

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK
Lesson 2, Chapter 1 Continued

In our first lesson on the Book of Habakkuk, we opened with an introduction to provide context for reading, interpreting, and therefore understanding what this Prophet of God was telling his people. Just as today when impactful and profound things happen in this world, they only make sense within the current context of the world as it exists at the moment... not several years earlier nor how it will exist several years later. It is the tendency that as human societies age and evolve to want to rewrite history... more so in modern times than in ancient. That is, to project backwards upon a time in the past when what we are now experiencing, within our current context and mindset, was totally unlike what that generation was experiencing or thinking. It gets even more complicated when we do that upon a culture and a language that was entirely foreign to us and to ours. Therefore, most of the commentaries on Habakkuk attempt to explain it based upon the generation in which that commentary was written, and not on the generation in which Habakkuk wrote.

Thankfully, some of our highest (and therefore least popularly known) scholars in both language and the ancient Bible texts, have worked diligently to part that veil of time and culture and language and to help us understand our Bibles in the way and sense it was written, and thus intended. Since this effort has gained steam, we've seen much pushback from the traditional and classic denominationally based scholarship that has virtually ruled Bible research for centuries and silenced all who would attempt to offer different views. Their standard response to these newer findings, which of themselves are nearly impossible to dispute on a factual basis, is that the Bible is not a steady-state book of spiritual knowledge; rather it is a living document made to change and to be amended over time. But even more, that its words are nearly magical in that it matters not at all what they meant at the time they were given, because their meaning will change as our societies progress and evolve. Thus, whatever we wish to take those precious words to mean now are just as valid as what they meant to the 1st generation to hear them. Needless to say, I find that not only disturbing, but dishonest... dare I say even heresy to the Word itself.

So, I'm intent on drawing from the latest scholars that attempt to recover original meaning. That means this will sometimes clash with the populist beliefs of Christians about who God says He is, some of His principles that the Church has taught as foundational, and how we are to define the meaning of literal when it comes to understanding each individual word, phrase and sentence of Scripture. Simply correctly translating each word from their original language is not sufficient because the Bible is full of idioms and expressions that operate just as our idioms and expressions of modern times operate. The sum of the words means something different than their individual parts. We're all familiar with that concept and without even thinking about it we use our own cultural idioms dozens of times every day in our speech. So, for those idioms and expressions the term "literal" must mean what they meant to their ancient listeners.

But then we get to types of literature. Without going into several genres, the issue of poetry immediately surfaces. Poetry's intent is to express deep human feelings, share unique perspectives, and evoke emotions. Unlike regular narrative prose and text that just give us facts, poetry uses sound, rhythm, and imagery to make readers feel and think in a special way. So, one might think that all poetry in all cultures works the same. It does not. The language of Hebrew poetry was virtually unknown to the Church until fairly recent times. Jewish knowledge of it has been far greater, but even that diminished somewhat over the centuries. This matter is critical in Bible study especially as it concerns the Prophets, that used Hebrew poetry extensively in their writings.

In Francis I. Anderson's publications on the matter of Hebrew poetry, he says this:

"We need a new sensitivity to Hebrew poetic art. Often the use of various kinds of ellipsis has not been appreciated either because literal-mindedness has forced some kind of interpretation onto the surface tradition, or because the text is deemed to be corrupt since it is evidently ungrammatical (usually because it is thought that something is missing), and attempts are made to repair the damage by emendations following the rules of grammar worked out for

Hebrew prose... such corrective rewriting of the text has been the main preoccupation of critical scholars..."

Bottom line: Hebrew poetry doesn't fit the rules of Western poetry of any age, nor especially it doesn't fit the rules of commonly spoken or written Hebrew prose. But, even in our modern times Bible and language scholars have, for the most part, either been ignorant of how Hebrew poetry works or has decided it doesn't matter and so think if the poetic grammar doesn't fit their ideas of standardization, then the words are corrupt and must be rewritten in however that particular scholar thinks they ought to be. Usually that reluctance to accept the realities and complexities of Hebrew poetry in the Bible comes from not wanting to destabilize what has been centuries of traditional understanding that has been reworked into countless Church doctrines.

