

HISTORICAL ALLUSIONS IN THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

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Unlike some prophetic books, the introductory lines of the Book of Habakkuk say nothing from which his prophecies can be dated.¹ (He is mentioned in the legend of *Bel and the Dragon*, an addition to the book of Daniel, but the historical value of this reference is dubious.²) Thus, any judgment on the date of his prophecies or individual oracles contained in it depends entirely on internal evidence found in the text itself. Among the historical allusions in the text are:

1. An extraordinary event will occur in the listeners' lifetime (Hab. 1:5).
2. The Chaldeans will rise to regional dominance (1:6).
3. A cavalry attack (1:8-9) followed by a description of siege-tactics (1:10).
4. Allusion to the Chaldeans as a nation that will serve as God's punishing agent against the iniquities committed in Judah (1:12).
5. A reference to King Zedekiah, who reigned 596-586 BCE (2:4).³
6. The possibility that Habakkuk 2:17 refers to a political-military event, in which Egypt reacts to Babylon's moves in Aram and Lebanon.
7. A reference to "exiled" (3:2).⁴

The assumed historicity of these allusions obviously depends on the specific interpretation of the indicated verses or other biblical referents.

Most scholars consider the main guides for dating Habakkuk to be the Battle of Carchemish in 605 and the passage *For a work is being wrought in your days/ Which you would not believe if it were told. For lo, I am raising up the Chaldeans* (1:5-6). A *terminus a quo* of 645 can be reached by using the historical pointers in

DATING HABAKKUK'S PROPHETIC ACTIVITY

Items 1 and 2 and adding 40 years – the assumed span of life at that time – to the Aron Pinker has a M.Sc. in theoretical physics and mathematics from The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and a Ph.D. in mathematics from Columbia University, New York. He was a professor of mathematics at Frostburg State University, and a Principal Operation Research Scientist at ANSER. He is author of numerous articles and several books which have been published in Israel, among them *The Atom and Theory of Relativity*. Whatever free time he has is dedicated to Judaic studies. Dr. Pinker resides in Silver Spring, Maryland.

date of the battle of Carchemish when the rise of Babylon became certain.

According to the midrashic *Seder Olam Rabba* 20 (second-third century CE), Habakkuk prophesied during the time of King Manasseh (c. 698-642) whose name does not appear in the superscription to the book because he was unfit to be mentioned. Josephus seems to allude to a similar tradition, though without mentioning Habakkuk: "And when they persevered in the same course of life, God raised up war against them from the king of Babylon and Chaldea, who sent an army against Judea, and laid waste the country; and caught king Manasseh by treachery, and ordered him to be brought to him."⁵ He may here conflate two historical events, the earlier arrest of Manasseh (II Chr. 33:11) and the later raising up of the Chaldeans (Hab. 1:6).

Of the traditional Jewish commentators, most assume that Habakkuk prophesied about Babylon. Only Kimchi mentions the opinion of *Seder Olam Rabba*, and he does not accept it. Indeed, the place of the Book of Habakkuk among the twelve Minor Prophets suggests that the Massorettes assumed that it was a prophecy about Babylon, which replaced Assyria the subject of Nahum's prophecy.⁶

Clement of Alexandria (second-third century CE) identifies Habakkuk as a contemporary of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and says that Jonah and Habakkuk lived at the time of Daniel (*Stromata* 1:21).

Among modern scholars,⁷ those who opt for an early dating for Habakkuk's prophetic activity identify Assyria as the instrument of God's judgment against His people (Isa. 10:5). Assyria itself is then subjected to judgment, and thereafter Babylon serves as God's punishing agent (Hab. 1:5). However, there is no reference to Assyria in Habakkuk (unless *asher* in 2:5b is vocalized *ashur* and understood as Assyria). Others place Habakkuk's prophesy later, based on the rapidly changing balance of power in the region with the fall of Nineveh and collapse of Assyrian power in 612, and the ensuing rapid rise of the Chaldean dynasty of Babylon under its King Nabopolassar and Crown Prince Nebuchadnezzar. Another key event and date is the Battle of Carchemish in 605, when the Babylonians crushed the ambitions of the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho II and were thereafter clearly the dominant power in the region. Habakkuk could be placed about a generation earlier than this, since he looks forward to an event to come *in your days* (1:5).

