

INTRODUCTION TO HABAKKUK¹

AUTHOR AND TITLE

Little is known about the prophet Habakkuk. He was likely a contemporary of Zephaniah and Jeremiah, and possibly even of Ezekiel and Daniel, but none of the other prophets mention him. His name appears twice in the book (1:1; 3:1), and he is clearly the main character. God commands Habakkuk to record the vision in chapter 2, and he probably also wrote chapter 3. In the apocryphal book *Bel and the Dragon*, Habakkuk is said to supply nourishment to Daniel when the latter was in the lions' den, but this work is not considered historically reliable.

DATE

The only hint of a date for this book is its prediction of the Babylonian invasion of Judah (1:6), but it is unclear how far into the future this event would be (see 2:2–3). The Babylonians do not appear to be an imminent threat when Habakkuk was writing, but he seems to be very aware of their potential threat, and thus Habakkuk's time frame is probably not later than the end of Josiah's reign (640–609 B.C.). Before Josiah, Judah had radically turned away from God under the leadership of the extremely wicked kings Manasseh and Amon, and the nation was ripe for punishment (2 Kings 23:26–27). Judah was morally and spiritually corrupt, worshiping Baal on the high places, offering its children to Molech, dedicating horses to the sun god, and allowing the temple to fall into ruin. Judah experienced a significant, though short-lived, time of revival during Josiah's reign with the restoration of the temple and reinstatement of the Feast of Passover, but returned quickly to its evil ways following his death. It was a politically turbulent time as well. Assyria had ruled Judah with a heavy hand for well over a hundred years, inflicting punishment and tribute; but Assyria was beginning to weaken, and soon Babylon would be the world power. Habakkuk probably lived to see the following events: the destruction of Nineveh by Babylon in 612 B.C.; the battle of Haran in 609 in which Josiah died as he tried to hinder the Egyptians from reaching the battle; the final defeat of the Assyrians at the Battle of Carchemish (605); and possibly the fulfillment of his own prophecy of the Babylonian invasions of Judah in 605, 597, and 586.

THEME

By the end of the book, Habakkuk is a changed person—he has learned to wait and trust in God, who works out all things for his glory. Habakkuk, like Job, questions God's justice, but in the end both realize that God is sovereign and his justice is far beyond their comprehension. Habakkuk's message of judgment on Judah would not have been well accepted, for the nation had been blinded by sin while false prophets were declaring that God would not punish his chosen people. But God's justice demands that wickedness be punished, whether found in pagan nations or in his own people.

¹ Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (2243). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

PURPOSE, OCCASION, AND BACKGROUND

Habakkuk is unusual as a prophetic book in that it never addresses the people of Judah directly but rather is a dialogue between the prophet and God. The first two chapters are organized around Habakkuk's prayers (or, more correctly, complaints) and the Lord's replies. Habakkuk saw the rapid progress of Judah's moral and spiritual deterioration and this deeply troubled him. Yet God's response puzzled him even more, for "how could a good and just God use a more wicked nation to punish a less wicked one?" God makes it clear that both nations are to be judged and appropriately punished for their evil acts. Although Habakkuk may not fully understand, he has learned to rely totally on the wisdom and justice of God to bring about the proper resolution in ways he could never have imagined. This God is certainly worthy of Habakkuk's praise and worship, which is how the book ends.

The words of this prophet would surely have resonated with many of the righteous in Judah, who wondered what God was doing and struggled with the same issues that Habakkuk struggled with. God's words reassured them that he was in control and would take appropriate measures to deal with the nations. This book continued to have relevance to its readers, as evidenced by a commentary on the first two chapters discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

KEY THEMES

1. God is just and merciful, even though his people may not always understand his ways (2:4).
2. Wickedness will eventually be punished, and the righteous will ultimately see God's justice (2:5–20).
3. God uses some wicked nations to punish other wicked nations, but ultimately God will judge all nations (1:6; 2:5–20).
4. The key phrase "but the righteous will live by his faith" summarizes the path of life God sets for his people and is quoted three times in the NT (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38), each time highlighting a different aspect of the phrase's meaning.

HISTORY OF SALVATION SUMMARY

God's ways of preserving and purifying his people are mysterious to the believer; and yet God calls his suffering people to show faith that God's purposes for the world will at last prevail (2:4, 14; 3:17–19)—a faith that NT authors develop and commend.

LITERARY FEATURES

The first two chapters fall into the dramatic format of dialogue; more specifically, they are question-and-answer exchanges between the prophet and God. The prophet's vision of God's appearance (3:3–15) is a theophany, and it is followed by a personal testimony (3:17–19). Overall, the first-person format of the dialogue, the visionary theophany, and the testimony make the book read like a personal journal.

Part of the artistry of the book is its patterns. The prophet complains twice, listens to God twice, and prays once (ch. 3). There are two oracles from God (1:5–11; 2:2–20) and one vision of God (3:3–15). In the first two chapters, the prophet's faith is troubled; in chapter 3, it is triumphant. Two chapters tell us what God is doing, followed by a chapter that demonstrates who God is.

THE NEAR EAST AT THE TIME OF HABAKKUK

c. 620 B.C.

Though the exact date of the prophecies of Habakkuk are difficult to determine, it is likely that he prophesied a short time before the Babylonian invasions of Judah, which began in 605 B.C. During this time the Assyrian Empire was in decline, and the Babylonians were rising to replace them as the dominant power in the Near East.



OUTLINE

1. Superscription (1:1)
2. First Cycle (1:2–11)
 - a. Habakkuk's lament (1:2–4)
 - b. God's response (1:5–11)
3. Second Cycle (1:12–2:20)
 - a. Habakkuk's lament (1:12–2:1)
 - b. God's response (2:2–20)
 - c. Habakkuk's Prayer (3:1–19)