

# Habakkuk

## 1. Introduction

### 1. Background

#### (a) Events inside Judah

Habakkuk 1:2-4 describes conditions in Judah during a period of national moral decline. “Destruction and violence...strife and contention” suggests that social cohesion has gone. “The law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth...goes forth perverted” suggests that the judicial system no longer works. Moreover, the question with which the prophecy opens (“How long?”) indicates that this decline has been deepening for some time.

These conditions are consistent with the reigns of the kings before and after Josiah (reigned 640-609 BC). But Josiah himself was a good, reforming king.

God speaks in 1:6 of raising up the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans (Babylonians) were insignificant until the reign of Nabopolassar (626-605 BC), and their dominance in the ancient world dates from the battle of Carchemish and the accession of Nebuchadnezzar in 605 BC.

It seems reasonable, therefore, to date the prophecy of Habakkuk:

- to the period after the death of Josiah (609 BC) – which fits the collapse in the moral life of Judah;
- but also to the period before the accession of Nebuchadnezzar (605 BC) – which allows the prophecy to be truly predictive of the rise of the Babylonians.

Josiah was killed in battle against Pharaoh Neco (2 Kings 23:28-30).

He was succeeded by his son Jehoahaz, but after three months Neco deported Jehoahaz to Egypt and placed his brother Eliakim on the throne of David, changing his name to Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:31-34).

Jehoiakim reigned for 11 years (609-598 BC). He “did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his fathers had done” (2 Kings 23:37). Jeremiah was strongly critical of Jehoiakim (Jer. 22:13-23) – his denunciation fits with the conditions which provoked Habakkuk to cry out to God.

It was during Jehoiakim’s reign that the Chaldeans began to flex their muscles (2 Kings 24:1-2).

#### (b) Events outside Judah

The foundation of the Babylonian empire was laid during the reign of Nabopolassar who came to the throne in the year after the death of Ashurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria.

Nabopolassar joined with the Medes and destroyed Nineveh in 612 BC. Perhaps it was Nabopolassar’s assertiveness and aggressiveness that earned the Babylonians the reputation for being “that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own” (Hab. 1:6).

Assyria appealed to Egypt for help (Egypt was a vassal state of the Assyrian empire). Egypt marched north in 609 BC. Josiah (who followed an anti-Assyria, anti-Egypt policy) endeavoured to stop Pharaoh Neco's northward advance: he engaged Neco in battle at Megiddo, but was fatally wounded. Neco then joined forces with Assyria and faced down Nabopolassar at Harran.

Babylonian power stopped on the east side of the Euphrates. However, in 605 BC, Nabopolassar's son and heir, Nebuchadnezzar, crossed the Euphrates and devastated the armies of Assyria and Egypt at Carchemish. The Babylonian empire was the new world power.

## 2. Theme: Only faith triumphs in life despite many trials

Habakkuk finds himself in a vice – on the one hand the moral collapse of Judah demands the justice of God; on the other hand, God is going to use the Chaldeans (of all people!) as the instruments of his justice. It is true that the Chaldeans will themselves be judged by God (Hab. 2:6-20), i.e. there will be deliverance (though unlike the other pre-exilic Minor Prophets, Habakkuk does not spell this out); but in the meantime the Chaldeans will not be discriminating – they will pillage and deport the faithful as well as the faithless.

In this demanding context God's message to Habakkuk is that the righteous man can only live by his faithfulness (Hab. 2:4). Thus the prophecy shows how faith matures from confusion, through challenge, to confidence and contentment.

## 3. Structure and Content of Habakkuk

Superscription (1:1)

### Part 1 (1:2-17) *The Dialogue of Protest*

- A. 1:2-4 A complaint about unanswered prayer for relief from injustice
- B. 1:2-6 The LORD reveals his instrument of retribution
- C. 1:2-6 Habakkuk challenges the LORD's programme for punishment

### Part 2 (2:1-20) *The Resolution of Wisdom*

- A. 2:1 Habakkuk is at his watchpost
- B. 2:2-5 The vision demands living faith and rebukes arrogant unbelief
- C. 2:6-19 Five woes against the Chaldeans
- D. 2:20 The LORD is in his temple

### Part 3 (3:1-19) *A Psalm of Submission*

Liturgical superscription (3:1)

- A. 3:2 Habakkuk prays for the believer's life to be sustained
- B. 3:3-15 Habakkuk envisions God coming in all his glory
- C. 3:16-19b Habakkuk resolves his struggle by triumphant faith

Liturgical footnote (3:19c)

# Habakkuk 1:1-2:1

## 2. *God in the Dock*

The opening of the prophecy opens with questions: “How long? Why?” Habakkuk wants answers from God explaining God’s apparent lack of action.

