STUDIES IN THE

OLD TESTAMENT

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OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Habakkuk

> Habakkuk is not content to say, "What'er my God ordains is right," and leave it there in a spirit of resignation. Like Job, he argues with God and expostulates with him, and thus reaches a clearer understanding of God's character and a firmer faith in him. The old, easy assurances that peace, health, long life, and prosperity were tokens of divine approval have collapsed in the face of experience, but Habakkuk, in hardship and privation, comes to know God more fully and to rejoice in him for his own sake and not for the benefits he bestows.
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> **F. F. Bruce, "Habakkuk," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 835.**

I. Introduction

Habakkuk joins many of the other prophets in the Twelve who receive less devotional treatment than they deserve and so whose theological contributions are not fully recognized. Yet the book of Habakkuk distinguishes itself from some of its prophetic "colleagues" in two ways. For one, like Jonah, the book differs strikingly from the rest of the prophetic literature in how its contents is presented. Where Jonah takes the form of an historical narrative, Habakkuk takes the form of intimate conversations between God and one of his prophets. In other words, "Habakkuk was unique among the prophets because he did not speak for God to the people but rather spoke to God about his people and nation."[1]

Second, the central verse of the book—"but the righteous shall live by his faith" (2:4)—occurs in three strategic quotations in the NT (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38). Thus, the book of Habakkuk forms an important theological link between the OT and the NT, and for this reason, the importance of its message for the NT church rises acutely.

[1] Carl E. Armerding, "Habakkuk," in *EBC*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7:494.

A. ***Date & Authorship***

Habakkuk provides no biographical data for his readers apart from his name. One ancient tradition held that he was the son of the Shunammite whom Elisha had saved, while the apocryphal book *Bel and the Dragon* presents him as a Levite (perhaps explaining his familiarity with music). Modern critics have speculated that he was a temple priest based on the various liturgical forms in the book. All of these options, however, have little evidential support.[2] Some evidence suggests that his name may have derived from the name of a certain Assyrian plant (*habbaququ*, *CAD* 6:13 s.v.), a feature which corresponds to the period Manasseh's reign when theophoric names were replaced with names reflecting nature, i.e., "Achbor" (spider), "Huldah" (mole), and "Shaphan" (rock-badger).[3]

Fitting Habakkuk into the period of Manasseh and the latter years of Judah's existence fits well with the content of the book. Habakkuk's initial inquiry depicts a time in Judah where decadence has replaced justice in the land and the nation was clearly out of covenant compliance (1:2-4).

Yet the critical factor regarding the date of the book hinges on Habakkuk's reference to the "Chaldeans" (1:6). Some liberal scholars have tried to amend the word to *Kittim* ("Greeks"), or even view the name as a code word for *Kittim*, and thus date the book to the time of Alexander the Great (4th cent. B.C.). But these speculations are baseless.[4] Habakkuk clearly has the Babylonians in mind with his reference to "Chaldeans," which means that he was living during a time when Assyrian influence in the region was waning and Babylon was gaining ascendency. This means that the book most likely dates no earlier than 626 B.C. when Babylon asserted its independence from Assyria and began to make a name for itself. On the other hand, the prophet seems surprised at God's announcement that Babylon would become his rod of discipline against Judah, which suggests that his inquiries date no later than 601 B.C. when Babylon first invaded Jerusalem.

For this reason, it seems likely that Habakkuk's initial inquiries occurred early in the reign of King Jehoiakim (608-598 B.C.), though it may be the case that the sections of dialogue that follow commenced over an extended period of time and reflect the prophet's ongoing internal struggles.

B. ***Historical Background***

As just described, Habakkuk falls during a key transitional time in Judah's history. Assyria had dominated the ANE as the international superpower since the late 2nd millennium. As their vassal state, Judah reflected under Manasseh's reign the pagan influences of Assyrian religion. It was not until Josiah's sweeping social and religious reforms and the start of Assyria's decline under Assurbanipal that these pagan influences began to fall.

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[2] Mark F. Rooker, "The Book of Habakkuk," in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011), 465.

