

# HABAKKUK

## Message

The LORD *affirmation of righteous judgment transforms Habakkuk's heart from challenging God to confident believing praise.* Habakkuk struggles with the incomprehensible judgment that God is about to bring upon wicked Judah through the even more wicked and idolatrous Babylonians. God assures Habakkuk that judgment does not compromise His holiness, but engenders faith because even though He would use the wicked Babylonians as His rod of judgment against Judah, He would judge them and deliver His covenant people as their Mighty Warrior-God.

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

## Title

The Hebrew title of this book, “Habakkuk,” as in the case of the other Minor Prophets, is taken from the author and principal character of the book. The name Habakkuk is an unusual Hebrew name generally associated with the verb *habaq*, meaning “to fold one’s hands,” “clasp,” or “embrace.” Thus Habakkuk means “embraced by God” or “embracer of God.”<sup>1</sup>

## Author

Nothing is known about the prophet Habakkuk apart from his mentioned profession as a prophet (1:1; 3:1). “The designation ‘the prophet’ is an official title, showing that others recognized Habakkuk as a prophet of the LORD.”<sup>2</sup> Some have suggested that the prophet’s closing statement at the end of his psalm (3:19) “For the choir director, on my stringed instruments,” may imply that Habakkuk was a Levite, and therefore officially qualified to take part in the liturgical singing in the temple (see 1 Chron 25:1-8).<sup>3</sup> “Habakkuk is sometimes referred to as the ‘prophet of transition’ because his ministry makes the transition from Assyrian to Babylonian domination.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The name “Habakkuk” can be understood in either an active “embracer of God” or passive “embraced by God” sense. See J. Ronald Blue, “Habakkuk,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 1005.

<sup>2</sup>Ronald B. Allen, “Habakkuk,” in *Nelson Study Bible*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher, et al. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 1519.

<sup>3</sup>C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, “Habakkuk,” in *Minor Prophets, Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 10 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 10:49.

<sup>4</sup>Stephen J. Bramer, “Habakkuk” (unpublished class notes for course #304 Old Testament Prophets, Dallas Theological Seminary, Summer 2001).

### Date of Composition

Like Nahum, Habakkuk does not date his prophecy to coincide with the reigns of the kings of Judah, so a precise dating of his book is difficult to determine. However he does provide two internal characteristics that help to date his prophetic ministry. First, he must have written his prophecy shortly before 605 B.C. because he records a prediction from the LORD that He was raising up the Chaldeans (Neo-Babylonians), the fierce and impetuous people, to punish Judah (1:5-11). The first of the Neo-Babylonian kings was Nabopolassar (627-605 B.C.). Second, Habakkuk's description of the social conditions in Judah—*justice was being ignored and wickedness abounded* (1:2-4)—support a date between 609 and 605 B.C. (cf. 1:7-11). He describes conditions that existed in Judah following the death of “good” King Josiah (640-609 B.C.). Josiah had instituted an era of social reform that was rapidly lost following his death. The reign of “good” King Josiah was followed by the very brief reign (3 months) of his son Jehoahaz (609 B.C.), who was followed by wicked King Jehoakim (609-598 B.C.), a selfish, tyrannical and godless king who led the nation of Judah to destruction at the hands of the Babylonians in 605 B.C. (cf. 2 Kings 23:34–24:7; 2 Chron. 36:5-8). Since Habakkuk prophesied to Judah just prior to the Babylonian invasion in 605 B.C., a date of 607 B.C. for the writing of his book seems most reasonable.

*Habakkuk's Contemporaries.* Habakkuk was contemporary with the prophet Jeremiah (627-586 B.C.), and while some have suggest that he was also contemporary with Zephaniah (627-621 B.C.),<sup>5</sup> the evidence derived from the Book of Zephaniah would seem to indicate otherwise.<sup>6</sup>

*Habakkuk's Relationship to Several Other Writing Prophets.* Habakkuk is but one of four prophets who proclaim Yahweh's message of judgment against three countries/empires that afflicted God's people throughout their history:

1. Obadiah—against Edom (placed her if early or following Habakkuk if late)
2. Jonah—against Assyria
3. Nahum—against Assyria
4. Habakkuk—against Babylon

### Recipients

Habakkuk ministered unto the people of Judah, but in a round about way. That is, he did not directly prophecy against the people of Judah, instead he recorded a moving dialogue between himself and God that no doubt was used as a public expression to help

<sup>5</sup>Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody, 1976), 233-34.

