

The DIVINE DIALOGUE *in the Book of Habakkuk*



Left: A fragment from the Commentary on Habakkuk, which was one of the first scrolls found at Qumran. The full

text covers chapters 1 and 2 of the Book of Habakkuk and is one of the most complete commentaries from Qumran.

understandable yet thorough overview the writers gave of the Book of Habakkuk. What resulted was a series of questions posed to J. Daniel Hays, one of the co-editors of the *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook*.

What is unique about the Book of Habakkuk?

One of the most striking features of the Book of Habakkuk is that the entire book is a dialog between God and the prophet. Habakkuk questioned God about the injustices he saw around him in his country of Judah, and he was shocked at God's solution—an invasion by the Babylonians! Eventually, Habakkuk came to grips with God's answer, even learning to rejoice in God's plan. Another interesting feature of the Book of Habakkuk is the important role it plays in the New Testament. Paul used Habakkuk 2:4 ("but the righteous will live by

An Interview With J. DANIEL HAYS

WHAT DO YOU KNOW about the Book of Habakkuk? For many, sadly, the answer would be "not much." While recently reading *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook*,¹ the editor of *Biblical Illustrator* was struck by the

WAR GODS



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: G.B. HOWELL/LOUVRE MUSEUM (S718/82)

Neo-Assyrian plaque depicting seven gods who were responsible for both war and destruction. The gods, known collectively as *Sebeti* (meaning “seven”), always worked as a unit and were thus always depicted together. Each was portrayed with a different animal head. Although images of these gods are somewhat rare, they are sometimes depicted with an ax, arrow, or knife—ready for warfare.

Habakkuk described Yahweh as warrior: “You took the sheath from Your bow; the arrows are ready to be used with an oath.... Sun and moon stand still

in their lofty residence, at the flash of Your flying arrows, at the brightness of Your shining spear. You march across the earth with indignation; You trample down the nations in wrath (Hab. 3:9a,11-12, HCSB).

One of the significant differences between Yahweh and the mythological gods of the ancient Near East, though, was that He was also the rescuer. Habakkuk declared, “Yet I will triumph in Yahweh; I will rejoice in the God of my salvation! Yahweh my Lord is my strength; He makes my feet like those of a deer and enables me to walk on mountain heights!” (vv. 18-19, HCSB).

time (e.g. “in the fifth year of king so-and-so”). As we read through the book, however, we can deduce the setting from statements in the text. Habakkuk lived in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. His dialog with God took place just prior to one of the Babylonian invasions of Judah (597 B.C. or 586 B.C.). The prophet Jeremiah also lived and prophesied during this time period. The lengthy Book of Jeremiah, along with the corresponding chapters in 2 Kings from this same time period (2 Kings 22–25), painted a clear picture of the tumultuous times in which Habakkuk lived. A series of weak, unfaithful kings, in collusion with corrupt priests and false prophets, had led Judah away from the true God of Abraham and Moses and into idolatry. Not surprisingly, as the people turned away from serving God, they abandoned the moral code embedded in God’s law, especially as expressed in Deuteronomy. Further, they allowed serious social and economic injustices to flourish. The dialog in the Book of Habakkuk took place in this context.

What is the message in the book?

As mentioned above, Habakkuk is different than the other Old Testament prophetic books in that the message is presented through a dialog between God and Habakkuk. This dialog unfolds as follows:

HABAKKUK’S OPENING QUESTIONS TO GOD—*Why is there so much injustice in Judah and why don’t You do something about it?* (Hab. 1:1-4). Habakkuk cried out, “How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? . . . Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?” (vv. 2-3) The prophet saw all kinds of sin and injustice all around him and he asked God how long he had to cry out about this before God did something about it.

GOD’S ANSWER TO HABAKKUK—*I am doing something; I am raising up the Babylonians to invade Judah* (1:5-11). God answered Habakkuk, telling him to “look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed” (v. 5) for God was “raising up the Babylonians” (v. 6). Then God described the Babylonians: “that ruthless and

his faith”²) as a central verse in explaining justification by faith (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11).³

What was the historical setting for the book?

Unlike several of the other Old Testament prophetic books, the Book of Habakkuk does not present an opening historical superscription identifying the

Below: Found among the ruins at Lachish, this inscribed potsherd (called an "ostrakon") describes that the cities of Azekah and Lachish were the last Hebrew strongholds to fall to Nebuchadnezzar before his armies advanced to Jerusalem. The inscription contains a prayer for safety: "May Yahweh cause my lord to hear news of peace, even now, even now." It also details that the neighboring

city of Azekah had evidently fallen to the Babylonians: "We are watching for the beacon from Lachish, following the signals you, sir, gave, but we do not see Azekah." Of the cities in Judah, Lachish was, at one point, second only to Jerusalem in size.

