



HABAKKUK

a study of God's unexpected work

You're probably wondering why in the world we would take the time to study a book like Habakkuk. What's it all about? Isn't it too old to be useful? How do you even pronounce that name?

For starters, let's try this: *Huh-BACK-uck*. Even if that's slightly off from the original Hebrew intonation, at least we're all in the same listing boat.

Secondly, let me say this. This short and very ancient prophecy (at least 2500 years old) is perhaps one of the most relevant among the prophets. Even in 2015 modern America, the daring and boldness of this little known prophet from nowhere is intensely applicable to some of the biggest questions we are still asking: What is God doing in the world? Is God just? What is the point of suffering? Is God really in control? Can God be trusted as a manager? The relevance of these questions makes Habakkuk an extremely significant study. To be sure, it will take some work for us to uncover, but our labor will prove a blessing in the end.

In this simple tool kit, we will look briefly at some helpful background information that will aid your understanding and study of Habakkuk. Please use this resource just like a box of tools. Use a particular tool or section when you need it. You may want to read it through but you don't have to. Use it as you see fit. The topics included here are:

- **Habakkuk the man**
- **The Message of Habakkuk**
- **The Timing of the Book**
- **The Culture and Background of this Time**
- **Structure and Outline**
- **Study and Application Questions**
- **Helpful Resources**



Habakkuk the Man

We know less about Habakkuk than almost any other prophet. Nothing is mentioned about his lineage, hometown or role in the community. “Habakkuk the prophet” is all that we get. To be sure, certain things can be deduced from the text about his profession, role, name meaning and time period.

To begin, the etymology of the name Habakkuk is interesting. It may be related to the Hebrew verb *habaq* which refers to *folding the hands* or *embracing something or someone*. Thus it could mean “he who embraces” or “the one who folds the hands.” The name may also be Akkadian and refer to some kind of plant or fruit tree (*habbaququ* in the Assyrian dictionary).

As we will see in the next section, based on the content of Habakkuk’s prophetic oracle we can reasonably deduce the time period in which he wrote. If in the late seventh century B.C. as we will make a case for below, this would make him a general contemporary to Nahum, Zephaniah and Jeremiah. He would have written after Isaiah’s long ministry and before Ezekiel and Daniel.

Since little is known about Habakkuk the man, it seems later tradition attempted to disperse the fog. There is an ancient but un-authoritative and un-inspired appendix to the **Book of Daniel** in the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. This addition is known as *Bel and the Dragon*. It is altogether separate from Daniel but claims to coincide with the events recorded in Daniel. It describes Habakkuk as the son of a certain Levite named Jeshua and includes a legend about him that is pure fantasy. Taken together with the song of **Habakkuk chapter 3**, some have suggested that Habakkuk was associated or involved in the temple practice of Jerusalem, perhaps a priest or musician in the temple. Based on the possible meaning of his name, some Rabbis have suggested that Habakkuk is actually the son of the Shunammite woman that Elisha resurrected in **2 Kings 4**. In the end, we are left with only what the Scripture reveals. Habakkuk was a prophet and poet of history, a worshipper of Yahweh and a servant of Israel.

The Message of Habakkuk

Unlike any other prophet in our Scripture, Habakkuk turns the prophetic role on its head. Old Testament prophets were instructed to call the nation of Israel (or other nations as in **Jonah** and **Nahum**) to repent from their disobedience and idolatry and return to covenant with God, to worship Him only and to live according to His values. Sometimes their message was delivered forcefully and with great authority (**Isaiah 1:10ff**), sometimes it was done with weeping (**Jeremiah 9:1ff**), and in certain situations it was done with dramatic symbolism (**Ezekiel 12:5ff**) or bold illustration (**Isaiah 20:1ff**). Habakkuk, instead, turns his rebuke to God Himself.

