BIBLICAL TEXT

The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.

How long, O Lord, will I call for help,

And You will not hear?

I cry out to You, “Violence!”

Yet You do not save.

Why do You make me see iniquity,

And cause me to look on wickedness?

Yes, destruction and violence are before me;

Strife exists and contention arises.

Therefore the law is ignored

And justice is never upheld.

For the wicked surround the righteous;

Therefore justice comes out perverted.

(Habakkuk 1:1-4)

INTRODUCTION

The book of Habakkuk highlights one man’s personal struggle with the dichotomy of the fact that Yahweh is just, but yet allows evil to be present does not take the necessary action in order to eliminate, or at the very least, reduce the evil in the world that Habakkuk lived in. Habakkuk questioned why Yahweh would not take care of His very own people and allow the wicked to
Although the book of Habakkuk takes on an autobiographical tone of Habakkuk’s faith crisis, many commentators view Habakkuk’s faith crisis as extending beyond Habakkuk and permeating the society that Habakkuk lived in.² This paper will argue that an underlying message of Habakkuk is the questioning of God as an important aspect of faith development, focusing on Habakkuk 1:1-4 to explore this idea.

**CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

**LITERARY CONTEXT**

The book of Habakkuk consists of three chapters with the first two chapters generally being divided into a conversation-like text alternating between the voice of the prophet and the voice of YAHWEH. The third chapter is generally described in contexts that describe a prayer that Habakkuk prays such as the “prayer of the prophet”³ or the “psalm of Habakkuk”⁴. A likely reason why Bruce termed chapter 3 the Psalm of Habakkuk is because of the Psalm-like ending of Habakkuk in 3:19, “For the choir director, on my stringed instruments.” The book of Habakkuk is labeled as a dialogue, but many commentators have found the coherence of the conversation between Yahweh and Habakkuk to be problematic.⁵ It is possible that because Habakkuk was considered a professional prophet, the book of Habakkuk was written for liturgical purposes and presented as a liturgy in the temple.⁶

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⁴ Bruce, *Habakkuk*, 835.
Habakkuk 1:1-4 summarized is essentially Habakkuk expressing frustration that the Yahweh of justice is still allowing injustice to be prevalent in the society that Habakkuk lived in. Habakkuk was likely frustrated that Yahweh seemed to be ignoring his pleas for Yahweh to respond to the injustices that were taking place. In verses 1:5-11, Yahweh does not defend Habakkuk’s accusations, but rather asserts that if Habakkuk knew what He was doing in that generation, then Habakkuk would not believe Him⁷. Yahweh speaks to Habakkuk about how He was raising up the “impetuous” Chaldeans and describes many of the dreadful acts that the Chaldeans were committing at the time Habakkuk’s vision took place. In 1:12-17, Habakkuk continues to ask Yahweh why in the world he would look upon the wicked with favor and compares the Chaldeans to the fish of the sea, “like creeping things with no ruler over them (v.14)”.

In Chapter 2, Habakkuk describes a moment where he waited for the Lord to speak to him and the instructions that the Lord gave to him. Chapter 2 is divided into a test, Yahweh’s response including five different woes to the wicked.⁸ Chapter 3 presents Habakkuk’s prayer written in a poetic form, and seems like it is divided up into three prayers. The first prayer is a plea for Yahweh to revive His work and show mercy to His people (v. 2). The second prayer seems to be a reflection on the Yahweh’s character (v. 3-16), and the third prayer seems to be an account of Habakkuk rejoicing in the character of the Lord (v. 17-19).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The prophet Habakkuk remains a mystery; the scriptural text gives little clue to who in the world Habakkuk was. There is not anything mentioned about his family background, or who he was, the time he lived or where he was from. The only thing that can be derived from the text about Habakkuk himself is that he was called a prophet. The other thing that can be inferred from content of the text is the approximate date that Habakkuk was written, or at least the approximate time that he lived in.9 Some scholars have made an attempt to learn about Habakkuk the person based on the meaning of his name. Nogalski asserts that because Habakkuk’s name means “houseplant”, it therefore has no theological significance.10 Due to the fact that Habakkuk’s name means “houseplant”, he may have been from a foreign land and it might say something about the Babylonian exile. However, according to Gowan, the name Habbakuk derives from the Hebrew root “to embrace”, which could mean that the name Habakkuk is theologically significant.11 A later addition to an apocryphal text Bel and the Dragon cites Habakkuk being a son of Joshua in the tribe of Levi12 and places Habakkuk in Judea.13 Basically, in the context of this story, Habakkuk gets transported by an angel from Judea to Babylon in order for Habakkuk to feed Daniel the stew he had prepared for the workers of the harvest while Daniel was trapped in the lion’s den. This story involves an angel that transports Habakkuk from Judea to Babylon

