



Habakkuk - Chapter One

Summary of Chapter One

Habakkuk is disappointed that God does not seem to be answering his prayers; but God's response indicates that, unknown to the prophet, he has already begun answering them.

Habakkuk then starts a second cycle which expresses the age-old dilemma concerning God's justice: 'Why does evil seem to go unpunished?' God's vindicating answer is, "I will see to it that all those who are wicked will be punished, but the righteous ones must live by faith."

I. Habakkuk 1:1 - Superscription

The first verse introduces this prophetic oracle. It identifies Habakkuk as the delivery mechanism for the oracle.

¹ The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

Habakkuk 1:1

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. It was quite common for prophets to receive their prophecies in visions or dreams: <<*I spoke to the prophets; it was I who multiplied visions, and through the prophets I will bring destruction*>> (Hosea 12:10), <<*The vision of Obadiah. Thus says the Lord God concerning Edom: We have heard a report from the Lord, and a messenger has been sent among the nations: 'Rise up! Let us rise against it for battle!'*>> (Obadiah 1), <<*Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation. The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them*>> (Micah 3:6), and: <<*An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh*>> (Nahum 1:1).

Oracle translates a common word for ‘burden’, Hebrew *massa*, but when used in the Prophets it may more specifically signify a prophetic oracle: <<***When the Lord has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon: How the oppressor has ceased! How his insolence has ceased!***>> (Isaiah 14:3-4). Jeremiah 20:9 and Amos 3:8 suggest that once God gives a message, it becomes a ‘burden’ until the prophet announces it. Habakkuk had a burden, not only in the sense of a message from God, but also in the sense of a heavy weight. It was heavy in its content, because Habakkuk announced coming judgement on Judah. It was also heavy in its source, because Habakkuk deals with tough questions he brings to God and God’s answer to those questions.

Prophets do not typically use the term prophet for themselves, but Habakkuk is called a prophet twice (1:1 and 3:1), possibly because his message differs significantly from that of most other prophets. It is taken by some to indicate that Habakkuk was a professional prophet, one who earned his living serving as a prophet at the Temple or court, unlike Amos: <<***Then Amos answered Amaziah, ‘I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees’***>> (Amos 7:14).

The prophet Habakkuk. Not much is known about the prophet Habakkuk from any other book in the Bible. Since he prophesied the coming Babylonian army and its destruction of Judah, he prophesied some time before that invasion. Many think that Habakkuk ministered sometime during the reign of King Jehoiakim, perhaps around the year 607 BC. It is hard to say with certainty when Habakkuk prophesied. Since he speaks of God raising up the Babylonians (v.6), it can be assumed that he wrote in the 25 year period between the time when Babylon conquered Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire (612 BC), and the time when Babylon finally conquered Jerusalem (587 BC). Nor is it known just how old Habakkuk was when he gave this prophecy, but it is likely that he lived during the time of godly King Josiah (640-609 BC) and then gave this prophecy during the reign of one of Josiah’s successors, most likely Jehoiakim. Habakkuk knew what it was like to live during a time of revival, and then to see God’s people and the nation slip into lethargy and sin. Habakkuk had a burden. He had lived through a period of national revival followed by a period of spiritual decline, and he had to speak out.

The name Habakkuk is derived from the Hebrew verb ‘embrace.’ His name probably means, ‘He Who Embraces’ or ‘He Who Clings.’ It is an appropriate name for both the prophet and the book because Habakkuk comes to a firm faith through grappling with tough questions.

II Habakkuk 1:2-17 - The Prophet's Complaint

Refer to the chapter summary above.

II.a Habakkuk 1:2-4 - Habakkuk's Lament

Habakkuk believes that God is letting sin go unpunished and that therefore there is no justice. A major interpretative decision is whether the source of the wrongdoing in these verses is a foreign power that suppresses faithfulness, i.e. the Assyrians, or the leaders of Judah who oppress their own people. The following comments reflect the second position.

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

Habakkuk 1:2

O Lord. Habakkuk uses the covenant name for God, emphasising the relationship between God and the prophet.

How long? This is the common form of the formal complaint, as also seen in: <<*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*>> (Psalm 13:1-2), <<*Then the angel of the Lord said, 'O Lord of hosts, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which you have been angry these seventy years?'*>> (Zechariah 1:12), and: <<*they cried out with a loud voice, 'Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?'*>> (Revelation 6:10).

Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save? Habakkuk looked at the violence and injustice around him in the nation of Judah. He wondered where God was, and why God did not set things right.

Violence! During much of the latter part of the 7th Century BC Judah was morally corrupt with much wrongful violence and spiritually apostate. The description of Josiah's reforms underscores the depths of the people's depravity; refer to 2 Kings Chapter 23.

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

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

Habakkuk 1:3

Why do you make me see wrongdoing. This is an excellent question. Why does God allow his people to see iniquity and trouble, in themselves or in others? Job exclaimed: <<*It is all one; therefore I say, he destroys both the blameless and the wicked. When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity[a] of the innocent*>> (Job 9:22-23).

Why God allows Christians to see iniquity in themselves:

- To keep them humble.
- To make them submissive in the hour of trouble.
- To make them value salvation all the more.

Why God allows Christians to see iniquity in others:

- To show them what they might have been and, indeed, once were.
- To make them see the wickedness of sin, that they might pass it by and hate it, and not indulge in it themselves.
- To make them admire the grace of God when he saves sinners.
- To set them more earnestly to work that God can use them to save others and extend his Kingdom.

Look at trouble. Habakkuk can hardly believe that his God appears to tolerate sin instead of punishing it (v.13).

4 So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous –
therefore judgement comes forth perverted.

Habakkuk 1:4

The law becomes slack or is paralysed. The Mosaic Law had little impact on the hearts of these people and was not accomplishing its purpose. Instead, they were living according to their own greedy, self-centred desires, just as their ancestors

had done: <<*In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes*>> (Judges 21:25).

Justice never prevails. Habakkuk believes that God's inactivity has caused injustice to become worse. The rich were using their power and money to get what they wanted; the rights of the poor were being trampled on. Others make similar claims: <<*Even when I cry out, "Violence!" I am not answered; I call aloud, but there is no justice*>> (Job 19:7), <<*Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them*>> (Isaiah 1:23), and: <<*He said to me, 'The guilt of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great; the land is full of bloodshed and the city full of perversity; for they say, "The Lord has forsaken the land, and the Lord does not see"'*>> (Ezekiel 9:9).

The wicked surround the righteous. There was still a righteous remnant, but life was hard for them because they fell prey to the wicked and would not break God's laws to get ahead.

II.b Habakkuk 1:5-11 - God's Response

God has already begun to answer Habakkuk's request for the Babylonians were coming to punish the Israelites.

⁵ Look 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.

Habakkuk 1:5

Look at the nations. Habakkuk lived in a time of political turmoil – the Assyrians were losing power, whereas the Babylonians were gaining it.

Be astonished! God tells the troubled prophet, "Do not worry about it. Look at the surrounding nations and from them will come a nation that will be my instrument of judgement on sinful Judah." The prophet similarly writes: <<*Be stunned and amazed, blind yourselves and be sightless; be drunk, but not from wine, stagger, but not from beer*>> (Isaiah 29:9 NIV).

You would not believe. Habakkuk refused to believe that a just God would allow the cruel Babylonians to punish his people. There is the idea of something 'too good to be true,' but that is not what God is talking about here. This is something 'too bad to be true,' a work of judgement so astounding that Habakkuk would have

a hard time believing it. Paul uses this prophecy to warn the people of Pisidian Antioch: <<*Beware, therefore, that what the prophets said does not happen to you: “Look, you scoffers! Be amazed and perish, for in your days I am doing a work, a work that you will never believe, even if someone tells you”*>> (Acts 13:40-41).

⁶ For I am rousing the Chaldeans,
that fierce and impetuous nation,
who march through the breadth of the earth
to seize dwellings not their own.

Habakkuk 1:6

For I am rousing. God controls the political scene and uses nations for his own purposes, as confirmed by: <<*who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose’; and who says of Jerusalem, ‘It shall be rebuilt’, and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid’*>> (Isaiah 44:28), <<*He changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding*>> (Daniel 2:21), and: <<*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God*>> (Romans 13:1).

Moses had prophesied this would happen to the Israelites if they failed to obey the law: <<*The Lord will bring a nation from far away, from the end of the earth, to swoop down on you like an eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a grim-faced nation showing no respect to the old or favour to the young*>> (Deuteronomy 28:49-50), and so it came to pass: <<*The Lord sent against him bands of the Chaldeans, bands of the Aramæans, bands of the Moabites, and bands of the Ammonites; he sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by his servants the prophets*>> (2 Kings 24:2).