[3] P. J. M. Southwell, "Theology of Habakkuk," in *NIDOTTE*, 5 vols. ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:688-9.

[4] F. F. Bruce, "Habakkuk," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 831.

Stretched in numerous directs and filled with political strife, Assyria began to diminish, which presented Babylon with an opportunity to assert its independence, which it finally gained in 626 B.C. They would go on the destroy Nineveh in 612 B.C. Though the last Assyrian king continued to hold out for another few years, the empire would never again rise and regain its power.

Despite Assyria's obvious fate, Egypt's king Neco travelled north to aid Assyria and thus maintain a small buffer between Babylon and his own kingdom. But he was detained briefly by King Josiah, who engaged him at Megiddo perhaps in order to assure Assyria's demise. Josiah, however, was tragically killed, and the reforms he had made spiritually in the nation quickly disappeared. His son Shallum lasted only three months on the throne before Neco replaced him Jehoiakim, who immediately began reversing all the spiritual progress that his father Josiah had initiated.

When Egypt's forces finally fell to Babylon at Carchemish in 605 B.C., it was decided who now sat on the international throne. Babylon was the new superpower, and Jehoiakim must swear allegiance to them. Only a few years passed before he conspired with Egypt to revolt, and in 601 B.C. Babylon invaded Jerusalem, deposed Jehoiakim, and placed Zedekiah on the throne.

All of these details form the backdrop to Habakkuk's inquires and complaints to God. His initial dialogue involved the injustice and decadence of Judah, leading the prophet to ask God why he has not acted (1:2-4). The divine response was not what Habakkuk expected. God would bring judgment upon Judah, but he would use the Babylonians to do it. Habakkuk's second inquiry (1:12-2:1) seems to reflect the prophet's perplexity at God's chosen actions. During the years following Babylon's independence (626 B.C.) and their deposition of Jehoiakim (601 B.C.), they had proved themselves to be a ruthless and idolatrous nation whose injustice surpassed that of Judah's. All of this was too much for the prophet, and the book uncovers perhaps years of Habakkuk's personal striving to reconcile God's actions with God's character.

II. **Major Themes**

Habakkuk offers numerous theological thrusts which contribute to Christian life. As a prophet who obviously struggles with the decisions of God and strives to reconcile his doubts with his understanding of God, he rightly "learned to turn doubt and grief into prayer."[5] He also portrays God as one who condemns evil such as greed, drunkenness, theft, violence, oppression, debauchery, abuse of nature, and idolatry. All these are instructive for the believer seeking to be instructed "in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). But two particular themes stand out as central to Habakkuk's book:

A. ***The Ways of God***

Habakkuk can be seen as a later theological companion to the book of Job, for both individuals focus on reconciling God's character and God's ways. As Bruce eloquently puts it, "The Book of Habakkuk is short and easily overlooked, but it plays a valuable part in the

[5] Southwell, "Theology of Habakkuk," 4:690.

Hebrew Bible as an exercise, though not on the magnificent scale of Job, in justifying the ways of God to humans."[6] He was witness to the horrible injustices and idolatry that plagued Judah under Jehoiakim's leadership, and he cried to God, looking for answers as to why God could allow his covenant people to sustain such evil.

God's answer to his befuddled prophet was to point him toward the mysterious ways of Yahweh. "Look among the nations!" God responds. "Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days—you would not believe if you were told" (1:5). God's revealed his plans to Habakkuk to deal with Judah's sin in a way that the prophet would never have anticipated. "For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous people who march throughout the earth to seize dwelling places which are not theirs" (1:6). This was shocking news to the prophet, and only compounded his perplexity. As Bruce explains,

> The prophet, having first complained to God about the injustice of Jehoiakim's rule and having been told that the Chaldeans are to be the executors of divine judgment against him, complains next that the curse is worse than the disease. If Jehoiakim chastised the people with whips, the Chaldeans are chastising them with scorpions. If God's apparent silence in the former situation posed a problem for faith, greater still was the problem posed by his choosing as the instruments of his righteous judgment invaders whose brutality set all notions of righteousness at defiance.[7]

