

# Frustrated with God: A Syrian Theologian's Reflections on Habakkuk

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Frustrated with God

A Syrian Theologian's Reflections on Habakkuk

Riad A. Kassis, Ph.D.

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Riad A. Kassis

“Serious readers of the Bible know that context matters in interpreting ancient texts. But it’s not just the historical and cultural context of the biblical author that must be considered, the context of the interpreter also influences the way Scripture is read and understood. And that’s why this book matters! Reading the book of Habakkuk in a context of instability, war and suffering, Dr. Riad Kassis brings the prophet’s voice to our ears in a way that few others could. Habakkuk’s questions and lament are the questions of millions of people in war ravaged regions. Dr. Kassis helps us see how this ancient text speaks profoundly to our world today. I highly recommend it.”

- Mark Young, Ph.D., President, Denver Seminary, USA

“To a world that is drowning in the blood of the victims of conflict, this little book is a rescue rope. Riad Kassis skillfully entwines the message of the book of Habakkuk with other biblical texts to make a sturdy helpline for those losing hope of any answer to the age-old question: Why do the innocent suffer? Or more pointedly, why does God let the innocent suffer? His exposition of Habakkuk is punctuated with real life stories from war-embroiled Syria. It is a book written about, and for, crises that threaten to overwhelm faith.”

- Havilah Dharamraj, Ph.D.,

Academic Dean and Faculty in the Department of Old Testament, South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, India

“In this exquisite study of the book of Habakkuk, Rev. Dr. Riad Kassis – from Syria, and a global citizen – provides the contemporary Christian community with an engaging blend of insightful biblical scholarship with pastoral awareness of the pain and suffering of contemporary Christians, particularly those who have lived through recent events in the Middle East. Dr. Kassis demonstrates that the oracles of the prophet are more relevant now than ever.”

- Gordon T. Smith, Ph.D., President and Professor of Systematic and Spiritual Theology, Ambrose University, Canada

"I am grateful for this reflection on Habakkuk as it helps to help make sense---yet again--- of what, at first glance, seems to be a world spinning out of control. Be it our own fractious, bellicose US political landscape or the tragedy of yet another evil attack on innocent women and children at a park in Pakistan of God can find themselves asking, in the quiet of their thoughts and prayers, "How long, O Lord, how long?" Dr. Kassis' elucidation of Habakkuk's own frustration with a God who is allowing for evil to triumph, alternating with such current and painful examples of those who are caught in an eerily similar dilemma, echoes the "angst" of our human condition---which might, indeed, debilitate us until God's own promise breaks into our hopelessness, as it did for Habakkuk: "For the vision is yet for an appointed time; But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; Because it will surely come..." This deep and thoughtful plunge into a short, but powerful piece of Scripture takes us from our own mired, misery to a "30,000 foot view" from our God who holds history in his hands, and asks of us some patience for and confidence in his plans, purposes and always perfect timing..."

- Marilyn Borst, M.A., Associate Director for Partnership  
Development, The Outreach Foundation, USA

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Introduction

Why, Lord?

I was on a visit to Algeria at the start of the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia. While the large crowds filled Al-Tahrir Square in Cairo on June 30, 2013, I was in South Korea glued to my hotel TV screen watching the latest developments. With the start of the Syrian crisis, I was in the United States. Whether I was far away or close to the place of current events, my thoughts and feelings as a Syrian were beyond time and geography. I identified with those who were seeking freedom and dignity—those suffering from hardship, those who slept in the midst of the sounds of gunshots, and those who lost their smiles. On my first visit to Syria after the crisis began, I was struck by the destruction and devastation. I was shocked to see pictures of martyrs that filled the public squares, the streets, and the towns and villages.

In the midst of these tragic events affecting the Middle East, many questions started going through my mind that I didn't think about in the past. These weren't questions that I alone was asking. They were questions everyone was asking—questions posed by university students, construction workers, the religiously devout and even atheists. Why this violence? Why does God allow such death and destruction to continue? Why doesn't God put an end to it once and for all?

Someone posted the following update on Facebook:

God can bless all of humanity, but He doesn't want to!

God can feed all the poor and hungry, but He doesn't want to!

God can wipe out evil from this world, but He doesn't want to!

God can bring about equality and justice, but He doesn't want to!

God can stop bloodshed and bring about peace, but He doesn't want to!

So is there a need for the Devil when there is a God like that!

These statements address the question of the power of God ("God can..."), His goodness ("bless, feed") and His desire ("...but he doesn't want..."). These questions are challenging and complicated. If God can stop evil in this world, why does He allow it to continue? And why does it seem that evil is spreading while good is on the decline? Does God allow evil? And why?

These questions bring up even more queries: Didn't God promise to protect those who believe in Him? If so, why do some believers live while others are killed? What is the fate of religious minorities in the Middle East? When will we see the last episode of horror and fear? How long, O Lord?

I grabbed the TV remote to find answers to some of these questions as I flipped from one television station to another. I failed miserably. I resorted to finding these answers from experts and friends, but that attempt was no more effective than flipping through TV channels. Suddenly, I found myself attracted to an old book on my shelf, and wondered: Can an old book forgotten in history help me in the 21st century? Did any of these questions come into the writer's mind back then? Did he find answers to his questions? It was then that I began my journey into the Book of the Prophet Habakkuk. Habakkuk became one of my best friends to an extent that my 15-year-old daughter asked me more than once whether I was going to talk to her about Habakkuk again? My

dear readers, I'm not going to talk about Habakkuk, but I hope that God speaks to us through Habakkuk's suffering and his questions, to bring hope to you as it did to him.

