

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Habakkuk

"Why do you allow injustice?" Habakkuk asked God. "Why do you tolerate evil?" God did not answer Habakkuk's questions directly. Instead, much as he did with Job, God gave Habakkuk a vision of his deity. Whether or not the prophet understood God's ways, he could safely trust him. Habakkuk's questions echo in the hearts of all God-fearing people. The book of Habakkuk does not offer easy answers to the problem of evil in the world. Instead, it gives sound reasons to exercise faith in the sovereign, holy, and just God, who will ultimately bring justice to his world.

Setting

Habakkuk lived during a time when Judah had long been under the power of Assyria. The Assyrian Empire had engulfed most of the ancient Near East, from Mesopotamia to the Egyptian capital city of Thebes. But by Habakkuk's day (late 600s BC), Assyria was showing signs of weakness that would ultimately spell its doom. After finishing military campaigns in the mid 640s BC, the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal became preoccupied with literary and artistic pursuits. His growing inattention to the administration of his empire brought weakness abroad and uprisings within.

At Ashurbanipal's death, Assyria was faced with a new threat. In Babylon, King Nabopolassar (626–605 BC) proclaimed his independence from Assyria and laid the foundation for a Neo-Babylonian empire that would last for nearly a century (626–539 BC). Nabopolassar conquered one after another of Assyria's principal cities. The capital city of Nineveh fell in 612 BC, and the remaining Assyrian forces were subsequently defeated at Haran (609 BC) and Carchemish (605 BC).

When Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BC) succeeded him, his empire extended over vast portions of the ancient Near East. Nebuchadnezzar launched a series of campaigns against the kingdom of Judah, successfully attacking Jerusalem on three occasions and carrying many of its people into slavery. The last of these attacks (586 BC) resulted in the final overthrow of the kingdom of Judah.

Except for the final years of the godly king Josiah (640–609 BC), violence and injustice characterized Judean society from the evil reign of Manasseh (697–642 BC) to the fall of Jerusalem (586 BC). In many ways Manasseh was the opposite of his godly father, Hezekiah (see [2 Kgs 21:1–9](#); [2 Chr 33:2–9](#)). Manasseh actively promoted pagan rites that pre-Israelite settlers of Canaan had practiced. This apostasy doomed Judah. Manasseh's later repentance and attempts to undo his earlier evils ([2 Chr 33:15–19](#)) did not result in lasting change, and his son Amon reintroduced the pagan practices ([2 Kgs 21:21–22](#)). The subsequent ministries of prophets such as Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and the reform efforts of Josiah ([2 Chr 34:1–35:19](#)) also did not produce lasting change. Judah's later kings were all condemned for their wickedness ([2 Kgs 23:32, 37; 24:19](#); [Jer 22; 27:1–22](#); [36:30–31](#)).

Even during Josiah's reforms, the people of Judah remained entrenched in their apostasy.

Both externally and internally, the nation of Judah was in a precarious state. It was during this last, tragic period of Judah's history as an independent state that Habakkuk lived and served as prophet (see [Hab 1:2–4](#)).

Summary

Habakkuk's prophecy is a dialogue between God and the prophet. In the opening verses, Habakkuk contemplates the violent society Judah had become. He cannot understand why God seems to ignore Judah's sin. Habakkuk feels that despite his repeated cries, God simply is not listening to him ([1:2-4](#)). God's first answer is that he is about to deal with Judah's violence by bringing an even more violent people, the Babylonians, to judge them ([1:5-11](#)).

This answer perplexes Habakkuk even more ([1:12-2:1](#)). Judah was indeed wicked, but why would God use people who were even more wicked to chastise his own people? God's answer to this question focuses on his justice in punishing both Judah and the Babylonians ([2:2-5](#)). Both failed to maintain God's standards of faith and morality, and both merited God's judgment. In a series of five taunt songs ([2:6-20](#)), God lists his charges against all who are corrupt and do injustice. Undoubtedly, this included the Babylonians; even if God is using people to accomplish his purposes, those same people are still responsible for living according to God's ethical standards. If they do not do so, they cannot escape punishment.

