

# **HABAKKUK - A TEACHER'S GUIDE**

---

## **THE CENTRAL QUESTION:**

### **What does this book/story say to us about God?**

This question may be broken down further as follows:

- a. Why did God do it/allow it?
  - b. Why did He record it for our study?
- 

1. Habakkuk is unique among prophets in that his entire book seems to be a dialogue between Habakkuk and God. Who do you think initiated this dialogue and why? What does such a book say to us about God?

“AUTHOR: Habakkuk

“The author of this book is Habakkuk, about whom little is known apart from his name, which is derived from the Hebrew word meaning ‘embrace’ or ‘embracer,’ and the fact that he is called a ‘prophet’ (Hab. 1:1; 3:1), which suggests that he was a prophet by profession. Another hypothesis derives from the musical allusion in Hab. 3:19, which may suggest that Habakkuk is a Levite engaged in the temple service, possibly in the temple choir. Sufficient internal evidence assuredly points to a man called ‘embracer,’ denoting his genuine and overpowering concern as one who sternly rebukes, but nonetheless intensely comforts, God’s chosen people. Furthermore, Habakkuk embraces or firmly clings to the Lord.

Historical Background:

**612 B.C.** Nineveh falls to the Medes and Babylonians

**609 B.C.** Death of Josiah king of Judah

**605 B.C.** Babylon defeats Egypt at Carchemish - Nebuchadnezzar’s reign begins

**605 B.C.** Daniel and friends are among the first Judeans taken captive to Babylon

**598 B.C.** Second conquest of Jerusalem - Ezekiel taken captive with many others

**586 B.C.** Jerusalem falls to the Babylonians - Jerusalem destroyed

“Carchemish by the (upper) Euphrates was an extremely strategic and important city at that time. It was located about 50 miles due west of Haran. Sargon II (722–705 B.C.) captured Carchemish for Assyria in 717 B.C. During the declining years of the Assyrian Empire, following the fall of Nineveh (612 B.C.) to the combined forces of the Neo-Babylonian and Median Empires, Ashur-uballit II (612–609 B.C.) of Assyria and Necho II (609–594 B.C.) of Egypt joined in an attempt to reconquer Haran, which had been abandoned in 610 B.C. Although Necho’s expedition to rescue Haran was unsuccessful, he was able to conquer all of Syria and Palestine and to hold the important city of Carchemish on the Euphrates. During this campaign, Josiah’s attempt to intercept the forces at Megiddo led to his death. Four years later, in May or June of 605 B.C., the epoch-making second battle of Carchemish resulted in Nebuchadnezzar’s (605–562 B.C.) defeat of the combined armies of Assyria and Egypt (cf. Jer. 46:1–12). Necho had removed Jehoahaz, Josiah’s son, from the throne and placed his brother Eliakim (Jehoiakim) on the throne of Judah when he took Jehoahaz captive into Egypt. In this period, Jehoiakim shifted his alliance from Necho II of Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar of

Babylon. Following a fierce battle at the Egyptian border in which the Babylonians suffered a temporary defeat (601 B.C.), Jehoiakim made a strategic blunder when he rebelled against Babylon during the last years of his reign over Judah (609-597 B.C.). In March of 597 B.C., Jerusalem made its first capitulation to Nebuchadnezzar, when Jehoiachin was taken captive and some of the temple treasures were removed to Babylon (cf. 2 Chronicles 36:6,7; 2 Kings 24:1-4; Jer. 22:13-19; 25:1-9; Dan. 1:1; Hab. 1:6). In July, 586 B.C., Jerusalem fell to the Neo-Babylonian Empire (2 Chr. 36:15-21).” (*Believer’s Study Bible*)

**“Historical Setting.** The date of Habakkuk is difficult to ascertain, since he does not mention the king or kings during whose reigns he prophesied. The best key that Habakkuk offers for dating his prophecy is his description of the Chaldeans in Hab. 1:5-11. Some commentators, noting that God says He is in the process of raising up the Chaldeans (Hab. 1:6), would date the prophecy as early as the reign of Manasseh. Habakkuk’s message, therefore, would be that just as God raised up the Assyrians to judge Israel, so He is raising up the Chaldeans (Babylonians) to judge Judah. This interpretation would date the prophecy before the destruction of Nineveh, which resulted in the exaltation of the Chaldeans to world prominence.

