

Habakkuk

Chapter 1

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

1:1-4 Gregory of Nazianzus: “[Habakkuk] utters more heated words, and is impatient with God Himself, and cries down, as it were our good Lord, because of the injustice of the judges” (NPNF 2 7:217). (TLSB)

1:1 oracle. Such as the two found here (vv. 5–11; 2:2–20). Oracles were frequently received in visions. The Hebrew word for “oracle” (possibly meaning “burden,” but perhaps only “pronouncement”) often refers to revelations containing warnings of impending doom (cf. Isa 15:1; 19:1; 22:1), but in Zec 9:1; 12:1; Mal 1:1 it refers to messages that also contain hope. (CSB)

Habakkuk. The name is probably Babylonian and refers to a kind of garden plant. (CSB)

prophet. Habakkuk is called a prophet also in 3:1, tying ch. 3 closely to chs. 1–2. (CSB)

The title gives us the author’s name, Habakkuk, and that’s really all he tells us about himself. He mentions no hometown or family tree. He lists no kings during whose reigns he lived and worked nor is he mentioned in the historical books of the OT that cover his time period, books like 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. No other prophet mentions him either, even though he was a contemporary of Jeremiah and may have known Nahum and Zephaniah, who labored for the Lord shortly before he prophesied. Whatever we do know about him – his attitude, his faith, and the like – must be inferred from his book’s content. (PBC)

RECEIVED – ESV has “saw.” God’s revelation to Habakkuk evidently had some visual aspects. (TLSB)

Habakkuk’s Complaint

2 O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? 3 Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. 4 So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

1:2–2:20 A dialogue between the prophet and God. The basic theme is age-old: Why does evil seem to go unpunished? Why does God not respond to prayer? (CSB)

1:2 how long – Addressing God directly, Habakkuk demands to know how long the Lord, who promises to hear the prayers of believers, will remain silent. Like Job (Jb 19:7), the prophet cries, “Violence!” (with regard to the injustice among His people), but his prayer for deliverance remains unanswered.) (TLSB)

Violence! At this time Judah was probably under King Jehoiakim, who was ambitious, cruel and corrupt. Habakkuk describes the social corruption and spiritual apostasy of Judah in the late seventh century B.C. (CSB)

This describes the immoral or even criminal behavior evident on all levels of Jerusalem society under Jehoiakim: murder, robbery, theft, fraud, embezzlement, rape, adultery, and other flagrant violations of God’s moral law. These are sins that flow out of godless minds and unregenerate hearts. They destroy the lives of individuals and ruin the fabric of society. (PBC)

1:3 *see iniquity* – Injustice is the inability or unwillingness of society to react against and punish the “violence” it finds in its midst. Habakkuk observes that the courts are corrupt, that the processes of justice have broken down. Justice is perverted to favor the wicked intentions of the godless, and the godly who play by the rules are taken advantage of. The wicked escape punishment, and the godly find that justice eludes them, or they are ridiculed or persecuted because they refuse to condone evil but rather call for its condemnation and punishment. (PBC)

you idly look at wrong. The prophet was amazed that God seemed to condone cruelty and violence. (CSB)

The prophet is deeply troubled because God seems to tolerate iniquity and wrong—things such as destruction, violence, strife, and contention—and does nothing about it. Sin and its results abound in the land. Habakkuk echoes the sentiments of many faithful people of God who wonder why God does not deal immediately and directly with the evil that surrounds them (cf Ps 73; Jer 12:1). (TLSB)

2 Peter 3:9, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

1:4 *law is paralyzed ... justice never goes forth.* Because wealthy landowners controlled the courts through bribery. (CSB)

From the prophet’s perspective, the law has become ineffective because of the Lord’s failure to act. (TLSB)

A paralyzed person cannot walk or move his hands; he can’t work or defend himself if attacked. So likewise is the law in an immoral society. The law has become ineffective, easy to circumvent, so crippled that “justice never prevails.” There is no agreement on what is right or wrong. There is no willingness to effectively punish those who break laws. As a result, the law ceases to function. It becomes unable to dispense proper justice. (PBC)

1:2–4 Habakkuk experiences firsthand the oppressive policies of Jehoiakim, king of Judah (609–598 BC; 2Ki 23:36–37), and he feels surrounded by unchecked evil because of failure to enforce God’s Law. Habakkuk grumbles against God. We need to remember that God hears our prayers and that, though we struggle when facing life’s perplexing questions, nothing can separate us from His love (Rm 8:38–39). • O Lord, teach me to be patient as You carry out Your will in my life in Your own good time. Amen. (TLSB)

The Lord’s Answer

“Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. 6 For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own. 7 They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. 8 Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour. 9 They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. 10 At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. 11 Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!”

