



# **Fear or Faith?**

**the oracle that  
habakkuk the prophet saw**

**three studies in  
the book of habakkuk**

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QUESTIONS



QUOTATIONS



BIBLE READING



FOR DISCUSSION



WRITE IT DOWN



TAKE NOTE



TAKE A CLOSER LOOK



PUT IT INTO ACTION

# A Brief Background to Habakkuk

Habakkuk is a little known book within one of the least well known parts of the Bible - the Minor Prophets. At just three chapters, this small book nevertheless struggles with big issues of what God is doing in this world, why he seems to tolerate, and sometimes even use, evil.



## Authorship

We know nothing of Habakkuk apart from what is in the book that bears his name and even that is fairly patchy. There is a Jewish legend that names him Habakkuk, son of Joshua, of the tribe of Levi. From the liturgical style of his book it is possible to suggest that he has a priestly background - in I Chronicles 25v1 we hear of prophets who prophecy with lyres, harps and cymbals. One of the functions of such prophets was to give guidance to those who came to the Temple. The guidance that Habakkuk seeks from the Lord, even if sought for another, shook his faith to the core.



## Dating

The main clue that helps in the dating of the book of Habakkuk is the reference to the Chaldeans [Babylonians] in 1v6. The Babylonians were on the advance in the last quarter of the seventh century BC and so it is best to locate its origins around 605BC.



## Historical Situation

The Assyrian Empire was the major player in the Ancient East for a period of about 150 years from the mid-eighth century until they were knocked off the throne by the Babylonians in the late seventh century. The Assyrians ruled by brute force and fear. If vassal nations didn't cause issues they were largely left in peace, but any attempt at rebellion was squashed with a calculated brutality.

In 722BC the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, destroying the capital Samaria, deporting most of the population into the previously conquered territories and resettling the region with foreigners. [These people inter-married with the remaining Jewish people to produce the 'half-breed' Samaritans of Jesus' day]. Around this time, the southern Jewish kingdom of Judah became a vassal state of the Assyrian Empire and this continued for almost 100 years. The overrule of Assyria was seen in the integration of Assyrian cultic practices into the Temple and alongside the worship of YHWH.

During the 620's, Assyrian control was really slipping. During this time Judah's King Josiah had broken free of Assyrian control

enough to cleanse the Temple and the nation of Judah of idolatry and reform the worship of YHWH [approximately 621 BC].

However, this time of Assyrian decline was balanced by the beginnings of the assertion of Babylonian power. The Assyrian Empire was ended at Haran by the Babylonians in about 610 BC. This was despite the attempt of Pharaoh Neco of Egypt to maintain the Assyrian buffer between Babylon and Egypt. King Josiah opposed Neco but was killed in battle and Judah was briefly annexed by Egypt. However Egyptian resistance was short lived with the Babylonians eventually conquering the entire Middle Eastern region, including Judah, by the 580's.

The question that we need to address is, "Who are the oppressors of 1v2-4?" There are a number of candidates - They could be the Assyrians, the Egyptians, or, most likely, the puppet King of Judah, Jehoiakim. The Prophet Jeremiah rages against him in Jeremiah 22v13-19.

<sup>13</sup> "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbour serve him for nothing and does not give him his wages, <sup>14</sup> who says, 'I will build myself a great house with spacious upper rooms,' who cuts out windows for it, panelling it with cedar and painting it with vermilion. <sup>15</sup> Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. <sup>16</sup> He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? declares the LORD. <sup>17</sup> But you have eyes and heart only for your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence."

<sup>18</sup> Therefore thus says the LORD concerning Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah: "They shall not lament for him, saying, 'Ah, my brother!' or 'Ah, sister!' They shall not lament for him, saying, 'Ah, lord!' or 'Ah, his majesty!' <sup>19</sup> With the burial of a donkey he shall be buried, dragged and dumped beyond the gates of Jerusalem."



## Message

The message of Habakkuk is a theodicy - a defence of God's justice and holiness against objections to the contrary. Habakkuk has objected to the injustice of Jehoiakim only to find that, in his opinion, the cure is worse than the disease. Habakkuk, and all God's people, knew of the justice of YHWH - "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?" [Gen 18v25]. Obviously circumstances appeared to belie this truth and so Habakkuk is a book that wrestles with issues that are as real for us as they were for Israel.



## Structure

Habbakuk falls neatly into two halves - one an oracle [1v1-2v20] and the other a psalm [3v1-19]. The oracle in turn has two parts - the prophet's first objection and the Lord's response [1v2-5, 1v5-11], and the prophet's second objection and the Lord's response [1v12-2v1, 2v2-20].

