


HABAKKUK: CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUNDⁱ

Babylon	Judah
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 612 BC: Babylonians rise to power 609 BC: Egyptians were allied with the Assyrians so they rose up under Pharaoh Necho II to get Babylon out of power in Syria and Asia Minor. Babylon repelled them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 609 BC: King Josiah of Judah stood against the Egyptian army and tried to prevent them from advancing to Megiddo. Josiah died in this conflict. 609-598 BC: King Jehoiakim was king of Judah, appointed by Pharaoh Necho II. Judah became a vassal so they paid large tribute with a heavy tax from the people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 605 BC: Battle of Carchemish – the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians in battle; cemented their dominance 605 BC: The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II attacked Jerusalem. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 605 BC: In response to the attack, Jehoiakim switched his allegiance from the Egyptians to the Babylonians so they wouldn't destroy Jerusalem. He gave Babylon temple artifacts, money from the treasury, and gave some members of the royal family and nobility to be hostages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 601 BC: Nebuchadnezzar II mounts an invasion of Egypt which fails and weakens Babylon's overall control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 601 BC: Seeing the failed invasion, Jehoiakim switches allegiance back to the Egyptians
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 598 BC: Nebuchadnezzar II invades Judah and attacks Jerusalem for 3 months  <p><i>"Nebukadnessar II" – "engraving on an eye stone of onyx with an inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II" – Anton Nyström, 1901.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 598 BC: Jehoiakim dies in this battle. Jehoiachin, his 18 year old son, takes the throne and surrenders Jerusalem before too long. 598 BC (3 months later): Nebuchadnezzar II deposes Jeconiah and installs his uncle Zedekiah, taking Jeconiah into captivity along with his household and 3,000 Jews 597-586 BC – Reign of Zedekiah, last king of Judah before the exile. He was a puppet king. Jeremiah was his counselor, but he did not heed his words. Jeremiah tried to convince him not to revolt against Babylon, but Zedekiah allied with Egypt and revolted anyway.

December 589 BC - 586: Siege of Jerusalem – Zedekiah’s changing alliances angered Nebuchadnezzar so he invaded Judah and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. The siege lasted 30 months and resulted in famine, loss of life, disgrace, forced labor, and, ultimately, loss of sovereignty and exile.

Scholars think that Habakkuk’s vision came after 605 BC (when Babylon defeated Egypt) and before 586 BC (when Jerusalem was destroyed and the people were sent into exile).

HABAKKUK 1:1

1 The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

We don’t know too much about Habakkuk except his name and that he’s a prophet. The name Habakkuk is either the word for a fragrant plant in Akkadian or it is related to the Hebrew word meaning “to clasp” or “to embrace.” In the Bible, prophets are people who receive oracles and visions from God and report them to the people. They also sometimes intercede for the people when they are in trouble. Many scholars think that Habakkuk was a cult prophet, which means that he was tied to the Temple and worked as a counselor to kings. Other scholars think that he was a Levite because the third chapter is rendered in the style of a psalm.ⁱⁱ



“An 18th-century Russian icon of the prophet Habakkuk” from the Iconostasis of Transfiguration Church at the Kizhi monastery in Karelia, Russia.

HABAKKUK 1:2-4 – THE PROPHET CRIES OUT TO GOD

²O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?

³Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

⁴So the law becomes slack

and justice never prevails.
 The wicked surround the righteous—
 therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

The wickedness that Habakkuk describes in these verses is about the state of Judah's society. There is violence and inequity. The wealthy are manipulating the courts to favor themselves and justice is abandoned. Habakkuk looks to God for redress.

1. Habakkuk sees violence and wrongdoing and he calls on God to listen and to save. Does it feel okay to ask God "how long" or can that feel unfaithful?
2. Habakkuk's eyes have been opened to the suffering around him. In verse 3, he almost seems to be accusing God: "Why do you make me see..." and in verse 2 he's challenging God for not acting and fixing this wickedness. He almost seems to be asking God: how can you not be bothered by these things when they bother me so much? Do you relate to Habakkuk's impatience for justice? How do we deal with that?

HABAKKUK 1:5-11 – THE LORD SPEAKS

⁵Look at the nations, and see!
 Be astonished! Be astounded!
 For a work is being done in your days
 that you would not believe if you were told.
⁶For I am rousing the Chaldeans,
 that fierce and impetuous nation,
 who march through the breadth of the earth
 to seize dwellings not their own.

⁷Dread and fearsome are they;
 their justice and dignity proceed from themselves.

⁸Their horses are swifter than leopards,
 more menacing than wolves at dusk;
 their horses charge.

Their horsemen come from far away;
 they fly like an eagle swift to devour.

⁹They all come for violence,
 with faces pressing forward;
 they gather captives like sand.



"A relief detail of Ashurbanipal hunting on horseback, which is part of the British Museum exhibition"

¹⁰At kings they scoff,
and of rulers they make sport.
They laugh at every fortress,
and heap up earth to take it.
¹¹Then they sweep by like the wind;
they transgress and become guilty;
their own might is their god!

Habakkuk's major complaint is about violence and abuse in his society. God's response? To raise up Chaldeans (Babylonians) as instruments of divine justice/punishment.

1. Here, the word of the Lord is jarring and hard to swallow. As the Lord speaks, the verbs are in a form in Hebrew that lets us know that God is speaking not just to Habakkuk, but to all the people. What do you think about a whole nation being punished for its sin?
2. Habakkuk came looking for relief and got a fearsome response. How do we cope when God answers our prayers with harder times?
3. Most of this section details how powerful and brutal Babylon is. In verse 7, we find that, "their justice and dignity proceed from themselves." What does the Bible teach us about what justice is and where it comes from?
4. The Babylonian military machine is described like a force of nature, sweeping up nations. But verse 11 brings up the notion of their own sinfulness and ends, "their own might is their god." What is the end of trusting in our own might – no matter how powerful we are?

HABAKKUK 1:12-17 – THE PROPHET RESPONDS

¹²Are you not from of old,
O LORD my God, my Holy One?
You shall not die.

O LORD, you have marked them for judgment;
and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment.

¹³Your eyes are too pure to behold evil,
and you cannot look on wrongdoing;
why do you look on the treacherous,
and are silent when the wicked swallow
those more righteous than they?

¹⁴You have made people like the fish of the sea,
like crawling things that have no ruler.

¹⁵The enemy brings all of them up with a hook;
he drags them out with his net,
he gathers them in his seine;
so he rejoices and exults.

¹⁶Therefore he sacrifices to his net
and makes offerings to his seine;
for by them his portion is lavish,
and his food is rich.

¹⁷Is he then to keep on emptying his net,
and destroying nations without mercy?

1. Habakkuk affirms God's eternity and holiness, but think that means God should require justice. So, Habakkuk wants to know: how can a righteous God use wicked people to punish the people of Judah who, though they are sinful, are still more righteous than the Babylonians? Can evil people be instruments of God?
2. Starting at verse 14, Habakkuk seems to be referring to the first creation story in Genesis 1. On the 5th and 6th days, God created fish and crawling things. These are creatures that the creation story explicitly tells us that we are supposed to have dominion over. But Habakkuk says that people are as bad as fish – maybe we were created without enough sense to rule ourselves or maybe all our leaders are bad. Can you relate to this cynicism? Do you think God created us with enough sense to do better or are we lost to chaos and sin?
3. In verses 15-17, Habakkuk relates the fish/creation metaphor back to the present problem of the Babylonians. Habakkuk worries that our disorder leaves us

vulnerable to those who would prey on the weak and vulnerable. Then, the abuser comes to worship his own tools and power. Habakkuk wants to know: how long will the wicked thrive? How do we see through the allure of the spoils of war and of unjust systems when we are the ones who benefit? How do we speak to those in power when we are the ones who suffer?



"Koi Freeding Frenzy" by Bernard Spragg. NZ, 2009.

ⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habakkuk> & https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Habakkuk & https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-Babylonian_Empire & <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehoiakim> & <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nabopolassar> & <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeconiah> & <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zedekiah>

ⁱⁱ James D. Nogalski. *The Book of the Twelve: Micah-Malachi* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 681.