The final chapter opens with Habakkuk's prayer for God's mercy on Judah, even while he chastens them ([3:1-2](#)). Habakkuk then records a psalm of praise that reflects poetically on the account of God's redemption of his people during the Exodus ([3:3-15](#)). Habakkuk closes with a declaration of commitment and a note of praise ([3:16-19](#)).

Author

Nothing is known about Habakkuk except that he was a prophet of Judah. One manuscript of *Bel and the Dragon*, a story included at the end of the book of Daniel in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, identifies Habakkuk as a Levite. If accurate, this might help explain the musical notations in the third chapter ([3:1](#), [3](#), [9](#), [13](#), [19](#)), as the Temple music leaders were Levites (see [1 Chr 6:31-47](#); [25:1-31](#)). Habakkuk's rich use of figurative language and his careful compositional structure indicate his high literary sensitivity. His hatred of the immorality and social breakdown that sin causes also demonstrates his deep spiritual concern that God's people live by God's standards.

Date

The date of Habakkuk's prophecy is uncertain. The circumstances mentioned in the book fit best with a time late in Judah's history, but before Judah's exile to Babylon; therefore, the prophecy is most likely dated between around 645 BC (near the end of Manasseh's reign) and 605 BC (Babylon's first invasion of Judah). Habakkuk's complaint about social injustice ([Hab 1:2–4](#)) and his attention to the Neo-Babylonian Empire ([1:5–11](#); [2:6–20](#)) also favor a date during this time frame.

Regarding a more specific date, three general positions have been advanced. (1) Many date the book to the time of King Jehoiakim (609–598 BC), whose evil disposition and wicked actions ([2 Kgs 24:1–3](#)) brought both condemning prophecies ([Jer 22:18–19](#); [26:3–6](#); [36:27–32](#)) and the threat of Babylonian invasion ([Jer 25](#)). (2) Others argue for the early days of Josiah (640–609 BC), who, prior to the finding of the Book of the Law in 622 BC, dealt with rampant apostasy ([2 Chr 34:1–7](#)). (3) Still others defend the traditional Jewish view that Habakkuk lived during the time of the independent reign of Manasseh (686–642 BC), whose wickedness ([2 Kgs 21:16–17](#)) and reinstatement of Canaanite worship and pagan rites ([2 Kgs 21:1–11](#); [2 Chr 33:1–9, 19–20](#)) caused God's pronouncement of Judah's doom ([2 Kgs 21:12–15](#)).

Meaning and Message

When violence and corruption abound and evil appears to rule, the faithful may be tempted to wonder whether God really cares or is really in control. Habakkuk's dialogue helps us to understand that God does not despise such questions when they are brought to him in prayer from an honest heart.

Habakkuk's prophecy reaffirms that God is in control of history and that his dealings are always just and right. Believers must be willing to accept God's answers and delight in his will, even if it seems completely foreign to their own thinking. God does see and care deeply about what happens on earth. Although people may not perceive it, God's sovereign hand is at work, and he will ultimately bring matters to a proper and just conclusion ([Hab 2:2-3, 14](#)).

The Babylonians worshiped the raw power that brought them prosperity. God's charges against the Babylonians remind readers to worship God alone (cp. [1 Jn 5:21](#)).

God's message to Habakkuk also emphasizes that the believer's holy life of faith and faithfulness must reproduce God's ethical standards ([Hab 1:12; 2:4](#)). Those who trust and actively serve God will be able to rejoice in the Lord ([3:18](#); [Phil 4:4](#)) and live triumphantly under any circumstances ([Hab 2:20; 3:16-19](#); see also [Rom 1:16-17](#); [Gal 3:11](#); [Heb 10:35-39](#)).