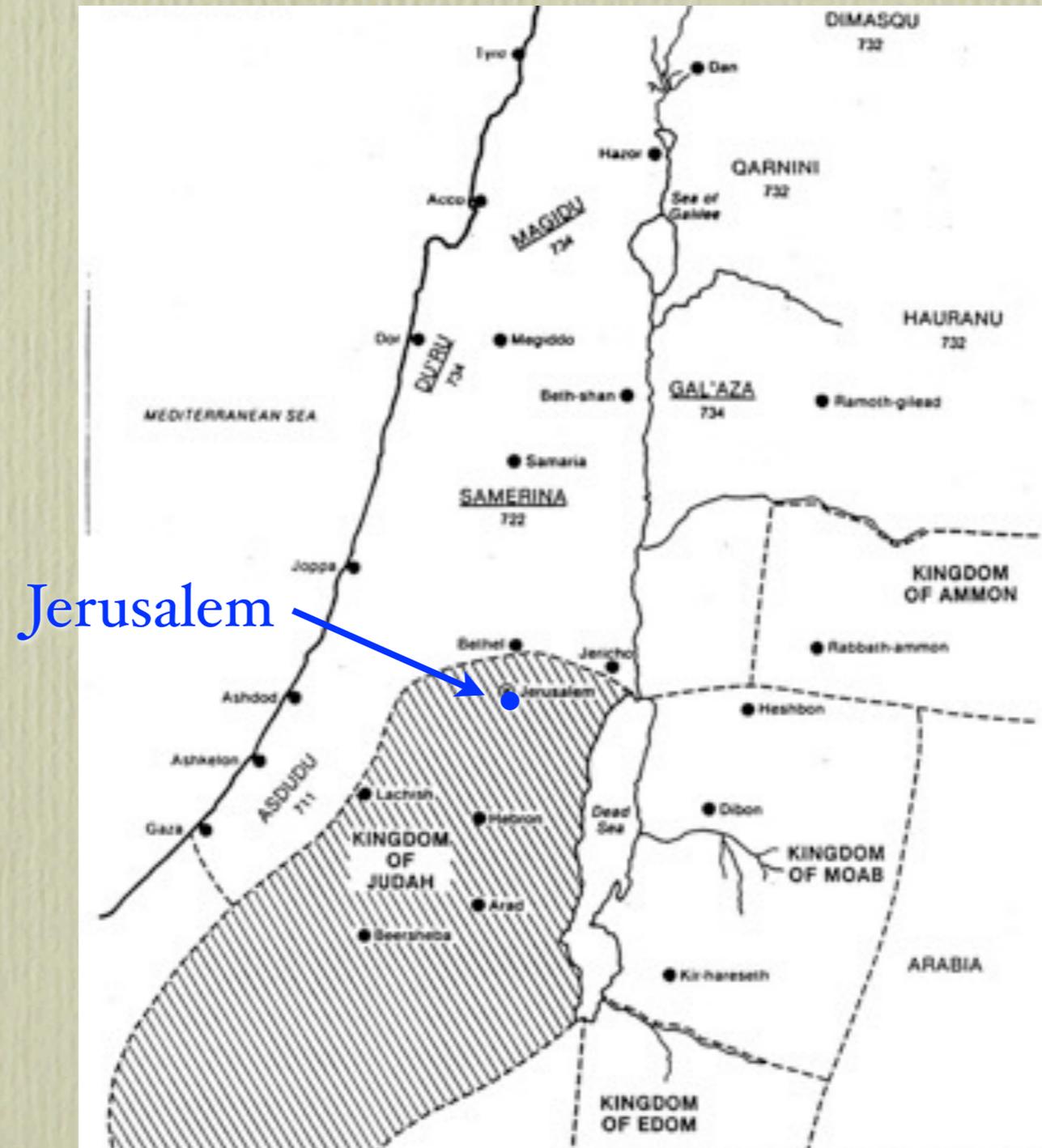


### 03. The Prophet Habakkuk 605-590

during the reigns of **King Jehoiakim (609-598)**  
and **King Zedekiah (597-587)**



In 609 the Assyrian army suffered a crushing defeat at Haran. Necho, Pharaoh of Egypt, was heading north to assist Assyria, but was delayed by Josiah in the plain of Megiddo. Josiah was killed.

The king-makers of Judah bypassed Josiah's eldest son, Eliakim, and chose as king his younger brother, Shallum, who took the throne name Jehoahaz (see Jeremiah 22:11; 1 Chronicles 3:15). They hoped he would continue the policies of his father, Josiah.

