

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

A. ORIENTING DATA FOR HABAKKUK

- Content: Habakkuk enters into dialogue with God over the question of injustice (How do people get away with evil and God seems to do nothing?) and receives grounds for trust
- Prophet: Habakkuk, a prophet of Judah, is unknown apart from this book
- Date of prophetic activity: sometime between 612 and 599 B.C., when Babylon had begun to dominate the international scene, but before she had attacked Jerusalem
- Emphases: prophetic indignation over God's apparent toleration of injustice; prophetic confidence in the justice and power of God; the stance of the righteous is faithfulness and trust in God; God's assurance that the wicked will be punished

B. OVERVIEW OF HABAKKUK

You may find this eighth in the Book of the Twelve to be among the easier of the prophetic books to read, because the structure is clear and the train of thought easy to follow. The first two chapters take the form of a dialogue between the prophet and Yahweh over injustice. Chapter 3 is the prophet's final response to God in the form of prayer in which he longs for the new exodus, yet affirms his trust in God no matter what.

In his complaint Habakkuk wrestles with what he knows to be true about God's character alongside God's apparent tolerance of the violence and injustice that abound in Judah (1:2–4). God's response—that he is raising up the Babylonians to handle this matter (1:5–11)—is small comfort to the prophet (1:12–17), since the Babylonians are more violent yet! So he takes his stand like the watchman of the night to see what answer will come in the morning (2:1). God's second response is twofold: (1) The prophet must wait and continue to trust in God (2:2–4), and (2) the arrogant will surely meet their doom in kind (plunder for plunder, 2:4–20). Habakkuk's prayer is a dramatic metaphorical remembrance of the exodus from Egypt, which inspires hope, trust, and rejoicing in God in the face of all difficulties.

C. SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING HABAKKUK

In many ways reading Habakkuk is like reading an extended lament such as one finds, for example, in Psalm 10 or 13. Everything is predicated on God's character—and the prophet's/psalmist's confidence that God will indeed eventually judge the actions of the wicked. In each case it is precisely because of who God is that the prophet or psalmist cries out, "How long?" at what seems to be divine tolerance of evil.

It is this relationship to the laments in the Psalter that best explains the most unusual feature of Habakkuk, namely, that there is no oracle directed toward God's people as such. Rather the prophet has himself taken on the role of the people in his dialogue with God over present injustice. And the liturgical notations at the beginning and the end of chapter 3 make it clear that Habakkuk intended his prayer/psalm to be sung in the community of the righteous.

For the biblical background to Habakkuk you will want to read 2 Kings 22–23 and 2 Chronicles 34:1–36:4. The way he mentions the raising up of Babylon in Habakkuk 1:6 suggests that she had not yet achieved full international ascendancy (after 605 B.C.), which also means that Habakkuk was a contemporary of Zephaniah, Nahum, and Jeremiah. The descriptions of Judah’s sins in these four books confirm the Kings–Chronicles testimony that Josiah’s reform was only short-lived and skin-deep, and that Judah was a society of continuing injustice, violence, and rejection of the law. Yet, like his contemporaries, Habakkuk saw the future with clarity—that God’s justice would prevail.

You will recognize that the oracles against Babylon are quite in keeping with the whole prophetic tradition, which clearly understood Yahweh to be the sovereign God of all the nations. God is the one who raised up Babylon to execute judgment against Judah.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 244–245.