“Most commentators, however, date Habakkuk’s prophecy during the reign of King Jehoiakim. The fall of Nineveh occurred about 612 B.C. in fulfillment of Nahum’s prophecy. It may have been after this fulfillment that Habakkuk received his vision setting forth the overthrow of the Babylonian kingdom. If so, when Habakkuk prophesied, the southern kingdom was wallowing in its sin and tottering politically in view of the impending threat from Babylon, the current world power. Nebuchadnezzar may have already carried Daniel and many of Jerusalem’s nobles into captivity (606/605 B.C.), with the second deportation soon to follow (597 B.C.). The final destruction of the city was yet to occur in 586 B.C. Habakkuk’s description of the Chaldeans and their feats may even allude to all three of these events. Putting the above considerations together, the date of Habakkuk’s prophecy is somewhere between 655 B.C. and 598 B.C. Advocates of the former view would select 655 B.C. as the date of writing, while advocates of the latter view commonly select 606 B.C.” (*King James Version Study Bible*)

“DATE: 609–605 B.C.

“Although the prophecy is not dated according to the reign of a king, internal evidence presupposes a date between the death of King Josiah (609 B.C.) and the beginning of the Babylonian captivity (605 B.C.). The deplorable conditions of the people (Hab. 1:2–4) imply a date after the untimely death of Josiah at the Battle of Megiddo (609 B.C.) and during the wicked reign of King Jehoiakim (609–597 B.C.; cf. Jer. 22:13–23). Along with Zephaniah and Jeremiah, Habakkuk warned of God’s approaching judgment through the Chaldeans, i.e., the Babylonians. Nineveh, the capital of the once-mighty Assyrian Empire, fell to the Babylonians in 612 B.C. Seven years later (605 B.C.) Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon defeated Pharaoh Necho of Egypt at Carchemish (on the Euphrates), then pursued the Egyptians back through Palestine. In so doing, Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem and took hostages, including Daniel (Dan. 1:1). Doubtless he would have conquered the city, if word of the death of his father, Nabopolassar, had not reached him, causing him to return immediately to Babylon to

ascend the throne. Nevertheless, the first phase of the Babylonian captivity, of which Habakkuk prophesied, became a reality.

“THEME: Triumphant Faith

“Realizing Israel’s iniquity and need for punishment, Habakkuk is perplexed with the moral dilemma of how a holy God could employ the more deplorably wicked Chaldeans to chastise His children. God responds by asserting His sovereign prerogative as to the choice and the timing of His retribution. Though it may appear unreasonable, His way is best. Thus the prophet learns that to believe what God says and to heed His warning is to be numbered among the righteous who shall live by faith (2:4). Consequently, Habakkuk’s theme is faith triumphant over apparent difficulties.” (*Believer’s Study Bible*)

The name Habakkuk is found nowhere else in the Bible. We know very little about him. There is an interesting commentary on the first two chapters of Habakkuk found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Since it quotes the original text that it is commenting on, it gives us a manuscript of the first two chapters that was copied about 100 BC—one of the earliest Old Testament manuscripts available. There are very few differences between that ancient manuscript and the Masoretic Text that we have used for all these years, once again demonstrating how careful the copyists were.

It is possible that Habakkuk worked as a temple singer since the third chapter is dedicated to the “chief singer (or choirmaster) on my stringed instruments”. Dating Habakkuk is possible based on the following information: The temple was still standing (Habakkuk 2:20); The rise of the Babylonians and their invasion of Israel seemed still to be quite a surprise to Habakkuk (Habakkuk 1:5-7); the spiritual condition of people in Judah was pretty bad. Thus it is possible that it was written during the evil times of Manasseh, Amon or the early years of Josiah. It was probably written before Nabopolassar began to rule Babylon and set out on his conquest of the world. (626/625 BC) This would suggest a date of about 630 BC or soon after Nahum.

Habakkuk focuses his attention on the nations of Judah and Babylon and predicted disaster coming on each of them. **Job gave us some ideas about why the righteous suffer and Habakkuk by contrast helps to explain why the wicked prosper.** But this raised an immediate question in Habakkuk’s mind: How can God use a nation as wicked as the Babylonians to punish His own people Judah? God proceeds to show that He is fully aware of Babylon’s ways and wickedness and He is still in control. Habakkuk chooses to trust God and ends with a statement of immense faith.

From reading the book itself, it might appear that Habakkuk was struggling with what he saw going on around him. He no doubt was praying to God to help him to understand it all. Perhaps God recognized the sincere prayers of Habakkuk and carried on this “conversation” with His prophet Habakkuk.

“The name *Habakkuk* may come from a Hebrew word that means ‘to embrace.’ In his book, he comes to grips with some serious problems and lays hold of God by faith when everything in his life seems to be falling apart.

“Habakkuk saw the impending Babylonian invasion, and he wondered that God would use a wicked nation to punish His chosen people. His book describes three stages in Habakkuk’s

experience—perplexity: faith wavers (chap. 1); perspective: faith watches (chap. 2); and perseverance: faith worships (chap. 3).

**“The key text is 2:4, ‘But the just shall live by his faith.’ It is quoted in Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38. The theme of Romans is ‘the just’ and how to be justified before God. Galatians tells us how the just ‘shall live,’ and the emphasis in Hebrews is on living ‘by faith.’ It takes three New Testament epistles to explain one Old Testament text!” (With the Word Bible Commentary)**

“Living by faith is a bewildering venture. We rarely know what’s coming next, and not many things turn out the way we anticipate. It is natural to assume that since I am God’s chosen and beloved, I will get favorable treatment from the God who favors me so extravagantly. It is not unreasonable to expect that from the time that I become his follower, I will be exempt from dead ends, muddy detours, and cruel treatment from the travelers I meet daily who are walking the other direction. That God-followers don’t get preferential treatment in life always comes as a surprise. But it’s also a surprise to find that there are a few men and women *within* the Bible who show up alongside us at such moments.

“The prophet Habakkuk is one of them, and a most welcome companion he is. Most prophets, most of the time, speak God’s Word *to us*. “They are preachers calling us to listen to God’s words of judgment and salvation, confrontation and comfort. They face us with God as he is, not as we imagine him to be. Most prophets are in-your-face assertive, not given to tact, not diplomatic, as they insist that we pay attention to God. But Habakkuk speaks our word *to God*. He gives voice to our bewilderment, articulates our puzzled attempts to make sense of things, faces God with our disappointment with God. He insists that God pay attention to us, and he insists with a prophet’s characteristic no-nonsense bluntness.

“The circumstance that aroused Habakkuk took place in the seventh century B.C. The prophet realized that God was going to use the godless military machine of Babylon to bring God’s judgment on God’s own people—using a godless nation to punish a godly nation! It didn’t make sense, and Habakkuk was quick and bold to say so. He dared to voice his feelings that God didn’t know his own God business. Not a day has passed since then that one of us hasn’t picked up and repeated Habakkuk’s bafflement: “God, you don’t seem to make sense!”

“But this prophet companion who stands at our side does something even more important: He waits and he listens. It is in his waiting and listening—which then turns into his praying—that he found himself inhabiting the large world of God’s sovereignty. Only there did he eventually realize that the believing-in-God life, the steady-trusting-in-God life, is the full life, the only real life. Habakkuk started out exactly where we start out with our puzzled complaints and God-accusations, but he didn’t stay there. He ended up in a world, along with us, where every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.” (*the Message* - Intro to Habakkuk)

2. What do you think the beings in the rest of the universe thought as they watched generation after generation going by and things getting progressively worse and worse? Wouldn’t it be

natural for them to say to God, “Why are you wasting Your time with these people? Why don’t You just let them go?” (Hosea 4:17; 4ST 258:2:4- see EG White comments)

They must have asked this type of question repeatedly! But God had a plan that He was working on that needed a little more time for conditions to become right for His Son to come and live here on planet Earth. (See Galatians 4:4) It would be interesting to know what He told the angels and the beings from other parts of the universe during the times of Habakkuk. They also were willing to wait and trust God to see how He would work things out. (See Habakkuk 2:4)

3. Is it true that if God really told us what He is doing, we wouldn’t believe it? (Habakkuk 1:5) Could such a thing be true in our day? How does this fit with Daniel 9:19–“For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name?” (Compare 2 Kings 19:34; 20:6; Psalms 25:11; Isaiah 37:35; 48:9-11; Jeremiah 14:7,21; Ezekiel 20:9)

I’m sure this was not the first time people were surprised at God’s actions. What did they think when He sent the flood? **It is natural for us to take an egocentric approach to such questions. We want to know how it is going to affect us! But in the larger picture, it is God’s name and reputation that need to be preserved in all of this. The questions in the great controversy are not about us—everyone knows that we are sinners—they are about God.** So if we could forget about ourselves for a while and think about what all of this is saying about God we would probably get a clearer understanding of why things work out the way they do.

4. What is the meaning of the last phrase of Habakkuk 2:4–“the just shall live by faith?” (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38) What does it mean in context here? What do you think Paul was thinking when he used it? What did it mean to Martin Luther when he started a reformation with it? If we understand what faith really is, doesn’t this imply that even in our time, as we see things going from bad to worse, to even worse, that those who are truly righteous people will look back to the evidence they already have about God’s trustworthiness and live by trust (faith) in God?

This verse has come to be a centerpiece of some of the most important theological passages in the entire Scripture. It is essential that we understand what it implies. There are at least three major ways this phrase has been understood down through the years.

1. Martin Luther said he remembered this phrase as he was climbing “Pilate’s Staircase” on his knees in Rome. According to the story, as he thought of the implications of this phrase he stood up and walked down the stairs. Some claim that this was the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. To Martin Luther the phrase apparently meant, “those who are legally forgiven because of their faith will live”. Since he was terrified of what God would do to him if he were lost, it was most important that his standing with God be “justified” or “declared righteous”. He reasoned that if God had fully forgiven him, then God would not need to punish him either in hell or purgatory.

2. Another way the verse has been understood is as follows: If you are “justified” or “declared righteous” then you will be able to live eternally because of your faith”. Is it that faith makes us righteous (the real meaning of the word “just”) or is it that “just” people are able to live because of their “faith”?

3. A third way to look at this phrase is to look back at the original context and consider what is the most natural meaning in that context. God is saying to Habakkuk that things look really bad but if Habakkuk is a friend of God’s he will be willing to trust Him and wait. God asks us to allow Him to work with us to transform our lives. But we must be willing to trust Him enough to be willing to do it in the way and at the time that He sees is best. Thus the original Greek expression “righteousness” or “salvation” by “faith” could be translated “God can and will save and heal all who trust Him”. **Habakkuk 2:4 understood in this way means “those who are God’s friends because they have been healed and saved by trusting Him are willing to continue trusting Him and wait”.**

5. When do you think the fulfillment of Habakkuk 2:14 (Compare Isaiah 11:9) will take place—“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea?” (NIV) When do you think Habakkuk expected it to be fulfilled?

This is obviously a passage describing how things will be in the New Jerusalem after sin is completely eliminated. This is the way it should have been all along. Habakkuk probably had read this expression from Isaiah and realized that it was describing a time when “The Son of David”—the Messiah—would rule the world from Jerusalem. It certainly has not happened yet! In Habakkuk’s mind, this would find its initial fulfillment with the overthrow of the Babylonians. Isaiah repeatedly talks about the Jewish people being destroyed for “lack of knowledge” (Isaiah 1:3; 5:12,13; Hosea 4:6) and it is clear here and in Isaiah 11:9 that the essential knowledge is the “knowledge of God”. Certainly, Habakkuk was hoping that this time would come as soon as possible, but he must have recognized that it wasn’t happening in his day.

6. Did the prophets have a clear understanding of the impotence of idols? (see Psalms 115:1-8; Isaiah 44:9-20; 1 Kings 18:25-29) If it is folly to worship anything created (Romans 1:20-23), what kind of folly is it to worship something you have created yourself? (Habakkuk 2:18,19)

The logic of the arguments in these passages is compelling! But unfortunately those who worship idols aren’t inclined to spend a lot of time thinking through the implications of what they are doing! This is an example of a type of behavior which is all too common even in our day. When someone wants to believe something they are very inclined to believe it even if essentially all the evidence is against it. Why do people smoke? Why do people ignore the many clear commands in the Scriptures to keep the Sabbath holy?

In this case, it is likely that the attractiveness of the promiscuous sexual orgies that were regarded as a part of the “worship” of these idols drew people to them even when it was clear that they were not “gods” at all. (See *Isaiah Teacher’s Guide* #17)

7. Does the book of Habakkuk suggest that God may in some way be losing control? Is it possible that He might not be able to actually carry out what He has said? Notice Habakkuk

2:20—The way we worship says a lot about the kind of God we worship! “Be patient, wait, God is still in control!” What kind of God would give us such a message? Did Baal talk like this? Molech? Dagon? Did these “gods” demand quiet reverence and careful evaluation of what it meant to worship them? (See 1 Kings 18:25-29)

The message of Habakkuk seems to be that God is still in control. Even when things look really bad, God can be trusted. Isaiah says that our bread and water will be sure (Isaiah 33:16) but Habakkuk seems to suggest that he would rejoice in the Lord even when everything is gone! (See Habakkuk 3:17-19) If God is extremely intelligent (See Isaiah 40:10-31) and all powerful (Isaiah 40-48) then His people can rely on Him. Idols have none of these properties!