### 1. The Oracle of Habakkuk - 1v1-2v20

*Objection #1 - Injustice! - 1v2-5*

*Answer #1 - The Babylonians are coming! - 1v5-11*

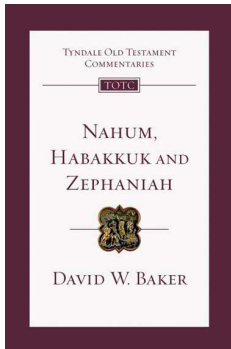
*Objection #2 - The Cure is worse than the Disease! - 1v12-2v1*

*Answer #2 - Trust in the Justice of the Lord - 2v2-20*

### 2. The Psalm of Habakkuk - 3v1-19



# Suggested Resources for Study

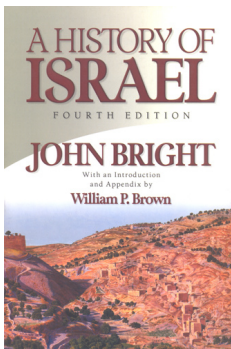
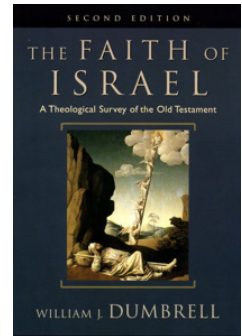


**David Baker, Nahum, Habakkuk & Zephaniah**  
Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries

A great basic commentary to these three Old Testament prophets. Priced at about \$20 it is a cheap, but quality, resource to have on hand. A great resource for the Bible Study leader!

## Bill Dumbrell, The Faith of Israel

A fantastic resource for the whole of the Old Testament. Dumbrell has chapters on each of the 39 books of the Old Testament, helpfully flagging the main ideas and themes.

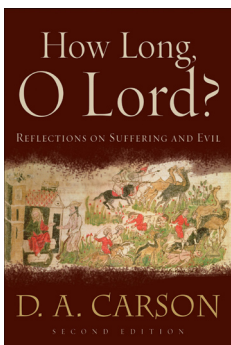
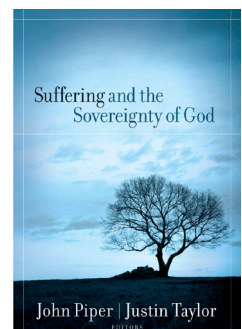


## John Bright, A History of Israel [~\$70]

One for the History buffs - covers the Old Testament and Intertestamental History of the Jewish nation. A good read for interest at least.

## John Piper [Ed.], Suffering and the Sovereignty of God

This one is free - download it at [http://www.desiringgod.org/Store/Books/ByTopic/All/670\\_Suffering\\_and\\_the\\_Sovereignty\\_of\\_God/](http://www.desiringgod.org/Store/Books/ByTopic/All/670_Suffering_and_the_Sovereignty_of_God/)



## Don Carson, How Long, O Lord?

A great mind wrestling with the Bible's teaching on suffering and evil. A different approach to Piper. Well worth the read.

# God, Do Something! Not That!

Habakkuk 1v1-2v1



What, if anything, makes you cry out to God for justice?  
What is it about that issue that makes you do this?



What does your 'cry to the Lord' reveal regarding your understanding of his character? What do you expect of Him?

Habakkuk wrote his prophecy down at the end of the seventh century BC. It was a bad time for the Lord's people and things were only going to get worse for them. They were a conquered people under a corrupt vassal king, Jehoiakim.



Read Jeremiah 22v13-19



What crimes does Jeremiah charge Jehoiakim with?



## Read Habakkuk 1v1 - 4



What is Habakkuk's complaint against God?



- what is implied by the question 'how long'?



- what questions do you imagine the 'righteous' might ask?

*How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?  
How long will my enemy triumph over me?*

*Psalm 13v1-2*



*A 'silent heaven is the greatest mystery of our existence'*

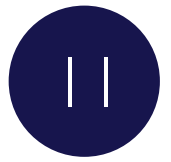
*Sir Robert Anderson*



- do you agree or disagree? Why?



Read Gen. 18v25, Exod. 23v6-8, & Deut. 32v4



Why would this problem be especially difficult for Israel?



Read Habakkuk 1v5-11



What is the Lord's answer to Habakkuk's complaint?



- how would you feel if you received an answer like this?



What challenges would there have been for Habakkuk and his righteous contemporaries to get their heads around this?



Read Deuteronomy 28v15, 36-37, 64 & Isaiah 39



Was this judgment unexpected?



Read Habakkuk 1v12-2v1



What then is the issue for Habakkuk?

God answers his second complaint in chapter two - stay tuned for the next study...



What do we see of Habakkuk's heart in this opening complaint?  
[see 1v12]



- is it wrong to question God?



- what does Habakkuk's approach show us?



**Going a bit deeper** - Paul uses 1v5 in his sermon Acts 13 to the Synagogue in Pisidian Antioch.



Read Acts 13v13-41



- What are the main points of his argument?



• What is the effect of using that quote at the sermon's end?



• How does the message that Paul preached mirror Habakkuk?



• What did "God do in their days"?



• How did this answer the problem of injustice & evil?



• What perspective does the cross give us on our suffering?



*Reflecting on his father's martyrdom at the hands of the Waodani Indians of Ecuador in light of the teaching of Acts 2v22-23*

*"I don't think that God merely tolerated my dad's death. I don't think he turned away when it was happening. I think he planned it ... If God could plan the death of his own righteous Son, why couldn't he plan the death of my dad?"*

*Steve Saint, Sovereignty, Suffering and the Work of Missions*



## PUT IT INTO ACTION



- What have you learned of the way God does things?