What Habakkuk couldn't understand was how the God of righteousness and justice could see fit to use such an evil instrument to "right" the wrongs of Judah. His second inquiry captures the prophets struggles. He rightly understands the nature of God (1:12-13):

> Are you not from everlasting,
> O Yahweh, my God, my Holy One?
> We will not die.
> You, O Yahweh, have appointed them to judge;
> And you, O Rock, have established them to correct.
> Your eyes are too pure to approve evil,
> And you cannot look on wickedness with favor.
> Why do you look with favor
> On those who deal treacherously?
> Why are you silent when the wicked swallow up
> Those more righteous than they?

Clearly, Habakkuk possessed a correct, biblically-informed theology proper, and this knowledge only fueled his troubled spirit. Bruce goes on to write,

> If God had not revealed himself to be the God of righteousness, establishing judgment and justice as the foundation of his throne, there would not be this problem: it would simply have to be accepted as a fact of life that the weaker should go to the wall (compare Eccles. 4:1). But as it was, God's character had to be vindicated: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do

[6] Bruce, "Habakkuk," 835.

[7] Ibid., 834-5.

> what is just?" (Gen. 18:25). Habakkuk is not content to say, "What'er my God ordains is right," and leave it there in a spirit of resignation. Like Job, he argues with God and expostulates with him, and thus reaches a clearer understanding of God's character and a firmer faith in him. The old, easy assurances that peace, health, long life, and prosperity were tokens of divine approval have collapsed in the face of experience, but Habakkuk, in hardship and privation, comes to know God more fully and to rejoice in him for his own sake and not for the benefits he bestows.[8]

What Habakkuk learns—or, at least, comes to recognize in faith—is that God is always at work, and his ways are always right, though they may seem out of phase with man's perceptions and desires. Events which no man would desire to occur have their root in the divine wisdom and plan of God. In fact, Yahweh's second response to Habakkuk assures the prophet that in time, he will deal justly with the Babylonians. In a series of five woe oracles (2:6-20), God denounces the very instrument he has chosen for Judah's chastisement and promises that they, as well, will face divine judgment for their actions.

The final chapter of the book forms a fitting conclusion, encapsulating all that Habakkuk has come to understand in his dealings with Yahweh. It is a song—a psalm—extolling God as the sovereign ruler who will establish his righteousness and justice on the earth. He expresses with confidence that God will both judge and deliver, uprooting the evil of the world and providing redemption for his remnant.

B. ***Faith and Righteousness***

The central verse of the book is Habakkuk 2:4, a divine promise that God will ultimately deliver the righteous remnant from ultimate destruction. It is the beating heart of the book and the promise that drives hope into the struggles of the prophet. Understanding the ways of God is only half of the book's ultimate thrust. The full thrust couples understanding with hopeful waiting.

What God calls the prophet to do—what all believers are called to do—is to wait on God. Armerding writes,

> The prophet asked some of the most penetrating questions in all literature, and the answers are basic to a proper view of God and his relation to history. If God's initial response sounded the death knell for any strictly nationalist covenant theology of Judah, his second reply outlined in a positive sense the fact that all history was hastening to a conclusion that was certain as it was satisfying. In the interim, while history is still awaiting its conclusion (and Habakkuk was not told when the end would come, apparently for him prefigured by Babylon's destruction), the righteous ones are to live by faith. The faith prescribed—or "faithfulness," as many have argued that *'emunah* should be translated—is still called for as a basic response to the unanswered questions in today's universe; and it is this, a theology for life both then and now, that stands as Habakkuk's most basic contribution.[9]

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[8] Ibid., 835.

[9] Armerding, "Habakkuk," 7:495-6.