10 Ibid., 648.
so Habakkuk could feed Daniel while he was in the lion’s den.\textsuperscript{14} This is almost certainly an entirely fictitious story but it is one of the only other accounts of Habakkuk that is recorded. Although there is very known about Habakkuk, Bible scholars have worked hard to extract important information from the text such as the dating of Habakkuk and the historical situation that Habakkuk found himself in.

The book of Habakkuk generally is dated according to the traces of a historical situation described in the text in which the Chaldeans arise and according to Bruce, this dates Habakkuk toward the last part of the seventh century.\textsuperscript{15} According to Nogalski, Habakkuk may have been gradually written throughout the Persian period and the text is a reflection of the Persian period rather than a vision that the prophet had.\textsuperscript{16} According to O’Connell, scholars generally use Habakkuk’s reference to the Chaldeans (or the Babylonians) in 1:6 as a time marker in which Habakkuk’s vision took place. This would date Habakkuk to somewhere in the twenty years before the Babylonian invasion, King Josiah’s death, and the replacement of Josiah with Jehoiakim.\textsuperscript{17} It is very possible that Habakkuk’s struggle came out of the drastic change of society from Josiah to Jehoiakim. There is also a possibility that Habakkuk’s struggle of theodicy is prevalent due to the perceived oppression of the Babylonians (also known as the Chaldeans).\textsuperscript{18} According to Bruce, Habakkuk considered the Chaldeans to be foreign invaders.\textsuperscript{19} Chaldeans

\begin{footnotes}
\item[15] Bruce, \textit{Habakkuk}, 835.
\item[16] Nogalski, \textit{The Book of the Twelve}, 649.
\item[19] Bruce, \textit{Habakkuk}, 836.
\end{footnotes}
was used as a code word for “kittim”, which could have in turn meant the Greeks or the Romans.20

DETAILED ANALYSIS

The book of Habakkuk could be described as a vision report evidenced by the first-person point of view that Habakkuk takes on while describing his vision. For example, the second verse of Chapter one begins with, “How long, O Lord, will I call for help and You will not hear?” and in 1:3, “Why do You make me see iniquity, and cause me to look on wickedness?” Habakkuk also is written in the form of a dialogue where Habakkuk makes a formal complaint21 to Yahweh and then Yahweh responds.22 Habakkuk 1:1 terms the first part of Habakkuk as an oracle, with a blatant statement in chapter 1, “The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.” The passage chosen for this paper, Habakkuk 1:1-4 takes on the characteristic of a formal complaint from Habakkuk to Yahweh.

According to Andersen, a formal complaint is essentially something outside of ones’ self that is considered wrong being brought to Yahweh’s attention.23 According to Rast, Habakkuk takes on more of the form of a lament than a complaint.24 There is also an underlying theme of theodicy that throughout the entire book of Habakkuk in which although a lot of the book of Habakkuk confidently questions why Yahweh is supposed to be just, but yet there is still evil present, it still ends with Habakkuk acknowledging the goodness of Yahweh.25 Andersen makes

20 Ibid., 835.
21 Andersen, Habakkuk (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 124.
23 Andersen, Habakkuk, 124.
an interesting observation about Habakkuk’s prayers in chapter 1, how Habakkuk does not request deliverance or for God to look on him with favor. Habakkuk’s prayer is actually motivated by bewilderment and morality.\(^{26}\)

Verse 1:1, labeled “the first superscription” is a pretty straightforward verse that states, “The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.” Although this verse is simple and does not smoothly transition to verse 2, there are two important words in this verse that set the tone for the rest of the chapter. First, the word oracle sets the genre for Habakkuk. A generalized purpose of a prophetic oracle is for God to share His word with His people\(^{27}\). According to Blue Letter Bible, the transliterated word for oracle in Hebrew is “massa’” which essentially translates to “burden”\(^{28}\) and it is evident in the first verses of Habakkuk that Habakkuk is sharing a burden with Yahweh. The word “oracle” used in this verse has also been transliterated from the Hebrew verb “hzḥ” which means to see or to perceive or to behold. When the verb “hzḥ” is being referenced, it usually means the prophet has experienced an encounter with Yahweh when in a deep sleep and they believe they need to proclaim the words of Yahweh, not unlike Habakkuk’s vision.\(^{29}\)