8. When God finally felt it was necessary to allow His children to be punished, why did He allow what appeared to be the most wicked nations of the times (Assyria and Babylon) to come and do the punishing?

This was certainly Habakkuk’s question and it is a fair one. There are some obvious answers such as these nations were in the process of conquering other nations anyway, so it was easy for them to step in to do what God wanted them to do. God, in other words, didn’t have to create and prepare a whole nation who otherwise wouldn’t be even in existence to discipline His children. But unfortunately, when God uses a nation such as the Assyrians and allows them to conquer several other nations it is quite natural for them to get the impression that they are doing this on their own! Isaiah describes just exactly that as he discusses the Assyrians in Isaiah 10:5-27. God apparently had in mind that the Assyrians do something for Him but they wanted to go far beyond that and they believed that they were acting on their own behalf and they didn’t think Israel’s God had anything to do with it!

9. Could you comfortably agree with Habakkuk’s conclusion in Habakkuk 3:16-19?

In response to God’s request in Habakkuk 2:4, the prophet seems ready at the end of the book to leave everything in God’s hands. For someone living in a subsistence agricultural society, the conditions described here by Habakkuk are just about as bad as it can get! But Habakkuk has decided that he will trust God no matter what happens! This requires real trust. And this is exactly what God had in mind when He asked Habakkuk to trust Him in Habakkuk 2:4! Since trust (faith) is the only requirement for salvation as suggested by Paul (Acts 16:31) Habakkuk has apparently succeeded in developing that essential relationship with God that He would like to see in each one of us.

© Copyright 2000-2006, Kenneth Hart  
info@theox.org

Last Modified: September 17, 2006  
C:\My Documents\WP\TG\TG-2\HABAKKUKtg.wpd

## EG White Comments

“For centuries God looked with patience and forbearance upon the cruel treatment given to his ambassadors, at his holy law prostrate, despised, trampled underfoot. He swept away the inhabitants of the Noachian world with a flood. But when the earth was again peopled, men drew away from God, and renewed their hostility to him, manifesting bold defiance. Those whom God rescued from Egyptian bondage followed in the footsteps of those who had preceded them. Cause was followed by effect; the earth was being corrupted.

“A crisis had arrived in the government of God...All heaven was prepared at the word of God to move to the help of his elect. One word from him, and the bolts of heaven would have fallen upon the earth, filling it with fire and flame. God had but to speak, and there would have been thunderings and lightnings and earthquakes and destruction.

“The heavenly intelligences were prepared for a fearful manifestation of Almighty power. Every move was watched with intense anxiety. The exercise of justice was expected. The angels looked for God to punish the inhabitants of the earth...”

“The heavenly universe was amazed at God’s patience and love. To save fallen humanity the Son of God took humanity upon himself.” *Review and Herald*, July 17, 1900; (4RH 201:1:4-201:2:1) compare *Desire of Ages* 37

“For centuries God bore with the inhabitants of the old world. But at last guilt reached its limit...He came out of His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth, and by a flood cleansed the earth of its iniquity.

“Notwithstanding this terrible lesson, men had no sooner begun to multiply once more, than rebellion and vice became widespread. Satan seemed to have taken control of the world. The time came that a change must be made, or the image of God would be wholly obliterated from the hearts of the beings He had created. All heaven watched the movements of God with intense interest. Would He once more manifest His wrath? Would He destroy the world by fire? The angels thought that the time had come to strike the blow of justice, whom, lo, to their wondering vision was unveiled the plan of salvation.” MS 22, January 10, 1890; *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* 569,570

“Before Christ’s first advent, the sin of refusing to conform to God’s law had become widespread. Apparently Satan’s power was growing; his warfare against heaven was becoming more and more determined. A crisis had been reached. With intense interest God’s movements were watched by the heavenly angels. Would He come forth from His place to punish the inhabitants of the world for their iniquity? Would He send fire or flood to destroy them? All heaven waited the bidding of their Commander to pour out the vials of wrath upon a rebellious world. One word from Him, one sign, and the world would have been destroyed. The worlds unfallen would have said, ‘Amen. Thou art righteous, O God, because Thou hast exterminated rebellion.’” *The Signs of the Times*, August 27, 1902; *Reflecting Christ* 58; compare *The Youth’s Instructor*, July 29, 1897; *That I May Know Him* 19