

## *O Lord, How Long Shall I Cry*

*Habakkuk 1:2*

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*Attribution*

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*1 The burden which the prophet Habakkuk saw.*

*2 O Lord, how long shall I cry,  
And You will not hear?  
Even cry out to You, "Violence!"  
And You will not save.*

*3 Why do You show me iniquity,  
And cause me to see trouble?  
For plundering and violence are before me;  
There is strife, and contention arises.*

*4 Therefore the law is powerless,  
And justice never goes forth.  
For the wicked surround the righteous;  
Therefore perverse judgment proceeds. (Habakkuk 1:1–4)*

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There has been much discussion about the Title of this OT Prophetic Book. The vast majority of Scholars seem to come to the conclusion (and rightly so, it seems) that the book takes its name from its author and possibly means "one who embraces" (1:1; 3:1).

Habakkuk 3:1 applies the title of Prophet to Habakkuk just as verse 1 here does. It records what has been commonly called "The Prophet's Prayer".

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### *3 A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, on Shigionoth.*

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BTW, a "Shigionoth" is a passionate or even wild song having rapid changes of rhythm. Its' use (in Chapters 1 & 3) lends a sense of emotion to what the Prophet is proclaiming. An emotion that, upon consideration of what the Books is saying is well justified and even truly necessary. By the end of the prophecy, this name becomes appropriate as the prophet clings to God regardless of his confusion about God's plans for his people.

As with many of the Minor Prophets, nothing is really known about the prophet except that which we can infer from the book. In the case of the Book of Habakkuk, internal information is virtually nonexistent, making conclusions about his identity and life conjectural. His simple introduction as "*the prophet Habakkuk*" may imply that he needed no introduction since he was a well-known Prophet of his day. One thing is surely clear, it is certain that he was a contemporary of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zephaniah.

The mention of the Chaldeans (1:6) suggests a late seventh century b.c. date, probably very shortly before Nebuchadnezzar commenced his military march through Nineveh (612 b.c.), Haran (609 b.c.), and Carchemish (605 b.c.), on his way to Jerusalem (605 b.c.). Habakkuk's bitter lament (1:2–4) may reflect a time period shortly after the death of Josiah (609 b.c.), days in which the godly king's reforms (cf. 2 Kin. 23) were quickly overturned by his successor, Jehoiakim (Jer. 22:13–19).

With regard to the background and setting of the Book... It seems certain that Habakkuk prophesied during the final days of the Assyrian Empire and the beginning of Babylonia's world rule under Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar. When Nabopolassar ascended to power in 626 b.c., one of the things that he started to do immediately was to begin to expand his influence to the N and W. Under the leadership of his son, the Babylonian army overthrew Nineveh in 612 b.c., forcing the Assyrian nobility to take refuge first in Haran and then Carchemish. Nebuchadnezzar pursued them, overrunning Haran in 609 b.c. and Carchemish in 606 b.c.

The Egyptian king at that time, named Pharaoh Necho, who was traveling through Judah in 609 b.c. on his way to assist the fleeing Assyrian king, was opposed by the Israelite King Josiah at Megiddo (2 Chr. 35:20–24). Josiah was killed in the ensuing battle, thereby leaving his throne to a succession of 3 sons and a grandson.

We remember that, earlier, as a result of discovering the Book of the Law in the temple (622 b.c.), Josiah had instituted significant spiritual reforms in Judah (2 Kin. 22, 23). One of the things that he did was to go about abolishing many of the idolatrous practices of his father Amon (2 Kin. 21:20–22) and grandfather Manasseh (2 Kin. 21:11–13). However, upon his death, the nation quickly reverted to her evil ways (cf. Jer. 22:13–19). It seems that it was this that caused Habakkuk to frame his prophecy in the form a lament and a question of God's silence and apparent lack of punitive action (1:2–4) to purge His covenant people.

Some of the truly interesting things about the Book are the historical and theological themes we find there. The opening verses reveal a historical situation similar to the days of the Prophets Amos and Micah.

- Justice had essentially disappeared from the Land;
- violence and wickedness were pervasive, existing unchecked.
- In the midst of these dark days, Habakkuk cried out for divine intervention (1:2–4).
- God's response, that He was sending the Chaldeans to judge Judah (1:5–11), creates an even greater theological dilemma for Habakkuk:
  - Why didn't God purge His people and restore their righteousness?
  - How could God use the Chaldeans to judge a people more righteous than they (1:12–2:1)?

- God’s answer that He would judge the Chaldeans also (2:2–20), did not fully satisfy the prophet’s theological quandary; in fact, it only intensified it.
- In Habakkuk’s mind, the issue crying for resolution is no longer God’s righteous response toward evil (or lack thereof), but the vindication of God’s character and covenant with His people (1:13).
  - Like Job, the prophet argued with God, and through that experience he achieved a deeper understanding of God’s sovereign character and a firmer faith in Him (cf. Job 42:5, 6; Is. 55:8, 9).
  - Ultimately, Habakkuk realized that God was not to be worshiped merely because of the temporal blessings He bestowed, but for His own sake (3:17–19).

There are also a number of interpretive challenges for the reader/studier to get through in order to understand this book. It seems that the queries of the prophet represent some of the most fundamental questions in all of life, with the answers providing crucial foundation stones on which to build a proper understanding of God’s character and His sovereign ways in history.

- The core of his message lies in the call to trust God (2:4), “the just shall live by his faith.”
- The NT references ascribe unusual importance theologically to Habakkuk.
  - The writer of Hebrews quotes Hab. 2:4 to amplify the believer’s need to remain strong and faithful in the midst of affliction and trials (Heb. 10:38).
  - The apostle Paul, on the other hand, employs the verse twice (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11) to accentuate the doctrine of justification by faith.

There need not be any interpretive conflict, however, for the emphasis in both Habakkuk and the NT references goes beyond the act of faith to include the continuity of faith, that faith makes sense and is very valuable in the ongoing context of the believers’ life. Faith is not a one-time act, but a way of life. The true believer, declared righteous by God, will habitually persevere in faith throughout all his life (cf. Col. 1:22, 23; Heb. 3:12–14). He will trust the sovereign God who only does what is right.