It is likely that he preceded Zephaniah, because he still mentions the Temple

in a formulaic *phrase* (*heychal kodesho* in v. 2:20) while Zephaniah does not. Also, a comparison of v. 1:8 with Jeremiah 4:13 and 4:6 supports dating Habakkuk before Jeremiah came forward as a prophet; that is, before the 13th year of King Josiah in 628. The tenor of v. 1:8 is not as negative or ominous to Judah as it is in Jeremiah. In this view, a date within the years 625-612 is a reasonable estimate, though other views favor a date as late as 603.

ADDITIONAL HISTORICAL POINTERS

Scholarship on Habakkuk demonstrates a quite wide range of possibilities for dating his prophecy and thereby identifying the "wicked" and the oppressor. Besides the points generally made by scholars, I consider that several other verses contain historical allusions.

The description of the Babylonian cavalry maneuvers in 1:8-9, followed by a description of their siege tactics in 1:10 (item 3) recalls the successful attack by the Medes and Scythians on Nineveh. While *The Fall of Nineveh Chronicle* (British Museum 21901) does not provide details on the military assets that were used in that campaign, it is reasonable to assume that cavalry rather than chariotry played a major role in the initial phases of the attack.⁸ It is known that the Babylonians used cavalry as the superior fighting-arm of its army, and the Medes and Scythians excelled as mounted archers, attacking an enemy as one gigantic mounted horde. It seems from Nahum's description that Nineveh's defenders were surprised by the swift movement of the enemy and were unable to deploy their chariots.⁹ Echoes of the attack against Nineveh may be present in the description of Babylon's strategy against Jerusalem. If so, Habakkuk must have been familiar with the details of Nineveh's defeat.

Habakkuk complains in the first chapter that his pleas for God's intervention go unanswered, though the moral and judicial situation has obviously reached intolerable levels. Nothing in the text points specifically to an external oppressor, and the social situation seems to reflect the state of affairs during the reign of Jehoiakim (608-598) recorded in II Kings 23:36-24:7. Allusion to the Chaldeans in 1:12 as a nation that will serve as God's punishing agent against the iniquities in Judah (item 4) seem to fit the corruption of those days of great instability and political opportunism, which led to a decline in law and order (Jer.

22:13-19). It is thus conceivable that there was hope, at least at the early stages of Babylonian rule, that Babylon could impose order and justice on Judah.

I consider v. 2:4 (item 5) a description of the court's realistic assessment of the political reality vis-à-vis Babylon and advice to Zedekiah to be steadfast in his loyalty to Babylon and live. I read v. 2:4 thus *Behold, the Ophel it is satisfied with him [Babylon], And Zedekiah, in his steadfastness would survive.*¹⁰

The vision presented in v. 2:3 is explicitly focused on the need to wait and control impatience. Though there is "light at the end of the tunnel," the tunnel is admittedly very long. Habakkuk had been charged with the task of explaining what is entailed in this waiting. Foremost, it precludes any adventurism by the court and king. It seemed that the court was realistic in its attitudes toward Babylon but Zedekiah and his cronies flirted with rebellion. Habakkuk addresses these rash leanings and points to disastrous consequences. Zedekiah did rebel, and incurred dire consequences to himself, his family, and Judah. Understanding v. 2:4 as Habakkuk's political advice to Zedekiah, rather than an ethical paradigm, implies that Habakkuk prophesied during the period of Zedekiah's rule (596-587).