However, Necho deposed him in favour of Eliakim, who was given the throne name, **Jehoiakim (609-598)**. This began the unravelling of the independence that Josiah had achieved.

In 605 the Babylonian army led by Nebuchadnezzar defeated the combined forces of Assyria and Egypt in the battle of Carchemish. In 598 Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah and besieged Jerusalem. Jehoiakim died during the siege. He was succeeded briefly by his eighteen year old son, Jeconiah (Coniah), who took the throne name Jehoiachin. He reigned for the first three months of 597BC. He decided to surrender, and the siege was lifted.

He was taken into exile in Babylon, along with all the leading citizens, including the priest-prophet, Ezekiel. Nebuchadnezzar replaced Jehoiachin with his uncle, Mattaniah, who was given the throne name Zedekiah.

- 605 Nebuchadnezzar  
Carchemish



Many of the prophets speak out against injustice. Habakkuk struggles with the violence of the aggressive policies of the new super-power, Babylon (chapter 1). He struggles to believe that justice will prevail (chapter 2); that ‘the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of YHWH, as the waters cover the sea’ (2:14). More than any other prophet Habakkuk gives voice to the oppressed as their cry pierces the heavens. God does not seem to be listening, or doing anything.

Habakkuk forces us to look at the systems under which we live in whatever nation we belong to (1:2-4). He then expands our reflection to the international stage to look at the way stronger states dominate weaker ones and are able to manipulate systems to their own benefit while oppressing others (1:12 - 2:1).

His ridicule of the pretensions of imperial power in 2:5-20 is also a warning to us personally not to put our trust in wealth, in security that is not based on faith, in power, or in honour and reputation. We must be careful not to worship what we can control. This goes even for the danger of limiting God to our inherited or contrived ways of understanding the deity.

His key contribution is his insistence that the righteous will live, because of the faithfulness of YHWH. To find real life, we must put our trust in the faithfulness of God, and persevere in fidelity to the covenant God has made with us (see 2:4).

In his concluding prayer (chapter 3) he affirms his belief in God's power, and, in spite of the calamity that appears inevitable (see 3:16), he concludes with one of the finest expressions of faith to be found in the Older Testament (see 3:17-19)

## Habakkuk 1:1-5

after Babylon's victory over Assyria and Egypt at Carchemish (605)

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

YHWH, how long must I cry for help, and you do not listen?

Or cry to you “Violence!” [ḥāmās] and you do not save?

Why do you make me see injustice and look on wrong-doing?

Destruction and plunder are before me; strife and conflict abound.

So the law becomes slack and **justice** never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous – so that justice is perverted.

Look at the nations, and see! Be astonished! Be astounded!

For a work is being done in your days

that you would not believe if you were told.

## Habakkuk 1:6-11

For I am rousing the Chaldeans (= Neo-Babylonians)

that fierce and impetuous nation,

who march through the breadth of the earth

to seize dwellings not their own.

Dread and fearsome are they;

their justice and dignity proceed from themselves.

Their horses are swifter than leopards, more menacing than wolves at dusk

their horses charge. Their horsemen come from far away;

they fly like an eagle swift to devour.

They all come for violence, with faces pressing forward;

they gather captives like sand.

At kings they scoff, and of rulers they make sport.

They laugh at every fortress, and heap up earth to take it.

Then they sweep by like the wind; they transgress and become guilty.

Their own might is their god.

## Habakkuk 1:12-17 : after capture of Jerusalem 597

Are you not from of old, YHWH my God, my Holy One?

You shall not die. YHWH, you have marked them for judgment;  
and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment.

Your eyes are too pure to behold evil,

and you cannot look on wrongdoing;

why then do you tolerate the treacherous,

and are silent when the wicked swallow

those more righteous than they?

## Habakkuk 1:14-17

You have made people like the fish of the sea,  
like crawling things that have no ruler.

The enemy 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 exults.

Therefore he sacrifices to his net  
and makes offerings to his dragnet;  
for by them his portion is lavish,  
and he enjoys the choicest food.

Is he then to keep on emptying his net,  
and destroying nations without mercy?

## Habakkuk 2:1-4

I will stand at my watch post, and station myself on the rampart;  
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,  
and what he will answer concerning my argument.

Then YHWH answered me and said: Write the **vision**;  
make it plain on tablets, so that a herald may run with it.

For the vision is a guarantee for the appointed time;  
it bears witness of the end, and does not lie.

If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.

Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them,  
but the righteous lives by **his** faithfulness.

## Habakkuk 2:4

the righteous lives by **his** faithfulness.