The Chaldeans is another name for the Babylonians, but technically they were an ethnically diverse Aramæan tribe in southern Babylon that began to take control as the Assyrians weakened. The Babylonians gained independence from Assyria in 626 BC and, continuing to increase in power, defeated Assyria in 605 BC. Nebuchadnezzar led the Babylonians in this victory and consolidated the Babylonian Empire. After his father’s death in 605 BC he became king over the vast empire, which flourished until the Persians defeated it in 539 BC.

When the Babylonians, i.e. the Chaldeans, eventually came against Judah, they came as sent by the Lord. It was not that they themselves did not want to come,

but God allowed their sinful desire to conquer Judah to come to fruition. If God had not allowed them to do it, they never could have conquered Judah and exiled God's people out of the Promised Land. This was clearly demonstrated when Alexander the Great conquered the region in 332-331BC but did not attack Jerusalem in line with the prophecy given by Zechariah. Refer to the comments made on Zechariah 9:5-8.

That fierce and impetuous nation. God knows the Babylonians well and uses their character traits to punish Judah.

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

Habakkuk 1:7

Dread and fearsome are they. Habakkuk wondered where God's judgement was against sinful Judah. The Lord lets him know that the judgement will indeed come, and when it comes through the Babylonians it will be terrible and dreadful: <<***But the army of the Chaldeans pursued them, and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho; and when they had taken him, they brought him up to King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, at Riblah, in the land of Hamath; and he passed sentence on him. The king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah at Riblah before his eyes; also the king of Babylon slaughtered all the nobles of Judah. He put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him in fetters to take him to Babylon. The Chaldeans burned the king's house and the houses of the people, and broke down the walls of Jerusalem. Then Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard exiled to Babylon the rest of the people who were left in the city, those who had deserted to him, and the people who remained***>> (Jeremiah 39:5-9).

Their justice and dignity proceed from themselves. In pursuit of domination, the Babylonians were not bound by Judæan legal systems, or even common decency. In their pride and arrogance they abused their power.

⁸ Their 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.

Habakkuk 1:8

The Babylonians conquered their enemies so quickly that their horses seemed to come faster than swift leopards. Using horses allowed them to overtake their enemies before they had time to prepare.



Babylonian Cavalry

Given the description here of swiftly moving cavalry, it seems most likely that these are spear-carrying horsemen rather than mounted archers. Assyrian reliefs from the palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh show how effectively these mounted soldiers could traverse hills and woodlands. Their sudden appearance would have terrified local villagers. In open country the chariot corps functioned as mounted infantry and archery platforms, serving as a frontal assault force, while the infantry followed them. Mounted bowmen and spear carriers, fighting in pairs for protection, stood on the flanks to protect the army from being taken in the rear and also to bar the escape of enemy soldiers

More menacing than wolves at dusk. Wolves hunted in packs and were known for the fearless and relentless pursuit of their prey. Jacob prophesied that the tribe of Benjamin would become warriors such as these: <<***Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey, and at evening dividing the spoil***>> (Genesis 49:27).

An eagle is a bird of prey, depicting the Babylonians' fierceness and voracious appetite for conquest.

- ⁹ They all come for violence,
with faces pressing forward;

they gather captives like sand.

Habakkuk 1:9

They all come for violence. Habakkuk had seen violence in the land (v.2), but the Babylonians would take it to a whole new level.

They gather captives like sand. The Babylonians continued the Assyrian policy of deporting captives to their land to discourage and disorient them. Habakkuk returns to this theme in the next chapter: <<*Moreover, wealth is treacherous; the arrogant do not endure. They open their throats wide as Sheol; like Death they never have enough. They gather all nations for themselves, and collect all peoples as their own*>> (Habakkuk 2:5).

¹⁰ At kings they scoff,
and of rulers they make sport.
They laugh at every fortress,
and heap up earth to take it.

Habakkuk 1:10

They scoff, they laugh. The powerful Babylonians had little regard for weaker kings or rulers whose meagre fortifications offered little resistance. This was the fate of King Jehoiakim: <<*Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he began to reign; he reigned for eleven years in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord his God. Against him King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came up, and bound him with fetters to take him to Babylon*>> (2 Chronicles 36:5-6).

