

The Gospel Coalition  
Bible Commentary



THE BOOK *of*  
**Habakkuk**

David G. Firth

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For information, contact:  
The Gospel Coalition  
P.O. Box 170346  
Austin, Texas 78717  
thegospelcoalition.org  
info@thegospelcoalition.org

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# Introduction

The eighth of twelve Minor Prophets, Habakkuk is one of three such books addressing the challenges faced by the Kingdom of Judah due to Assyria's fall and Babylon's rise in the second half of the seventh century BC. Nahum anticipates Assyria's fall while Zephaniah deals more with issues internal to Judah, though this also includes their relationship with the surrounding nations. Habakkuk is distinctive in reflecting simultaneously on both Judah's internal problems and the threat of Babylon, and thus is placed appropriately between the other two prophets.

As a prophetic book, Habakkuk is distinctive in its form. We know nothing about the prophet other than what is reported in the opening verse. Yet even with this limited information, this work is one in which the prophet's personality is particularly evident, because much of the book is presented as a dialog between Habakkuk and Yahweh. From this dialog, we see Habakkuk was someone prepared to explore the challenging aspects of faith, striving to understand how Yahweh's justice could be seen in the lived experience of his people. Perhaps because of this, Habakkuk 2:4 has become such a well-known verse since it holds together the key tension of a faith that trusts God while acknowledging that all in the world is not right. Such a perspective would have been especially important if, as seems likely, the book was written sometime between the Battle of Carchemish (605 BC) and Jerusalem's fall to Babylon (597 BC – to be distinguished from the later events of 587 BC from which the exile is usually dated). Habakkuk could see the emerging threat of Babylon and, knowing their famed violence, could question Yahweh about his justice (Hab 1:12–2:1). But Habakkuk was not blind to Judah's internal problems, and it is notable that he raises these as the presenting problem (1:2–4). In his dialogs with Yahweh, Habakkuk never loses sight of either the internal or external threats faced by those who trusted in Yahweh.

Although typical of prophetic books that Yahweh's words are reported, Habakkuk lacks the traditional "Thus says the LORD" pattern that occurs frequently elsewhere. Rather, Yahweh participates in a dialog with the prophet through the first two chapters as he responds to Habakkuk's challenges, a feature that gives the book

a liturgical feel. This aspect becomes particularly important in the closing chapter which is, in effect, a psalm attributed to Habakkuk (note that Hab 3:1 is a separate title). Although formally different from the previous two chapters, it is an important element in the book because here the faith described in Habakkuk 2:4 comes to resolution. In the worship of Yahweh, the prophet comes to understand what such faith is, leading to the closing affirmation of trust where the prophet declares he will rejoice in Yahweh irrespective of the circumstances faced (3:17–19). What is encouraged is a life of faithfulness which continues to rejoice in God rather than focus only on the circumstances encountered. But faithfulness is also prepared to challenge God to demonstrate his justice because believers live in a world in which he is sovereign and yet their struggles continue.

## Purpose

Habakkuk helps believers wrestle with God's justice in the world, exploring what it means to have faith in God in a world that is full of injustice.

## Key Verse

"Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith." (Habakkuk 2:4)

## Outline

- I. Title (1:1)
- II. Dialog between Habakkuk and Yahweh (1:2–2:5)
- III. Five Woes against Workers of Injustice (2:6–20)
- IV. Habakkuk's Psalm (3:1–19)

# Title

Unlike some prophetic books which contextualize a prophet through reference to relevant kings (e.g. Amos 1:1), the opening of Habakkuk focuses solely on the message he brings and the most basic of facts about the messenger. The message is called an "oracle," a term that typically refers to a message about the nation. Most commonly that nation is identified, but that is not done here, leaving readers to wonder if the oracle is about them or another nation. In fact, it will be both, but that only becomes clear as the book develops. We are told that Habakkuk "saw" this oracle. Although this might suggest a visionary experience, it can also serve as a technical term for the range of ways by which a prophet might perceive God's message. But lest there be any doubt about the message's validity, Habakkuk is called "the prophet." That is, he is a spokesperson for God. We are not told anything else about him because this would distract from the focus upon God's word through him. This focus is also important in terms of what follows because much of it is presented as a dialog between Habakkuk and Yahweh. Although this is an unusual way for a prophet to present their message, it too can be considered as an oracle.