Each Bible prophet tended to have their own particular way of using Hebrew poetry, which is far less standardized than how modern poems are. Habakkuk, too, has his own style, which has an important effect on its meaning. And we will take that into account as we proceed in our study of his book.

I'll remind you that Habakkuk was the last prophet to write prior to Babylon invading, conquering, and exiling Judah. He seems to have written from about 610 – 606 B.C. and was a resident of Judah. We know little more of him than that.

Last time, we opened chapter 1 and got as far as verse 5. The first verse, as nearly always, was the book's superscription, with verses 2 – 4 representing Habakkuk's first prayer to God. This most unique prayer had the character of something between a lament and a complaint from a desperate man. I think it is fair to say that this prophet's prayer even had an accusatory tone to it. Essentially, Habakkuk says to God that everything is falling apart in Judah... society has gone to the dogs, and is full of violence, corruption, and immorality. Plainly God can see this, and just as plainly God says in His Word that this shouldn't happen. But it is happening and it seems that Yehoveh isn't lifting a finger to stop it. So, the obvious implication is that the extreme state of apostasy and chaos of Judah is just as much God's fault as it is the peoples'

fault. And Habakkuk wants God to explain to him why this is. That is pretty bold and I think not something as God worshippers we might have expected from such a renowned prophet. Yet have we not all wondered sometimes at God's silence and inaction in our own times as the atrocities of this world become greater and worse from decade to decade? It's not wrong to wonder that (if you do). Yet, if we learn from our Bibles as those words were originally intended and learn from the experiences of the great prophets and others, the answer to that question of the ages is at least somewhat clearer and more satisfying.

Let's re-read the 1st chapter of Habakkuk beginning at verse 5.

RE-READ HABAKKUK CHAPTER 1:5 – 17

We concluded last time at verse 5 and touched on the subject of the feeling of abandonment that was a significant part of what Habakkuk was wrestling with. "Where are you, God?" And this is not unique to Habakkuk as we find Yeshua, Jeremiah, Job and so many others in the Scriptures as having that same emotion. God's response that begins in verse 5 doesn't help much. It almost feels like Yehoveh is avoiding Habakkuk's question. Verses 5 – 11 record God's response to Habakkuk's prayer.

God's response to Habakkuk is to speak of a coming event. Yehoveh promises action but says it is going to happen through the Chaldean people (Babylonians). They will act as God's agent of judgment. But exactly what they are going to do is left to Habakkuk's mind to contemplate. That must have terrified him, because Babylon had taken over Assyria's Empire and had become every bit as ruthless. Was God really going to use Babylon to address Habakkuk's concerns about Judah? These were not the comforting words he was hoping for.

It is so interesting that in the Book of Acts, we find the same thought as expressed in Habakkuk 1:5. Listen to what is said:

CJB Acts 13:41 ***'You mockers! Look, and marvel, and die! For in your own time, I am doing a work that you simply will not believe, even if someone explains it to you!'***

I have no doubt that the Apostle Paul who spoke this to fellow countrymen as he was explaining who Yeshua was and why it was important to take his message to heart, was a direct allusion to Habakkuk 1:5. In fact, when we look at the Greek Septuagint (the OT written in Old Greek in the 3rd century B.C.), here is how it comes out:

NETS Habakkuk 1:5 ***⁵ Look, you despisers, and watch! And marvel at marvelous things, and be annihilated! For I am working a work in your days that you would not believe if someone should tell it.***

It is virtually identical to Acts 13:41. So, it has been known for a long time that a great deal of the OT quotes we find in the New Testament use the Greek Septuagint instead of the Hebrew. This simply adds more proof that the majority of the Jewish Diaspora were Greek speakers and therefore many used the Greek Septuagint as their Bible. And, that writers like Luke and Paul, because they dealt mostly with the Diaspora, used the Greek language and the OT Scriptures that had been translated into Greek when they spoke to people outside the Holy Land.

