**Habakkuk Commentary**

**Habakkuk Chapter 1**

Hab 1:1

**“burden.”** The word of the Lord can be a burden to the prophet, and then, when it is spoken, can be a burden to the people. It might have been more clear in English to say “burdensome message” instead of “burden,” but the Hebrew word is “burden.”

[For more information on “burden,” see commentary on Mal. 1:1.]

**“saw.”** God gives revelation to people in different ways, and one of those ways is via a vision or vision with sound (Acts 10:9-13). That is the way that God gave the revelation of the future to Habakkuk; a vision with sound and dialogue.

[For more on revelation and how it is received, see commentary on Gal. 1:12.]

Hab 1:2

**“Yahweh, how long will I cry out.”** The book of Habakkuk starts out with Habakkuk talking to God, but the dialogue goes back and forth, changing without warning, so the reader has to pay close attention to the context. God answers Habakkuk starting in Habakkuk 1:5, and then in Habakkuk 1:12, the prophet begins to speak back to God again, which continues to the end of the chapter.

Hab 1:4

**“surround.”** The idea is that the wicked surround the righteous and intimidate them (cf. NET, “intimidate”), to the end that justice is not carried out. To the righteous, the wicked seem everywhere, and they threaten in such a way that the righteous feel they have no way out of the situation except to do what the wicked suggest. That righteous people are intimidated into not standing up for what is right is an ongoing problem. Habakkuk encountered it some 2,600 years ago.

Hab 1:5

**“Look among the nations.”** Here in Habakkuk 1:5, God begins to speak back to Habakkuk (see commentary on Hab. 1:2). The imperative verbs in Habakkuk 1:5 are plural, so they are meant for the entire nation of Israel, not just for Habakkuk. The entire nation of Judah is to pay attention to what God is doing. Their coming destruction is due to their continued sin and unwillingness to repent and obey God. The plural is hard to bring out in English.

Hab 1:6

**“Chaldeans.”** Strictly speaking, “Chaldea” (sometimes “Chaldaea”) was the area on the north-west end of the Persian Gulf, but especially since a number of Babylonian kings came from Chaldea, the name “Chaldea” was often used for the whole of Babylonia, and that is the case in Habakkuk.

**“who march through the width of the earth.”** This is a hyperbole, but the conquest of the Babylonians did cover much of the known world at that time.

Hab 1:7

**“They are dreaded.”** The Hebrew text is singular, “He is dreaded” (we could also translate the phrase as “it is dreaded”), portraying the Babylonian army as unified as one person or one unit. This use of the singular for the Babylonians continues on in the chapter.

Hab 1:9

**“They gather.”** The Hebrew text is “He gathers” (we could also translate the phrase as “it gathers”), portraying the Babylonian army as unified as one person or one unit. This use of the singular for the Babylonians continues on in the chapter.

Hab 1:10

**“build up an earthen ramp.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “they pile up dirt,” but the reference is to the building of siege ramps by piling up huge amounts of dirt and rock, so we have followed the pattern of many other versions and nuanced the text for ease of understanding. Without a knowledge of ancient warfare, the reader might not know why piling up dirt was a way to conquer a city. Building earthen siege ramps was a common way that ancient walled cities were taken, and it is described in many ancient texts. Also, there are remains of them from the ancient world. One very good example is the siege ramp the Roman army built so they could conquer the Jewish fortress of Masada.

Hab 1:12

**“Aren’t you.”** Here in Habakkuk 1:12, the dialogue shifts back to Habakkuk speaking back to God (see commentary on Hab. 1:2).

**“We will not die.”** Habakkuk hears what God is saying—that the Babylonians are coming to attack Judah—and he does not comprehend it, just as God had said he wouldn’t in Habakkuk 1:5. We can understand that Habakkuk would have a hard time comprehending why God could not somehow find a way to protect His people, His holy city Jerusalem, and His Temple, and not see them destroyed. At this point in the narrative, Habakkuk believes that God would protect His people so the Babylonians would not kill them, and therefore says, “We will not die.” But the people of Judah had turned from God, and He could not protect them from the consequences of their sin. The Babylonian attack was terrible. Thousands died as the Babylonians destroyed the cities of Judah, killed, raped, pillaged, and eventually burned Jerusalem and God’s Temple to the ground.

We must not prooftext this sentence, “We will not die,” and try to make it mean that people never really die. That is not the context of what Habakkuk was saying. We must not get fooled into believing the first lie the Devil ever told, ‘You will not surely die” (Gen. 3:4). People do die, and are dead in every way, awaiting the resurrection and their judgment by God.

[For more on the fact that dead people are really dead, and that their soul does not live on, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.” For more on the soul, and that it does not live on after a person dies, see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

Hab 1:14

**“Why.”** The “why” comes from the previous verse, Habakkuk 1:13, which did not have to end but could continue on with this verse. A number of versions do that (cf. ASV, RV, JPS, YLT). The NASB1995 adds the “why,” as the REV does, and has, “*Why* have You made men like the fish of the sea, Like creeping things without a ruler over them?” Some other versions add “why” as well (cf. NJB). Nevertheless, many versions do not see the need for the “why” and simply say “You make mankind like the fish of the sea” (ESV). However, it seems more likely that Habakkuk is asking why God has created people the way He did rather than making a statement to God about the nature of mankind as a whole.

Hab 1:15

**“The Chaldeans.”** The Hebrew text has “he,” (or “it”) referring to the Babylonians (here called Chaldeans), referring to the nation as a single “he,” which is confusing in English (see commentary on Hab. 1:7). The REV does not normally substitute the proper noun for the pronoun, but in this case the “he” could be so confusing in the context that we opted to put in the proper noun, as did some other versions (cf. HCSB, GW, NASB, NET, NRSV).

Hab 1:17

**“Will they therefore continually empty their net.”** This verse ends the chapter and is an indirect challenge to God. Habakkuk is distressed that the Babylonians attack and conquer nation after nation, enriching themselves with booty and captives, and now they are about to attack Judah, so he asks God if He will allow this behavior to continue on and on. If God answered, “No,” then Habakkuk would obviously assert that if God was going to stop the evil Babylonians at some point, why not stop them before they attacked Judah?

**Habakkuk Chapter 2**

Hab 2:4

**“the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.”** The Hebrew is written in the singular. Salvation is a personal issue. No one is saved as part of a group. Each person is saved individually. This is also reflected in the Greek text of Romans 1:17 where Habakkuk is quoted.

Hab 2:5

**“wine.”** This verse is very difficult in Hebrew, as the many different translations in the different English versions attest. The mention of wine in this verse seems sudden and to some commentators out of context. But history, and even the Bible (Dan. 5:1-2) testify that the Babylonians loved wine, and in their inebriated state they made many ungodly decisions, no doubt in many cases decisions that were influenced by demons. Rulers and leaders need to be especially aware of the problems that can be caused by alcohol (and drugs). Scripture says, “It is not for kings, O Lemuel, not for kings to drink wine, nor for those who rule *to drink* beer. Lest they drink and forget that which has been decreed, and alter the legal claim of all the afflicted people.” (Prov. 31:4-5; cf. 1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7). The Persian king Ahasuerus made a rash and unwise decision when he was drunk (Esther 1:10-11). Eventually, the sin of the Babylonians for their ruthless and ungodly ways caught up with them and they suffered the consequences and were conquered by the Persians.

Hab 2:6

**“and who enriches himself by *keeping* goods taken as a pledge.”** The literal Hebrew is difficult due to the culture and idiomatic use of the language. The Hebrew text is more literally, “who makes himself heavy with heavy debts” (or “the weight of pledges”).

The idea is that the wealthy powerbroker makes loans and takes collateral (the NAB reads, “collateral,” while the CJB, HCSB, and NRSV read, “goods taken in pledge”), but then ends up keeping the goods he has collected, making himself rich. Because the collateral he has taken are material things and have weight, the reading of the Hebrew text, “makes himself heavy with…” is very accurate. Some versions nuance the text and read “extortion” (cf. NET, NIV, NLT), but while this is easy to understand in English, it is not exactly accurate. Although extortion may well be involved in some cases, what the powerbroker is doing is closer to simple dishonest business practices: making loans then figuring out how to keep the collateral, perhaps by charging excessive interest and claiming the loan was never really repaid.

Hab 2:7

**“creditors.”** The Hebrew literally reads, “those who bite you,” referring to the fact that people who have come to collect from you “bite” you. We use the same terminology today. We might say, “Those taxes took a bite out of my paycheck.”

Some versions translate this as “creditors” (cf. CJB, HCSB, NASB, NET, NIV2011, NRSV); while other versions understand this as the “debtors,” that is, those who have been taken advantage of who now rise up and attack the powerbrokers (cf. ESV, NAB, NIV84, NLT, RSV). However, historically, it was the Persians, not the other people who Babylon had conquered, who rose up and conquered the Babylonians. So while the text is not specific as to who it is who “bites” the Babylonians, it seems like the text is implying that the evil ways of the Babylonians were piling up a debt that the creditors, the Persians, came to collect and the Babylonians became their plunder.