The only geographic location mentioned in the first two chapters of Habakkuk is Lebanon. It is collocated with *behemot*, usually understood as "beasts of burden," badly mistreated by the Babylonians in their chore of carrying the lumber of Lebanon. However, v. 2:17 is very difficult. It is possible that *behemot* refers here to Egypt, *The beast of the bulrushes* (Ps. 68:31)¹¹, and to a political-military event in which Egypt reacts to Babylon's moves in Aram and Lebanon (Isa. 30:6) (item 6). Perhaps v. 2:17a describes a time when Babylon made some conquests in Aram and Lebanon that provoked an angry reaction from Egypt, which considered these areas to be under its influence. It is known that Nebuchadnezzar II went very often to Syria and Palestine to drive out the Egyptians, taking the Philistine city of Ashkelon in 604 and trying to push into Egypt in 601, when he was forced to pull back after a bloody, undecided battle and regroup his army in Babylon.

I have also argued that in v. 3:2 "*shanim* [years]" should be read as "*shovim* [captors] (item 7), a term attested to in Isaiah 14:2, an emendation of only one letter for another very similar one. The emended verse *O Lord, I heard Your renown, I fear Your deed, among his captors make him survive, [when] among*

his captors announce, in anger mercy You will remember makes good sense, while *bekerev shanim* is problematic.¹²

Reading v. 3:2 as concern about the survival of the exiled implies that he prophesied after the exile, but it is not clear whether he refers to the first wave of exiles in 597 (II Kgs. 24:14-16) or the massive one of 586 (25:1-11). The strong tradition that Habakkuk lived at the time of Daniel makes it more likely that it was the latter; a tradition apparently reflected in the legend of *Bel and the Dragon* and the dating of Clement of Alexandria. Consequently, I assume that Habakkuk started his prophetic activity at the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim (608-598) or a few years earlier, and continued until after the fall of Jerusalem (587). This period of about 20 years will be shown to encompass all the indicated historical allusions.

HABAKKUK'S PROPHETIC ACTIVITY

How old was Habakkuk when he started to prophesy is not known. The tenor of his complaints suggest he was mature, perhaps 30-40 years old. If he started to prophesy about 608, that would make him about 60 years old at the end of the Kingdom of Judah. He then lived in some of the most tumultuous times of Judah and the Near East. The young Habakkuk was probably shaped by the religious reformation of King Josiah (639-609), and perhaps was a member of the King's movement of religious and political activism that led to national renewal and territorial expansion.¹³

Judah's days of greatness were brief. After the fall of Assyria, Babylon and Egypt vied for control of Syria and the Land of Israel (item 6?), and Judah was crushed in this battle of the giants. In 609, Pharaoh Necho II marched an Egyptian force to the aid the remnant of Assyria and contain the Medes and Scythians. Josiah, who was pro-Babylonian, tried to stop Necho and was killed at Megiddo and Necho quickly deposed Josiah's son and successor King Jehoahaz, apparently because he was also pro-Babylonian, and crowned his brother Jehoiakim as King of Judah.

Jehoiakim seems to have allowed deterioration of his father's reforms (v. 1:4) and to have held prophets in contempt (Jer. 36:22-23). In II Kings 24:4 he is accused of spilling innocent blood in Jerusalem, and Jeremiah accuses him of expanding his palace while neglecting social justice (22:13-17). These acts, so antithetical to Josiah's administration of justice, seem as an appropriate basis for

Habakkuk's complaint in 1:2-3.

In response to his first complaint, God promises to raise the Chaldeans (1:5-6). This was an astounding development: The Assyrian Empire would be replaced not by the aggressive Medes and Scythians, who played the major role in the fall of the Assyrian Empire, but rather by Babylon the minor partner in that coalition. This was about to occur in "their days," perhaps a few years after the fall of Nineveh.

In 605, Pharaoh Necho II marched toward the Euphrates River and was countered by a Babylonian force commanded by Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar. In the ensuing battle at Carchemish, one of the most important in history of that time, the Egyptians were utterly routed. Nebuchadnezzar was pursuing them back to the borders of Egypt when he was called to Babylon because of his father's death, and there succeeded to the throne in 604. Babylon was now obviously a major geopolitical power in the Near East.