There is an interesting ambiguity in the final key phrase ‘**by his faithfulness**’. If the ‘his’ refers to God, we are being encouraged to put our trust in the faithfulness of YHWH and the trustworthiness of his word, even though we cannot comprehend the mystery of God’s justice. As verse 3 insists, we will see it at ‘the appointed time’.

If the ‘his’ refers to the righteous person, we are being encouraged to be faithful to the covenant we have with God, to walk in the truth, trusting that all will be revealed.

Instead of ‘his’ the Septuagint has ‘mou’ – with the same ambiguity: it could mean ‘my’ [God’s] faithfulness to the righteous person, or it could mean the righteous person’s faithfulness in regard to ‘me’[God].

## Habakkuk 2:5-8

Moreover, wealth is treacherous; the arrogant do not endure. They open their throats wide as Sheol; like Death they never have enough. They gather all nations for themselves, and collect all peoples as their own. Shall not everyone taunt such people and, with mocking riddles, say about them:

[1] “Woe to you who **heap up what is not your own!**”

How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge?

Will not your own creditors suddenly rise,  
and those who make you tremble wake up?

Then you will be booty for them.

Because you have plundered many nations,

all that survive of the peoples shall plunder you –

because of human bloodshed, and violence to the earth,  
to cities and all who live in them.

## Habakkuk 2:9-14

[2] “Woe to you who get evil gain for your houses,  
setting your nest on high to be **safe from the reach of harm!**”  
You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples;  
you have forfeited your life.  
The very stones will cry out from the wall,  
and the plaster will respond from the woodwork.

[3] “Woe to you who build a town by **bloodshed,**  
and found a city on iniquity!”  
Has not YHWH of hosts determined that peoples labour  
only to feed the flames,  
and that nations exhaust themselves for nothing? [Jeremiah 51:58]  
But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of YHWH,  
as the waters cover the sea. [Isaiah 11:9]

## Habakkuk 2:15-20

[4] “Woe to you who make your neighbours drink, pouring out your wrath until they are drunk, in order to gaze on their nakedness!” You will be sated with contempt instead of **glory**. Drink, you yourself, and stagger! The cup in YHWH’s right hand will come around to you, and shame will come upon your glory! For the violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you; the destruction of the animals will terrify you – because of human bloodshed and violence to the earth, to cities and all who live in them.

[5] What use is an **idol** once its maker has shaped it – a cast image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in what has been made, though the product is only an idol that cannot speak! Woe to you who say to the wood, “Wake up!” to silent stone, “Rouse yourself!” Can it teach? See, it is gold and silver plated, and there is no breath in it at all.

But **YHWH** is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!

## Habakkuk 3:1-6 : Psalm inserted by Habakkuk

A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk according to Shigionoth. [Psalm 7]

YHWH, I have heard of your renown,  
and I stand in awe, YHWH, of your work.

In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known;  
in wrath may you remember mercy.

God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran.

Selah [Musical interlude?]

His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise.

The brightness was like the sun; rays came forth from his hand,  
where his power lay hidden.

Before him went pestilence, and plague followed close behind.

He stopped and shook the earth; he looked and made the nations tremble.

The eternal mountains were shattered;

along his ancient pathways the everlasting hills sank low.

## Habakkuk 3:7-13 : A warrior God

I saw the tents of Cushan (?) under affliction; the tent-curtains of the land of Midian trembled. Was your wrath against the rivers, YHWH? Or your anger against the rivers, or your rage against the Sea, when you drove your horses, your chariots to victory? You brandished your naked bow, sated were the arrows at your command. Selah

You split the earth with rivers. The mountains saw you, and writhed; a torrent of water swept by; the deep gave forth its voice. The sun raised high its hands; the moon stood still in its exalted place, at the light of your arrows speeding by, at the gleam of your flashing spear. In fury you trod the earth, in anger you trampled nations. You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed. You crushed the head of the wicked house, laying it bare from foundation to roof. Selah

## Habakkuk 3:14-16 : A warrior God

You pierced with his own arrows the head of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter us, gloating as if ready to devour the poor who were in hiding. You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the mighty waters. I hear, and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters into my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me. I wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us.

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.

## Habakkuk 3:17-19

Even if the fig tree does not blossom,  
and there is no fruit on the vines;  
even if the produce of the olive fails  
and the fields yield no food;  
even if the flock is cut off from the fold  
and the stalls stand empty of cattle;

yet I will rejoice in YHWH;  
I will exult in the God who saves.  
YHWH, the Lord, is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
and makes me tread upon the heights.