Second of all, Habakkuk being identified as a prophet is significant. In the Minor Prophets, three prophets are clearly labeled as prophets. In addition to Habakkuk, Haggai and Zechariah are also clearly labeled as prophets. The first reason that Habakkuk being labeled as a prophet is significant is because form criticism gives a small amount of information about the prophet himself. According to Gowan, it was suggested that Habakkuk was employed as a

\(^{26}\) Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 124.

\(^{27}\) O’Connell, “Habakkuk,” 227.


\(^{29}\) J. Gordon McConville, “חזה”, *NIDOTTE* 2:57.
prophet in the Jerusalem temple. He may have written songs and oracles for worship services in the temple. However, the fact that this is derived from such a small amount of information should be kept in perspective when analyzing the historical setting in Habakkuk.\textsuperscript{30} It is significant due to the fact that Habakkuk is one of the only to be labeled as a prophet in their superscription, but also that the fact Habakkuk is labeled a prophet sets the tone for the rest of the book of Habakkuk.\textsuperscript{31} Despite the fact that this verse sets the tone for the rest of the chapter, as previously stated, Habakkuk 1:1 is a stand-alone verse and does not “flow” with the rest of the chapter.

Verse 1:2 begins Habakkuk’s complaint toward Yahweh and states, “How long, O Lord, will I call for help, And You will not hear? I cry out to You, “Violence!” Yet You do not save.” One of the most significant sentences in this passage lies in the beginning of 1:2, “How Long, O Lord, will I call for help and You will not hear?” The question “How long?” in itself highlights a cry for help from Habakkuk to God. Habakkuk does not use the traditional form of a prophet’s cry but Habakkuk’s words are still crucial to the message of Habakkuk. Instead of “Thus says the Lord”, Habakkuk asks “How Long?” This phrasing is said to be crucial to the idea of faith that is presented in the Old Testament. This is not only essential to analyze the form of the passage, it is also essential to the message of the passage. It will defeat the purpose of this exegesis if it is not acknowledged that Habakkuk did not doubt that God was going to take action, but he doubted when God was going to take action and questioned why God did not take action.

\textsuperscript{30} Gowan, \textit{The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk}, 15.
\textsuperscript{31} Baker, \textit{Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah}, 66.
It also arouses curiosity why Habakkuk took on the issue of Yahweh’s silence as an individual issue rather than addressing Yahweh with “we” statements, although it made just as much sense for Habakkuk to use “we statements”. It partially goes back to the autobiographical form of the book of Habakkuk. Although the genre of this passage is important, setting it aside, Habakkuk describes himself crying and shouting for God to do something about the injustice in the world that surrounded him but phrased it in a way that Habakkuk was the only one to see the injustice and the oppression present in the time that he lived in. Since the word “cry” has so many possible meanings, it is imperative to explore the possibilities of what Habakkuk meant when he used the word cry in order to describe his conversations with God.

According to the Blue Letter Bible, the word used in this passage for “cry” is transliterated into za’aq which means to cry out or call for help. In Habakkuk 1:2, the word simply means “cry” and this particular form is used 32 times in 30 verses throughout the NASB. This same word is also transliterated with the verb “s’q”\textsuperscript{32}, which means to cry out or to wail a plea. It is found forty-seven times in the Old Testament and is used in the context of a cry for relief. In Habakkuk 1:2, the parallel word is “sw’ pi, which essentially means calling for help. This is generally an appeal made to God in the midst of injustice.\textsuperscript{33} It seems although Habakkuk’s faith remains unshaken in this particular verse, Habakkuk is still questioning God’s lack of action.