### 1. **Chronic Fatigue (1:2-4)**

Violence, iniquity, wrong, destruction, strife and contention are what David Prior calls “horror words”. Society had become vicious, cruel and ugly. Bribery and intimidation were rife in the law courts. Good judges were hard to find. The whole legal system was perverted. Law and order no longer functioned.

It’s in this context that Habakkuk cries out, “How long?” This suggests that he had been deeply vexed by the collapse of society for some considerable time.

The question “Why?” demands not just a satisfying answer, but also swift and decisive action.

But – and this is the strange and puzzling thing that left Habakkuk perplexed – God seemed not to hear; God did not save; God appeared to look on idly.

Chronic fatigue was setting in among the faithful (of whom Habakkuk is a representative). Faith was looking for answers but finding none.

Conventional and simplistic answers often do not satisfy (c.f. Jobs comforters).

It is important to note that God does not chide Habakkuk – Habakkuk has neither been angry with God nor ignored God.

### 2. **From Bad to Worse (1:5-11)**

Habakkuk has questioned God’s apparent inaction. But when God speaks, it is to announce that he is going to take such astonishing action that Habakkuk wouldn’t believe it if he heard from another source (1:5). God is going to raise up the Chaldeans as the instrument of his judgement on the violence and injustice in Judah. (The role of the Chaldeans as God’s chastening rod is implicit.)

The Chaldeans were (i) ambitious (v. 6), (ii) awesome (v. 7a), (iii) arrogant (vv. 7b,11), (iv) able (vv. 8,10), and (v) aggressive (v. 9). They had marched several hundred miles north-west up the Fertile Crescent to sack Nineveh in 612 BC. They had held a coalition of Assyria and Egypt at bay in 609 BC. What could little Judah do against such a nation set on domination?

But notice that the LORD is in control: “I am doing a work...I am raising up the Chaldeans” (vv. 5-6).

### 3. **Surely Not! (1:12-17)**

The punishment (devastation at the hands of imperialistic warmongers) seems worse than the crime (home-grown injustice). Habakkuk is more confused than ever: “You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why

do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?" (Hab. 1:13).

Habakkuk compares the Chaldeans to fishermen (v. 15):

- some men they catch individually with hooks – and indeed the Chaldeans, like the Assyrians, led away high-profile captives with hooks through their lips;
- other men they catch wholesale in nets, simply “emptying them out” with callous disregard to their humanity – deporting whole populations.

And the Chaldeans thank their gods for their success (v. 16) – Babylonian art depicts the major Babylonian deities Ningirsu, Shamash, Enlil and Marduk dragging a net in which their captured enemies squirm.

The Chaldeans are brutal (v. 15), sensual (v. 16) and relentless (v. 17).

Habakkuk is perplexed that God could use the Chaldeans. There is a gulf between what he knows to be true about God and how God acts.

Our knowledge of God is a Pole Star, a fixed reference point (v. 12). So faith (which wants to know God) is confused when God seems to act differently from the way he is represented in Scripture.

When C.S. Lewis's wife died of cancer, he was plunged into sorrow. In his grief he wrote, “[It’s] not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him. The conclusion I dread is not ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’”

However, “this intensive probing of the purpose of God by the prophet should not be analyzed as a manifestation of weak faith. Both the nature and purpose of God elicit from the prophet expressions of confidence. Not a weak faith but a perplexed faith torments Habakkuk” (Robertson, NICOT, p. 156).

#### **4. What Next? (2:1)**

Habakkuk has been very bold – he has protested (“How long?”) and challenged (“Why?”) the apparent inaction and the revealed purpose of the LORD.

Now he faces options: to turn away from God, rejecting God’s plan and wisdom; or to turn towards God and to wait for further revelation. He chooses the latter because this is the attitude of faith. The faith of the people of God may be sorely tried, but they say, “I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD” (Ps. 118:17).

The “watchman who stands and waits for God’s word” depicts an ardent desire for knowledge of God and experience of God’s salvation (Ps. 130:5-8). This is not stoical resignation to circumstances! If anything, the attitude that “a real man shows a stiff upper lip” is an expression of arrogant unbelief.

But Habakkuk knows that he has spoken boldly, and so he braces himself for what is going to come next.

# Habakkuk 2:2-20

## 3. *The Arrogance of Unbelief is Condemned*

Secularism presents agnosticism – the unwillingness to commit oneself to belief in God – as the only reasonable course of action in the absence of definitive proof for God's existence. God disagrees! For one thing, the central issue isn't whether you believe in God's existence (God has made this abundantly evident, Ps. 19:1-6; Ron. 1:18-23), but rather whether you will commit to God in a relationship of trust and obedience. But as well as that, God roundly condemns agnosticism (and all forms of unbelief) as arrogant, self-indulgent and destructive.