God tells Habakkuk to look around at the nations. To find this response here is pretty surprising. Habakkuk has said nothing about the nations; his prayer and inquiry was only about Judah. Here's the thing; while God looks at Israel separately in many ways, but in the larger picture they are part of God's purposes as it concerns the whole world. Israel's fate and the fate of the nations can only be understood in the context of how one affects the other. We, as humans, can get little slices of understanding of God's mindset as to how all this works, but Yehoveh alone knows and understands it all. Habakkuk's glimpse left many holes and gray areas that troubled him deeply, and it's not much different for God worshippers of the 21st century. When we approach God demanding answers to things we don't understand, thinking God is either letting us down or maybe has even abandoned us for a time, it is us thinking in all of our human limitations. We simply don't have the biggest

picture of what God is doing, and much of our thinking is actually rather naïve... compared to God's perspective. This is where our sincere trust and faith in Him come into play in the most necessary way.

What exactly does God mean for Judah to look around the nations? What He does NOT mean is: search out the nations to see whether such a coming judgment has happened to them. What he DOES mean is: look at the nations because from among them YOUR judgment, Judah, is going to come bursting upon you. This work God is going to do will both amaze and terrify Judah. I think one of the more impactful messages within this message is:

CJB Habakkuk 1:5 *For what is going to be done in your days you will not believe, even when you are told.*

Here's the thing: God is implicitly warning Judah that their terrible judgment is coming for their constant rebellion against Him. They don't believe they are rebellious, and they don't believe He's really going to send a gentile nation to attack them. Their belief is centered in their denial of the messages of the many prophets that have warned them. This is the same state as the bulk of God worshippers today. God has told us what is coming. Many Believers say they believe that; but what are they doing about it? Are they preparing for the onslaught God has promised? If one is part of the Evangelical movement within the churches, then likely not. Why? Because the Church has lied to them and told they won't have to be here to face the music. Before any of the really bad stuff starts to happen (an event that they call The Tribulation), God is going to whisk away the Christians so that they can avoid it. God never promises that, and the biblical pattern since the beginning is anything other than that.

Judah just didn't believe God would do these terrible things to them, even though He had done exactly that to Judah's now exiled and no-longer-existing brother kingdom, Ephriam-Israel, barely more than a century earlier. The parallels between what God is warning and how Judah responded, to how things are today are so tight that we must not be blind to them. Now is the time for both spiritual and physical preparation to withstand the troubles. When it comes, it will be sudden and too late.

CJB Habakkuk 1:6 *I am raising up the Kasdim, that bitter and impetuous nation, who march far and wide over the earth to seize homes that are not their own.*

Yehoveh says He is going to raise up the **Kasdim**. The **Kasdim** were the earlier ancestors of the Babylonians. Chaldeans was at that time the typical regional name for the national inhabitants of the New Babylonian Empire that is associated with Nabopolassar becoming their king. His ascension to the throne happened in Habakkuk's lifetime; he was most aware of it and of course noticed the changes that occurred. During the earliest part of Habakkuk's life, and even when he eventually began to prophecy, Judah and the Chaldeans were not enemies. So, notice that God does not say to Habakkuk that it was the Chaldeans that would attack them. It is only that they would "rise up". Against who? It is not said, even though from our historical vantage point we know that it was Judah that the Chaldeans would rise up against.

These people are described as bitter and impetuous. That is, they were savage and merciless and did as their impulses led them to do. They had already established this reputation, and yet they still had a pretty decent relationship with Judah. This leads to why God said in the 5th verse that Judah would be amazed. There was no hint that Babylon would come after them at this time. When it does happen, the Judeans are going to feel the sting even more because this oracle of God speaks not just of attack, but of "seizing". That is, the Judeans would lose their own land and many taken captives. It doesn't get any worse than that.

I imagine it never occurred to Judah that many centuries earlier the Israelites conquest over Canaan that gave them this land they now call home, involved seizing it from the Canaanites who had lived there for so long. God did that to the Canaanites due to their becoming so wicked that they lost their right to be there, so God used Israel to punish them. God is doing the same thing, now, to Judah (and the same he had done to Ephriam/Israel and for exactly the same reason). This is another of God's revealed patterns, and so we are to look for such a thing as those patterns happening as the centuries move along.