An assumption that Habakkuk started to prophesy about 608 would well fit the historical events, giving about 45 years to accommodate the urgent *in your days* (1:5); the change from Babylon's limited power in 620-610 to the rise of its Chaldean dynasty after 604 (1:6).

Perhaps Habakkuk hoped that Babylon would depose the pro-Egyptian Jehoiakim and, in recognition of Josiah's valiant pro-Babylonian stance at Meggido, allow Judah a more tolerable vassal kingdom. However, Jehoiakim retained his throne even when Judah fell to Babylon. This may have been the background for Habakkuk's second complaint (1:12-13). The exploitation of Judah continued, changing Habakkuk's original pro-Babylonian enthusiasm into bitter resentment (2:5-19).

Yet, like his contemporary Jeremiah, he understood that Judah did not have any choice but to wait patiently for the end of its predicament. God's response at the watchtower emphasizes "timeliness" and the need to wait (2:3). But despite the warnings of these prophets, the last kings of Judah would not wait and resign themselves to servitude. Continuously did they try to exploit political shifts in the region to regain independence. The international situation, however, at that time demanded extreme skill in political maneuvering. Repeatedly were the kings of Judah forced to come to terms with kaleidoscopic situations and astonishingly frequent political dilemmas that had most fateful consequences.¹⁴

The downfall of Judah began with the opportunistic moves of Jehoiakim. In

601, Nebuchadnezzar's failed march on Egypt may have prompted Jehoiakim to rebel against Babylon counting on support from Egypt. After his smaller incursions on Syria and a guerilla war against Judah (II Kgs. 24:1-2), Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah at the end of 598 (item 4). Jerusalem was taken in March 597, after Jehoiakim had died. His son Jehoiachin capitulated, and along with at least 10,000 Judeans he was carried off to exile in Babylon. Zedekiah, a son of Josiah, was appointed the new king.¹⁵

In my view, Habakkuk in v. 2:4, in line with similar efforts by Jeremiah, urges Zedekiah to stay on course as a vassal of Babylon,¹⁶ Though Zedekiah was apparently a pro-Babylonian, for several reasons he eventually succumbed to pressures for revolt. In 589, the Pharaoh Hophra, who had succeeded Necho II, tried to combine all the Syrian states in a conspiracy against Babylon. The time seemed opportune for a rebellion, since for two years past Babylon had been in straits both without and within the empire. It was attacked by Elam, and faced uprisings in Edom, Moab, and Ammon, while Tyre and Sidon joined the Egyptian coalition. Babylon's cruel oppression, Egypt's encouragement, and personal ambitions eventually persuaded Zedekiah to join the rebels. A Babylonian army began to surround Jerusalem in 587. It was unable to take the city by storm and intended to subdue it by starvation. Pharaoh Hophra came to help the besieged, and the Babylonians raised the siege to drive the Egyptians back, but then returned to Jerusalem. They captured the city in 587/586, completely destroyed it, and took the Temple treasures to Babylon.

Many thousands of Judeans were forced into the Babylonian Exile, and the country was reduced to a province of the Babylonian Empire. Zedekiah was brought before Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah, where his sons were slain before him and his eyes blinded. It is this event that probably led Habakkuk to his plea *O Lord, I heard Your renown, I fear Your deed, among his captors make him survive, [when] among his captors announce, in anger mercy You will remember* (3:2). Habakkuk perhaps describes the state of Judah at that time in 3:17.

CONCLUSION

Only 25 years after the glorious days of Josiah, Judah was conquered and subjugated, because its leadership made the wrong political choice of relying on Egypt. While in retrospect such a judgment seems warranted, it is difficult objectively to fault the leadership for making this choice. Generally, Egypt was the

dominant power in the area. Egypt, and probably many residents of the area of Israel and Judah, considered this area as part of its sphere of influence. The intervention of the Mesopotamian powers in the affairs of Syria-Palestine was relatively late and sporadic. Most of the contact came in the form of raids by various kings, with the goals of collecting booty. The hard political choices emerged when Mesopotamia and Egypt came into direct conflict. At that point, Israel and Judah were important strategically to both powers, as a staging area for attacks and as a buffer zone for warning and prevention of these attacks.