<sup>6</sup>Assuming Zephaniah was born about 648-640, and that he would not have begun his prophetic ministry until he was 20 years of age, then the earliest date for his prophecy would be about 628-620. In addition, as noted by Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “since the book presupposes the existence of pagan idolatry in Judah (cf. [Zeph] 1:4-6), many would date it prior to Josiah's cultic reforms (ca. 622-621), which to some extent eliminated such practices (cf. 2 Kings 22–23) (*Interpreting the Minor Prophets* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990], 201).

the people of Judah better understand the ways of God in allowing a people more wicked than His own to serve as instruments of judgment against them.

### Historical Background

*The Positive Influence of King Josiah.* Josiah (640-609 B.C.) was the last godly king in Judah, who is remembered for bringing about the final spiritual revival in Judah. In 622 B.C. Josiah ordered repairs to be carried-out on the temple which resulted in the rediscovery of the Law (either the Book of Deuteronomy or the entire Mosaic Law, i.e., the Pentateuch or Five books of Moses; [2 Kgs 22:3-10]). This resulted in Josiah's convening of a sacred assembly of all the people to whom he had "read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the covenant" which in turn resulted in he and all the people making a pledge to God to obey the covenant (2 Kgs 23:1-3). The spiritual renewal that followed was superficial, and following Josiah's death in 609 B.C., the people quickly reverted back to their former wicked ways.

*The Prophesied Destruction of the Nation of Judah Following Josiah's Death.* Internally the national atmosphere of Habakkuk's day, following the death of good King Josiah, was characterized by a state of rapid spiritual degeneration. The people of Judah were guilty of gross covenant violations—social injustice, wickedness, destruction, contention, indifference to the law, and apathy toward God plagued God's wayward people (Hab 1:3-4). Following Josiah's death, his son Jehoahaz reigned for only three months before being deposed by the king of Egypt (2 Chr 36:1-4). King Jehoakim (609-598 B.C.), a selfish, tyrannical and godless king ruled over Judah for eleven years, and is probably most well known for his denunciation and destruction of Jeremiah's prophecies (Jer 36:23, 28). In 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish. As part of solidifying his rule, Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem, appointed Jehoiakim as the vassal king over Judah and took a number of hostages back to Babylon (2 Kgs 24:1). Daniel and his three friends were taken as a part of this first deportation (Dan 1:1-6). Jehoakim ruled for three years until his death in 597 B.C. and was followed by his son Jehoiachin who only ruled for three months before he was taken into exile to Babylon along with 10,000 fellow Judeans (2 Kgs 24:8-16). The Babylonians then installed Zedekiah as the vassal king of Judah. Zedekiah made a very unwise choice to rebel against Babylon and in 588 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar marched against Jerusalem and engaged in a very costly and prolonged two and one half year siege that led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the final deportation of Judah to Babylon.

### Theological Purpose

Habakkuk's theological purpose for writing can be seen in his struggle with the seeming incongruity of God's decision to use the Chaldeans as His instrument ("rod") of discipline on decadent Judah. What troubled Habakkuk was how God could use a people far more wicked, in his mind, than Judah to punish His own nation of Judah. God explains that He was going to use Babylon to punish His people for their covenant unfaithfulness. In other words, God was acting according to His nature as a sovereign and wise God, who will ultimately bring about His people's repentance and restoration. In the end, Habakkuk admits, through a beautiful psalm and prayer of praise to God, that God is indeed on His magnificent and glorious throne and the whole earth ought to be silent before His majesty. His psalm is really a beautiful

prayer of commitment to trust in the power of God to care for His people. Tom Constable suggests that Habakkuk's problem was really more on the lines of a "philosophical" dilemma, in which the prophet wrestles with the question of how God deals with the sins of His covenant people:

Habakkuk's concerns were of a philosophical nature. What disturbed him was that the sovereign Lord was not responding to Habakkuk's evil generation and its internal injustices. He voiced his concern to Yahweh in prayer (1:2-4). The Lord replied that He was working. He was raising up a nation that would punish His people for their covenant unfaithfulness (1:5-11). This raised another problem for Habakkuk, which he also took to the Lord in prayer. How could He use a more wicked nation than Judah to punish God's chosen people (1:12-2:1)? The Lord explained that He would eventually punish the Babylonians for their wickedness too (2:2-20). The final chapter is a hymn of praise extolling Yahweh for His wise ways. The purpose of the book, then, was to vindicate the justice of God so God's people would have hope and encouragement.<sup>7</sup>

### Literary Forms

The Book of Habakkuk introduces a new dimension in prophetic expression. *It presents Judah's dilemma rather than Yahweh's demands for preventing her judgment.* This book contains a variety of literary forms. The first part of the book is comprised of a dialogue between Habakkuk and his God which alternates between prophetic lament and oracle (1:2-2:5). The book presents two prophetic laments (1:2-4, 12-17) in which Habakkuk questions Yahweh's righteousness. The LORD responds to the prophet's questions with two oracles of judgment (1:5-11, 2:1-4). The second part of the book introduces a "taunt" comprised of five "woes" (2:6-20). Ronald B. Allen commenting on the connection the dialogues between Habakkuk and Yahweh (1:2-2:5) may provide with the taunt in 2:6-20 states that:

The connection between the dialogues [between Habakkuk and Yahweh] (1:2-2:5) and the taunt is left for the reader to apprehend, but this ambiguity and the terse poetic style encourage the reader to listen closely to the prophet's speech to God, and God's speech to the prophet, and to the prophet's speech against Babylon.<sup>8</sup>

The book concludes with a beautiful prayer of praise and trust in God, complete with musical directions (3:1-19).

## Outline

### I. Title 1:1

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<sup>7</sup>Thomas L. Constable, "Habakkuk" (notes published by Sonic Light and available for online downloading from [www.soniclight.com](http://www.soniclight.com), May 2000 Edition).

## II. Habakkuk's Complaints and Yahweh's Responses 1:2–2:20

### A. The First Dialogue 1:2-11

1. Habakkuk's complaint about Judah's sin 1:2-4
  - a. Yahweh's indifference to his prayers for Judah's punishment 1:2
  - b. Yahweh's indifference to His people's sin 1:3-4
2. Yahweh's response about Judah's judgment 1:5-11
  - a. Habakkuk is to be patient: Judgment is coming 1:5
  - b. Habakkuk is informed that Yahweh would use the Babylonians as His instrument of judgment on Judah 1:6-11
    - 1) Their dominance in that day 1:6
    - 2) Their dreaded description 1:7-11
      - a) Their deadly reputation 1:7
      - b) Their devouring swiftness 1:8-11a
      - c) Their determined judgment 1:11b

### B. The Second Dialogue 1:12–2:4

1. Habakkuk's complaint and commitment to wait for Yahweh's reply 1:12–2:1
  - a. Habakkuk's complaint about Yahweh's use of the wicked Babylonians to punish His own people (those more righteous than the Babylonians) 1:12-17
    - 1) How can a holy God tolerate the evil Babylonians? 1:12-13
    - 2) How can God allow His righteous to fall by the wicked Babylonians? 1:14-16
    - 3) How can God condone such evil without judging the Babylonians? 1:17
  - b. Habakkuk's commitment to wait for Yahweh's reply 2:1
2. Yahweh's response concerning His use of the wicked Babylonians 2:2-20
  - a. The LORD's indictment of Babylon: Judgment is certain 2:4-5
    - 1) Record the vision of Babylon's coming judgment 2:2
    - 2) Recognize that Babylon's judgment will come in God's appointed time 2:3
    - 3) Realize that the Babylonian's are to be contrasted with the righteous 2:4-5
      - a) The Babylonian's are proud and greedy (insatiable) conquerors 1:4a, 5
      - b) The righteous are those who live by faith in God 1:4b
  - b. The LORD's sentence on Babylon: A prophetic taunt or song comprised of "five woes" anticipating Babylon's coming judgment 1:6-20
    - 1) Woe #1—against their greedy extortion and plundering 2:6-8

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<sup>8</sup>Ronald B. Allen, "Notes on the Book of Habakkuk" (unpublished class notes in 304 Old Testament Prophets, Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 1998), 2.