# The Necessity of Holiness

**1:2-4** Although Habakkuk is found among the prophets, the opening of the dialog with Yahweh is more typical of the Psalms. The cry “how long” is commonly found in the Psalter (e.g. Ps 13:1), introducing a prayer calling for Yahweh’s assistance. Such prayers often accuse Yahweh of not having acted soon enough to alter the circumstances of affliction, and that is the case here. The call of “how long” makes clear that Habakkuk has been raising the issue in prayer for some time. That he cannot change the situation himself is clear from the verbs used, which show that he has called for action from Yahweh for some time. The issue he has highlighted is that of violence from which God alone can save. Yet, nothing has yet happened, and instead Habakkuk points to the evidence of how this has afflicted his society as destruction and violence were before him, along with strife and contention. That is, the social breakdown he observed contained both physical harm and verbal contention. He accuses Yahweh of causing him to see this societal breakdown, whilst also complaining that Yahweh was idly overlooking the wrongdoing. Habakkuk has been pointing out the effects of a society in acute decay, but Yahweh has seemingly done nothing. All of this comes to a head in the statement of verse 4 in which Habakkuk declares that the law is paralyzed. “Law” here is *torah*, the summation of Yahweh’s guidance for the nation. Once this guidance is set aside, then the rest of the complaint in this verse can be seen to follow. Without *torah*, justice does not go forth. That is, the presence of God’s law creates the context for justice among his people, and without it, the basis for justice is excluded. Rather, the wicked can surround the righteous since the basis on which the righteous can flourish has been removed. Instead of justice therefore being straight and upright, it is now perverted, something bent out of shape. Habakkuk challenges Yahweh to demonstrate that he is indeed a God of justice.

**1:5-11** Habakkuk had complained about the paralyzing of Law (*torah*), indicating that his initial concern with injustice was about Judah alone since other nations would not be expected to live by it. But in this part of the dialog Yahweh now speaks, and in doing so begins to raise issues of justice as they impact other nations beyond Judah. Habakkuk has asked “how long,” so it is at this point that Yahweh begins to

indicate how he will address the problems of injustice Habakkuk has identified. Although not immediately marked by naming a new speaker, it soon becomes clear that Yahweh is responding to Habakkuk's challenge. Yahweh knows that the solution he is proposing will be unlike anything Habakkuk would have expected. Here, he directs Habakkuk to look to the nations and be astounded, noting that even had Habakkuk been told what was about to happen he would not have believed it. The reason for Habakkuk's astonishment is that Yahweh was raising up the Chaldeans (a term broadly equivalent to "Babylonians" but covering a wider region than the city alone). That Habakkuk would find this astonishing is indicated by the fact that Yahweh calls them "bitter and hasty" (v. 6), while going on to note that they were a warlike people who had been on the march for some time to seize the lands of other nations. If we are correct in dating Habakkuk to the period shortly before the capture of Jerusalem (see Introduction), then the threat they posed would have been particularly acute and thus even more astonishing to Habakkuk.

The existential and physical threat they posed is outlined in verses 7–11 as Yahweh describes them in some detail. We should note that some of Yahweh's language here picks up on Habakkuk's concerns about Judah, speaking of their "justice" (v. 7) and "violence" (v. 9). But mention of their justice is clearly ironic because Chaldean justice was every bit as twisted as that which Habakkuk experienced in Judah. Beyond this, the focus is on their military prowess and equipment, all of which exceeded other nations, giving them the position to scoff at other kings who were unable to resist them. The Chaldeans were not put-off by defensive fortifications such as fortresses since they had devised tactics to overcome them. This description ends with the declaration that the Chaldeans were "guilty men whose own might is their god!" (v. 11). Yahweh proposes to counter injustice with injustice, violence with violence. This work is indeed one that Habakkuk would not previously have believed.

**1:12–2:1** At this point, Habakkuk again speaks, addressing Yahweh directly. Where his first speech was concerned that Yahweh had not acted to address injustice and violence, this time he is worried about Yahweh's justice in using the Chaldeans. Habakkuk thus shows the astonishment that Yahweh had indicated would be his response. Habakkuk offers a range of arguments to suggest that employing the Chaldeans is inconsistent with Yahweh's character. This is expressed through noting that Yahweh is eternal and holy, factors that Habakkuk considers inconsistent with the current situation. This is perhaps why he insists "We shall not die," claiming that the actions of the Chaldeans cannot constrain Yahweh's ultimate purpose. Habakkuk's concern is that Yahweh is pure, but this approach not only fails to address the injustice within Judah, it brings a further expression of it. This reality is brought home through a series of illustrations in verses 15–17 which describe the actions of the Chaldeans through an individual, probably the Babylonian king. The first illustration refers to fishing and stands in contrast to Yahweh's sovereignty over all expressed in verse 14 through the image of humans as fish—the point being they have no ruler other than Yahweh. But the Babylonian king fishes, dragging people in with a hook and net. More than that, he subverts Yahweh's authority by then sacrificing to his net, treating it as a god while making himself richer. In effect, they claim their violence in battle has divine approval—though not from Yahweh. Hence,

