



CHAPTER 1

The Prophet Who Confronted God

Often when people of faith look at all the violence, injustice, starvation, disease, and environmental destruction in the world, they ask themselves, where is God? How can God allow this?

These important questions have been asked for literally thousands of years. They were asked with special eloquence by a Hebrew prophet named Habakkuk 2,600 years ago. Habakkuk had a vision in which he asked God these questions, and he got some answers. They were not the answers he wanted. But he responded with an affirmation of faith that stands out as one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible.

THE PROPHET HABAKKUK

We know very little about Habakkuk other than the words of the Old Testament book that he wrote. We do not know his tribe or hometown. The word *Habakkuk* may mean “embrace,” as in a hug or enfolding that can keep you warm when there is no other shelter or source of warmth. Or it may have been an Akkadian or Babylonian name for a kind of garden plant or fruit tree. We don’t know.¹ However, based on his writings, scholars estimate that Habakkuk lived at the end of the seventh century B.C., the same time period as the prophets Nahum, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah.²

The book of Habakkuk begins with the words “The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received” (Hab. 1:1).³ When a prophet received an oracle, it was his responsibility to communicate it to God’s people. In Habakkuk’s case, the task was especially difficult, since the message was that the kingdom of Judah would be destroyed by the Babylonians.

The traditional role of the prophet was to call the people back to a right relationship with God. When the people drifted away from their covenant with God, the prophets would urge them to repent and

become obedient again. As you might expect, it was an unpopular role. Prophets were often attacked by those they called to repentance.

Habakkuk was a different kind of prophet. Instead of confronting his people, he confronted God. He wanted to know what God was doing to fulfill his covenant with his people. How could God allow so much violence and injustice? How could God allow his covenant to be broken without doing anything about it?

A TURBULENT TIME

Habakkuk lived during a turbulent time for the Judeans. After the reign of King Solomon, Israel split into two kingdoms—the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The two kingdoms were dominated and eventually destroyed as the Assyrians then the Egyptians, and finally the Babylonians assumed control of the region.

The Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722–721 B.C. The tribes of Israel were assimilated into other cultures or were deported. The Assyrians invaded the southern kingdom of Judah in 701 B.C., destroying many cities but leaving Jerusalem

unharméd. Judah survived as a vassal of Assyria, allowed to govern its own internal affairs but paying heavy tribute and taxes to the Assyrians.

Judah became more independent toward the end of the reign of King Josiah (640–609 B.C.). King Josiah launched internal reforms and expanded Judah’s territory and influence to the north. Meanwhile, tribes from southern Babylonia known as Chaldeans took over the Babylonian Empire and expanded it. These “Neo Babylonians” defeated the main Assyrian force in battle in 612 B.C.

With the defeat of the Assyrians, the Egyptians saw an opportunity. In 609 B.C., the Egyptians marched through Judah on their way to do battle with the Babylonians. King Josiah tried to stop them and was killed in the battle. Judah became a vassal of the Egyptians, who placed Jehoiakim on the throne. King Jehoiakim was known as a petty tyrant who allowed pagan practices and the deterioration of public morality.

The situation changed a few years later, in 605 B.C., when the Babylonians defeated Egypt at Carchemish. The Babylonians were now the only major power in the region. Some time around 603 B.C., as the Babylonian army advanced toward

Judah, King Jehoiakim conceded and became a vassal of the Babylonians.⁴

However, Jehoiakim later rebelled against the Babylonians. As a result, in 598–597 B.C., the Babylonian army marched on Judah, arriving in Jerusalem just after Jehoiakim died. The new king, Jehoiachin, surrendered. In order to subjugate the kingdom, the Babylonians took Jehoiachin, his wives, his servants, the queen mother, high officials, and thousands of leading citizens, soldiers, and craftsmen to Babylon.⁵ The Babylonians placed Zedekiah on the throne of Judah.

There was continuing unrest in Judah. When a rebellion broke out in 589 B.C., the Babylonians' response was harsh. They blockaded Jerusalem and two years later conquered the city, burning it down and leveling its walls. The Babylonians then proceeded to destroy the cities of Judah, killing many people and ruining the economy. They did not stop until the kingdom of Judah was no more.⁶

When Judah was destroyed, more Judeans were carried off to Babylon. The “Babylonian exile” continued until Persia conquered Babylonia in 539–538 B.C. The Persian leader, Cyrus the Great, allowed the Judeans to return to their homeland.

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

The book of Habakkuk was probably written sometime during the reign of Jehoiakim, who ruled from 609 to 598 B.C.⁷ That was after the fall of the Assyrians and before Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. The coming invasion by the Babylonians was revealed to Habakkuk in his vision, as was the fall of the Babylonians at the hands of the Persians many years later.

The book of Habakkuk has three chapters. In the first two chapters, Habakkuk makes two complaints, each of which God answers in turn. The third chapter is a prayer or psalm that recalls God's glory and is a powerful affirmation of faith.

We turn now to the vision of Habakkuk, his two complaints, and God's answers.