They heap up earth to take it. One of the primary means of capturing a walled city was to construct earthen ramps so that movable towers could be pushed close enough to the walls to breach them: <<*And like David I will encamp against you; I will besiege you with towers and raise siege-works against you*>> (Isaiah 29:3), and: <<*See, the siege-ramps have been cast up against the city to take it, and the city, faced with sword, famine, and pestilence, has been given into the hands of the Chaldeans who are fighting against it. What you spoke has happened, as you yourself can see*>> (Jeremiah 32:24).

¹¹ Then they sweep by like the wind;
they transgress and become guilty;
their own might is their god!

Habakkuk 1:11

Their own might is their god. The Babylonians had become so successful and powerful that they relied on their military might for protection, as others would have relied on their gods. This can be seen by the words of their king: <<*All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, and the king said, 'Is this not magnificent Babylon, which I have built as a royal capital by my mighty power and for my glorious majesty?'*>> (Daniel 4:28-30).

II.c Habakkuk 1:12-17 - Habakkuk's Lament

Habakkuk wonders how God can use a wicked nation to punish a less wicked one.

¹² Are you not from of old,
O Lord my God, my Holy One?
You shall not die.
O Lord, you have marked them for judgement;
and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment.

Habakkuk 1:12

Are you not from of old? Habakkuk has sound theology and knows that God lives forever: <<*Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God*>> (Psalm 90:2).

Some translation state 'We shall not die'. Several other translations, including the NRSVA, have you shall not die at this point, reflecting a later rabbinic tradition. This makes an easier reading than the abrupt change from 'you' to 'we,' but it finds no support in the Hebrew manuscripts or the Septuagint, and should not be considered original. Habakkuk grounds his confidence in God's future for his people in the eternal nature of God.

You, O Rock, have established them for punishment. Habakkuk understands that God has ordained Babylon to be his agent of punishment. God is also recognised as being the solid foundation for those who are faithful to him: <<*Yet his bow remained taut, and his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel*>> (Genesis 49:24), <<*There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God*>> (1 Samuel 2:2), and: <<*David spoke to the Lord the words of this song on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul. He said: The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my*>>

deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my saviour; you save me from violence>> (2 Samuel 22:1-3).

13 Your 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?

Habakkuk 1:13

Your eyes are too pure to behold evil. This is a classic statement regarding the puzzle of how an all-powerful God can allow sin to continue unchecked. Habakkuk cannot understand the justice of allowing wicked Babylon to punish a less wicked nation such as Judah. He can call Judah more righteous because, even though most of its people were unfaithful to God's covenants, some of them actually were faithful. Habakkuk thinks that God's holiness should have prohibited him from using the corrupt Babylonians.

You cannot look on wrongdoing. Habakkuk knows that God cannot abide sin and will not look upon it without becoming angry. Jeremiah sums this up at the time Jerusalem was taken: <<*When all the prisoners of the land are crushed under foot, when human rights are perverted in the presence of the Most High, when one's case is subverted – does the Lord not see it?*>> (Lamentations 3:34-36).

Why do you look on the treacherous? Habakkuk was first troubled that there was no judgement against Judah; God answered by telling him judgement was on the way. Now Habakkuk is troubled by the agent of judgement, the Babylonians, who were an even more wicked people than the people of Judah.

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

Habakkuk 1:14

Habakkuk's charge against God is that he allows mankind to act like lower creatures, i.e. fish and crawling things, with no rulers or judges, so that wickedness goes unchecked.

15 The 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.

Habakkuk 1:15

The enemy brings all of them up with a hook. Captives were sometimes taken away with hooks in their noses, an intentionally painful and humiliating treatment. This is in line with: <<*The Lord God has sworn by his holiness: The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fish-hooks*>> (Amos 4:2).

He refers to the wicked one in v.13, a personification of the nation of Babylon.

He drags them out with his net. The image is that of a fish helplessly caught in a fishing net: <<*I am now sending for many fishermen, says the Lord, and they shall catch them; and afterwards I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks*>> (Jeremiah 16:16). Mesopotamian rock reliefs portray prisoners in nets being hauled off to captivity.

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

Habakkuk 1:16

Therefore he sacrifices to his net. The Babylonians appear quite proud of their weapons of destruction.

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

Habakkuk 1:17

Destroying nations without mercy. If a righteous God does not step in to end the Babylonians' wicked plan, who will? Where is God's justice, and how can he tolerate this?