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HABAKKUK

INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Habakkuk

The only hint that points to the period in which Habakkuk exercised his ministry is found in chapter 1 verse 6 which refers to the ‘Chaldeans’, a term used to designate the people of the Neo-Babylonian Empire founded by Nabopolassar in 626. As noted in the Introduction (page 13). Josiah was killed at Megiddo in 609. Egypt put his son Jehoiakim on the throne. It was during his reign that Nebuchadrezzar II, son of Nabopolassar, defeated the combined forces of Assyria and Egypt in the battle of Carchemish in 605. Nebuchadrezzar reigned from 605 to 562. He was responsible for the capture of Jerusalem in 598 (Jehoiakim died during the siege), the exiling in Babylon of the young king, Jehoiachin, and leading citizens, and the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 587.

Habakkuk’s oracle found in 1:1-11 must have been delivered shortly after 605. The material from 1:12 to 2:20 appears to come from the time of Zedekiah between the capture of Jerusalem in 598 and its sacking in 587, as it is written against the background of actual experience of Babylonian oppression. As to the psalm in chapter 3, scholars offer different suggestions. Some claim it as a separate piece from Habakkuk himself (as indicated in 3:1). Others suggest that it is an archaic poem added by later editors to proclaim the faith of Israel in the final victory of divine justice. There is no convincing reason against Habakkuk himself having included it, as it forms an excellent conclusion to his oracles. Habakkuk’s ministry was probably exercised in the period 605-590.

Inspired by Habakkuk?

Many of the prophets speak out against injustice. Habakkuk struggles with 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 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)

**GOD WILL PUNISH THE
INJUSTICE RAMPANT IN JUDAH**

HABAKKUK 1:1-11

¹The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

²YHWH, how long must I cry for help, and you do not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you do not save?

³Why do you make me see injustice and look on wrong-doing? Destruction and plunder are before me; strife and conflict abound.

⁴So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous – so that justice is perverted.

As with Nahum, the Habakkuk scroll is introduced as an ‘oracle’ (מִשְׁאָר, *māsšā*). Also like Nahum it is spoken of as something Habakkuk ‘saw’ (רָאָה, *hāzā*; see Isaiah 1:1). The prophet is speaking out of an enlightenment that he has received from God. His call is to share with others what he ‘sees’.

Here in the opening words of his oracle, Habakkuk deplores the lack of justice in the institutions of Judah and laments God’s apparent failure to act against injustice. Worse still, the injustice is associated with ‘violence’ (חָמָס, *hāmās*) in verse 2 and again in verse 3. Those with power have become rich on the ‘plunder’ (שָׁד, *šōd*) they have taken from the community. Habakkuk is repeating a complaint frequently heard in Amos (see 3:10).

‘Strife’ (רִיב, *rīb*) and ‘conflict’ (מַדּוֹן, *mādôn*) are words associated with the judicial system, which is not achieving justice. Like Amos (see 2:6-7; 5:1) he describes the victims of this oppression as ‘righteous’ (שְׁדִיִּים, *šaddîq*).

The effect of this prevailing injustice is that the Torah is neglected and the judgments (מִשְׁפָּט, *mišpāt*) handed down by those responsible for justice are perverted.

This criticism by Habakkuk of the situation during the reign of Jehoiakim is confirmed by Habakkuk’s contemporary Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 22:13,17).

For the most part when prophets are critical of prevailing injustice, they speak for God and threaten divine punishment. Habakkuk speaks as one of the oppressed and voices their complaint to God. In doing so he establishes his key theme: where is divine justice in this unjust world?

This is God's response to Habakkuk's complaint. God is about to act by bringing upon Judah an invasion from the Chaldeans (Babylon). This will be God's punishment for those who are perpetrating the injustice that is oppressing the righteous.

When Nebuchadrezzar defeated the combined forces of Assyria and Egypt at the Battle of Carchemish in 605, Babylon became the dominant force in the area. Habakkuk describes its army in terms typical of the time. They sieze and annex territory (verse 6). There is a special emphasis on their horses (verse 8) and the ease with which they can conquer a walled city such as Jerusalem (verse 10), and carry off its inhabitants (verse 9).

In seeing foreign invasion as an instrument used by YHWH to punish his people, Habakkuk is consistent with the prophetic tradition from Amos in the middle of the eighth century to Zephaniah and Nahum in the years just before Habakkuk. In spite of this simplistic view of God as controlling events in history (see the Introduction pages 16-17 and 18) Habakkuk expresses an unwavering belief in God's justice.

However, as the rest of the scroll demonstrates, Habakkuk is not entirely satisfied with this traditional theology.

**⁵Look 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.**

**⁶For I am rousing the
Chaldeans, that fierce and
impetuous nation, who march
through the breadth of the
earth to seize dwellings not
their own.**

**⁷Dread and fearsome are they;
their justice and dignity pro-
ceed from themselves. ⁸Their
horses are swifter than leop-
ards, more menacing than
wolves at dusk; their horses
charge. Their horsemen come
from far away; they fly like an
eagle swift to devour.**

**⁹They all come for violence,
with faces pressing forward;
they gather captives like sand.**

**¹⁰At kings they scoff, and of
rulers they make sport. They
laugh at every fortress, and
heap up earth to take it.**

**¹¹Then they sweep by like the
wind; they transgress and be-
come guilty. Their own might
is their god.**

