

BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Approximate date: 640-612 B.C.E. (Right, conservative-moderate, some Left); 400s-200s B.C.E. (some Left)

Time period: immediately before the judgment on the Southern Kingdom via Babylon

Author(s): Habakkuk exclusively (Right, some conservative-moderate); Habakkuk and/or anonymous other(s) (some conservative moderate, some Left); Habakkuk and anonymous redactors (some Left)

Location of prophet/author(s): somewhere in Judah (Right, conservative-moderate, Left)

Target audience and their location: Southern Kingdom Israelites

People:

Habakkuk

People mentioned:

Babylonians

Places:

Lebanon, Teman, Mount Paran, Cushan, Midian

Key Themes:

Habakkuk asks the Lord why He does not intervene due to the sin of Judah / the Lord responds by saying He will send the ruthless Babylonians / Habakkuk asks the Lord why He seems to tolerate injustice / the Lord decrees that He will judge Babylon, whom He has used to judge Judah / Habakkuk prays to the Lord, declaring His greatness

Key Scriptures: Habakkuk 1:2-5; 2:4; 3:2, 18-19 / **Habakkuk's doubt** (1:1-2:20); **Habakkuk's prayer** (3:1-19)

Theological Summary: Not much is known about the Prophet Habakkuk himself, other than that he was probably a contemporary of Jeremiah. The meaning of the name *Chavaqquq* (חַבְבַּקֻּק) is elusive, as it may be similar to an Akkadian word meaning "plant," although others have suggested that it means "to clasp,"¹ "to embrace,"² or "wrestler."³ Some have tried to link

¹ L.E.H. Stephens-Hodes, "Habakkuk," in *NBCR*, 767.

² Marvin Sweeney, "Habakkuk, Book of," in *ABD*, 3:1; Dillard and Longman, 409.

³ C.E. Amerding, "Habakkuk," in *ISBE*, 2:583.

Habakkuk to the priesthood.⁴ Given the prediction of Babylon's invasion (1:6), Habakkuk likely lived in Judah sometime near the end of Josiah's reign (640-609 B.C.E.) or the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign (609-598 B.C.E.). Theologians have speculated that the prophecy of Judah's fall was probably given after the Egyptians were defeated in battle by Babylon (cf. Jeremiah 46). Habakkuk, like Jeremiah, could have probably witnessed the fall of Judah to Babylon.

While a small text, the Book of Habakkuk is debated because of various historical-critical issues, and with the interpretation of some passages in both Jewish and Christian theology.⁵ It is not agreed whether or not Habakkuk wrote the entire text, or that the entire text originates with him. The concentrated debate largely concerns ch. 3, and whether or not it was appended by another hand,⁶ particularly because of some stylistic differences. It is notable, though, that these discussions are modern, and there were no major ancient debates surrounding the text.⁷ Ancient Hebrew and Greek witnesses do include ch. 3. The dialogue that ensues between the Prophet Habakkuk and the Lord was considered to be Divine revelation, possibly via a similar process to how various psalms were considered canonical.⁸

Conservatives generally argue for some kind of unified composition of the Book of Habakkuk, dating it to the Seventh or Sixth Centuries B.C.E. Support is derived from the facts that the Temple is depicted as still standing (2:20; 3:19), and the Babylonians are depicted as a rising power (1:5-6).

Some liberals favor a pre-exilic composition of Habakkuk, and some liberals favor a post-exilic composition. Liberals assert that perhaps some part of the text is authentic to Habakkuk, but the prophet's original oracles may have been appended. A few have suggested that the Chaldeans are to be interpreted as not being the actual Chaldeans/Babylonians, but instead as representing the Greeks. *If* this is how Habakkuk is to be viewed, then the text is indeed post-exilic,⁹ but all conservatives discount this. Liberals will often argue for ch. 3 being appended at a later date,¹⁰ but can also stress Habakkuk being a literary masterpiece.

The Hebrew MT of Habakkuk is not always clear, and sometimes the Greek LXX must be consulted. There is no agreement between conservatives and liberals as to how much or how little the MT has been preserved, with conservatives¹¹ favoring a higher degree of preservation than liberals.¹² A commentary on Habakkuk found among the DSS only includes remarks made on chs. 1-2,¹³ where some find support for chs. 1-2 only being authentic to the prophet. It is notable that ch. 3 is found in all complete copies of the LXX and in Hebrew texts

⁴ E.A. Leslie, "Habakkuk," in *IDB*, 2:503.

⁵ Robert D. Haak, "Habakkuk," in *EDB*, 535.

⁶ Leslie, "Habakkuk," in *IDB*, 2:503.

⁷ Amerding, "Habakkuk," in *ISBE*, 2:584.

⁸ Ehud ben Zvi, "Habakkuk," in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1226.

⁹ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 933-934; Stephens-Hodes, in *NBCR*, 768; John B. Graybill, "Habakkuk," in *NIDB*, 407.

¹⁰ Sweeney, "Habakkuk, Book of," in *ABD*, 3:4; Haak, "Habakkuk," in *EDB*, 535.

¹¹ Amerding, "Habakkuk," in *ISBE*, 2:584.