- What have you learned of his character & power?



- What have you learned of how to respond to him?



- What difference do these things make?



What do I need to pray about?

# “You Reap What You Sow”

Habakkuk 2v2-2v20



What is your response when you hear or watch the News? [Especially when it is negative].



What expectation do you have about what God might do about it?

From his perspective, Habakkuk the prophet has just received really bad news. God was going to deal with the problems of the injustice of corrupt leadership in Judah, but he was going to use the pagan Babylonians to do it. 2v1 ends with Habakkuk waiting for an answer from God because Habakkuk does not approve of his methods, and in 1v12-17 has said as much.



Read Habakkuk 2v2-4



How do we see the Lord answer Habakkuk?



- v2 - is it for Habakkuk alone?



- v3 - why does God give Habakkuk this caution?



- v4 - what relevance does this exhortation have to v3?



- v4 - what is the nature of the 'faith' that is commended?  
What is its object?



**Going a bit deeper** - What makes us cry out 'How Long, O Lord?'



- what challenge does the Lord's reply give us?



Read Habakkuk 2v5-20



How does the Lord describe the Babylonians in v5? What is the effect of this description? [note - it is possibly better to read 'wealth' rather than 'wine']

As you probably have noted, the Lord's reply here is an 'oracle of woe'. Now 'woe' is not a word that we tend to use very much - we probably don't speak oracles of woe against our adversaries. To declare 'woe' was to declare that misfortune, calamity and adversity was coming against the 'target'. In the Bible, these are oracles of judgment that the Lord would execute against rebellious individuals, groups and nations. The target here is Babylon.



Write down the nature of each "Woe" that the Lord utters against Babylon and his response of judgment.

	the aspect of sin condemned	the Lord's judgment
2v 6-8		
2v 9-11		

2v 12-14		
2v 14-17		
2v 18-20		



Does the fact that God uses that Babylonians for his purposes 'let them off the hook'?



- what comfort is this?



- how do we understand 2v4 in respect to God's words here?

On one level, our situation is quite different to that of the faithful Jews of Habakkuk's day, but when you look at things carefully the general themes of Habakkuk's complaint are very valid in our day. How long will injustice reign? How long will the rich and powerful do as they please with no fear of God while God's people are so often on the receiving end of injustice, simply because they seek to be faithful to God? Why is it that God seems to be silent?

God's answer is simply the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ - the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, his once for all victory over sin, death, evil - all that stand opposed to God and his purposes.



**Read Romans 1v16-20**



What are we 'righteous' called to believe?



- how do we see God's judgment against evil now?



- does this challenge our faith?



- when will we see the ultimate victory?



What do I need to pray about?

## “Yet I Will Rejoice...”

Habakkuk 3v1-19



If a non-Christian did a ‘cost-benefit’ analysis on the Christian faith, what result would you expect?



From what you know of Habakkuk from Chapter 1 & 2, what result would you expect if he did the analysis?



If you did the same analysis what answer would you give?

The last section of the Book of Habakkuk is actually a Psalm. It has all the poetic and musical structure of a Psalm and has musical directions - “On shigionoth”, “Selah”, and “For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.” Habakkuk 3 processes and responds to the issues raised in Habakkuk’s objections and the Lord’s answers [1v1-2v20]. It is important to remember that as a psalm, this is not the prophet’s private contemplations, but rather the response of the believing community.



RECALL - What were the two objections that Habakkuk raised with the Lord? What were the answers he received?



- OBJECTION #1



- ANSWER #1



- OBJECTION #2



- ANSWER #2



Read Habakkuk 3v1-20



In v2, Habakkuk introduces his psalm. In the face of the turmoil of his day, where does he look for assurance?



- what two responses does Habakkuk make?

In 3v3-15, we see the great acts of God's salvation recounted in a vivid and highly poetic way. While there are hints to suggest the actual events that stand behind these descriptions of God's actions, the main point is not the details but how God is presented as acting. It is mostly likely God's salvation of Israel from slavery in Egypt that is in view, with his victory over Pharaoh, and his deliverance of his people through the Red Sea.



How is God presented in 3v3-15?



- 3v3-4 [hint - Mt Paran and Teman are east of Judah]



- 3v5 [see Ezekiel 14v21, Revelation 6v8]



- 3v6



- 3v7



- 3v8-15 [see also Psalm 74v12-15, Isaiah 51v9-10]



What is the goal of God's actions? [see v13]



In 3v16-18, we see Habakkuk's conclusion. Where does he end up?



Rewrite 3v16-18 in your own words.



TAKING IT DEEPER



- How does Habakkuk deal with the tension between faith and experience?



- What does he 'use' to enable him to do this? How does he cultivate joy in the face of calamity?



- What does the contrast between 3v16a and 3v19 reveal?



- What acts of salvation can we 'stand in awe of'?



- What hope can we draw from these actions?



Read Romans 8v31-38



What do I need to pray about?