Habakkuk takes it upon himself to work in the other direction [as a departure from every other prophet], calling God to account when his actions did not seem to correspond to those demanded by the covenant. The situation of a prophet was precarious enough when he confronted his people, but it is a very rare individual who will put himself completely on the line by confronting his God. Such a man was Habakkuk. (Baker, Tyndale)

Only **Job**, who was not a prophet, approximates this interaction between Habakkuk and Yahweh (indeed Job exceeds it with extensive questioning that devolves into accusation). In fact, the content and themes are very similar to Job, the oldest book in our Bible at over 4500 years old.

“Although often neglected, Habakkuk’s prophecy is one of the most influential in the Bible. Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted three times in the New Testament (**Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38**).... It served as the basis for the Protestant Reformation and, through Luther’s Commentary on Galatians, the conversion of John Wesley. Habakkuk is a book of faith.” (Geisler, 260)

Taken together, these factors make Habakkuk a masterfully relevant message that still rings a clarion call of truth despite its age. The message of the book wrestles with God’s just prerogative to act according to His nature and character. He loves His people like a Good Father. This love includes the kind of discipline that is found only there, inside of fatherly love. While some disasters, destructions and diseases are opportunities for God to show Himself powerful to heal and rescue, others seem to be a set of rather unexpected tools in His righteous hands; tools to form His people according to His mysterious purposes. Like Job, Habakkuk wrestles honestly with these truths and realities. And like Job, Habakkuk takes his problems and complaints directly to God. We should not miss this point.

Habakkuk is unusual among the prophetic books in that it tells a story. In this, it is similar to Jonah, which is also the record of a prophet’s experience. Jonah gives the account of a prophet’s failure to sympathize with God. Habakkuk gives the account of a prophet’s failure to understand God. Jonah deals with a problem posed by Nineveh, and Habakkuk deals with a problem posed by Babylon. (Constable)

There are several key points to Habakkuk’s oracle. First, people of faith sometimes have trouble continuing to trust God. This is especially true in the midst of the inevitable crises of this broken world. Thus the key and central verse to the book is **2:4**, with its thoroughly repeated truth “the righteous shall live by faith.” The book also reminds us of the great perils of pride because it seems that the two are connected, faith and pride. Either one has faith in God’s righteous character, the only thing that limits God’s actions in any way, or one falls into rebellious pride which manifests itself in the complaints and mocking of scoffers and fools. It is, of course, one thing to write a sentence like this and another to live it out, especially in the face of such unexpected actions at the hand of God. Within this tension lies the great message of Habakkuk.

Timing of the Book

Date is a subject of some discussion. There are three main views in the conservative camp. By the *conservative camp* I mean those that still hold to the possibility of divine revelation regarding future events, specifically God’s ability to foretell or predict events and communicate them to humans. If one rejects this kind of supernatural revelation, then a much later date is preferred, one after all of the events mentioned or alluded to in Habakkuk. I, of course, belong to the camp of those who hold to Divine revelation, miracles and supernatural intervention by the Creator God. That being said, here are the three main views regarding date of writing.

Structured largely around the contemporary Judean Kings, the first possible range for the writing of Habakkuk is during the late reign of Manasseh (686-642 B.C.). There are proponents of this view and several reasons why it is possible. There are also good reasons to suspect it as too early.

A second view is that Habakkuk was penned during the reign of Josiah (640-609). This is problematic because of how the internal references of Habakkuk, specifically the social and religious climate, conform to the drastic reforms of Josiah (**2 Kings 22**).

A third, and the best view in my opinion, places the writing of Habakkuk during the early reign of Jehoiakim (609-597). At this time, the Chaldean (Babylonian) empire is on the rise and the Assyrian Empire is no more. Also the social and moral conditions alluded to in **Habakkuk 1:2-4** are very similar to those of the reign of Jehoiakim (Freeman, 253; so Geisler, Constable, Wood, etc.).


The Culture and Background of this Time

This subject is perhaps the most important to properly understanding the tension between Habakkuk and God expressed in the book. Taking together the date of the book and the history of Israel, we must understand the extremely delicate socio-political temperature of this time period in order to properly understand its complaint. Habakkuk found himself living in a precarious time, in between the past and future, as we all do. The known past for Habakkuk was horrific; the revealed future, even more so.

As the timeline below reveals, the Assyrian Empire had been the local Middle Eastern bully for quite some time. For years the Assyrians and their extremely brutal war tactics had assaulted the Northern Tribes of Israel (Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Issachar, Zebulun and others). All armies North and East of Israel attacked from this direction due to the vast deserts directly east of Israel. These assaults culminated in a full destruction of the Northern Territories of Israel and their exile to other Assyrian conquered lands in 722 B.C. Traveling further south into Judah and her capital, Jerusalem, the Assyrian army would have wiped out the remainder of Israel if God had not intervened. Revolts and disorder called the army elsewhere and she retreated from Judah. In the subsequent years, Assyria's power was threatened and weakened by many factors until finally the Chaldeans, synonymous to the Babylonians in Biblical history, defeated Assyria and destroyed Nineveh, her capital.

Meanwhile in Judah, a litany of idolatrous Kings brings darkness to God's people. Finally Josiah succeeds his father as King of Judah at the age of eight. He instituted massive religious and cultural reforms and did much to restore true worship in Judah. For this reason he is hailed as one of Judah's greatest Kings. Unfortunately, Josiah dies in 609 B.C. at the hands of the King of Egypt, Pharaoh Neco (**2 Kings 23:29**), and his reforms are immediately reversed. It is about this time that Habakkuk takes up his complaint to God (**Habakkuk 1:2-4**). It is understandable in some sense because of God's unexpected revelation, namely, that He would use the Babylonians to further purify and discipline His people Israel from their robust wickedness, idolatry and pride. Habakkuk cries foul. The cure is worse than the disease, the prophet says. "...*Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?*" (**Habakkuk 1:13**) It seems God's unexpected ways are almost too much for Habakkuk to comprehend. This conflict and history forms the fundamental background for the book.


Old Testament Timeline (all dates are B.C.)

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- c.2092 – Abraham enters the Promised Land
c.1446 – Exodus from Egypt under Moses
1407 – Conquest of Promised Land under Joshua
1053 – Saul’s Accession to the Throne of Israel, her first King
967 – Temple completed under Solomon
931 – Kingdom of Israel divided into Northern Kingdom (Israel) and Southern Kingdom (Judah)
722 – Assyrian army invades and finally conquers the Northern Kingdom of Israel
701 – Assyrian army invades Judah under Sennacherib (finally retreats due to threats in other areas)
612 – Nineveh, capital city of the Assyrian Empire, falls to the Babylonians (Chaldeans)
[609-605 – Probable Writing of Habakkuk]
609 – King Josiah of Judah killed by Pharaoh Neco of Egypt (**2 Kings 23:29**), His reforms are reversed
605 – Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, defeats Egypt and Pharaoh Neco at Carchemish
605 – Babylonian invasion of Judah - First Deportation of Judah into Exile (Daniel among these exiles)
597 – Second Deportation of Judah into Exile under the Babylonians
586 – Jerusalem falls to Babylonians, Temple destroyed, Third Deportation of Judah into Exile
539 – Cyrus of Persia defeats Babylonians and their capital city falls
538 – Cyrus allows some Jews back to Judah
516 – Temple finally rebuilt under Zerubbabel and Haggai (it took over 20 years due to opposition)
458 – Second return to Judah under the care of Ezra
445 – Third return to Judah under Nehemiah
444 – Walls of Jerusalem completed under Nehemiah
c.4 – The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea

Structure and Outline

Although chapter and verse numbers were added to Biblical books long after they were penned, Habakkuk is sectioned nicely by these divisions. The first two chapters contain the prophets question/answer conversation with God. Lacking the more traditional prophetic formula “*thus says the Lord*” intended for a specific audience, this interaction is wholly between Habakkuk and The Lord. It seems that the significant social/national use of the oracle was found therein. Chapter three records a worship song/psalm that perfectly culminates the conversation, the theology of the book as well as the growth and maturation of the prophet himself.