¹² Sweeney, "Habakkuk, Book of," in *ABD*, 3:2.

¹³ Leslie, "Habakkuk," in *IDB*, 2:504-505.

dating to the Second Century C.E.¹⁴ Harrison is a conservative who sits between the liberal and significant conservative view of preservation, noting that the Hebrew text has not been preserved that well, and that the LXX should be consulted for some verses (1:6; 3:10).¹⁵ He does, however, consider ch. 3 to be authentic to Habakkuk.¹⁶

Habakkuk is rooted in the history of the perilous political times either before or during Jehoiakim's reign, which was pro-Egyptian and not pro-Babylonian.¹⁷

The Book of Habakkuk is a unique text that includes no oracles delivered by God to the people, but rather is largely a dialogue between the prophet and God. The Prophet Habakkuk is seen arguing with God over ways that he perceives to be unfair or unjust (chs. 1-2). God replies, and Habakkuk confesses his faith in Him (ch. 3). Habakkuk does not just compose a "personal journal" between a prophet and God, but was composed to teach a very important lesson. Certainly some Southern Kingdom Israelites would have wondered why God would not have just intervened when wickedness and corruption had manifested themselves in Judah.¹⁸ Ultimately, we see that those used to judge Judah would themselves be judged (2:8), as evil is a universal human problem (2:9-10).

A major thrust seen in Habakkuk is to have patient faith in the Lord (2:3-4), as God's Kingdom will reveal itself (2:14). This is a test that chastises not Israel, but the prophet who chastises God.¹⁹

The Prophet Habakkuk was considered important enough to be mentioned in the Apocryphal work *Bel and the Dragon*, as one who assisted in rescuing Daniel from the lion's den,²⁰ but most theologians regard this as legend. Other legends also arose concerning Habakkuk and his parentage,²¹ particularly in some pseudepigraphal²² and early Christian writing.²³

The DSS commentary on Habakkuk interprets Habakkuk's message against the events of the First Century B.C.E., considering the Chaldeans to represent the Romans.²⁴ In the Jewish theological tradition, Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted as a summary of the Torah's 613 commandments (b.*Makkot* 23b-24a).²⁵ To a more modern Jewish audience, the Book of Habakkuk asks questions regarding the allowance of the Holocaust by God, and other similar atrocities.

Habakkuk 2:4 in the Tanach, "the righteous person shall live through his faith" (ATS), is a major verse for the doctrine of "justification by faith" (cf. Galatians 3:11; Romans 1:17),²⁶

¹⁴ Dillard and Longman, 411.

¹⁵ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 938.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 936.

¹⁷ Stephens-Hodes, in *NBCR*, 767; Dillard and Longman, pp 410-411.

¹⁸ C.E. Amerding, "Habakkuk," in *EXP*, 7:494.

¹⁹ Stephens-Hodes, in *NBCR*, 767.

²⁰ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 931.

²¹ Dillard and Longman, 409.

²² Sweeney, "Habakkuk, Book of," in *ABD*, 3:1-2.

²³ Amerding, "Habakkuk," in *ISBE*, 2:583.

²⁴ ben Zvi, in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1227.

²⁵ Cf. Marvin Sweeney, "Habakkuk," in *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 1231.

²⁶ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 937; Amerding, in *EXP*, 7:485.

widely thought of as a cardinal tenet of Protestantism. The Talmud makes an interesting observation on Habakkuk 2:4, noting,

“Isaiah again came and reduced them to two: ‘Thus says the Lord, (i) Keep justice and (ii) do righteousness’ (Isa. 56:1). Amos came and reduced them to a single one, as it is said, ‘For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel. Seek Me and live.’ *Objected R. Nahman bar Isaac, “Maybe the sense is, ‘seek me’ through the whole of the Torah?’* Rather, [Simelai continues:] **‘Habakkuk further came and based them on one, as it is said, “But the righteous shall live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4)’**” (b.*Makkot* 24a).²⁷

Here, obedience to God is ultimately distilled down to one’s faith in Him—with everything else coming as a direct result of that faith. The theological value of Habakkuk is extremely important for anyone’s interpretation of the Apostolic Scriptures. Furthermore, the value of Habakkuk should not just be limited to his emphasis on faith. The Prophet Habakkuk asks some very poignant questions about the actions of God and the judgment of His people.

Habakkuk 3 is the Haftarah selection for *Shavuot*, concurrent with the revelation of the Torah given at Mount Sinai.²⁸

At present, there is no serious Messianic engagement with the Book of Habakkuk. Undoubtedly, this will change given time, especially as more examination occurs with texts such as Galatians and Romans.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON HABAKKUK:

1. How significant is the pattern of Habakkuk’s questions of God, and God’s subsequent responses?

²⁷ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*; Dillard and Longman, 409.

²⁸ Sweeney, “Habakkuk, Book of,” in *ABD*, 3:5.

2. What important theme seen in Habakkuk 2:4 later guides a substantial amount of Apostolic theology, particularly in Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans?

3. Do you believe that today's Messianic community takes the message and themes of Habakkuk seriously?

(4. Have you ever questioned God in a manner similar to the Prophet Habakkuk?)

REFLECTION ON HABAKKUK'S PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Book of Habakkuk: