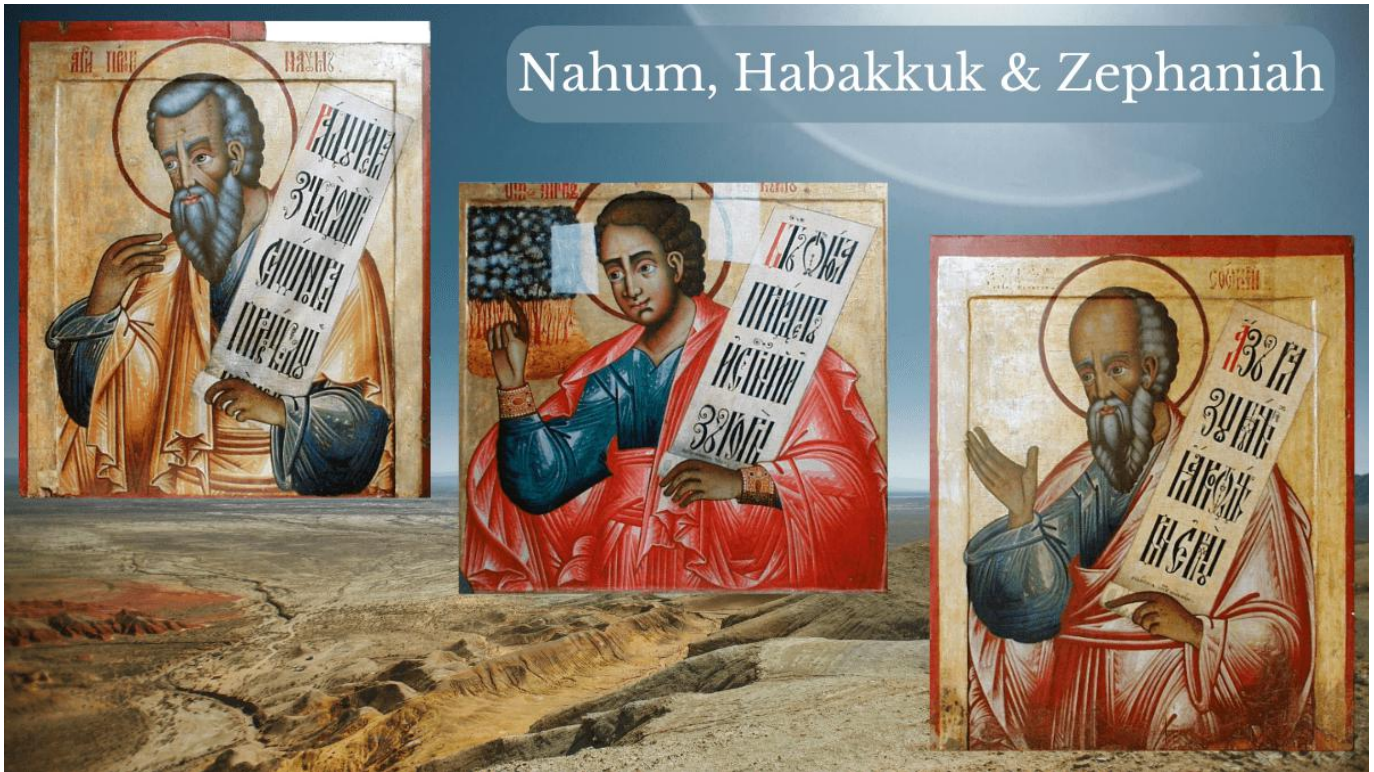


Nahum, Habakkuk & Zephaniah



A Trilogy: Nahum-Habakkuk-Zephaniah

Among the “Minor Prophets” these are three relatively short books, each consisting of only three chapters. There are no verses from Nahum that are part of the Sunday lectionaries; only one from Habakkuk and two from Zephaniah. Despite their limited use, these three books form an important “trilogy” about the last days of the Kingdom of Judah and the Word of God that the prophet spoke to the kings, the priests, and people, as well as speaking to us.

As we have discussed throughout our course of studies, it is clear that books of the Old Testament, while having a primary source also have undergone editing. A good example is *Jeremiah* in which even the text itself lets us know the name of the editor: Baruch, Jeremiah’s secretary. Baruch collected stories, sermons, and more, assembling them into a single “book.” On a larger scale, that is true of the entire Old Testament.

The Torah (Pentateuch) - the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures - shows the clear pattern of a weaving of different oral traditions of the collective Hebrew memory into a unified story line. This is why you often hear the expression: “in its final written form.” Such editing is not only true within a book, but in the order in which the books traditionally appear in catalogs and lists. As for our “trilogy” the internal editing is always a topic for the scholars, but as will become clear, the placement of these three prophets in order has its own purpose.

Nahum-Habakkuk-Zephaniah provides a prophet’s view of the history of the Kingdom of Judah over a narrow segment of history, somewhat less than 40 years leading up to the 587 BC destruction of Jerusalem by the armies of Babylon, the banishment of the people from the land, and the loss of the Promised Land.

The Land and the People

In his book on the three prophets, O. Palmer Robertson, provides a wonderful lens through which to consider how these three prophetic books not only address the times in which the prophets lived, but also how these three particular books are well placed in the storyline of the Hebrew Scriptures. Robertson

focuses on the possession of the land promised to Abraham - what that bespeaks of the relationship of the people to their God - and what dispossession of the land implies.

If Moses and Joshua provided the direction for Israel in their possession of the land, then the prophets provided the direction for Israel through their loss of the land. Abraham had been promised a land not because he had none, but because this gift of God communicated the hope of restoration to the garden. Abraham wandered in the land all his lifetime, waiting to possess the promise until the day of his death. When the land was finally claimed, it was described in idyllic terms: it was a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 3:8, 17; etc.). Like a paradise restored, its possession symbolized the consummation of God’s redemptive purposes.

But what then could banishment and exile from the land mean to God’s people? They had become “Not-My-People” (cf. Hos. 1:9 *Then the LORD said: Give him the name “Not-My-People,” for you are not my people, and I am not “I am” for you.*). They no longer possessed the symbol of the blessings of redemption. What could be more drastic? Who could explain such an experience? This task was given to Israel’s prophets. As the God-inspired interpreters of the breakup of nations, they offered the framework for a faith that would provide the key to life in the midst of cataclysmic circumstances.

In many respects, the exile of Israel from the land was a redemptive event far more complex than the call of Abraham. God’s purposes of redemption focused originally on a single individual. But now an entire nation manifesting a diversified response to the challenges of faith became the center of redemptive acts of judgment and salvation. As God worked out his purposes, mighty world powers marshaled troops that strode across continents seeking the fulfillment of their ambitious goals. They too had a role to play in the ongoing drama of redemption.

The struggle of the life of faith originally demonstrated by a single wandering patriarch had become international in scope. Instead of claiming the promise of the land in opposition to other localized peoples, the people of God must now exercise faith in the face of an international power struggle seeking to control the Palestinian land bridge that joined three continents.

It is remarkable to see how faith triumphs (or how non-faith fails to triumph) in a scene involving all the intrigue of international politics. Particularly when the struggle climaxes as it does in the 7th century B.C., the faith of the kings of Judah in the covenant promises of God determines the course of individuals and nations more than all the resources of the mightiest of monarchs in their hours of greatest strength.

Central to this entire cosmic drama is faith; and it is the prophets of Israel who interpret and apply the demands of faith to their own generation. The ministries of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah fit within this scheme of God’s redemptive purposes. Their ministries focus on the nation of Judah, since God had given her a central role as his chosen servant. But it is always Judah as God’s emissary to bring the message of redemption and judgment to the nations that provides the basis for God’s concentration on this tiny nation among the giants of the globe.

The Triumphs of Faith in the Days of Hezekiah (715–687 BC)

This part of the biblical storyline no longer includes the Northern Kingdom. They were dispossessed from their lands and exiled into a diaspora by the Assyrian Empire (722 BC) before our three prophets came on the scene. It is only the Kingdom of Judah that remains, centered in Jerusalem with Solomon’s Temple as the symbol of their nation and the presence of God among them. The throne of David is occupied by King Hezekiah, left with no allies against the might of the Assyrian Emperor Sennacherib whose armies stand before the gates in 701 BC.

The realistic and prudent choice would be to pay tribute and become a vassal state of Assyria. The prophet Isaiah pleaded with Hezekiah to place his trust in the Lord and Hezekiah had taken massive steps of faith by repudiating Assyria's dominance and preparing for the retaliation that was sure to come (2 Kings 18; 2 Chr. 32; Isa. 36–37). One of these works of faith was the construction of Hezekiah's tunnel. Hezekiah prepared Jerusalem for an impending siege by the Assyrians, by blocking the source of the waters of the upper Gihon, and leading them straight down on the west to the City of David (2 Chronicles 32:30). By diverting the waters of the Gihon springs, he prevented the enemy forces under Sennacherib from having access to water during the siege while the city had a steady and reliable supply. Though no one was overwhelmed at the sight of the Assyrian troops as they arrived, the Israelites at least could laugh among themselves at the taunts of Sennacherib's emissary that they would die of thirst if they resisted him (cf. 2 Chr. 32:11).

Assyria has perfected their "war machine" and to that point in history, no city had successfully resisted conquest. Hezekiah placed in trust in God and God's protection became evident. The Assyrian army encamped outside Jerusalem was destroyed overnight, and Sennacherib was forced to return to Assyria (Isa. 37:36–38; 2 K. 19:35–37; 2 Chr. 32:20–21). Not only the scriptural records but also the Assyrian annals attest to the work of God. Upon his return home to Nineveh, Sennacherib was assassinated by his sons in the house of his gods (2 Kings 19:36–37).

There is the flow of history among the machinations of someone who wanted to be Emperor of the known world and the internecine intrigues of a royal family, the covenant God of Israel showed himself faithful to the promises made to David and his sons. Hezekiah's faith in the sovereign purposes of God was stronger than human armies. God's purposes to provide a way of redemption from sin proved stronger than the purposeful strivings of human beings.

The Dark Days of Unbelief

Kings Manasseh (687–642 BC) and Amon (642–640 BC)

King Manasseh did not "inherit" the faith of his father Hezekiah. Manasseh was uniquely and personally responsible for introducing the abominations of sacred prostitution and human sacrifice within the religious practice of Israel (2 Kings 21:6–9; 2 Chr. 33:6–9). It is perhaps that in these abominations, he sealed Israel's fate in spite of subsequent repentances.

Despite his complete ignoring of the king's role to lead the people in Covenant righteousness and holiness, Manasseh survived the rulership of three Assyrian monarchs: Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal who came to the weakened Assyrian throne in 669 BC. But it came at a price. Judah was a vassal state required to provide tribute, materials and labor to building projects of Nineveh.

It was during this time that Assyria was focused and determined to extend its control over the nation of Egypt - and it is the Promised Land that lay between the two worldly powers. As a consequence, aggressive Assyrian military and political power was felt in Palestine throughout this period which included conscription into military service as well as the armies of Judah going to war as an ally of Assyria. The military campaign extended 400 miles down the Nile River to the city of Thebes. The Assyrian record does not indicate whether Israel's troops were forced to accompany the Emperor for the entire 400-mile trip down the Nile to Thebes (aka 'Ni to the Assyrians; No in Hebrew). The story of this campaign and conquest was well known to the inhabitants of Judah, as seen by the prophecy of Nahum. He boldly asks the Assyrians themselves if their situation for defense is better than that of No because now the hand of God is coming against them (in Nahum's time, not Manasseh's):

“Are you better than No-amon that was set among the Nile’s canals, Surrounded by waters, with the river for her rampart and water for her wall? Ethiopia was her strength, and Egypt without end; Put and the Libyans were her allies. Yet even she became an exile, and went into captivity; Even her little ones were dashed to pieces at the corner of every street; For her nobles they cast lots, and all her great ones were put into chains.” (Nah. 3:8–10)

Quite intriguing is the fact that Assyrian presence in Israel reaches its zenith at the time when the monarch of Israel shows little or no faith in the one true living God. From a purely secular perspective, Assyria had to invade and subdue Egypt if they intended to maintain control of Syro-Palestine. As impossible as the task might have seemed, the effort had to be made. Otherwise Assyrian aspirations for world domination had to be surrendered. But one can hardly overlook the fact that the time of Assyrian expansionism corresponded with the dark days of unbelief under Manasseh. The God of all nations would not allow the people bearing his name to deny him with impunity.

The Repentance of Manasseh?

2 Chronicles has an “addendum” to the life of Manasseh not recorded in *Kings*. According to this account, Manasseh was carried away to Babylon by the Captain of the Assyrian army. There Manasseh repented, humbled himself, prayed to the Lord, and was brought again to Jerusalem. Upon his return, he instituted certain building projects and initiated a number of religious reforms (2 Chr. 33:11–20). While no direct testimony outside Scripture confirms this distinctive record of the Chronicler, certain circumstantial considerations support the account. Those theories need not be rehearsed here, but most versions have Manasseh becoming involved in a revolt within the ruling house of Assyria which also controlled the city of Babylon during this timeframe. While Judah is not mentioned in the Assyrian annals as regards this revolt, the Assyrian texts mention the subduing of Edom, Ammon, and Moab and the humiliation of their kings. If this was, in part, Manasseh’s fate, the Judean king would have been over sixty years of age at the time, having known nothing but life on the throne since he was twelve years of age (2 Chr. 33:1). The shock of such a sudden and complete humiliation might have brought about the piety that may have marked perhaps the last five years of his fifty-five-year reign.

Just such an historical circumstance provides an appropriate setting for the prophecy of Nahum. This was the height of Assyrian power and domination from Egypt to Elam they dominated all the nations of the world. Yet Nahum does not hesitate to declare their doom.

Thus says the LORD: though fully intact and so numerous, they [Assyrians] shall be mown down and disappear (Nah. 1:12)

The reform of Manasseh, small though it might have been in comparison with the long years he had spent laying a solid foundation for an enduring apostasy, may explain why Nahum says little or nothing about the guilt of God’s people.

In introducing this analysis of Nineveh’s condition in his own day, Nahum employs the customary, solemn “*Thus says the Lord*” for the first and only time. He lays the strongest possible stress on the fact that despite all appearances of full strength in Assyria, God shall see to it that they fall. Only faith in the sovereignty of the God of redemption could generate belief in this message concerning Nineveh’s fall under such circumstances. But if the hand of God may be seen coordinating the hour of greatest strength for God’s chastening instrument with the deepest depravity of his people, then faith may also believe in the coming destruction of his enemies even when they currently appear to be in full force.

Manasseh was succeeded by his son Amon, who reigned only two years before he was assassinated by the servants of his own house (2 Kings 21:19–23; 2 Chr. 33:20–24). The rareness of this kind of violence

against the throne in the Southern Kingdom (it was the norm in the Northern Kingdom) attests to the grace of God in honoring the promise to the line of David. While ten different dynasties consumed one another in the approximately 200-year history of the northern kingdom, only the one dynasty of David reigned in Judah for almost 350 years.

Scripture does not discuss the reason for Amon's assassination. Possibly at Egypt's instigation an anti-Assyrian party removed Amon when they detected his return to the earlier policies of his father Manasseh. In any case, the "*people of the land*" immediately took over, executed Amon's assassins, and placed his own eight-year-old son Josiah on the throne (2 Kings 21:24; 2 Chr. 33:25). These "people of the land" may have been a privileged social and political class or an aristocratic institution of landowners which was active on the legal and military level and which had political influence. At any rate, they seemed to have a loyalty to the provisions concerning throne succession as found in the Davidic covenant. Their swift action preserved the throne of David intact despite the possibility of international intrigue.

Reformation Under Josiah (640–609 BC)

Josiah began his public career at eight years of age when his father Amon was murdered and that he was to be king. Nothing is known of the early years of Josiah's reign. But he must have been impressed very early with an awareness of God's covenant fidelity throughout the centuries. He was a son of David, a direct descendant of the one chosen by God to reign in this very place three hundred years previously. Neither the pharaohs of Egypt nor the monarchs of Assyria could boast of a God so faithful and so powerful. By the time he was sixteen years of age, Josiah "*In the eighth year of his reign, while he was still a youth, he began to seek after the God of David, his father. Then in his twelfth year he began to purify Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the asherahs, and the carved and molten images*" (2 Chr. 34:3).

In this passage distinctive to the Chronicler, the exilic author employs one of his keywords to describe the early religious experience of the youthful king: he began to "seek" the Lord (2 Chr. 34:3; cf. the programmatic statement of 2 Chr. 7:14). Following this early inclination, Josiah at twenty years of age began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the pagan images which Manasseh had introduced (2 Chr. 34:3–7). He extended his reform into the Assyrian-dominated territory of the northern kingdom of Israel, including cities located in the territory of Manasseh, Ephraim, Simeon, and even Naphtali (2 Chr. 34:6). The precise timing of the early beginning of Josiah's purge is significant for three reasons:

- This early purge occurs in the twelfth year of his reign, which would be 628 BC, before the death of Ashurbanipal, The tyrant who had cowed Manasseh into aiding him with his assault against Egypt. Yet Josiah presumed to move into the northern part of Palestine and exercise his prerogative as Israel's messianic-king figure. For a young man only twenty years of age, this action could be inspired only by folly or by faith in the rightness of the Lord's cause.
- This early purge of Josiah preceded the call and ministry of Jeremiah and apparently of Zephaniah as well. As a young lad without prophetic backing, Josiah had the courage, the faith, and the strength of will to overthrow a religious, social, and political tradition that had regulated the whole life of his populace for the previous sixty years.
- This early purge preceded the discovery of the "law book" in the temple by six or seven years. Even without this authoritative justification for his actions, the king introduced his radical program of reform.

It is understandable that the Chronicler says of Josiah: "*He did what was right in the LORD's sight, walking in the way of David his father, not turning right or left.*" (2 Chr. 24:2)

With the death of Ashurbanipal an era came to an end. For the previous one hundred years, the might of Assyria had dominated the life of the people of Israel. The Assyrian Empire quickly weakened. Within 15 years Nineveh the capital had fallen. No sooner had Ashurbanipal died than Babylon and the Medes, both to the East, asserted their independence.

If the weakness of Manasseh's faith had corresponded to the time of Assyrian strength under Ashurbanipal, the strength of Josiah's faith corresponded with a time of unprecedented weakness for Assyria.

It was in this context that the "*book of the law*" that had been "*given by Moses*" was discovered in 622 (2 Kings 22:8; 2 Chr. 34:14–15). Now the reform of Josiah took a significant leap forward. The book of Kings stresses the destruction of false-worship centers and the extension of the reform to Bethel in the territory of the northern kingdom (2 Kings 23). The book of Chronicles pays special attention to the cultic celebration of the Passover, noting the prominent role of priests, Levites, and singers (2 Chr. 35).

The powerful prophetic ministry of Zephaniah appears to have arisen just at this point. Josiah made his public commitment to institute a mode of life for his kingdom based on the pattern established in the "*book of the covenant*." He found just the support he needed in the ministry of the prophet Zephaniah. With language steeped in the covenantal formulations of the book of Deuteronomy, Zephaniah presents a picture of covenantal judgment without rival anywhere in Scripture for its stark depiction of the terrors of the coming consummation. At the same time, his penetration into the love of God reaches dimensions that stagger the imagination. Even in the context of coming devastation because of sin, the redeeming love of God for his people shall prevail.

Scripture provides little information concerning the international scene between the time of Josiah's reform in 622 and his death in 609. But the following skeleton of events may be constructed from various documents external to Scripture:

- A series of attacks and counterattacks defined the relation of the Assyrians to the Babylonians during this period. In the meantime, Egypt aligned itself with a weakening Assyria, perhaps sensing that the emerging state of Babylon was to them a greater threat than their previous conqueror.
- The Medes captured Asshur, the ancient capital of Assyria, in 614. This event further confirmed the weakened character of the Assyrian empire.
- The Medes and Babylonians joined forces and assaulted Nineveh itself in 612. The city fell after a three-month siege. The Babylonians assumed supremacy over this area while the Medes returned eastward. At the same time, a remnant of loyal Assyrian subjects established a new king and capital at Harran, approximately 150 miles west of Nineveh.
- Two years later, in 610, Babylon defeated the remaining Assyrian forces at Harran, although Assyrian resistance was not altogether eliminated. Egypt, under Pharaoh Neco II continued the policy of aiding Assyria with the thought and if Harran could be regained, perhaps Assyria could continue as a buffer state between Egypt and Babylon.

It was at this point that King Josiah made his fatal mistake. Perhaps he saw the march of Egyptian forces through his territory as an affront to his expanded sovereignty. Perhaps he felt it absolutely necessary to resist any strengthening of the hand of an Assyria that had oppressed his nation for so long. In any case, Josiah strategically intercepted the Egyptian army at the pass of Megiddo in 609. Neco attempted to dissuade him. According to the Chronicler, the words of Neco were the "*mouth of God*" to Josiah.

Neco sent messengers to him, saying: "What quarrel is between us, king of Judah? I have not come against you this day, for my war is with another kingdom, and God has told me to hasten. Do not interfere with God who is with me; let him not destroy you." But Josiah would not withdraw from him, for he was seeking a pretext to fight with him. Therefore he would not listen to the words of Neco that came from the mouth of God, but went out to fight in the plain of Megiddo. (2 Chr. 35:21–22)

Josiah did not heed the words. Having been fatally wounded, Josiah retreated to Jerusalem, where he died. Appropriately, all Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah according to the lamentation composed by Jeremiah (2 Chr. 35:24–25). His senseless death marked the end of an era. It was the last glimmer of hope for Judah. The mourning for Josiah became required in Israel (2 Chr. 35:25), and was remembered vividly almost a hundred years later in the time of Israel's restoration (cf. Zech. 12:10–11). This act of mourning over the last of the faithful king-messiahs of Israel eventually was treated prophetically in Scripture. It became a picture of the ultimate lamentation of Israel as it grieved over the sufferings of its true messianic king (John 19:37; cf. Rev. 1:7).

Final Destruction Under the Sons and Grandson of Josiah (609–587 B.C.)

From the point of Josiah's death, the end came quickly. In rapid succession, three of Josiah's sons and one of his grandsons ruled in Jerusalem until the fateful collapse of the kingdom to the Babylonians in 587. Why the reforms of good King Josiah did not reach into his own family is not explained explicitly in Scripture, but historians surmised that because Josiah had children by several wives when he was just a teenager - before the age of 16 - that court intrigue among wives and children became the focus rather than Josiah's religious reforms.

Although the "people of the land" acted swiftly in establishing Josiah's son Jehoahaz as king immediately on the death of Josiah (2 Chr. 36:1), their control of the situation was destined to be short-lived. Neco of Egypt, from Megiddo, went north to battle the Babylonians at Harran. The Egyptians won, but not decisively so. Returning from this frustrating failure to win a decisive victory over Babylon, Neco sought to consolidate his control over Syria and Israel, he summoned Jehoahaz, deposed him, and designated his older brother Eliakim as his successor, changing his name to Jehoiakim. Jehoahaz was carried in chains to Egypt, where he died in fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah (cf. Jer. 22:10–11).

It is not clear why Neco favored Eliakim over Jehoahaz. On the one hand, perhaps it was simply that he intended to assert his will in appointing a man who would be beholden to him. On the other hand, the choice of Jehoahaz by the "people of the land" may have represented their expectation that he would follow the same anti-Egyptian tendencies maintained by his father Josiah. In any case, the people of Israel had exercised their will for the last time in determining who would rule over them.

Jehoiakim early manifested a character that was particularly odious to Jeremiah (cf. Jer. 22:13–23). While the Lord required justice and uprightness, Jehoiakim had insisted on a luxurious cedared palace, far exceeding the dwelling of his pious father Josiah. Because he actually could not afford such luxury, Jehoiakim had forced the citizenry to labor on his extravaganzas without pay. The much more upright Josiah had been content simply with food and drink, feeling that the maintenance of justice among the people was more important than palatial structures. So Jeremiah denounced the king by announcing that Jehoiakim would be humiliated in his death in contrast with the honors heaped on his father. The prophet promised the king "the burial of an ass" (Jer. 22:19).

This historical circumstance that prevailed between 609 and 605 fits well the message of the prophecy of Habakkuk. The prophet begins with a severe complaint because of pervading violence among God's

people. He is particularly concerned because the Torah seems helpless, which indicates that he is talking about violence among God's own people (Hab. 1:4). With the example of a king like Jehoiakim who lived lavishly before the people, it would be surprising for the citizens to do otherwise. Jehoiakim's return to the idolatries of Manasseh would have provided broad support for disregarding the torah of Yahweh. The Lord responded through his prophet Habakkuk by indicating that he would deal with the situation in a way that the people won't believe:

“Look over the nations and see! Be utterly amazed! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe, were it told. For now I am raising up the Chaldeans [Babylonians], that bitter and impulsive people, who march the breadth of the land to take dwellings not their own. They are terrifying and dreadful” (Hab 1:5-6)

By the time Jehoiakim (aka Eliakim) sat on the throne (605), the balance of power in the region was beginning to shift: Egypt-Assyrian vs. Babylon. The battle of Carchemish in 605, established Babylon's dominance in the region. Once the Egyptian resistance had been broken, Babylon could not be stopped. The author of Kings reflects the completeness of Egypt's defeat: *“The king of Egypt came not again any more out of his land; for the king of Babylon had taken, from the brook of Egypt unto the river Euphrates, all that pertained to the king of Egypt”* (2 K. 24:7).

After a few years of subservience to Babylon, Jehoiakim joined in a revolt against Nebuchadrezzar. In December of 598. Within 4 months Jerusalem fell and the king captured, but Jehoiakim had died and so it was his son Jehoiachin who taken into exile. Jehoiachin is included with the kings condemned by Jeremiah (Jer. 22). The prophet indicates that Jehoiachin and his mother would be given over to Nebuchadrezzar and hurled into a foreign land never to return (vv. 26–27). This young king is described as a broken pot, as though childless, none of whose descendants would sit on the throne of David (vv. 28–30). Although the actual destruction of Jerusalem came ten years later in 587, in a real sense the succession to the line of David ended with the deportation of Jehoiachin, grandson to Josiah.

Within ten years of Habakkuk's prophecy, Babylon carried away captives from Judah (in 597); and within twenty years the unbelievable devastation of the city of David would be an accomplished fact (587).

In this hour of Israel's greatest crisis, the prophet Habakkuk declares essentially a single message: the person of faith *“the just one who is righteous because of faith shall live”* (Hab. 2:4). Even as Judah is primed to experience the ultimate of God's judgments, a sinful person, because of faith, may know that he is accepted by God despite his and the nation's transgression of covenant law. Even as the mighty empires of the world are crumbling all about, the person of faith *“shall live.”* He shall survive, he shall receive the blessings of the covenant, if only he will continue to believe no matter how bleak may appear the events of history. It is a message for the ages. If under these circumstances the covenant promises of God hold true to the one who believes, God's work of redemption can never fail.

The 7th century BC was indeed a time of the tramping and tromping of nations. But to the eye of faith guided by the words of God's prophets of old, a clearer vision may be gained concerning God's purposes of redemption as they are being realized in history. The message of these prophets continues to speak with revelational clarity even today.