In this context it would not be surprising that groups supporting reliance on Egypt, Babylon, or neither were formed in the royal court, among the country's elite, priests, and prophets. Such groups must have exercised considerable influence on the king, in particular when weak kings ruled. It is likely that Josiah's far-sighted and statesmanlike policy survived him. Jeremiah 36 provides some evidence for pro-Babylonian leanings in the court, and he himself may have been associated with the pro-Babylonian group. Nielsen says:

the popularity in these circles of the prophet Jeremiah who is described in our sources, more or less correctly, as pro-Chaldean, and is imprisoned as such by Jehoiakim's successor, Zedekiah, clearly indicates their political convictions. It is even conceivable that Jeremiah acted as their mouthpiece.¹⁷

Had Habakkuk been associated with any such political groups? Was he pro-Babylon? Was he pro-Egypt? Neutral? Haak observes:

The first factor which must be considered is the fact that the oracle in 1:5-6 is clearly pro-Babylonian. If the understanding of the text presented in the translation above is correct, this pro-Babylonian stance continues throughout the prophecy. This would indicate that Habakkuk must be placed within the pro-Babylonian party in Judah.¹⁸

While little is known of Habakkuk or the political intrigues and affiliations of Judah's elite, one can discern in the Habakkuk corpus an initial admiration for the Chaldeans, or Babylonians.¹⁹ This attitude drew on the perception that the Babylonians were peace-loving people who had been oppressed and dislocated by the Assyrians. However, Habakkuk's initial favorable attitude changed as he came face to face with the Babylonian treacherous behavior toward Judah. It can be discerned in the Book of Habakkuk how the prophet's sentiments evolve from astonishment, wonderment, and perhaps sympathy toward the Babylonians

to utter hate, detestation, and eventual glee at their demise. This transformation of feelings took place within the two decades 608-587 in which Babylon became the super power in the Near East and Habakkuk prophesied.

NOTES

1. Only three prophets have in their superscription the title *Navi*: Haggai, Zechariah, and Habakkuk. Other prophets are identified by this title (Isa. 38:1, 39:3; Jer. 1:5, 20:2) but not in the superscription to their books. The identification of Habakkuk as a prophet in two superscriptions, singles him out as a professional prophet.
2. The heading of *Bel and the Dragon*, in the translation of the Septuagint (Codex Chisi) and the Syrian-hexaplar version which was made from it, says, "By prophet Habakkuk son of Jesus the son of Levi ."
3. A. Pinker, "Habakkuk 2:4 – An Ethical Paradigm or Political Statement?" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (forthcoming).
4. A. Pinker, "'Captive' for 'years' in Habakkuk 3:2," *Revue Biblique* 112,1 (2005) pp. 20-26.
5. W. Whiston, (trans.) *The Works of Josephus* (Peabody: Hendrickson 1992) p. 269.
6. The Zohar (1:7b, 2:44-45) states that Habakkuk was the son of the Shunamite woman whose birth was predicted by the prophet Elisha, telling her that after a year she would be embracing [*hoveket*] a son (II Kgs. 4:16). Obviously, this linguistic link cannot be a basis for dating Habakkuk's prophecy.
7. Among the modern scholars who have worked on this aspect of this prophecy of Habakkuk are: F.L. Andersen, *Habakkuk*, Anchor Bible 25 (New York: Doubleday, 2001) p. 27; C.F. Keil, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Vol. I (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) p. 412; M. Bolle, *Sepher Habakkuk, in Tere Asar im Perush Daat Mikra*, Vol. II. (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook) p. 6; G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Abingdon Press, 1968) p. 455; O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 1965) p. 422; K. Budde, "Habakkuk," in *Encyclopædia biblica; a critical dictionary of the literary, political and religious history, the archaeology, geography, and natural history of the Bible* (eds. T.K. Cheyne and J.S. Black) (NY: Macmillan Co., 1899-1903) cols. 1921-1928; R.D. Haak, "Habakkuk," *Supplement to Vetus Testamentum*, Vol XLIV (Leiden: Brill, 1992) pp. 131-133; W.L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*. Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) pp. 426-28, and "Plausible Circumstances for the Prophecy of Habakkuk," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 120,1 (2001) 123-142); J.M.M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) p. 83.
8. By the seventh century BCE cavalry equipped with both spear and bow, armored, and riding armored horses were in use, but played an uneven role in the various armies. In Assyria the dominance of the chariot persisted to the last of its days.
9. A. Pinker, "Nineveh's Defensive Strategy and Nahum 2-3," *Zeitschrift für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 119,1 (2007) pp. 618-625.
10. A. Pinker, "Habakkuk 2:4 – An Ethical Paradigm or Political Statement?" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (forthcoming).
11. J. Feliks, *The Animal World of the Bible* (Tel-Aviv: Sinai, 1962) p. 24.
12. A. Pinker, "'Captive' for 'years' in Habakkuk 3:2," *Revue Biblique* 112,1 (2005) pp. 20-26.
13. Josiah took advantage of the collapse of Assyrian power for territorial expansion and religious rejuvenation. Within 20 years, he extended his rule over the entire Land of Israel.