\textsuperscript{32} A. H. Konkel, “צעק,” \textit{NIDOTTE} 3:827.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 826.
This verse really marks the beginning of Habakkuk’s intense expression of his struggle with God. Nogalski labels this prayers as a “bold confrontation of Yahweh.” Habakkuk intensely questions how and why God would commit such a horrendous act to allow injustice and wickedness in the world but would continue to take no action and remain silent. It is easy to imagine Habakkuk’s frustration in this passage when he shouts at the supposed God of justice who remains silent although it seems as if Habakkuk had repeatedly prayed the same prayers of justice when struggling with the mess of society that was made during the transition from the just reign of King Josiah to the unjust and oppressive reign of King Jehoakim. It is also easy to relate to Habakkuk’s frustration in this particular verse in a 21st century context when social injustices such as human trafficking or homelessness are rampant, but it almost seems as if God is remaining silent about these issues. It is noteworthy that Habakkuk never asked in this passage why God was not there, he just asked how long God was going to take to do something. This is a powerful action of faith that Habakkuk has taken, especially when he likely had the role of a temple prophet.

In 1:3, “Why do You make me see iniquity, And cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; Strife exists and contention arises.” In this particular verse, Habakkuk asks the one question that every single person asks, “Why?” and here Habakkuk questions God. He questions in a way by using words that are practically synonymous. This puts an emphasis on the distress that Habakkuk feels in the midst of the

34 Nogalski, The Book of the Twelve, 658-659.
35 Andersen, Habakkuk, 124.
36 Watts, The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, 125.
oppression and injustice that Habakkuk is witnessing. Baker observed that all the words that Habakkuk used in this portion of the prayer are words that describe and define injustice. 37 Andersen observes that the same Hebrew word “hamas” is used at both the beginning of this verse and the end of this verse. 38 It seems like Habakkuk is blaming God for the evil that is happening in the world in this verse as well as blaming God for his silence.

It does not seem fair to Habakkuk that God would allow all of these terrible things to happen, but yet He refuses to do anything about it. There is something about the silence of God that causes people to question Him and this is not necessarily a bad thing39. It gives God an opportunity to reveal to people how the injustice he allows fits into the big picture that has in His will, as evidenced later in Habakkuk when Yahweh responds to the prayer being cited in 1:5, ““Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days—You would not believe if you were told.” It is crucial to reiterate the autobiographical tone that Habakkuk uses in this particular verse as evaluated in the literary context. It is interesting to ponder why Habakkuk asks God, “Why do I have to see this terrible thing?” instead of “Why do we have to see this terrible thing?” This helps the literary structure of Habakkuk argue more between Habakkuk and Yahweh rather than the people and Yahweh. This is part of how Habakkuk takes on his role as a prophet to be a voice for and advocate for the people.

38 Andersen, Habakkuk, 128.
39 Bruce, Habakkuk, 844.
In 1:4, “Therefore the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore justice comes out perverted.” Habakkuk is seriously wondering why God would continue to allow him to see things that cause Habakkuk distress such as that God would continue to allow the wicked to continue sinning. He wonders why God refuses to take action and continues to remain silent. It is worthwhile to consider that Habakkuk may have used this language literally rather than figuratively. It is likely that Habakkuk was irritated with the fact the proper system of justice was not being followed and the fact the law was not being implemented properly. The lazy execution of the law had serious consequences on those who were honorable and hardly any consequences on those who were wicked.  

Bruce observed that many people ask the why question to God and challenge God to answer them. He also observed that this is one of the few instances throughout scripture where God actually answers the person who challenged Him. Watts views this as more of an appeal to God than an argument and asserts that Habakkuk asked the question to the God of justice in order to appeal the injustice happening in the world. He believes that Habakkuk is appealing the disorder of society to God because of a poor political structure and the Lord has a personal interest in the justice of the people so God should do something about injustice. This could be why Habakkuk considers justice in this verse to be unfair and renders it perverted, which is an important aspect of the struggle of theodicy that Habakkuk experienced.

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40 Bruce, Habakkuk, 845.
41 Watts, The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, 125.
THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

When reviewing commentators’ analyses of the theology of Habakkuk and reviewing the book of Habakkuk, three main observations emerged from the commentators about the theology of Habakkuk: Habakkuk’s struggle with theodicy, the fact that there are many similar struggles throughout scripture, and the importance of trusting in God even when it seems implausible that He cares as evidenced by the prophecy of Habakkuk.

The first theological theme that emerges in Habakkuk is the theme of theodicy. The book of Habakkuk absolutely cannot be analyzed thoroughly without first addressing the message of theodicy. For the purpose of this theological analysis, theodicy will be defined in the context of which one struggles with the reconciliation of living in the world with both God and wickedness.\(^\text{42}\) A huge part of Habakkuk’s prophecy seemed to be a faith crisis that Habakkuk was having while simultaneously sharing a message from God. Habakkuk seemed so frustrated that the God of the universe is supposed to be just, but yet He remained invisible and silent when injustice and oppression were so prominent in the world that Habakkuk was immersed in. Andersen actually described Habakkuk’s struggle as a “human rage against heaven” \(^\text{43}\) Habakkuk was not phased about the terrifying task of confronting God or being honest with himself and expressing His anger toward God. It is remarkable that although Habakkuk was so frustrated with God, he only attacked God's lack of action and not the character of God. Habakkuk never once denied that God is just. \(^\text{44}\)

\[^{42}\text{Nogalski, The Book of the Twelve, 655.}\]
\[^{43}\text{Andersen, Habakkuk, 124.}\]
honesty and level of faith in this particular prophecy where he is straightforward with God and asks God why in the world He is being silent. Habakkuk was having difficulty fathoming why in the world a God of justice would still be silent in a world full of injustice and oppression but still never denied that God is just. Habakkuk seemed baffled that a God of goodness would still allow these events to happen.

In light of other scripture, Habakkuk takes on a really similar structure to various psalms, especially Psalm 94 in which the Psalmist begins the Psalm pleading for justice and then asks God how long it will take, similarly to how Habakkuk asked God in 1:2 how long he has to cry out for justice to be seen. The Psalmist also talks about the wicked and praises God at the end, not unlike the structure of Habakkuk. In light of the New Testament, this theme of God seeming contradictory is evident in situations such as when Jesus was on the cross and cried out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?” There are also various other areas in the psalter where the question “How long?” is asked. Scripture also encourages Christ-like character and standing up for the poor and the oppressed, which makes scripture seem contradictory to the God described in Habakkuk. FF Bruce comments that that it is really powerful when a man or woman of such intense faith makes such a comment because of the impact that follows the questioning of the actions of God. Habakkuk struggled with the idea that if God is supposedly just, then why does He remain silent in dire situations and still allow evil in this world? Yet Habakkuk still praised God and worked through his struggle with God by praying to God.

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45 Bruce, Habakkuk, 845.
46 Ibid., 846.
The fact Habakkuk still praised God throughout the questioning of God’s actions is also an important theological insight. Although Habakkuk seriously questions why God would still praise allow wickedness in a world that God claims to love, he still praises God. Although Habakkuk portrays God in a negative manner, as someone who is unconcerned for basic human desires\textsuperscript{47}, Baker made an observation that Habakkuk only questions God’s lack of action. Habakkuk does not question God’s goodness, His provision, or anything but His lack of action when it comes to approaching injustice in the world.\textsuperscript{48} The idea that God is so good, yet allows people to suffer is still baffling way beyond the time of Habakkuk. What is more baffling is that Habakkuk never questioned the goodness of God throughout the entire book and even praises God at the end. Habakkuk turned his doubt into prayer, despite his obvious frustration and disdain with the silence of God. There is a lot to learn from Habakkuk in this powerful action of turning doubt into prayer.\textsuperscript{49} Although it was not easy and might have been frustrating, Habakkuk was not afraid to challenge God and unknowingly spoke to so many generations after his own time. It almost seems as if Habakkuk’s faith was unshaken despite his frustration with the silence of God. Habakkuk got angry at God, but he prayed anyways. What a paradox.

CONCLUSION

The book of Habakkuk is one of the shortest yet one of the most theologically significant books in the entire Bible. Although there is very little known about who Habakkuk was, it is likely that Habakkuk was a temple prophet who became frustrated with the injustice happening in the world

\textsuperscript{48} Baker, \emph{Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah}, 73
after the Babylonian exile and the transition from the just King Josiah to the unjust King Jekohiam. In the book of Habakkuk, Habakkuk struggles with the idea of a just God that can allow so much injustice to happen in the world after the death of King Josiah and how to live with such a burden in the context of his world. Habakkuk challenged God for His silence. God answered that it is part of His will, without actually addressing Habakkuk’s complaint. The book of Habakkuk takes on the structure of an argument between the prophet and Yahweh. One of the most essential parts of understanding Habakkuk is to grasp the perspective that questioning God is important in one’s faith. He was assertive and unafraid to question God in this vision that he had. Even more essential is to realize that Habakkuk confronted God with prayer and a righteous anger. Habakkuk still ends up praising God, even in the midst of frustration with God’s silence.
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