Right: Visitors walk among the reconstructions, which reflect the grandeur of the ancient city of Babylon in Nebuchadnezzar's time.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/LOUISE KOHL SMITH (6/22/11)

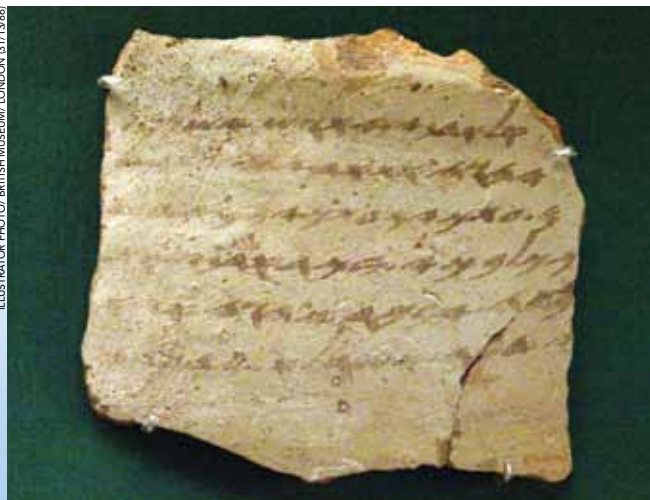


impetuous people" (v. 6), "feared and dreaded" (v. 7). Finally God described how terrible and horrific a Babylonian invasion would be (vv. 8-11).

HABAKKUK'S RESPONSE TO GOD—*But the Babylonians are worse than we are* (1:12-2:1). Apparently, Habakkuk was expecting a different answer from God. Perhaps he was hoping God would correct the terrible

situation in Judah by raising up a new, righteous king, who would bring about reform. At any rate, Habakkuk apparently questioned God's decision to use a Babylonian invasion as the solution to the prevalent sin and apostasy in Judah. The prophet responded, "My God, my Holy One, we will not die.... Your eyes are too pure to look on evil.... Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked [i.e. the Babylonians] swallow up those more righteous [i.e. us, the people of Judah] than themselves?" (1:12-13). Next Habakkuk poetically compared the ruthless Babylonians to fishermen, using their nets and hooks to pull in the peoples from various nations like fish from the sea (vv. 14-17). Then Habakkuk declared that he would wait and see how God would respond (2:1), apparently expecting God to change His mind regarding the Babylonian invasion.

GOD'S ANSWER—*This coming judgment is a certainty. You are to wait in expectation for it; afterward the Babylonians will also get what is coming to them* (2:2-20). Not surprisingly God did not revise His plan due to Habakkuk's objection. Rather God told him that this "revelation" (the coming judgment on Judah through the Babylonians) was indeed certain, so certain that Habakkuk was to "write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets" (2:2). "Though it linger," God declared, "wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay" (v. 3). Next God did address Habakkuk's basic question about the justice of using the Babylonians. God described to Habakkuk two different people. One of these people



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRITISH MUSEUM/LONDON (6/11/13/86)

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (9/23/79)

Left: Site of ancient Lachish, which was one of the last cities to fall to Nebuchadnezzar and his army. After taking Lachish, the Babylonians continued their military campaign and conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C.





ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/2/17/6)

Left: A brick from Sippur, from a structure belonging to Nebuchadnezzar II (ruled 605–562 B.C.). The bricks in Nebuchadnezzar’s buildings were usually square and inscribed with the

king’s name.

Below: Dated 550–400 B.C., the Babylonian Chronicle mentions the Battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. and records details about Nebuchadnezzar

extending Babylon’s power to the Mediterranean. The text is significant in part because it helps set the date for Babylon conquering Jerusalem, March 16, 598 B.C.

represented the Babylonians, arrogant and greedy, taking numerous peoples into captivity (v. 5). The other person, by contrast, remained faithful to God, even during the Babylonian atrocities; thus this righteous person of faith would live (v. 4). The one representing the Babylonians, however, would receive the appropriate judgment.

God described this judgment in 2:6-19 through five “woe” passages (like funeral dirges) that would be sung over the fallen Babylonians. This, too, was part of God’s plan. God further stated that through this judgment on the Babylonians, He would be glorified (v. 14). After the presentation of the five woes on the Babylonians, God concluded His answer to Habakkuk by underscoring His rule over all creation, declaring “The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (v. 20).

HABAKKUK’S CONCLUDING PRAYER—*I will wait for the coming judgment and yet still rejoice in God (3:1-19).* This concluding chapter is a bit different from the rest of the book. Habakkuk 3:1 and 3:19 indicate that this chapter is a prayer of Habakkuk’s as well as a



psalm to be sung. The implication is that Habakkuk prayed this in response to God’s answer in the previous chapter. In light of the coming judgment (which Habakkuk now accepted), he pleaded with God to remember mercy during His wrath (v. 2). Next Habakkuk described God as a powerful warrior, judging the entire world (vv. 3-15). In the final verses (vv. 16-19) Habakkuk determined to be like the person of faith in 2:4. He acknowledged God’s coming judgment on Judah, even though it frightened him. Yet he resolved to wait patiently for God’s judgment on the Babylonians as well. At the very end Habakkuk concluded that through it all he would rejoice in God, recognizing that God was the One who gave him strength to endure (vv. 18-19).

What is the message of Habakkuk for believers today?

We, like Habakkuk, often see things that are wrong in the world and wonder why God does not do something about it. This book teaches us that we do not always understand how God is working. From Habakkuk we learn to trust that God has a long-range plan; He will bring about justice in the world in His own good time. In the meantime, as Habakkuk tells us, we should trust in God’s control over all things and live by faith, rejoicing in the strength God gives us. **B**

1. J. Daniel Hays and J. Scott Duvall, eds., *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011).

2. All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

3. This is also the basis for Hebrews 10:38, which says, “But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.”

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