This is half of the message of Hab. 2:4 (we'll look at the other half in the next study). Hab. 2:4a says that the soul of the person who rejects a relationship of trust and obedience (called "faithfulness" in v. 4b) is "puffed up" – the word suggests "self-exaltation", but it can also mean "bloated" or "tumorous" – the unbeliever's conceit is a cancerous sickness. (See how the word describes Israel's presumptuous action in Numbers 14:44 – "We can do this on our own!")

Far from being reasonable, unbelief prevents a man from being upright (v. 4a) and coming to a condition of rest (v. 5) – he is condemned to perpetual agitation as he tries to satisfy his sinful desires.

Habakkuk enlarges on this condemnation in vv. 6-20. Although the immediate object of these five woes is the Chaldean king, their proximity to the "vision" of vv. 2-5 indicates that they are also God's condemnation of unbelief's arrogance.

This message about unbelief (and faith) is so important that God compares it to the giving of the Law at Sinai (v. 2)!

### 1. **Heaps of mud (vv. 6-8)**

The self-serving unbeliever is presented like a payday loan shark – he amasses wealth (not his own!) by lending at extortionate rates.

But the "pledges" (v. 6) with which he loads himself are literally "heaps of mud" – they are articles of no ultimate value.

Moreover, the tables are about to be turned – the financial system is going to collapse, and the debtors are going to band together and make the usurer tremble – the plunderer will be plundered.

When will this happen ("For how long?", v. 6)? Suddenly (v. 7).

### 2. **Designed to fail (vv. 9-11)**

The self-sufficient unbeliever has tried to build himself a house (a dynasty) beyond the reach of harm (v. 9). But on his way to the top he has climbed over the backs of other people (v. 10).

So the career he has built will testify against him (v. 11) – even his highest success will turn out, in the final analysis, to be his deepest failure.

### **3. Weary labour (vv. 12-14)**

Mankind was made to live in community. But towns and cities have become emblems of the sinful self-regard of unbelieving society. In the wake of the Flood, mankind refused to submit to God's programme, and instead banded together to build a city and a tower, a symbol of their prowess (Gen. 11:1-6). But God made an example of them, confusing their languages and scattering them (Gen. 11:7-9). And then God chose one man – Abram – through whom he chose to build the kingdom by which he would subdue the world to himself (Genesis 12).

So the self-regarding unbeliever may try and built the "City of Man" with himself at the centre (v. 12). But the project is just weary labour which profits nothing (v. 13). Meanwhile, the kingdom of God will surely come and fill the earth with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD (v. 14)!

### **4. Shameful sensuality (vv. 15-17)**

Much that is considered refined has a foundation in what is base – good wine is splashed out to make people drunk (v. 15a); physical beauty is abused to satisfy lust (v. 15b). The unbeliever wants satisfaction – he looks for it in created things, but cannot find it – he tries to squeeze it out, but ends up twisting and perverting what was meant to be good. His glory is turned into shameful sensuality, and you find him lying in the gutter (v. 16).

### **5. Useless idolatry (vv. 18-19)**

God made us for himself, and our hearts have no rest until they come to rest in him. So when an unbeliever casts away his relationship with God, he is left with a desire for transcendence and an abhorrence of the Transcendent One. So he make himself idols – sources of "teaching", of "laws" – but there is no "breath" (no spirit – no Spirit!) in them (v. 19) – all they teach is lies (v. 18a).

So the unbeliever is self-deceived. Whatever "rules" he makes for living will be arbitrary, i.e. from his own head. So they will feed his self-serving, self-sufficient, self-regarding, self-satisfying focus. If he also makes them the law by which other people live, then he behaves like the tyrant that the king of Chaldea was.

### **6. Silence! (v. 20)**

But unbelief is unable to "think God out of existence". Unbelief is a failed project – bloated and tumorous in its self-exaltation (v. 4a); incapable of rest and satisfaction (v. 5). So let the whole world be silent before God!

"Though men may grow mad against [God], yet he can easily by his hand subjugate them; for after all the tumults made by kings and their people, the Lord can, by one breath of his mouth, dissipate all their attempts, however furious they may be... But there is another kind of silence, and that is, when we willingly submit to God; for silence in this respect is nothing else by submission: and we submit to God, when we bring not our own inventions and imaginations, but suffer ourselves to be taught by his word" (Calvin).