CJB Habakkuk 1:7 *Fearsome and dreadful they are; their rules and strength come from themselves.*

The NAS Bible does a better job with this verse.

NAS Habakkuk 1:7 *"They are dreaded and feared. Their justice and authority originate with themselves*

The first part of this verse is more or less a restatement of what has already been established; these people are frightening in the way they calculate and carry out their conquests. The crux of this verse revolves around the first word of the 2nd part of it. It is translated variously, and I have chosen the NAS because it has chosen the word "justice". Most Bibles have chosen "judgment". The Hebrew word is *mishpat*. While judgment in a technical sense is not wrong, the issue is that what judgment means to modern ears is something negative. But technically, judgment means a decision born from the guidelines of a law. So, the idea is that Babylon is looking only to themselves to decide if it is a "just" thing to do, and if they have the rightful authority to invade other nations and seize their land and their people. This makes them lawless in the eyes of God, and certainly they do not see Yehoveh behind them ordering whatever it is they decide to do. This is making Habakkuk aware that although the Chaldeans will think they have made their own decision to invade nations according to their own agenda and plans, in fact it is the God of Israel that will cause them to do this.

This verse is made to poetically couple with verses 8 and 9.

CJB Habakkuk 1:8-9 *⁸ Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at night. Their cavalry gallop in from afar, flying like vultures rushing to feed. ⁹ All of them come for violence, their faces set eagerly forward, scooping up captives like sand.*

There is an irony here that shouldn't be missed. Verses 7 through 9 depict the extreme violence of the Babylonians. This connects back to verses 1 and 2 in which Habakkuk speaks of the violence that now is characteristic of Jerusalem

and Judah. So, Judah's own violence and injustice will only bring violence and injustice upon itself as its just reward. This threat from God is but something that is repeated from long ago. In the Torah we read:

CJB Deuteronomy 28:49-50 ***⁴⁹ Yes, Yehoveh will bring against you a nation from far away that will swoop down on you from the end of the earth like a vulture, a nation whose language you don't understand, ⁵⁰ a nation grim in appearance, whose people neither respect the old nor pity the young.***

As typical of Hebrew poetry, much hyperbole is used to describe the attack of the Babylonians. As nimble as leopards are their horses, with warriors as relentless as are wolves going after their prey, as greedy as the way flocks of vultures swoop down upon their already dead and immobile food source to fight over it, are these Mesopotamian invaders.

In verse 9, the CJB and most other Bibles translate Hebrew **kulloh** as meaning "all" (as in, all of them come). Rather, this more means "all at once". That is, this is not depicting the amount of those warriors, but rather the suddenness of their attack. Verse 9 has always presented a translation problem for the reasons I spoke about to begin today's lesson... the unique way Hebrew poetry works. Essentially, words have been chosen much less for how well they describe the scene and more about their rhythm and symmetrical pattern and structure. So, we need to avoid getting caught up in trying to debate over what the terms like "faces", "forward", "scooping up" and a couple of others are trying to get across. These words act like colors of paint on a color palette that must be blended to achieve an overall effect on the canvas. The desired effect is to bring about the feelings and emotions of the terrifying, swift, unyielding, merciless way that this enemy is going to overpower and devastate all in their path when they arrive.

Verses 10 and 11 are another pair meant to work together in a poetic fashion.

CJB Habakkuk 1:10-11 ***¹⁰ They scoff at kings; princes they deride. They laugh at any fortress; they pile up earth and take it. ¹¹ Then they***

sweep on like the wind, but they become guilty, because they make their strength their god."

Kings and princes (as the sovereign leaders of other nations) mean nothing to the Babylonians. Their kingdoms are only there for Babylon's taking, in their view, and so they have only contempt for other national leaders. The idea of laughing at fortresses means they feel that their military can overcome any manner of defensive walls and embattlements. Apparently one of their chief means to attack cities was to "pile up earth" to gain entry into the city they were targeting. This means to build an earthen siege ramp so as to, once completed, simply walk up its slope and go over the top of the city walls. This of course requires enormous manpower to build such a ramp; requiring hundreds of thousands of basketsful of dirt to be moved into place... basket by basket. This speaks of the incredible size and capability of the Babylonian army. And once they have captured that city, they are not satisfied. Rather, it just gives them the appetite to move on for more. Of course, the same can be said for all empires past and future... the Babylonians were not unique in this... it's only that they were the currently rising superpower in Habakkuk's era.

