



Type: Magazine Article

Habakkuk: A Prophet with a Problem

Author(s): Ellis T. Rasmussen

Source: *The Instructor*, Vol. 97, No. 9 (September 1962)

Published by: Deseret Sunday School Union

Page(s): Center Insert

Abstract: No abstract available.

HABAKKUK

A Prophet with a Problem

*O Lord, how long shall I cry,
and thou wilt not hear!
Even cry out unto thee of violence,
and thou wilt not save!*

*Why dost thou shew me iniquity,
and cause me to behold grievance?
For spoiling and violence are before me:
and there are that raise up strife and contention.*

*Therefore the law is slacked,
and judgment doth never go forth:
For the wicked doth compass about the righteous;
therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.—Habakkuk 1:2-4.*

This is the problem, the “burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see” — the wicked appear to prosper, while the righteous frequently suffer! “Why?” he asks. “How long shall it be so?” He complains and even questions the Lord for letting it so be.

His problem is not peculiar, however. In the scriptures, Job,¹ Jeremiah,² and Joseph Smith³ are among those that have felt in times of persecution and trial much as Habakkuk felt. In the *Psalms* are many supplications, pleading with God to hear in times of bitter tribulation. Even Jesus quoted one of those, crying out in anguish from the cross, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"⁴ Doubtless every man sometimes feels forsaken by God.

Habakkuk's miseries likely arose in the days of Judah's degeneration, after the time of Assyria's conquest of northern Israel, and before the time when Babylonia came to carry the remaining tribe, Judah, away into captivity. The religious reforms of Hezekiah in his century, and those of Josiah a hundred years later (about 620 B.C.) had put the just and the right at the helm in Judah for a time. But as always, resurgent corruption in politics, in morals, and in religion swiftly reappeared when the champions of right were gone.

Religious compromises, induced by the desires of the liberal and the libertine, ever seeking to soften the restrictions and responsibilities of Israel's covenant faith, brought derision and persecution upon the "pious" and the "faithful." Under these conditions Jeremiah suffered, and it is likely that this was also the setting of Habakkuk's ministry.

Thus it is that he cries out against the iniquity, grievance, spoiling, violence, strife, and contention on every side, for the processes of justice and execution of the law seem endlessly delayed when the righteous are encompassed about by the wicked.

When he asks, "How long shall I cry and thou wilt not hear?" the Lord answers with a promise. This decadence, He says, shall soon be swept away. The Chaldeans are coming upon Judah, and ". . . that bitter and hasty [impetuous] nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwelling-places that are not theirs"⁵ will be the Lord's tool of wrath upon His rebel-children.

At this reply the prophet is quite nonplussed. With some effort at reverence and restraint, he recognizes that God is ever at the helm and that He establishes justice and ordains correction. But since He is of "purer eyes," the prophet asks how He can look on and let these who are more wicked still devour His people.⁶

After this inquiry, and near fault-finding with the Lord, Habakkuk feels that surely he has over-

stepped his privilege as a prophet, and anticipates rebuke:

*I will stand upon my watch,
and set me upon the tower,
And will watch to see what he will say unto me,
and what I shall answer when I am re-
proved.⁷*

He receives his answer; and lo, it is not really reproof! The answer is like that which came to the others who asked:⁸ *Wait; be patient and humble; the judgments are not all in as yet. You do not know the ends to which the ways of God shall lead.*

Then the Lord gave him vision of the things that shall come at last, at their appointed time, and told him they are worth waiting for. Certain principles were reiterated. The man whose soul is lifted up in pride is not upright with God but the humble and just shall live by means of their faith,⁹ and they shall not be disappointed. Woe is pronounced upon the evil-doers of society — the drunkard, the proud, the thief, the covetous, the violent and iniquitous oppressor, and the worshipper of things made by the hands of man. On the other hand, the millennial promise is made to Habakkuk as to Isaiah, that at last ". . . the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."¹⁰

The message ends with a warning and another reassurance: ". . . the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him."¹¹

After this experience, Habakkuk felt inspired to utter a psalm of praise to God and trust in Him. In awe at the powers and glory of God, he poetically describes the power of Deity over all facets and functions of nature, and speaks of His might to overcome all of His enemies. Then in the spirit expressed also by Job who said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him: . . ."¹² Habakkuk lists in six poetic lines¹³ the disasters that could come to him, but strongly he avers in his last five lines:¹⁴

*Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.*

*The Lord God is my strength,
and he will make my feet like hinds' feet,
and he will make me to walk upon mine
high places . . .*

It is for this trust in God in spite of the vicissitudes of life that Habakkuk's message is for us also today a wholesome stimulant.

—Ellis T. Rasmussen.

1 Job 7, 9:20-26, 12:4-6.

2 Jeremiah 15:15-18, 18:18-23, 20:7-18.

3 Doctrine and Covenants 121:1-6.

4 See, for example, *Psalms* 10, 13, 22 (quoted by Jesus in *Matthew* 27:46), 44, 74, 77.

5 The "Chaldeans" are the same as the "Neo-Babylonians" who arose with Nabopolassar's dynasty after 625 B.C. and became the "world-power" of the Middle East after the crucial overthrow of Assyria in 614, 612, and 605 B.C. Nahum looked hopefully at the overthrow of Assyria; Habakkuk looked upon the rise of Babylon with fearful apprehension. The quotation is from *Habakkuk* 1:6.

6 *Habakkuk* 1:13.

7 *Habakkuk* 2:1. Note that this book, as most of the prophetic books, is all cast in Hebrew poetry.

8 Job 36; *Jeremiah* 15:19-21; *Doctrine and Covenants* 121:7, 8.

9 *Habakkuk* 2:4.

10 *Habakkuk* 2:14; compare *Isaiah* 11:9.

11 *Habakkuk* 2:20. This quotation is inscribed in the Idaho Falls Temple.

12 *Job* 13:15.

13 *Habakkuk* 3:17.

14 *Habakkuk* 3:18, 19. Here the King James English phrases are simply set out in the natural lines of the Hebrew poetry.



THE PICTURE

Artist Eugene Spiro has portrayed a background of bleak and cloudy gloom. While evil-doers prosper and good men suffer, the endurance of Habakkuk's faith is tried. His weary face shows uncertain hope as he hesitantly questions the Lord's delay of justice. But his faith is later justified, and the Lord reassures him — and us — that He will eventually establish justice and reward righteousness.

— *Virgil B. Smith.*