Habakkuk poses the question of verse 17—if this is what the Chaldeans are like, then should such merciless killing be permitted to continue? But although Habakkuk has complained, he has not lost faith. Rather, having received one response from Yahweh he stations himself, imagining himself as a lookout in a watchtower. There, he will watch for Yahweh's response.

**2:2–5** Habakkuk had stationed himself to see what Yahweh would say, and this phase of the dialog is resumed by Yahweh's reply. Yet, at first glance, the reply does not address Habakkuk's questions about Yahweh's justice, though this will emerge as Yahweh's answer progresses. Rather, the response initially focuses on what Habakkuk must do, making a comparison between Habakkuk and Moses. Moses had received the *torah* on tablets (e.g. Exod 24:12), and now Habakkuk is to place the vision on tablets. This vision was also to be "made plain", using a verb that elsewhere occurs only in Deuteronomy 1:5 and 27:8, where it probably refers to large lettering. The Sinai covenant had to be made known and understood; so also the vision given to Habakkuk was to be shared in an understandable way. For Habakkuk, this probably means that a messenger would carry the tablets and read them to others. The timing of the vision is not revealed, but some delay is indicated since those who encounter it are encouraged to wait in the certainty of its fulfilment. Nevertheless, the delay would not be long.

The content of the vision is not explicit, but it is unlikely that verses 4–5 represent its basic content because the possibility of delay does not seem relevant here. Rather, the content of the vision is probably laid out in the five woes of 2:6–20 since these verses do address Habakkuk's concern about Yahweh's justice. If so, then verses 4–5 represent the attitude with which the faithful are to wait until the vision finds its fulfilment. Verse 4 contrasts the attitude of the Chaldeans (and those Judeans who pervert justice), who are "puffed up" and not upright, with the righteous who express their faithfulness to Yahweh. That is, the righteous live by faith in which they trust Yahweh for his provision of justice. This faith is both the initial attitude of trusting God and continued dependence on him. Although verse 5 poses several difficulties, it probably refers once more to those in the first half of verse 4, pointing out that a life of constant acquisition, especially when gained by injustice, provides no real satisfaction. Faith learns that God's purposes are worked out over time and learns that this is where satisfaction is found.



## Five Woes against Workers of Injustice

**2:6a** Although most Bible versions head this section as indicating that the woes are directed only against the Chaldeans, this is probably too limited. Habakkuk's concerns have been with both those working injustice in Judah and the injustice of Yahweh drawing-on the Chaldeans to achieve his purposes. Accordingly, it is better to understand these woes as addressing both these groups and thus addressing the points made in Habakkuk's previous addresses to God. The people addressed by the "woe" at each point is unnamed, meaning that through these "woes" Yahweh addresses all the points previously raised. This introduction to the woes covers all five, showing that those who have suffered from injustice will use them as a taunt against their oppressors.

### First Woe

**2:6b-9** The first four oracles follow a standard pattern, beginning with the word "woe." Each is addressed to an individual who has brought harm to others through their actions which are briefly described before noting how this will end badly for the perpetrator. This individual is representative of anyone who acts this way, and hence can describe both the corrupt Judeans and the Chaldeans. The pattern is changed for the fifth oracle as the "woe" is held back until midway through it, a shift which marks this as the end of the sequence.

The "woe" most probably has its background in mourning at a funeral, so we might also translate the term as "how terrible." For the oppressor, whatever their mode of oppression, something terrible is coming. This first oracle is concerned with those who gained wealth through injustice, whether through manipulation of Israel's legal structures or military acquisition. Though the emphasis here is more on military power, both are expressions of violence, and the oppressor will ultimately fall to those they have oppressed. Note that the closing words of verse 8 recur in the second half of verse 17.