14. A. Malamat, "The Twilight of Judah: In the Egyptian-Babylonian Maelstrom," Supplement *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1974) 125. The great fortress or palace built by Jehoiakim at current Ramat Rachel, half-way between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, was certainly bound up with the revolt he was planning against Babylon (Jer. 22:13-19). (See: Y. Aharoni, "Entry to Exile" in *The Jews in their Land* (ed. D. Ben-Gurion) (London: Aldus Books, 1974) p. 66.

15. Malamat, pp. 133-134. The biblical sources on the exile of Jehoiachin are in outward contradiction. According to II Kings 24 the exile encompassed 10,000 (v. 14) or 7,000 (v. 16) persons (to either of which we must add 1,000 armourers and sappers). According to the list of exiles in Jer 52 a mere 3,023 were exiled. Malamat suggests that two separate deportations might be involved, 3,000 captives in the initial phase and 7,000 in the main deportation, at the later stage. The total for the two deportations was 10,000.

16. The word *yicheh* echoes Jeremiah's promise to Zedekiah that he will survive by being subservient to Babylon (Jer. 27:12, 17). Even when Babylon was at the gates of Jerusalem did Jeremiah promise Zedekiah that he will live if he only surrenders to the Babylonian (Jer. 38:17, 20). All the reference to human life in Jeremiah is in the context of yielding to Babylon. Habakkuk 2:4b may be a similar advice to Zedekiah.

17. E. Nielsen, "The Righteous and the Wicked in Habaquq" *Studia Theologica* 6 (1953) pp. 76-77. Jeremiah finds help from influential persons at rather critical moments as indicated in chapters 36 and 26. Nielsen suggests that Josiah's son Shallum-Jehoahaz followed in the steps of his father, and therefore was removed from his throne after three months and exiled to Egypt (cf. Jer. 22:10-11, Ez. 19:1-5), being replaced by Jehoiakim. In the eyes of the pro-Babylonian group Shallum-Jehoahaz was considered the *tsadik*, the lawful ruler, while his younger brother Jehoiakim was an usurper, the *rasha*. Habakkuk 2:4-5 refers to both kings by saying that the *rasha* will not prosper while the *tsadik* shall live by his faith (or steadfastness). As Babylonian dominance grew, Egypt's influence in Judah dwindled. Jehoiakim had eventually to align himself with Babylon.

18. Haak translates 1:6 thus: "for behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that nation bitter and skilled, the one walking on the broad places of the earth, in order to dispossess the one [Jehoiakim] whose dwellings are not his own [but those of Jehoahaz]."

19. Pinker, "Better, Bitter River," *Zeitschrift für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 114 (2002) pp. 112-115.