Or, as Rooker puts it, "Through righteousness God will preserve His own covenant people. Like Job, Habakkuk learned that he must continue to believe and trust in the promises of the Lord despite what he might encounter in his own circumstances and situations."[10]

Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted three times by NT authors. In Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11, the apostle Paul uses it as OT support for his central thesis of justification by faith as opposed to works of the law. At first, one might balk at Paul's apparent spiritualization of the text, for "live" in the original context clearly points to physical preservation amidst divine judgment. Likewise, numerous scholars have observed that "faithfulness" is most likely what the prophet intended when he wrote, "The righteous shall live by 'faith'." But Paul is not changing the overall meaning of Habakkuk's words. Rather, he seems to be focusing his attention on the "initial demonstration of this faith,"[11] which stands in stark contrast to the unbeliever, who continues to live by works. Like the Babylonians, who were haughty and proud, the one who lives by works is characterized by self-righteousness and pride. But the truly righteous person is he who humbly lives by faith—initiated by saving faith in Christ and lived out by faithfulness throughout his life. That person, both Paul and Habakkuk assert, is truly righteous and will ultimately "live."

This same text is quoted in Hebrews 10:37-38 as a pastoral exhortation to persevere in faith, waiting the coming of the Lord, and to not turn back and thus forfeit eternal life.[12] Once again, the parallels with Habakkuk's own day are obvious. The Jewish readers had suffered greatly for their faith, and were beginning to wonder whether they should revert back to Judaism instead of persevering in Christ. The author of this epistle urges them to press on in hopeful trust, waiting for Christ' return when he will right all wrongs (Heb 10:32-39):

> But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and party by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.
>
> > For yet in a very little while,
> > He who is coming will come, and will not delay.
> > But my righteous ones shall live by faith;
> > And if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.
>
> But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

[10] Rooker, "The Book of Habakkuk," 470.

[11] Ibid., 470.

[12] Bruce, "Habakkuk," 837.

Habakkuk stands as a message of hope and a call to stand firm amidst trials and the perplexities of living in a fallen world. Standing between the promises of God and their fulfillment, the righteous one is he who waits for God to accomplish his purposes, despite the fact that present circumstances seem to suggest that God has abandoned those promises. God is still at work, and he is coming to right all wrongs. But in the interim, the believer must wait patiently, living by faith—faith in the character and promises of God, and faithfulness in the gospel of the God that has and will ultimately rescue his soul.

III. **Purpose**

The purpose of Habakkuk as a book is rather straightforward. The prophet's struggles with his circumstances provide an opportunity for readers to understand how they should think and respond in the midst of circumstances they don't understand, and when they, like Habakkuk, are confused by what God is doing. With that said, the purpose of the book can be expressed as follows:

The righteous will live by faith as Yahweh brings his judgment, awaiting their ultimate salvation.

IV. **Literary Style & Structure**

Commentators have noted that both the style and the structure are fitting for the purposes for which the book was written. Since the book concerns itself with the establishment of God's righteousness, its style is shaped by this chief concern. To accomplish this, the prophet employs powerful, graphic language to demonstrate Babylon's eventual downfall, and his conversations with God include a long list of literary devices:[13]

- Proverbs (1:9; 2:6)
- Simile (1:8a, 9b, 11a, 14; 2:5; 3:4, 14, 19)
- Metaphor (1:8a, 9a, 15-17; 2:16; 3:8-11, 14)
- Allegory (2:15-16)
- Irony (3:8)
- Metonymy[14] (2:5; 3:2, 9)
- Merismus[15] (3:7)
- Hyperbole (1:6-11; 3:6b, 11)
- Paronomasia[16] (2:19; 3:13, 18; 3:8)
- Repetition (1:15b-17)
- Synecdoche[17] (3:7)

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[13] Rooker, "The Book of Habakkuk," 466-7.

[14] Metonymy is the substitution of the name of an attribute or adjunct for that of the thing meant, i.e., "a suit" = a business executive"

[15] Merismus is the use of two parts of a thing, perhaps contrasting or complementary parts, which are made to stand for the whole, i.e., heaven and earth = whole creation

[16] Paronomasia is essentially a pun, or word play, exploiting multiple meanings of words, or of similar-sounding words, for rhetorical effect

- Alliteration & assonance[18] (1:6, 10; 2:6-7, 15, 18; 3:2)
- Enjambment[19] (1:13; 2:18; 3:4)
- Parallelism
- Chiasm
- Inclusio[20] (2:4, 20)