To this submission – the "faithfulness" of v. 4b – we turn in our next study.

# Habakkuk 3:1-19

## 4. *The Triumph of Faith*

Habakkuk 2:4 is central to the message of the prophecy: unbelief is arrogant, cannot lead to uprightness and stands condemned; but “the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.” This is such an important message that God compares it to the giving of the Law at Sinai (2:2) – indeed, the way the message plays out in experience (seeming to delay, but coming at the appointed time, v. 3) will prove the faith of the faithful.

The shape of Habakkuk’s prophecy exemplifies this. His faith matures from confusion because of the challenge of circumstances (chapter 1), through to confidence and contentment in God (chapter 3).

It would be well to define faith. It has three dimensions: (i) the facts which are believed; (ii) the life circumstances in which they are believed; and (iii) the inner commitment of the believing person to the facts. So the faithfulness which God commends in 2:4 is “confidence in and commitment to the God who reveals himself in Scripture and in the incarnation, which is expressed as trust and obedience in all of life’s various circumstances, both good and bad.”

### 1. **The celebration of salvation (vv. 2-15)**

Habakkuk gathers together images of God’s salvation taken from the Exodus, the Conquest of Canaan, the Song of Deborah and the reign of David. He blends these together in a celebration of what God has done in the past in order to excite his expectation of what God will do in the future. God is neither remote nor theoretical – he is present in history for the salvation of his people.

Notice the movement in Habakkuk’s song. Verses 3-7 depict God coming in glory. In vv. 8-15 God has come and is present – this is indicated by the change from 3<sup>rd</sup> person address (“he...his”) to 2<sup>nd</sup> person address (“you...your”). The effect is to emphasise the deliberate action of God on behalf of his people.

Note verse 13. The NKJV translates it well: “You went forth for the salvation of your people, for salvation with your Anointed.” God’s salvation is for his people, but it is accomplished with his anointed. It is possible that Habakkuk’s prophecy refers first to Cyrus the Persian (c.f. Isaiah 45:1), but this does not exclude a reference to the Messiah.

Habakkuk strengthened his confidence in the promise of salvation by looking back at previous acts of salvation. We follow his example – we strengthen our confidence in the promise of eschatological salvation by looking back to the definitive salvation accomplished by the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Christ.

### 2. **A change in perspective (v. 16)**

At the start of his prophecy Habakkuk revealed his agitation with God: circumstances were far from ideal, and he was annoyed that God seemed unresponsive to his intercession.

A great change has occurred. Habakkuk is still trembling, but it is for very different reasons. His fear has now found the proper object – he is in fear of God.

He demonstrates this new perspective by waiting – this is what God required of him when he gave the prophecy’s central vision (Hab. 2:3). Devastation was coming upon Judah – both faithful and faithless were going to be caught up in it – but Habakkuk had learned to live by faith.

### 3. Confidence and contentment (vv. 17-19)

Habakkuk’s new perspective (his matured faith) will carry him through awful circumstances: total agricultural failure: no figs, grapes, olives or grain; no sheep or cattle.

But not because he has learned stoical resignation! Rather, he has learned that his life is “hidden with Christ in God” and that “when Christ who is [his] life appears, then [he] also shall appear with him in glory” (see Col. 3:1-4). So Habakkuk rejoices not in circumstances (which were awful) but in the LORD, the God of his salvation.

Biblical faith acknowledges the reality that living in a fallen, sin-broken, dying world entails all sorts of grief. But Biblical faith also teaches us to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil. 4:4), i.e. to make the Lord Jesus the object of our joy and desire. This is the secret of contentment and confidence (Phil. 4:10-13).

### 4. Conclusion: Life in all its fullness

Habakkuk tells us that only faith triumphs in life. The promise of life runs through the prophecy:

- Even when he was perplexed by God’s ways, Habakkuk was sure that life was God’s purpose for his people: “Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die” (Hab. 1:12).
- The promise of life was explicit in God’s call to persevering faith: “Behold...the righteous shall live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4).
- The fulfilment of this promise was Habakkuk’s desire: “In the midst of the years revive it [*literally, make him live*]” (Hab. 3:2). Calvin comments, “He means the condition of his people or of the Church.”

Lest we think of “life” in dull, flat or domesticated terms, Habakkuk closes his prophecy with a description of life which is “inexpressible and full of glory” – “GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places” (Hab. 3:19). “Surefooted, untiring, bounding with energy, the Lord’s people may expect to ascend the heights of victory despite their many severe setbacks. The heights of the earth, the places of conquest and domain, shall be the ultimate possession of God’s people” (Robertson, p. 247).

This is the triumph of faith.