

The Minor Prophets

An important theme in the Old Testament is that of the land. Whereas Moses and Joshua guided the people of Israel into the Promised Land, the Minor Prophets had the great task of pronouncing God's judgment upon the people for their disobedience and helping them understand God's work in exiling them from the land.¹ The Minor Prophets is the representative name for twelve books of the Old Testament. Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are called "minor" prophets simply for the brevity of each of the writings. In fact, all the Minor Prophets appear together as just one book in the Hebrew Bible which is simply entitled *the twelve*. The other Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel produced much longer works and are sometimes known as the Major Prophets.



In general, a prophet in the Old Testament was a person called upon to speak to the people on behalf of God. They were called to be his direct messengers to the people. Now before you start thinking "Wow, what a great job!" remember that many times the message they were to carry was something like this: "You guys all suck, and you are going to be destroyed if you don't repent. SO REPENT!" So these guys were not always the popular kids on American Idol. No, many times they were despised by their own people simply because they told them the truth. They also dressed weird and at times did and said all kinds of crazy things.

There are many themes found in the Minor Prophets but there are some commonalities throughout these books. James Montgomery Boice observed the sovereignty of God, the holiness of God, and the love of God to call people to repentance as common themes in the Minor Prophets.² O. Palmer Robertson makes note of the justice and judgment of God³ as well as the faithful salvation of God⁴ in these books. I find them both helpful in unifying the themes of these prophecies which were given in dire times for the people of God. More than anything the people needed to know that the coming judgment was from God.⁵ Yet God had not forsaken his promises to them as his people if they would repent and return to him, and as a consequence, a faithful remnant of Israel would be preserved and saved in the end.

We will now close by looking particularly at the prophecy of Habakkuk, ancient words given long ago to a prophet standing on the eve the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and the final defeat of the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

The Book of Habakkuk

Authorship

We know very little about this person Habakkuk other than what is in the text of his prophecy. We know he would have likely lived through the reforms and righteous kingship of Josiah⁶ (see 2 Chronicles 34 for Josiah's reforms) as well as seeing the sharp decline under his successors. This decline culminated with the wicked leadership of Jehoiakim⁷ most likely the king at the fall of the Kingdom of Judah. For those interested in the full decline of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, it is described in the works of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Time and Place of Writing

There are many important bits of information which help us to date Habakkuk's prophecy. Each of them serves to narrow the time frame so that we have a very good approximation of the time of

¹ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 1.

² See the preface to James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

³ Robertson, 21, 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵ Assyria was the conquering power for the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Babylonians for the Southern Kingdom of Judah

⁶ Boice, 391.

⁷ Robertson, 13.

writing. First, we see from Habakkuk chapter 1 that the Chaldeans or Neo-Babylonians⁸ were already a known power which was on a conquering path. We know that the Chaldeans conquered Nineveh in 612 BC so our date for the book is likely to be after this event. Second, we see from the description in Habakkuk 1:2-4 that the Kingdom of Judah is in decline not in a state of reform or revival. This must mean it is some time after the death of the godly king Josiah which is dated to 609 BC, likely during the reign of the wicked king Jehoiakim.⁹ Two other dates can be brought to bear at this point. It seems the Chaldeans had not yet made their inroads into Jerusalem so this puts Habakkuk's writing before the final fall of Judah in 587 BC. Additionally, the coming of the Chaldeans was still in the future during Habakkuk's writings so we must place it even before the first victory they had over a combined Egyptian-Assyrian force in Syro-Palestine in 605 BC.¹⁰ So this puts the date between the first defeat in 605 BC and the death of the king Josiah in 609 BC. So by inference, a date somewhere around 605-608 BC is likely. The following table shows the dates of the relevant events:

Table 1: Events surrounding the writing of Habakkuk

Date	Event
612 BC	Fall of Nineveh
609 BC	Death of Judean King Josiah
608-605 BC	Writing of Habakkuk
605 BC	Defeat of Egyptian/Assyrian army in Palestine
597 BC	First Exiles to Babylon
587 BC	Final Conquering of Jerusalem

One interesting note of history about the king Jehoiakim is warranted. This king's evil doings became notorious. His reputation was so evil in the eyes of God and people that Jeremiah said the following of him at his death:

*18 Therefore thus says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah: "They shall not lament for him, saying, 'Ah, my brother!' or 'Ah, sister!' They shall not lament for him, saying, 'Ah, lord!' or 'Ah, his majesty!' 19 With the burial of a **donkey** he shall be buried, dragged and dumped beyond the gates of Jerusalem."*

Jeremiah 22:18,19 ESV

As the old King James translation puts it, this king received the burial of an ass. You can guess what kind of guy he was.