Hab 2:13

***“*Behold.”** Habakkuk 2:13 is a close parallel to Jeremiah 51:58.

**“is it not from Yahweh of Armies.”** In other words, “Does it not come from Yahweh…?” The NET Bible has nuanced this for clarity to “The LORD who commands armies has decreed…,” while the NLT has “Has not the LORD of Heaven’s Armies promised.” Yahweh had stated over and over that people’s evil work would not last, and in this verse, God is reminding people of that fact.

***“*labor** ***only*** **to fuel the fire.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “labor for the fire,” but that is unclear in English, so the REV nuanced it for clarity. The NET went with a much less literal reading, but it is very clear: “The nations’ efforts will go up in smoke.” All the evil work done by nations, even if it enriches them in this life, will burn up on the Day of Judgment. When the text says, “the peoples labor only to fuel the fire,” we have to know from the context that it is evil work, evil labor that will burn up. This is not a general statement that people’s work on earth will not survive; good works will be rewarded while evil work will be burned up (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10-14).

Hab 2:15

**“makes.”** The Hebrew is the verb “gives” in the hiphil aspect (so more literally, “causes his neighbor to drink), so “makes” is appropriate (cf. ESV, NASB, NJB, NRSV. The NET has “force”).

**“you who makes.”** The Hebrew opens the sentence with the third-person singular, “his,” and then changes to the second-person form, “you” (“your”). This is not uncommon in Hebrew, but it is very confusing in English. The translations have handled it in different ways. We made the whole sentence second-person. The “you” in the sentence makes it very personal.

**“pouring out your wrath.”** This statement is seemingly unclear, but it makes perfect sense once it is understood. What is literally being poured out is the wine, but the word “wrath” is a metonymy of cause, and it gives us the selfish motive that lies behind a person making his neighbor drink. He wants to indulge his own perverted behavior at the expense of another (like sex traffickers do today) because the text says he wants to look at the person’s naked body. The relation between alcohol and sex has long been known, and getting drunk lowers a person’s sexual inhibitions. It is not unlikely that that motive is mixed with other motives as well, such as the one pouring the wine may want to compromise the other person and rejoice in their being shamed. There may be other evil motives mixed in as well.

The word “wrath” is the noun *chemah* (#02534 חֵמָה), and it relates to the word “heat.” TheTWOT[[1]](#footnote-16119) lists its meanings as, heat, hot displeasure, indignation, anger, and wrath; but also as “poison” (thus the NASB has “venom” in this verse), and also “bottles,” which is why some versions have “bottle” or “wineskin” (cf. KJV, NIV). However, most modern scholars see “wrath,” “anger,” or “venom” as the better choice here, due to other words being better choices for “wineskin.”

**“genitals.”** The Hebrew word is *maor* (#04589 מָעוֹר), which most literally means “uncircumcision,” and it is being used here as a synecdoche of the species for genital organs, male or female. For millennia people have gotten women drunk to take advantage of them sexually, and in the mind of the Author, women are certainly meant to be included, which is why we went with the translation “genitals” (cf. NET. Rotherham has “their parts of shame”). Although most versions say “nakedness,” or “naked bodies,” those are euphemisms for the sake of modesty. The Hebrew text is graphic and meant to be brutally honest and even shocking.

Hab 2:16

**“expose your uncircumcision.”** The literal Hebrew is “be uncircumcised,” but the meaning is to show your uncircumcision to others. This would mean the genitalia would be exposed. Some English versions have “stagger,” or “stumble.” That reading comes from a few Hebrew manuscripts and the Dead Sea Scrolls, but the accepted Hebrew text makes sense in the context and has been defended by scholars.

Hab 2:17

**“For the violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, as will the destruction of the animals that terrified them.”** This seems to be a reference to the fact that when the Babylonians came through Lebanon, they cut down many of the trees and destroyed the environment the animals lived in. They would have used the wood for military purposes, from everything from carts and chariots to wood for siege works, but it is also possible that some of the wonderful wood of Lebanon was sent back to Babylon to be used in building palaces, temples, etc. They would have also hunted and eaten the animals that lived there. Now the violence that they did to the woods and animals will come upon them. There are places in the Bible where the leaders of Judah are compared to the cedars of Lebanon, and because of that some commentators think the whole verse refers to destruction in the Promised Land, but there is no need to apply a figurative meaning here. The literal makes perfect sense, that both Lebanon and other lands, along with Judah, are included.