### Second Woe

**2:9–11** Where the first woe was more concerned with the violence of war, this second one is more concerned with the effect of those who used cultural and governmental systems to generate unjust gain to protect themselves. This would cover those in Judah who manipulated the system to their benefit as well as the Chaldean practice of demanding tribute from defeated states. The aim is to generate security through the accumulation of wealth, though in so doing the oppressor has brought shame on their own house through the mistreatment of others. The house which the oppressor thought was secure is pictured in verse 11 as crying out against them. The oppressor has taken life from many, and justice will be served on them.

### Third Woe

**2:12–14** The third oracle is an extension of the first two, addressing those who build a city on the basis of iniquity, particularly the taking of life. This would cover the elite in Jerusalem who prospered through their actions as well as the Chaldeans who used resources plundered from captive peoples to build Babylon, both elements are evident in the first two woes. Although the opening woes announced an end for the oppressor, the means by which this would happen was left unsaid. It could be that their evil had the seeds of its own destruction built into it, or it could be that Yahweh would act more directly. These options do not contradict one another—the seeming options are more a matter of emphasis, but the passage does make clear that Yahweh is indeed involved in the oppressor's downfall because all acts of oppression are contrary to Yahweh's purposes. The oppressor sought glory; instead, Habakkuk insists (bringing together Num 14:21 and Isa 11:9) that it is knowledge of Yahweh's glory that will fill the earth.

### Fourth Woe

**2:15–17** The fourth woe builds further on the previous three, making Yahweh's involvement clearer still. This time the focus is on those who sought to shame the weak by making them drink. Although literal drunkenness may be meant, the image of drinking a cup occurs in Jeremiah 51:7, and there the language is symbolic. Whether literally or symbolically, shaming the weak is something rejected by Yahweh. Instead of glory, the oppressor will receive shame since it is Yahweh who truly holds the cup. In verse 17 Habakkuk refers to an event in Lebanon, and though that event is unknown to us, it is presented as an example of the punishment that will be brought to the oppressor. The second half of this verse repeats the language of verse 8b, showing that the violence noted there has been seen by Yahweh and that he is acting against the oppressor. Yahweh will ensure justice is done.

## Fifth Woe

**2:18–20** The final woe oracle breaks the structure established by the previous four by withholding the “woe” until its midway point, bringing the sequence to a close. This oracle begins by pointing to the futility of trusting idols, a common motif in the OT (e.g., Isa 44:9–20). The paradox Habakkuk explores is that idols are unable to speak and yet they still deceive anyone trusting them. The act of trusting an idol means moving away from Yahweh as the living God who can be found in his temple. Since idolatry is often associated with oppression, this oracle points to the religious context that supports it. But Yahweh is in his temple, and from there he enacts justice, reminding worshippers as they wait for the fulfilment of the vision (cf. Hab 2:3) that he is the one who reigns and that all the earth should therefore be silent before him. In this context the life of faith outlined in 2:4 is to be lived.





## Habakkuk's Psalm

**3:1** The title along with other features of this chapter, including the use of "*Selah*" (v. 3, 9, 13) and reference to the choirmaster (v. 19b), is like the features of many Psalms, albeit the note to the choirmaster is included as a closing point. Although these features suggest that Habakkuk composed this psalm for other reasons, the poem is now closely integrated into the book. The five woes had indicated that Yahweh would bring justice, but the woes did not when this judgment would happen. This psalm helps the community work out what faith looks like as it waits, and why they can be confident that Yahweh will triumph. That it is called a "prayer" makes clear its focus as words addressed to God, though as is common in public prayers it often assumes an audience who are overhearing it. The public nature of the prayer is consistent with Habakkuk's calling as "the prophet," stressing that in this instance he both addresses Yahweh and brings a word from him. The phrase "according to Shigionoth" is unclear, though it appears to be related to a similar term in the title of Psalm 7.

**3:2** As this is a prayer, Habakkuk is speaking directly to Yahweh. Habakkuk notes that he has heard a report of Yahweh and that he fears his work. Habakkuk focuses on what Yahweh has done in the past, and this causes him to revere Yahweh. In his prayer to Yahweh, Habakkuk implicitly acknowledges that things are not currently as he would wish. This tension becomes more explicit in the second half of the verse, the point of direct intercession, where he asks that Yahweh revive and make known that great work of the past in the present. Habakkuk is experiencing injustice and so wants Yahweh to act in a way that makes his justice known. But in this, a context of wrath, he asks that Yahweh remember mercy. The word translated "wrath" here is unusual and might also mean "agitation," suggesting that Habakkuk lives in a disturbed world—a world where Yahweh's mercy is needed.

