

Habakkuk in Hebrews

Old Testament quotations in Hebrews 10 may raise questions when studying that chapter (as well as other passages in that book). A careful student of Scripture will turn back to the Jewish prophecies. The motive is not to challenge the New Testament writer but to see the original context.

When studying any New Testament book, the context is important.

- Who was it written to?
- How might their circumstances relate to what was written to them?
- What aim did the writer have for them?

(Many of those questions are a challenge to begin with in the case of Hebrews.)

The same questions can be asked when a New Testament writer uses a passage from the Old Testament. What was the original context, etc.?

Additional questions are also relevant.

- Was the NT writer using the original context, or did he have a different perspective on the passage?
- How would the first-century audience have responded to the OT reference?
- How would the OT quotation advance what the NT writer was saying?

Often, a further complication arises when the passage, as quoted in the NT, seems to vary to some degree from the original text. Hebrews 10:37-38 is an example.

Hebrews 10:37-38 NASB	Habakkuk 2:3-4 NASB1995
<p>³⁷ For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay.</p> <p>³⁸ But My righteous one shall live by faith; And if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.</p>	<p>³ “For the vision is yet for the appointed time; It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; For it will certainly come, it will not delay.</p> <p>⁴ “Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; But the righteous will live by his faith.</p>

Even ignoring the verse divisions (added centuries after the texts were written), there are some noticeable differences between the two passages. Several of the differences in wording are understandable in translating across multiple languages (OT Hebrew to NT Greek to modern English). For example,

He who is coming will come, and will not delay. (Hebrews 37b)
 For it will certainly come, it will not delay. (Habakkuk 2:3d)
(Both Hebrew and Greek omit the pronoun (“he” or “it”) which is determined by the context.)

Or in some cases, parts of the original were omitted in the reference (v. 3a-b).

As someone in a group discussion pointed out, we also paraphrase verses in order to communicate the meaning or intent of Scripture. And note that the writer does not say, “It is written...” which might imply a more precise quotation. He may have intended the words as a paraphrase or commentary rather than a precise quotation. In any case, the Holy Spirit was superintending the pastor’s work.

Another factor is the question of exactly which Old Testament version the writer was using. Presumably it would have been a version familiar to the audience. (Think how many modern discussions involve differing English translations of a passage.)

Essentially all modern English versions base the Old Testament translation on the Masoretic Text, the “traditional Hebrew text of the Jewish Bible.”¹ However, the Septuagint was a Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures prepared for the largely Greek speaking world at the time. (The designation “Septuagint,” abbreviated LXX, the Roman numeral for seventy, refers to the tradition of seventy scholars who did the translating.) Most (if not all) of the Old Testament quotations in the book of Hebrews were taken from the Septuagint, the Bible most familiar to the original audience. The chart below illustrates the similarities and the differences between a modern translation of Habakkuk, a Septuagint translation, and the English text of Hebrews 10.

Habakkuk 2:3-4 NASB1995	Habakkuk 2:3-4 LXX²	Hebrews 10:37-38 NASB
³ “For the vision is yet for the appointed time;	For the vision is yet for a time	
It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail.	And it shall shoot forth at the end, and not in vain;	³⁷ For yet in a very little while,
Though it tarries, wait for it;	Though he should tarry, wait for him	
For it will certainly come, it will not delay.	For he will surely come, and will not tarry	He who is coming will come, and will not delay.
⁴ “Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him;	If he should draw back, my soul has no pleasure in him	
But the righteous will live by his faith.	But the just shall live by my faith	³⁸ But My righteous one shall live by faith;
		And if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.

The Septuagint translation is noticeably different from the traditional text. The NT book of Hebrews follows the wording of the Septuagint, but changes the order of the clauses in verse 38, putting the reference to “shrinking back” at the end.

In the context of Hebrews 10, perhaps the writer wanted to emphasize “shrinking back” as the crucial element of the quotation. He was about to launch into a long discourse (Hebrews 11) about faith. The importance of faith is emphasized by the warning in Habakkuk. That warning is similar to the larger context of Hebrews 10, such as verse 27. “Shrinking back” would result in “a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.” In contrast, the final statement before chapter 11 provides the stirring encouragement to faith:

But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul. (Hebrews 10:39).

Most of the sermon to the Hebrews, including this passage and the Habakkuk quotation, has built towards “faith to the preserving of the soul,” the confidence that enables endurance (Hebrews 10:35-36).

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Masoretic-text>

² Sir Lancelot C. L. Brenton, trans., *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 1107.