1:5 *be astounded* – literally, “be astonished! astonished!” (Kretzmann)

I am doing a work. The Lord's response to the prophet's complaint, addressed as well to the people of Judah, promises divine action. (TLSB)

would not believe. To the people of Judah it was incredible that God would give them over to the arrogant Babylonians. (CSB)

1:6 The apostate nation of Judah is to be punished by an invasion of the Babylonians, a powerful people who regained their independence from Assyria in 626 B.C., destroyed Assyrian power completely in 612–605, and flourished until 539. In this context, the Chaldeans (see NIV text note) are synonymous with the newly resurgent Babylonians. (CSB)

I am raising up. God is about to execute judgment against Judah through an enemy nation. (TLSB)

Chaldeans. Aramaic group of tribes who appeared in lower Mesopotamia in the ninth century BC and became one of the main elements in the neo-Babylonian kingdom founded by Nabopolassar (625–605 BC). Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BC) rebuilt Babylon, solidified control over the Near East, and defeated Egypt at Carchemish all in the first year of his reign. (TLSB)

seize dwelling. This means to take possession of strange countries, to wage wars of conquest. (Kretzmann)

1:7 *dignity go forth from themselves* – Sarcasm. The Chaldeans presumptuously and arrogantly demanded obedience and claimed superiority. God used this self-serving nation as the instrument of His judgment against Jerusalem, as incomprehensible as this may seem. (TLSB)

1:8 The speed with which Babylon conquered her enemies had become proverbial.

leopards ... wolves ... eagle. The cunning, speed, and ferociousness of these ravenous creatures describes the lightning speed with which the Chaldean army pounced on Judah like a predator (Is 5:26–30). (TLSB)

1:9 *faces forward.* Chaldean army is pictured as pressing forward for the kill. (TLSB)

gather captives like sand. Like their Assyrian predecessors, the Babylonians deported conquered peoples as a matter of deliberate national policy (see 2:5). (CSB)

like sand. Innumerable. (TLSB)

1:10 *pile up earth.* A siege method. (CSB)

Earthen embankments were used as ramps to conquer walled cities. (TLSB)

1:11 *guilty men.* Again, incomprehensibly, a sinful nation that deified itself became the vehicle through which God acts within history to judge (cf v 7). (TLSB)

whose own might is their god. The Babylonians were so proud and confident of their military might that it had virtually become their god (see v. 16).(CSB)

Luther: “Habakkuk separates Nebuchadnezzar’s idol from the true God.... It is a false god whom we strive to please with our own efforts and works. However, the true God is the One who wants to help us” (AE 19:115). (TLSB)

1:5–11 God’s response to Habakkuk’s complaint describes the powerful and arrogant nation that He will raise up to punish Judah for the sins in that nation’s midst. Human beings dare never sit in judgment of God’s ways, which are beyond human discernment (Rm 9:20; 11:33). We, however, can place our trust in Him, confident that in the end He will carry out His beneficial will in our lives. • Lord, at times Your plan and work are unclear to me. Help me to submit to You, O Lord, and trust in Your mercy. Amen. (TLSB)

Habakkuk’s Second Complaint

Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. 13 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? 14 You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. 15 He brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net; he gathers them in his dragnet; so he rejoices and is glad. 16 Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet; for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich. 17 Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever?

1:12 Habakkuk cannot see the justice in Judah’s being punished by an even more wicked nation, and thinks that the Babylonians surely would not be allowed to conquer Judah completely. (CSB)

Are You not. The question expects a positive answer. The underlying question is how God could possibly cause a cruel nation to punish Judah and still be faithful to His covenant promises. (TLSB)

from everlasting. See Ps 90:2. (CSB)

We shall not die. The prophet is troubled, but not without confidence and hope. (TLSB)

LORD, you have ordained them. The prophet recognizes Babylon as God’s agent of judgment (cf. Isa 7:18–20; 44:28–45:1). (CSB)

O Rock – Habakkuk confesses God as the One in whom His people can find security, protection, and stability. God is not only like a refuge; He is a refuge (Ps. 18:1-3; 62:1-8). (TLSB)

1:13 A classic statement of the problem of evil within the context of Israel’s faith: Why does evil appear to flourish unchecked by a just and holy God?

Habakkuk is asking God an age-old question: Why do You permit evildoers to flourish, allowing them to oppress the righteous? (TLSB)

purer eyes. Habakkuk had called the Lord “my Holy One” (v 12). He wonders how such a person is able to look at evil. (TLSB)

wicked swallows up. The Babylonians. (CSB)

more righteous. Judah. (CSB)

1:14 People who have no strong ruler are like fish and crawling things: vulnerable to wicked oppressors. (TLSB)

1:15 *drags them out with his net.* Babylon's victims are as powerless as fish swimming into a net. Mesopotamian reliefs portray, in symbolic fashion, conquering rulers capturing the enemy in fishnets. (CSB)

Like fishermen who make a big catch, so the Babylonians gloat that they have skillfully trapped and ensnared God's helpless people. (TLSB)

1:16 *sacrifices to his net* – The Babylonian king worships military prowess that made him successful and prosperous. (TLSB)

1:17 *forever?* Habakkuk's cry to God is "Will this merciless killing never cease?" (TLSB)