Form and Purpose for the Prophecy

Literary Form



Habakkuk's prophecy is unique in that it records the prophet's personal interactions with God. This is a word given to the prophet about the people, but not directly *to them*. The book takes the form of a series of questions from Habakkuk and subsequent answers from God. It is sort of like getting to live in Habakkuk's head for a bit. I know some of the interactions I have with God in the privacy of my own soul; this book is a great look into such a dialogue. So this divine Q and A is the main literary structure of the book. Additionally there are two other literary styles of note. First, there is a taunting or mocking song given¹¹ by God in chapter two (yes, God does talk smack in the Bible...not in arrogance, but in truth) towards the evil Chaldean empire. Yes, he was allowing their success in conquering Judah, but they would in no way be excused for all their evil doing and excess. Finally, chapter three includes a psalm of worship by the prophet which sets up the culminating message of the book.

⁸ The word used for these people in the Old Testament is Kasdim

⁹ J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: A Commentary* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 83.

¹⁰ There is an excellent timeline of events from the 7th century BC in Robertson, 29, 30.

¹¹ Frank Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor's Commentary: Daniel and the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 495.

Purpose of the Prophecy

The purpose of the prophecy was to prepare a people to live faithfully amidst an unexpected downturn of events. Judah was in a state of internal sin and chaos where both justice and religion were being perverted. As a consequence they were about to be conquered as discipline from God. God wanted his people to know several things during this time of discipline and turmoil. First, the righteous would live by faith in the midst of the discipline. They would trust God in the middle of the storm. Secondly, he wanted them to know that their hope was in Him, not simply their temporal circumstances. This prophecy was also to steady the people of God through one of their darkest hours of exile from the Promised Land. They were not to lose hope; they were to persevere in faith. I believe the same purposes are eternally relevant for the people of God for we all travel through many troubles and trials in life and we too must persevere. The many themes found in this book establish our faith, trust, and hope in God which transcends our circumstances. We will close our discussion with a brief look at the themes found in Habakkuk.

Major Themes in the Book

Pastor James Montgomery Boice recounts a conversation he had with someone when he was teaching a series of messages from the book of Habakkuk. The man explained to him that he had never heard one message from this book in all his years of attending church.¹² Many of us probably resonate with this man; I personally have never heard a series of messages from this book. Many have likely never read its contents. This is indeed unfortunate as the book has an important message for our times. The vision of God found in the book, the questions it raises, the struggle it brings to our hearts are so needed today. Our own joy is at stake if we miss the message conveyed here and echoed in other parts of Scripture. The message is clear: steadfast joy can be found in spite of circumstances. Indeed, in preaching an overview of this book, Mark Dever entitled his series *The Message of Habakkuk: How Can I Be Happy*.¹³ By this he means that in this prophecy we discover the foundation and ground of true happiness; it is found in a steadfast faith and a hope that God in the end will triumph and save his people. Some of the themes in the book are difficult, at times perplexing, and provoke many questions. As we have noted, the very book itself is framed by the prophet's *own questions*. This is our first theme, that of *questioning*.

★ **Questioning God** – There are many who say that you should never question God. I disagree. I find questions to be a great way to seek truth, wrestle with God, open my mind to knowledge, and persevere in faith. However there are two ways in which we might question our God, neither being dispassionate. I will use a metaphor to describe. We can bring our questions in one of two ways. We either bring our questions to God with open hands or with clenched fists, and there is a world of difference. First, one can with great zeal press the heavens, but we do so with open hands. We do not accuse the almighty; we come as desperate sinners, angry at times, yet open to his voice and leading. The other way to come is to raise angry and clinched fists *at God*. I find this to be a great evil. Indeed, CS Lewis once remarked that we are quick to put God on trial, we are quick to put *God in the dock*.¹⁴ In doing so we become an accuser and treat God as one who is guilty of wrongdoing. I am a firm believer that we should come to God with all our emotions and all of our questions. Yet the Christian should come with open hands raised to the heavens, not the clinched first, nor the middle finger. We see a great example in the way questions are posed in this book by the prophet. David Prior summarizes the many questions Habakkuk raises in this book.

