

Book of Habakkuk

Title:

This prophetic book takes its name from its author and possibly means “one who embraces” (1:1; 3:1).

By the end of the prophecy, this name becomes appropriate as the prophet clings to God regardless of his confusion about God’s plans for His people.

Author – Date:

As with many of the Minor Prophets, nothing is known about the prophet except that which can be inferred from the book.

In the case of Habakkuk, internal information is virtually nonexistent, making conclusions about his identity and life conjectural.

His simple introduction as “Habakkuk the prophet”, may imply that he needed no introduction since he was a well known prophet of his day.

It is certain that he was a contemporary of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zephaniah.

Because the prophet is known to us only by name once again indicates the relative unimportance of the prophet, the major importance of the prophecy, and, more importantly, the God who sends the prophecy.

The prophet’s name means “Embracer” or “A Wrestler,” and this provides the key to the prophecy.

The prophecy is a record of the prophet’s wrestling with God in behalf of his people.

Further, he embraced God by faith (chapter 3), and embraces his people giving them the message that after the judgment to come, Chaldea (Babylonia), will itself be judged.

Because of the description (in 3:1; and the inscription in 3:19), some have inferred that Habakkuk was a Levite who assisted in the music of the temple.

The purpose of Habakkuk’s prophecy is twofold:

- (1) To warn Judah of its coming judgment at the hands of Chaldea, and
- (2) To comfort Judah concerning Chaldea’s ultimate destruction.

The theme of the prophecy is judgment on Judah and Chaldea (Babylon).

The mention of the Chaldeans (1:6), suggests a late seventh century B.C. date, shortly before Nebuchadnezzar commenced his military march through Nineveh (612 B.C.), Haran (609 B.C.), and Carchemish (605 B.C.), on his way to Jerusalem (605 B.C.).

Habakkuk's bitter lament (1:2-4), may reflect a time period shortly after the death of Josiah (609 B.C.), days in which the godly king's reforms (2 Kings Chapter 23), were quickly overturned by his successor, Jehoiakim (Jer. 22:13-19).

Historical Setting:

Most commentators however, date Habakkuk's prophecy during the reign of King Jehoiakim.

The fall of Nineveh occurred about (612 B.C.), in fulfillment of Nahum's prophecy.

It may have been after this fulfillment that Habakkuk received his vision setting forth the overthrow of the Babylonian kingdom.

If so, when Habakkuk prophesied, the southern kingdom was wallowing in its sin and tottering politically in view of the impending threat from Babylon, the current world power. Nebuchadnezzar may have already carried Daniel and many of Jerusalem's nobles into captivity (in 605 B.C.), with the second deportation to soon follow (597 B.C.).

The final destruction of the city was yet to occur (in 586 B.C.).

Habakkuk's description of the Chaldeans and their feats many even allude to all three of these events.

Putting the above considerations together, the date of Habakkuk's prophecy is somewhere between (655 B.C. and 598 B.C.).

Advocates of the former view would select (655 B.C.), as the date of writing, which advocates of the latter view commonly select (606 B.C.).

The date of Habakkuk is difficult to ascertain, since he does not mention the king or kings during whose reigns he prophesied.

The best key that Habakkuk offers for dating his prophecy is his description of the Chaldeans (in 1:5-11).

Some commentators, noting that God says He is in the process of raising up the Chaldeans (1:6), would date the prophecy as early as the reign of Manasseh.

Habakkuk's message therefore, would be that just as God raised up the Assyrians to judge Israel, so He is rising up the Chaldeans (Babylonians), to judge Judah.

This interpretation would date the prophecy before the destruction of Nineveh, which resulted in the exaltation of the Chaldeans to world prominence.

Background – Setting:

The prophecy of Habakkuk is unique among all prophetic literature.

Overall, it contains a high caliber of Hebrew poetry.

The first two chapters constitute a dialogue between the prophet and the Lord concerning the invasion of the Chaldeans (1:1-11), and their destruction (1:12 - 2:20).

Chapter 3 is a psalm with instructions given to the musicians for its rendering (3:1, 19).

In the first two chapters the prophet contends with the Lord and in the third chapter he submits to the Lord.

The opening verses reveal a historical situation similar to the days of Amos and Micah.

Justice had essentially disappeared from the Land; violence and wickedness were pervasive, existing unchecked.

In the midst of the dark days, the prophet cried out for divine intervention (1:2-4).

God's response, that He was sending the Chaldeans to judge Judah (1:5-11), creates an even greater theological dilemma for Habakkuk: Why didn't God purge His people and restore their righteousness?

How could God use the Chaldeans to judge a people more righteous than they (1:2-2:1)?

Habakkuk prophesied during the final days of the Assyrian Empire and the beginning of Babylonia's world rulership under Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar.

When Nabopolassar ascended to power (in 626 B.C.), he immediately began to expand his influence to the north and west.

Under the leadership of his son, the Babylonian army overthrew Nineveh (in 612 B.C.), forcing the Assyrian nobility to take refuge first in Haran and then Carchemish.

Nebuchadnezzar pursued them, overrunning Haran (in 609 B.C.), and Carchemish (in 605 B.C.).

God's answer that He would judge the Chaldeans also (2:2 - 20), did not fully satisfy the prophet's theological quandary; in fact, it only intensified it.

In Habakkuk's mind, the issue crying for resolution is no longer God's righteous response toward evil (or lack thereof), but the vindication of God's character and covenant with His people (1:13).

Like Job, the prophet argued with God, and through that experience he achieved a deeper understanding of God's sovereign character and a firmer faith in Him. (Job 42:5-6; Isa. 55:8-9).

Ultimately, Habakkuk realized that God was not to be worshiped merely because of the temporal blessings He bestowed, but for His own sake (3:17-19).

The Egyptian king Necho, traveling through Judah (in 609 B.C.), to assist the fleeing Assyrian king, was opposed by King Josiah at Megiddo (2 Chron. 35:20-24).

Josiah was killed in the ensuing battle, leaving his throne to a succession of 3 sons and a grandson.

Earlier, as a result of discovering the Book of the Law in the temple (622 B.C.), Josiah had instituted significant spiritual reforms in Judah (2 Kings Chapters 22 and 23), and grandfather Manasseh (2 Kings 21:11-13).

Upon his death, however, the nation quickly reverted to her evil ways (Jer. 22:13-19), causing Habakkuk to question God's silence and apparent lack of punitive action (1:2-4), to purge His covenant people.