- 2) Woe #2—against their evil gain 2:9-11
  - 3) Woe #3—against their violence and bloodshed 2:12-14
  - 4) Woe #4—against their drunkenness and immorality 2:15-17
  - 5) Woe #5—against their idolatry 2:18-19
- c. The LORD’s demand for reverence and respect: A command for all the peoples on earth to be silent before Him! 2:20

### **III. Habakkuk’s Response To Yahweh: A Prayer of Praise and A Commitment of Faith 3:1-19**

- A. Habakkuk’s Response to Yahweh’s Judgment 3:1-15
1. A prayer for God’s mercy in the midst of judgment 3:1-2
    - a. Introduction to Habakkuk’s prayer 3:1
    - b. Invoking God’s mercy in the midst of His approaching wrath 3:2  
(Habakkuk concludes that God’s ways, though not fully comprehensible, are best and to be trusted)
  2. A praise for God’s majesty and mercy in past judgments 3:3-15
    - a. A reflection on Yahweh’s awesome appearance: A Theophany of His Awesome Majesty and Might 3:3-7
    - b. A reflection on Yahweh’s angry actions in the past: A Theological Review of His Past Judgments 3:8-15
- B. Habakkuk’s Resolve to Wait on Yahweh: Commitment of Faith 3:16-19
1. The commitment of faith 3:16-19a
  2. The concluding musical notation 3:19b

### **Argument**

Apart from the opening Title (1:1), the Book of Habakkuk may be divided into two sections. The first section (1:2–2:20) presents a two-fold dialogue between Habakkuk and God in which Habakkuk addresses Yahweh with a complaint and Yahweh responds. In the first dialogue (1:2-11) Habakkuk complains about Yahweh’s apparent indifference to His people’s

sin, and prays for Judah's punishment (1:2-4). In His first response about failing to carry out judgment on Judah (1:5-11), Yahweh tells Habakkuk to be patient because judgment is surely coming (1:5). Yahweh goes on to inform Habakkuk that He would use the fierce and dreaded Babylonians as His instrument of judgment on Judah (1:6-11). In the second dialogue (1:12–2:4) Habakkuk complains about Yahweh's plan to use the wicked Babylonians to punish His own people (those more righteous than the Babylonians) [1:12-17]. Habakkuk makes a commitment to wait for Yahweh's reply (2:1). Yahweh responds that even though He is going to use the wicked Babylonians to chastise His wicked people in Judah, that Babylon's judgment will come in God's appointed time (2:2-3). While the Babylonians are described as proud and greedy (insatiable) conquerors (1:4a, 5), the righteous are described as those who live by faith in God (1:4b). The LORD pronounces His sentence of judgment on Babylon through a prophetic taunt or song comprised of "five woes" anticipating Babylon's coming judgment (1:6-20). The LORD denounces the Babylonians' greedy extortion and plundering (2:6-8); their evil gain (2:9-11); their violence and bloodshed (2:12-14); their drunkenness and immorality (2:15-17); and their idolatry (2:18-19). The LORD concludes the first section of Habakkuk with a demand for reverence and respect, and issues a command for all the peoples on earth to be silent before Him! (2:20)

The second part of the book deals with Habakkuk's Response To Yahweh which records his Prayer of Praise and A Commitment of Faith (3:1-19). Habakkuk concludes, like Job before him, that God's ways, though not fully comprehensible, are best and to be trusted. Habakkuk's response to Yahweh's judgment is to pray for God's mercy in the midst of judgment (3:1-2). Habakkuk continues by praising God's majesty and mercy in past judgments (3:3-15). Habakkuk concludes his book with a commitment of faith and resolve to wait on Yahweh (3:16-19), and closes with a musical notation (3:19b).