Habakkuk
Scripture: Habakkuk
Code: MSB35

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 and 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 “the prophet Habakkuk” 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.

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 (cf. 2 Kin. 23) were quickly overturned by his successor, Jehoiakim (Jer. 22:13–19).

Background and Setting

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 N and W. 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 606 B.C.

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 Chr. 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 Kin. 22,23), abolishing many of the idolatrous practices of his father Amon (2 Kin. 21:20–22) and

grandfather Manasseh (2 Kin. 21:11–13). Upon his death, however, the nation quickly reverted to her evil ways (cf. 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.

Historical and Theological Themes

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 these 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 (1:12–2:1)? 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 (cf. Job 42:5,6; Is. 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).

Interpretive Challenges

The queries of the prophet represent some of the most fundamental questions in all of life, with the answers providing crucial foundation stones on which to build a proper understanding of God's character and His sovereign ways in history. The core of his message lies in the call to trust God (2:4), "the just shall live by his faith." The NT references ascribe unusual importance theologically to Habakkuk. The writer of Hebrews quotes Hab. 2:4 to amplify the believer's need to remain strong and faithful in the midst of affliction and trials (Heb. 10:38). The apostle Paul, on the other hand, employs the verse twice (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11) to accentuate the doctrine of justification by faith. There need not be any interpretive conflict, however, for the emphasis in both Habakkuk and the NT references goes beyond the act of faith to include the continuity of faith. Faith is not a one-time act, but a way of life. The true believer, declared righteous by God, will habitually persevere in faith throughout all his life (cf. Col. 1:22,23; Heb. 3:12–14). He will trust the sovereign God who only does what is right.

Outline

I. Superscription (1:1)

II. The Prophet's Perplexities (1:2–2:20)

A. His first complaint (1:2–4)

B. God’s first response (1:5–11)

C. His second complaint (1:12–2:1)

D. God’s second response (2:2–20)

III. The Prophet’s Prayer (3:1–19)

A. Petition for God’s mercy (3:1, 2)

B. Praise of God’s power (3:3–15)

C. Promise of God’s sufficiency (3:16–19)

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2015 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).