Here is a suggested simple outline for the book:

- I. Heading – 1:1
 - II. Question and Answer about Judah – 1:2-11
 - III. Question and Answer about Babylon – 1:12-2:20
 - IV. Song of Praise to Yahweh – 3:1-19
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The last chapter is so magnificent in its praise and adoration of Yahweh, that some scholars deem it too different from the first two chapters to be written by the same person or in the same time period. There

are, however, no credible internal evidences that support such a claim. It remains best to see the three chapters, as we have them, a single unit written by the same man. It remains possible, and even probably, that the questions, answers and hymn of praise were encountered and penned by Habakkuk over a period of some time.

Study and Application Questions

Needless to say, Habakkuk has much to teach us. As part of God's revealed character in His inspired Word, we fail to give notice to even the "often neglected" books like Habakkuk at our great loss.

The following discussion questions have been adapted from Warren Wiersbe's great and simple work on Habakkuk in *Be Amazed; Restoring an Attitude of Wonder and Worship*, the ChariotVictor Publication of the Old and New Testament Commentary series. They are great for small group or private study.

Habakkuk 1

- List national or international events that might cause a person to wrestle with God. In what way have you had to wrestle with these kinds of events?
- What problems were solved when you trusted Christ as Savior?
- What new problems have you faced since you became a believer?
- What do you usually do when you are struggling with problems?
- Why do you think God gave a revelation instead of an explanation? What is the difference?
- What answer did Habakkuk expect to hear as he waited on God?
- Has God ever answered you in an unexpected way? How? When?
- What were the main points of Habakkuk's complaint?
- What specifically did God reveal to Habakkuk as a response?
- How would you answer someone wrestling with the question of 1:13?
- Are you fully yielded to God and willing for Him to have His way with you and those whom you love? Why or why not?

Habakkuk 2

- How is Psalm 73 similar to the experience of Habakkuk? How does Psalm 9 relate?
- What attitudes and activities are found in this chapter that we should avoid?
- What are the three responsibilities that God gave Habakkuk?
- To whom do you feel responsibility as a watchman?
- Does anything hold you back from proclaiming a warning? What? Why?
- What are some specific things that pride does to people? Which is true for you?
- What are the assurances God gave Habakkuk in the midst of the "woes"?
- What is Biblical justification?
- What does it mean to live by faith?
- Which sins does God pronounce woe on? Which one most impacts you? How?
- What are the positive and negative sides of ambition?
- What is covetousness? Where is it in your life?
- What is an idol? How is idolatry affecting you right now?

Habakkuk 3

- When were you in a dark valley of faith? Why? What brought you out?
- What were the promises that Habakkuk was living by? What promises are you living by?
- What took Habakkuk from the valley to the summit of faith?
- What the reasons Habakkuk prayed?
- How would you define or describe the glory of God?
- How did God reveal His glory in the Old Testament? How does He do it now?
- Where else did God use creation to accomplish His purposes?
- What does it mean to walk by faith?
- How can we rejoice when circumstances are difficult? How can we help others do this?
- How can you grow deeper in joy, trust and knowledge of God?
- What does the whole book of Habakkuk teach us?
- What have you learned about God? About yourself?

Helpful Resources

As always, I highly recommend Dr. Tom Constable's free study notes on every book of the Bible available at www.soniclight.com. They are regularly updated and are highly accessible to those of all levels of Biblical knowledge.

Other works I have found helpful, some quoted in this tool kit, include the following:

An Introduction to the Hebrew Prophets: The Prophets as Preachers by Gary V. Smith

Tyndale Old Testament Commentary on Habakkuk by David W. Baker

The Minor Prophets, An Exegetical and Expository Commentary, edited by Thomas E. McComiskey

An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets by Hobart E. Freeman

A Popular Survey of the Old Testament by Norman L. Geisler



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