The NAS does a much better job with the first part of the next verse, verse 11.

^{NAS} **Habakkuk 1:11** ***"Then they will sweep through like the wind and pass on. But they will be held guilty, They whose strength is their god."***

The CJB abbreviates this passage too much and ruins its effect, while the NAS restores it to get the feeling of it across. On the other hand, this is another passage that is notoriously difficult and so yields a number of different attempts at solving the translation puzzle. One of the stumbling blocks rests on the meaning of the Hebrew word ***ruach***. It can legitimately refer to either the wind or the spirit. Which of those a translator takes it to mean will have the deciding effect on how to extract meaning from the remainder of the verse. Let me show you but 2 more attempts to demonstrate what I'm getting at.

^{YLT} **Habakkuk 1:11** ***Then passed on hath the spirit, Yea, he doth transgress, And doth ascribe this his power to his god."***

The YLT is taken from the Masoretic Hebrew text and the translator assumed **ruach** is meant to mean spirit in the sense of a movement or embodiment of the divine. Therefore, the verse uses language to sound rather ethereal or even theological in its tone. Let's look at another.

^{NETS} **Habakkuk 1:11** *Then he will have a change of spirit and pass through and will appease. This strength belongs to my God.*

This is taken from the Old Greek Septuagint, and so the translators (to English) choose to translate **ruach** as spirit, but with a little different meaning as more of an invisible force that causes one to have a different mindset than before, such as someone changing from a spirit of bitterness to a spirit of thankfulness. In fact, this NETS translation goes so far as to give Yehoveh credit for changing the Babylonians' "spirit" in what seems to be a good way. Therefore, the remainder of verse 11 reflects this understanding of **ruach**.

It is my view that the NAS captures it the best. This chapter of Habakkuk, in its description of the powerful, blood-thirsty and single-minded Babylonian army, has not made a sudden turn and changed from the hard-hitting, even gruesome, sense of terror and awe and carnage that the Babylonian military forces inflict, to a softer theological viewpoint or to one in which somehow Babylon has actually had a change of heart. It simply doesn't fit.

Therefore, in the continuing poetic hyperbole and in the choice of emotional words, the army is likened by God to a strong wind that seems to suddenly come from nowhere, does its unstoppable damage, and then moves on to affect some other place. The next part of the verse, then, says that despite God setting this action of the Babylonians into motion, He is also going to declare Babylon guilty of their ruthless lack of justice and their greed for the possession of the lands of others. This means that in the Heavenly Court, Babylon will be put on trial, found guilty, and pay a steep price for their brutish behavior once they have completed God's mission of punishing Judah. Further, since they make their god (Marduk) as the one they worship and follow, what comes next will be based on his strength. And when that strength is matched against Yehoveh God of Israel, it is no match at all.

Beginning at verse 12, the narrative switches from Yehoveh speaking, to Habakkuk further confronting God.

CJB Habakkuk 1:12 ***Yehoveh, haven't you existed forever? My God, my holy one, we will not die. Yehoveh, you appointed them to execute judgment. Rock, you commissioned them to correct us.***

Verse 12 begins a new section of this oracle. It is typically labelled as Habakkuk's second prayer, which is as good a way as any to identify this section that will close out chapter 1. Thus, it has a close affinity in style and tone to the first prayer of verses 2 – 4. In academic terms, the verbs used to begin the verse are grammatically called interrogative. That is, they are about asking questions... interrogating. So, I want to immediately give you a different Bible version's translation because the CJB's translation loses the sense of it and therefore the connection to the first prayer. So, once again I will turn to the Young's Literal Translation.