**3:3-7** The prayer now describes a theophany, where God is portrayed as travelling from the south ("Teman" can also mean "south" while Mt Paran is on the Sinai Peninsula). The verbs here are unusual for a theophany and may indicate that Habakkuk believes it is imminent, even though it also fits with previous patterns. God's glory is emphasized, covering the heavens, and this in turn meant the earth was filled by his praise. The *selah* at this point may indicate a slight pause, enabling a brief

reflection on God's coming. From verse 4 on, the focus of the theophany is on God's power, though this emerges from his glory. As God journeys, he is joined by plague and pestilence. Although these can be general terms which are personified here, they may also refer to deities feared by people in the region. From Habakkuk's perspective, only Yahweh is God, but his prayer could also demonstrate this by showing that deities feared by people in the region were nothing but forces subservient to Yahweh. This becomes evident as Yahweh stopped and measured the earth—before him, all is insignificant. If creation cannot stand before him, then it is no surprise the nations cannot either. Although the focus here is on Cushan and Midian (both probably groups associated with Sinai), the point is that all nations are powerless before Yahweh.

**3:8–15** Whereas verses 3–7 described God's coming, here Habakkuk once more addresses Yahweh directly. The unit is bound together by the references to the waters in verses 8 and 15, while the two occurrences of *selah* probably show points where the reader would pause in the reading of the prayer. Where earlier references in the prayer are largely to the exodus, this frame of reference is now extended to include Israel's entry to the land under Joshua. The focus in verses 8–9a is on Yahweh's wrath against the waters. Although the terms for wrath differ, they all extend the note in verse 2 where Yahweh is also called to remember mercy. The waters are unnamed, but the rivers would include both the Nile and the Jordan, while the Sea here would be the Reed Sea (Exod 14:21–31). Throughout, Yahweh had shown himself victorious as the warrior Israel could trust. This point is developed in verses 9b–11 which draw on Yahweh's authority over all creation to provide the basis for his control over the sun and moon, with verse 11 alluding to the victory described in Joshua 10:12–14. The victories won in Joshua 10–11 are then the background to verses 12–13, though Habakkuk may also allude to later victories which could explain the reference to Yahweh's anointed. If the *selah* at the end of verse 13 does indicate a pause, then verses 14–15 would probably be intended as a summary of all the victories Yahweh has won reaching back to the exodus. These victories are over all foes, whether forces in creation, objects which surrounding nations tended to treat as deities, or those nations themselves.

**3:16–19** The implications of verses 3–15 are worked out here. Habakkuk knows Yahweh is coming, and nothing can defeat him. But he also knows problems remain unresolved in Judah in addition to the external threat of the Babylonians. He knows that there will be wrath because Yahweh will address all those oppressing Judah, but he also has confidence that Yahweh will remember mercy. Habakkuk presents himself as a model for the nation—he has heard Yahweh coming, and every part of his body trembles as a result while he waits for Yahweh to deal with those who raid Judah.<sup>11</sup> The means of waiting is outlined in verses 17–19a. Habakkuk recognizes that Yahweh's timescale is not necessarily his and so cannot be measured by short-term blessings such as a good harvest. Rather, waiting quietly is expressed by rejoicing in Yahweh as the God of his salvation. That is, Yahweh alone can provide salvation, and the faith summoned in 2:4 means trusting that his salvation will finally be shown. Although his society faced great challenges, Habakkuk could continue to know that

Yahweh was his strength, that just as the deer was enabled to walk on challenging places, so also Yahweh continued to enable Habakkuk. This was a model that the nation could follow.

The closing note indicates that the prayer belonged to a collection held by the music director, and hence was part of a liturgical tradition. In this way, subsequent generations could pray this prayer and through it express both their own need of and trust in God.



# Endnotes

- i. Some versions (e.g., the NRSV) follow an ancient tradition that reads “You shall not die.” If correct, then this is a further claim of Yahweh’s eternity, but as this point has already been made, the ESV’s reading (as above) is marginally preferable.
- ii. Although the verb here can refer to “invaders” (i.e. an external threat), this is not a necessary implication and the more neutral “raiders” is a preferable translation.



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# The Gospel Coalition Bible Commentary

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**David Firth** (PhD, University of Pretoria) is Old Testament Tutor and Academic Dean at Trinity College Bristol and Honorary Research Associate at the University of the Free State. As well as pastoral work in his native Australia, he and his wife have served in Zimbabwe and South Africa before settling in the United Kingdom.