HABAKKUK

# TITLE

This prophetic book takes its name from its author and possibly means “one who embraces” *(1:1;3:1).* By the end of the prophecy, this name becomes appropriate as the prophet clings to God regardless of his confusion about God’s plan for His people.

**CONTENT**

Habakkuk enters into dialogue with God over the question of injustice (how long do people get away with evil and God seems to do nothing?) and receives grounds for trust.

**AUTHOR AND DATE**

As with many of the Minor Prophets, nothing is known about the prophet except what can be inferred from the book. Internal information about Habakkuk is virtually nonexistent, making it impossible to establish any certain conclusions about his identity and life. His simple introduction as “the prophet Habakkuk” may imply that he needed no introduction since he was a well known prophet of his day. It is certain that he was a contemporary of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zephaniah.

The mention of the Chaldeans *(1:6)* suggests a late 7th century BC date, shortly before Nebuchadnezzar commenced his military march through Ninevah (612BC), Haran (609BC) and Carchemish (605BC) on his way to Jerusalem (605BC). Habakkuk’s bitter lament *(1:2-4)* may reflect a time period shortly after the death of Josiah (609BC), days in which the godly king’s reforms (*cf. 2 Kings 23)* were quickly overturned by his successor, Jehoiakim *(Jeremiah 22:13-19).*

**BACKGROUND AND SETTING**

Habakkuk prophesied during the final days of the Assyrian Empire and the beginning of Babylonia’s world rulership under Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar. When Nabopolassar ascended to power in 626BC, he immediately began to expand his influence to the north and west. Under the leadership of his son, the Babylonian army overthrew Ninevah in 612BC, forcing the Assyrian nobility to take refuge first in Haran and then Carchemish. Nebuchadnezzar pursued them, overrunning Haran in 609BC and Carchemish in 606BC.

The Egyptian king Necho, traveling through Judah in 609BC to assist the fleeing Assyrian king, was opposed by King Josiah at Megiddo *(2 Chronicles 35:20-24).* Josiah was killed in the ensuing battle, leaving his throne to a succession of three sons and a grandson. Earlier, as a result of discovering the Book of the Law in the temple (622BC) Josiah had instituted significant spiritual reforms in Judah *(2 Kings 22,23)* abolishing many of the idolatrous practices of his father, Amon *(2 Kings 21:20-22)* and grandfather, Manasseh *(2 Kings 21:11-13).* Upon his death, however, the nation quickly reverted to her evil ways *(cf. Jeremiah 22:13-19)* causing Habakkuk to question God’s silence and apparent lack of punitive action *(1:2-4)* to purge His covenant people.

**EMPHASES**

Prophetic indignation over God’s apparent toleration of injustice; prophetic confidence in the justice and power of God; the stance of the righteous is faithfulness and trust in God; God’s assurance that the wicked will be punished

**OVERVIEW**

The first two chapters take the form of a dialogue between the prophet and Yahweh over injustice. *Chapter 3* is the prophet’s final response to God in the form of prayer in which he longs for the new exodus, yet affirms his trust in God no matter what.

In his complaint, Habakkuk wrestles with what he knows to be true about God’s character alongside God’s apparent tolerance of the violence and injustice that abound in Judah *(1:2-4).* God’s response – that He is raising up the Babylonians to handle this matter *(1:5-11)* is small comfort to the prophet *(1:12-17)* since Babylonians are more violent yet. So he takes his stand like the watchman of the night to see what answer will come in the morning *(2:1).*

God’s second response is twofold:

1. the prophet must wait and continue to trust in God *(2:2-4)*
2. the arrogant will surely meet their doom in kind (plunder for plunder – *2:4-20)*

Habakkuk’s prayer is a dramatic metaphorical remembrance of the exodus from Egypt, which inspires hope, trust and rejoicing in God in the face of all difficulties.

**UNDERSTANDING HABAKKUKK**

In many ways Habakkuk is like an extended lament such as *Psalm 10* or *13.* Everything is predicated on God’s character, and the prophet’s/psalmist’s confidence that God will eventually judge the actions of the wicked. In each case it is precisely because of who God is that the prophet or psalmist cries out “how long?” at what seems to be divine tolerance of evil.