YLT Habakkuk 1:12 ***Art not Thou of old, O Jehovah, my God, my Holy One? We do not die, O Jehovah, For judgment Thou hast appointed it, And, O Rock, for reproof Thou hast founded it.***

"Are not thou" is interrogative. It is in the same line of thought as in "how long?" or "why?" that we find in the first prayer. It is Habakkuk questioning and by no means is it entirely rhetorical like the CJB makes it sound; Habakkuk wants an answer even if he partly already knows what the answer is. He is perplexed, even by Yehoveh's non-answer to his first prayer. I'll put this in a more frank way: for Habakkuk, he is complaining to God that His current policies and His actions (or inactions) concerning the terrible state of Judah is in, are seemingly either unintelligible if not merely too hard to accept. I'm not sure I would have Habakkuk's courage to confront the Creator of the Universe in such a direct way. On the other hand, I find some comfort in the reality that God's chosen prophet *did* confront and God certainly didn't respond by rejecting him or striking him down. And even more, that this is recorded for us to refer to.

This section is a mix of prose and poetry, so that adds a bit to its complexity. The Hebrew **halo atta** are the opening words, and indeed it means something like “are not you?” Habakkuk is amazingly blunt; there’s no respectful or cautious lead-in that immediately begins with acknowledging God’s holiness or greatness as one might expect. I know of no other narrative in the Bible with someone approaching God that begins so abruptly. The next word is **miqededem**, which is typically translated as forever or eternal or everlasting. The YLT has it much better, when it says “of old”. Let me explain because the reason extends well beyond this verse.

It will likely surprise you to know that just as the Tanakh (the Old Testament) never has a thought of a person dying and going to Heaven, neither at Habakkuk’s point in history does Israel have a concept or even an abstract thought of “eternal”. Such a concept had no meaning for them. Their thought of the distant past and whatever existed then, was simply more like “since time immemorial”. Or, as we see the YLT word it is, “of old”. It was general and open-ended. Human speculation about the lack of the dimension of time or of an absolute self-existent beginning that has no connection to time shows up nowhere in ancient Hebrew thought. Creation occurred in a universe of time, and although it was a long time ago, how to measure that amount of time was never even contemplated. I might add, this is why the constant Christian debate over old earth-young earth is so meaningless. The Bible never even addresses such a subject, and the calling out of generations that the young earth folks say means the earth is 6000 years old has absolutely nothing to do with measuring time.

So, for Habakkuk and all Hebrews in general, Yehoveh has existed since earliest **times** and that is the extent of their thought process on the matter. Unlike many other cultures of that day that had all sorts of mythology about the beginnings of their many gods, there were no existing myths about Yehoveh’s beginnings. This may be perhaps the defining feature of the Hebrew religion and their god that made it unique among all other religions that existed. In the minds of the Hebrews, God was just really old, and no one knew exactly how old.

As the verse continues, only the YLT seems to have the courage to tell it like it is. Unlike other English Bibles, it does NOT say, "Oh Lord my God". That is because the Hebrew word for Lord (which is **adonai**) is not there. Rather what *is* there is God's formal name, Yehoveh (which was eventually Latin-ized to Jehovah). And, neither does it say "Yehoveh my God". The only Hebrew word that truly means God is **yah**. Rather, the Hebrew word here is **elohay**. **Elohay** is the singular of the plural **elohim**. Both Hebrew and Christian tradition says those words mean "god" in the first case and "gods" in the second. I challenge that meaning because it doesn't comport with its biblical usage. I've talked at length about this in other lessons, so to get it more in-depth just use your search engine to find info on it in Torah Class lessons (the best source is the TorahClass.com website).

Basically, the term **elohim** has to do with an official position on the Heavenly Divine Council. God as **Elohay** is the singular chief of that council of beings called collectively, the **elohim**. For God, being the **Elohay** is one of His several roles. Essentially, the purpose of the Divine Council is to carry out God's will as administrators of Heaven. God makes a decision and the Divine Council carries it out. They are in charge of the entire hierarchy of other heavenly beings. So, while God is who He is, being **elohay** is one His functions. Now, neither Judaism nor Christianity want to deal with this biblical reality because it would create some issues that would complicate, perhaps even topple, some long-cherished doctrines and traditions. It is just too nuclear hot to deal with, and neither institution sees any profit in it. But, ignoring the reality stunts our ability to learn more about God and how He operates.

We'll continue in verse 12 the next time we meet.