Structurally, the book can be broken into three major units. The first two consist of Habakkuk's dialogues with God, while the third encompasses Habakkuk's final prayer. For the following diagram, the first two sections are combined into one macro-section:

HABAKKUK

Introduction	**Habakkuk's Perplexities**		**Habakkuk's Prayer**		
Prophet	First Complaint (1:2-4) God's Response (1:5-11)	Second Complaint (1:12-2:1) God's Response (2:2-20)	Petition	Praise	Promise
1:1	1:2	1:12	3:1	3:3	3:16

V. **Miscellaneous Contribution**

Additionally, Habakkuk provides helpful insights into the structure of biblical psalms, most importantly how superscriptions and subscriptions relate to the main content of psalms. These relationships have often baffled scholars and Bible translators (even the translators of the LXX) and evidence of this is seen in even the most recent English translations of the OT.

For one, the Hebrew Bible differs from English versions in their versification of the psalms. In English translations, the superscriptions are treated almost as non-inspired portions of the text. They are usually displayed above the first verse in small type, with the opening line initiating the first verse. But the Hebrew Bible incorporates the superscription into the first verse of the psalm, indicating that the ancient scribes who versified these psalms considered the superscriptions as part of the psalm itself—fully inspired.

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[17] Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole, or vice versa, i.e., "Cleveland" = "Cleveland baseball team"

[18] Alliteration is the occurrence of the same letter or sound at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words. Assonance is the repetition of the sound of a vowel in non-rhyming stressed syllables near enough to each other for the echo to be discernable

[19] Enjambment is the continuation of a sentence without a pause beyond the end of a line, couplet, or stanza

[20] Inclusio is the use of a word, phrase, or idea to bracket or envelop the section an idea. In other words, the beginning and end of a psalm or stanza begins and ends with the same word or phrase, and thus brackets the entire section with the idea expressed, i.e., Ps 103 begins and ends with "Bless the Lord, O my soul"

Yet it is apparent that scholars have been confused even about the division of the psalms, which has led to confusing superscriptions which don't always align with the character of the psalm they introduce and have led many to amend the superscriptions accordingly. For instance, the superscription of Psalm 88 has, "A Song. A Psalm of the sons of Korah. For the choir director; according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite."

The meaning of "according to Mahalath Leanoth" could mean, "To be sung at a dance," which seems hardly fitting to the tone of Psalm 88, which is one of the most mournful and gloomy of all the psalms.

But Habakkuk 3 sheds important light on how this psalm and others should be divided. Habakkuk's psalm begins with this superscription: "A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth" (3:1). The final verse of the psalm is a subscription: "For the choir director, on my stringed instruments" (3:19).

This scheme indicates that Habakkuk provided historical and literary information in his superscription. Then, at the end, he provided specific musical details on how the psalm was to be performed. When we use this scheme on Psalm 88, the confusion disappears.

Psalm 87 begins its superscription with the same words as Psalm 88, but in reverse order: "A Psalm of the sons of Korah. A Song." This would indicate that "A Song. A Psalm of the sons of Korah" is actually an inclusio that begins and ends Psalm 87.

The musical instructions at the start of Psalm 88 ("For the choir director; according to Mahalath Leannoth") fit much better with the concluding lines of Psalm 87: "Then those who sing as well as those who play the flutes shall say, 'All my springs of joy are in you'" (Ps 87:7).

What is apparent is that the subscription that used to be part of Psalm 87 has been wrongly divided and placed as part of Psalm 88. With the help of Habakkuk 3, we see that instead the superscription of Psalm 88 should include only "A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite," while the previous lines are really a subscription to the previous psalm. In other words, translators for centuries have divided the psalm wrong and placed the last lines of the previous psalm as part of the superscription to the next psalm!

Thus, when you see "For the choir director" in the superscription of a psalm (e.g., Pss 4-6; 8-9; 11-14; 18-22; 31; 36; 39; 40-42; 44-47; 49; 51-62; 64-70; 75-77; 80-81; 84-85; 88; 109; 139; 140), they are really musical directions in the subscription to the previous psalm.