It is this relationship to the laments in Psalms that best explains the most unusual feature of Habakkuk – that there is no oracle directed toward God’s people as such. Rather the prophet has himself taken on the role of the people in his dialogue with God over present injustice. And the liturgical notations at the end of *chapter 3* make it clear that Habakkuk intended his prayer/psalm to be sung in the community of the righteous (‘*For the director of music. On my* *stringed instruments*.’)

The biblical background to Habakkuk is found in *2 Kings 22,23* and *2 Chronicles 34:1 – 36:4.* The way he mentions the raising up of Babylon in *1:6* suggests that it had not yet reached full international ascendancy (after 605BC) which, as noted earlier, made Habakkuk a contemporary of Zephaniah, Nahum, and Jeremiah. The description of Judah’s sins in these four books (including Habakkuk) confirm the Kings-Chronicles testimony that Josiah’s reform was short-lived and shallow, and that Judah was a society of continuing injustice, violence, and rejection of the law. Yet like his contemporaries, Habakkuk saw the future with clarity – that God’s justice would prevail.

The oracles against Babylon are in keeping with the whole prophetic tradition, which clearly understood Yahweh to be the sovereign God of the nations. God is the One who raised up Babylon to execute judgement against Judah.

*These notes have drawn heavily on “How to Read the Bible Book by Book” by G. Fee and D. Stuart (Zondervan 2002, pp.244-245) and to a lesser extent:*

* *“The MacArthur Bible Handbook” by J. MacArthur (Thomas Nelson Publishers 2003, pp.255-258)*
* *“Jensen’s Survey of the Old Testament” by I.L. Jensen (Moody Bible Institute 1978, pp.447-452)*

**HABAKKUK**

**1:1 – 4 Habakkuk’s First Complaint**

Much of this complaint (vs.2-4) is like the lament psalms – a cry for God to act in light of the present situation, plus a catalogue of reasons for the lament

**1:5 – 11 Yahweh’s Answer**

Yahweh’s response is not what the prophet expected. God is raising up Babylon to mete out His judgement against Judah. The unstoppable, relentless nature of the attack compares closely to Nahum’s (Nahum 2:3,4,9,10) and Joel’s visions (Joel 2:1-11)

**1:12 – 2:1 Habakkuk’s Second Complaint**

How can this be justice, when the God whose eyes are too pure to look on evil summons the treacherous to “swallow up those more righteous than themselves” (1:13)? So Habakkuk takes the place of the watchman to see how God will respond this time (2:1).

**2:2 – 5 Yahweh’s Answer**

The answer is threefold (1) Habakkuk must wait, for the answer (“the revelation”) will come at its appointed time (2) the Babylonians’ present stance of arrogance is doomed (3) the righteous will live by their faithful trust in Yahweh (v.4)

**2:6 – 20 Woe Oracles against the Oppressor**

The nature of God’s justice as His judgement is meted out on Babylon is *lex* *talionis* (eye for eye).

A different image is picked up in each of the five oracles. The plunderer is plundered (vs.6-8), the haughty conqueror is shamed (vs.9-11), the builder’s building becomes fuel for the fire (vs.12-14), the one who forces the other to get drunk will drink shame from the cup of God’s wrath (vs.15-17), and the silent idol is silenced before Yahweh, who is present in His temple (vs.18-20)

**3:1 – 19 Habakkuk’s Prayer and Confession**

This final section can be divided into three parts (1) v.2 a prayer that God would renew His deeds of old (2) vs.3-15 a celebration of God’s past victories as the Divine Warrior (3) vs.16-19 Habakkuk’s two-fold commitment to “wait patiently for the day of calamity” and to put his trust and hope in God under any circumstances (cf. 2:2-4)

In three stanzas (3:7,8, 8-10, and 11-15) Habakkuk weaves together (1) God’s dominion over the chaotic waters of creation (2) His causing the sun to stand still for Joshua (3) the theophany at Sinai (4) poetic description of the exodus (cf. Exodus 15:6-8; Psalm 114) into a reminder of God’s triumph over Pharaoh in delivering His people. All of this serves to reassure God’s people that He will act once more on their behalf

*These notes are a full summary of “How to Read the Bible Book by Book” by G. Fee and D .Stuart (Zondervan 2002, pp.246-247)*

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