Hab 2:18

**“Worthless Ones.”** The Hebrew is the noun *eliyl* (#0457 אֱלִיל), and it means “worthlessnesses” (worthless thing, worthless one), or a “non-entity.” These carved images are not real gods, they are “worthlessnesses,” good for nothing. The word *eliyl* was a sarcastic term God used of idols, who are not gods and are worthless, but it does not technically mean “idol.” More properly, it means “non-entities,” “worthless things,” or “worthless ones.” It is valuable to translate *eliyl* as “Worthless Ones” or “worthless things” in the text when the readers can see that the phrase refers to idols, but the English phrase “worthless things” is so broad that in many verses most readers would not realize that “worthless things” was a reference to idols. Nevertheless, the meaning of the Hebrew—Worthless Ones—is accurate. False gods cannot save and they don’t even help, in fact, they cause harm in many ways.

Christians should pay attention to what God is saying here. Even the pagans did not usually believe that the idol they carved out of wood or stone, or cast out of metal, was the “real god,” but they did often believe that the god inhabited the idol, and therefore the idol was more than just a representation or reminder of the god, it was some kind of embodiment of the god. And, in fact, often the “god” (a demon) did inhabit or hang around the idol in some way, and thus the idol did sometimes seem to respond to the people. The fact that demons can make inanimate objects move, make sounds, bleed or cry (history has many bleeding and/or crying statues and paintings), and seem alive in other ways has reinforced the idea that the idols are “real” gods.

Sadly, Christians sometimes behave like pagans and ascribe actual power to things that should only be used to serve as reminders. For example, a cross hung on a wall, worn around the neck, or hanging from the mirror in a car can remind us of the work of Christ, but we should never (never ever!) ascribe any kind of protective power to that cross. The cross is like an ancient idol in that it is carved out of wood or cast out of metal and is mute; it cannot speak and it cannot act or give power. It is not God, nor do God or Jesus ever give it power. Any image or object must be a reminder only!

If a person starts to ascribe the power of protection or blessing to it, that is idolatry and false worship. The cross itself has become important and powerful, instead of reminding us of Him who is important and powerful. Worse, demons, who crave the worship and attention the cross is now getting, can then be attracted to it and hang around it, bringing harm instead of blessings. And that is not only true of crosses, but can be true of any Christian symbol such as prayer hands, angel statues or pins, statues of saints or of Joseph, Mary, or Jesus, and other “Christian things.” Christians must always be careful and on guard concerning the “natural attraction” that things like nice crosses, statues, and other Christian mementos can have, and take care never to let them cross over from being mere reminders to becoming idols, which happens as soon as some kind of invisible or spiritual power is ascribed to them.

**Habakkuk Chapter 3**

Hab 3:1

**“Shigionoth.”** The meaning of Shigionoth is unknown. It may be a reference to the musical notation or to the literary genre of the poem.

Hab 3:2

**“Yahweh, I have heard the report about you.”** Habakkuk has heard what Yahweh is about to do to Judah through the Babylonians, but he also realizes that God will judge the Babylonians. Habakkuk fears God, and is also afraid of what will happen to Judah (the Hebrew phrase is just, “I fear, O Yahweh.” What Habakkuk fears is not specifically stated, and the phrase may also mean, “and I stand in awe”). Therefore, he asks God to revive His works to deliver his people, which would mean destroying the Babylonian enemy, a theme that is much clearer in the next verse, Habakkuk 3:3. Because of all that will happen to his people, Habakkuk asks God that in His wrath to also show mercy.

Hab 3:3

**“Teman.”** The word Teman means “southland,” and here it refers to a place south of the Promised Land, and it is connected with Mount Paran, a mountain believed to be between Edom and Mount Sinai and connected with the Exodus from Egypt (Deut. 33:2). As Habakkuk’s poem unfolds in the next verses, it is easy to see the connection that Habakkuk is making with Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. When Israel was in trouble in Egypt, “God came from Teman,” south of the Promised Land, even from Mount Paran, to deliver them. In Habakkuk’s time, the people of Israel were in trouble again, but this time from the Babylonians. Habakkuk is portraying a hoped-for coming deliverance from Babylon using the vocabulary and imagery of God’s past deliverance of Israel from Egypt, as well as some other past times that God delivered Israel.

Hab 3:5

**“Pestilence.”** This is a reference to the plagues on Egypt which eventually resulted in Israel’s deliverance from Egypt.

Hab 3:7

**“Cushan.”** This is a reference to the Ethiopians. The Ethiopians and the people of Midian, both of whom were near God as He passed by to deliver Israel from Egypt, were distressed and afraid. The picture being painted by Habakkuk is that God is so powerful that even when He passes by people become afraid.

Hab 3:17

**“the yield of the olive.”** The Hebrew text is literally, “the labor (or “work”) of the olive fails.” In this case, “work” is put by metonymy for the results of work, which is the yield of fruit. There is no work to be done because there are no olives to pick.

[See Word Study: “Metonymy.”]

1. Harris, Archer, and Waltke, Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, s.v. “חֵמָה.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16119)