¹² Boice, 389.

¹³ Mark Dever, *Promises Made: The Message of the Old Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 835-860.

¹⁴ The "dock" is a phrase from a British courtroom, where the accused would be placed "in the dock" when he was on trial. Lewis has a series of essays published under this title. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock; Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1994).

*Beginning with his own situation, he found himself **articulating timeless questions** – about the problem of evil, about the character of God, about the apparent pointlessness of prayer and the impotence of God, about the oppressiveness of unrestrained violence and the silence of God.¹⁵*

Timeless questions indeed.

- ★ **The Suffering of a Fallen World** – If you are awake, you will realize that we live in a world of great blessings as well as great suffering. The reality of living in a world of human sin, natural disasters, diseases and famines weighs upon the soul as we travel life's roads. Yet there is also great goodness found in creation and in human beings. How are we to understand our present situation where life is mingled with both pain and blessing? Habakkuk guides us in wrestling with life outside of the garden in a fallen world.
- ★ **The Sovereignty of God in Human History** – Are we the director of our own destinies or are we part of a grander scheme of things which has greater captain? If God in control of all the good things in the world, does he have anything to do with the bad things? It is easy to sense that God has a purpose and plan for your life when you get a good job, get married, have kids, move forward in your career, win American Idol. Yet how do we view life when unemployed, after we get dumped, our nation is conquered, or we suffer deep personal loss of various kinds? Habakkuk confronts us with the resoundingly clear but difficult doctrine of the Sovereignty of God. God is in complete control of all things, or as Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones once taught in England after the horrors of World War II, *history is under God's control.*¹⁶
- ★ **Faith in the Faithfulness of God** – If God is in control of the best and worst of times, how should his people live in the middle of the darkest hours? Habakkuk gives a resounding answer which is echoed three times in the New Testament.¹⁷ The *righteous shall live by faith* for indeed the day will come when the *earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*¹⁸
- ★ **The Justice and Wrath of God** – If there is a theme which is constant throughout the Scripture yet is woefully neglected in the churches of our time it is the justice and wrath of God. We simply do not want to believe that God is fiercely wrathful against sin and he is just in being so. Yet we see this theme repeated throughout the whole counsel of the word of God. God is utterly holy and separated from sin. Human beings transgressing his laws and disregarding him is a great offense before God and there is a reckoning which will visit the unrepentant. This is not just an Old Testament theme as it is found abundantly in the New Testament. Jesus himself burned with intense anger at those abusing the temple (Mark 11, Matthew 21). Paul writes of the coming justice of God (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10) as well as our judgment by him (2 Corinthians 5:10). Finally, the apostle John, in the final book of the Bible is frighteningly clear as he described the coming wrath of God:

11 Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. 12 His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. 13 He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. 14 And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. 15 From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

Revelation 19:11-16 ESV

¹⁵ David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk: Listening to the Voice of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 204. emphasis added

¹⁶ James Montgomery Boice recounts his indebtedness to Lloyd Jones' teaching on Habbakuk following the anguish following the second world war in Boice, 393.

¹⁷ A phrase from Habakkuk 2:4 – the righteous shall live by faith, is quoted in Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38

¹⁸ See Habakkuk 2:4, 14

Yet the great news is that Jesus Christ is rescuing all who have faith in him from the wrath to come. He in no way turns away those who come to him for refuge and forgiveness. We can have great hope and courage reading the promises of the gospel:

1 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. 4 But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. 5 For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. 6 So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. 9 For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 ESV

- ★ **The Evil of Idolatry** – The worship of created things, human inventions, gods of our imaginations, the worship of ourselves, our possessions, and anything that is not the creator God is a great sin which lives in the hearts of people. Idolatry is something Habakkuk speaks about with brutally honesty. Though we may not see ourselves worshipping statues of gold there are many substitute saviors that populate our hearts and lives.
- ★ **The Source of True Rejoicing and Happiness** – That which we all long for in our journeys on the earth can indeed be found. It is no pipe dream – we were made for joy, even when the darkness falls on our days. Habakkuk will help us believe this deeply.

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