I would like to thank the Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida for giving me the opportunity to spend productive time focusing on writing this book. Many thanks to Dr. Ghassan Khalaf, who graciously reviewed this manuscript in its Arabic translation and offered many constructive ideas. I also thank Dr. Nahla Louka, who shared many first-hand stories about the depth of Syrian suffering. I especially appreciate my wife Izdihar, my son Timothy and my daughter Trivina whom all had an indispensable role in writing this book.

The painting on the cover of this book is by my beautiful and extremely talented wife Izdihar Eshak Kassis. In the midst of darkness and a barren tree we can see with Habakkuk what is beyond our present situation. The artist grants us the choice to focus on darkness and the barren tree or to look beyond them to enjoy the deep and vivid color of the shining light. The light is strong as if it is inviting us to give it our attention and focus. However, even if we focus on the light the darkness and the barren tree will stay there but now we look at them from an entirely different perspective. Please take a couple of minutes in an attempt to reflect on keeping the balance in your own life between light and darkness.

Unless otherwise noted I have used the New King James Version in this book.

## Chapter 1

### Disappointment with God

#### The Search for Basil

We planted in our back yard some green basil herbs leaning towards a slight turquoise color. As I write these words and look upon the basil, I see a pale and colorless plant. At least, that is what it seems like. My wife is careful about collecting the shed seeds with the hope of re-planting them in the future if need be. As spring approaches the seeds that we once thought had been lost to the high winds, heavy rains, and snowfall begin to sprout from under the soil. They spring up into a new plant filling the air with an amazing aroma and bringing delight to anyone who looks at it.

It is highly likely that the name of the prophet Habakkuk is derived from the Akkadian language, meaning "basil." Perhaps this is an indication of the message Habakkuk carries. Habakkuk wrote as the basil was dying in the midst of a harsh and cold winter while the sky was black as if all hope was gone. But is this the whole story? Is this the inevitable end? Did God leave His people in the harshness of winter? Was there no hope? Habakkuk does not leave his readers wandering and

wondering, but in his own fascinating poetic style, clarifies many of these and similar questions.

The prophet Jeremiah is known as the “crying prophet” because of the miserable situation he and his people suffered from. It led him to mourn and cry, so he wrote poems of lament that became known as the “Laments of Jeremiah.” As for our prophet Habakkuk, we can call him the “lonely prophet.” He is lonely because nowhere else is he mentioned in the Bible except in the book that bears his name. Like so many people he questions, he grew angry, he cried, he suffered, he struggled, he argued, he complained, he wished...all as if he was alone. He had no family carrying his burden with him, no faith community in support of him, and no friends to share his pain with and comfort him. He was lonely! In the midst of his deadly loneliness, he found himself with one God to complain to! So what does Habakkuk say to God?

Last winter, I underwent a minor surgical procedure. Before being admitted to a local hospital, I went into my home office to choose a book to accompany me during recovery. I saw many books I wanted to read, but for some reason, my heart leaned toward a book that my friend Jonathan Lamb had written. At the hospital, while recovering from general anesthesia and all that accompanies it including pain and discomfort, I started reading a few paragraphs from the book. Without reading for long, I put it aside. I put my head back on my pillow as I alternated between a state of consciousness and unconsciousness. A nurse walked into the room and gently checked up on me. She looked at the book beside me and asked me what it was all about. I thought to myself, “Is this really the best time to offer an explanation when I can barely talk?” But I answered her and said, “The book discusses the difficult times we are in, and how God stands beside us through them.” She responded as she gracefully left the room, “I wish I knew how to read English and I would have certainly read a book such as this!”

Isn't our situation these days very similar to those patients suffering at hospitals everywhere and the nurses caring for them? And what is God's message to us through the prophet Habakkuk? Is this message compatible with what we see on a daily basis regarding upheaval and tragedies in the Middle East?

### For How Long and Why?

In Middle Eastern and Oriental cultures, when addressing those more important than ourselves, we are used to using gentle praise and kind words to pave the way for later-to-follow questions and complaints. This helps to prepare a conducive context for this conversation. How much more should we do this when we address God? But this was not the case with Habakkuk! He did not leave room for courtesy or proper speech etiquette but rushed to express his resentment and make his complaints known as he exploded in fury and distress. Habakkuk was burdened with worries from head to toe. In fact, the word “vision” in Habakkuk 1:1 literally means “burden,” as we will see shortly—as if Habakkuk's aspirations were burdens that threatened his being and exhausted him.

Habakkuk wasn't only burdened with personal worries, but the concerns of his people as well. He expressed this to God with a heavy heart as he thought about his nation's destiny. This is the position of the brave who are not distracted by personal concerns, but by the concerns of the people around them. What are the issues that raised Habakkuk's anger and caused him to ask, “For how long and why?”

Habakkuk lived in the city of Jerusalem during the late seventh century BC, under the reign of King Josiah, who brought prosperity, justice and faith to his kingdom. King Jehoiakim, who took the throne after Josiah, did not, however, share this legacy. His works were evil and the kingdom saw great corruption on all levels. During the time of King Jehoiakim, Habakkuk looked around and saw injustice, violence, rape, sin, misery, idolatry and contempt of God—things we see or hear about

almost on a daily basis today.

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 1:2-4

There is a strong association between injustice and violence. Some segments of society use influence and power to exercise violence by using the judicial system to their advantage. Violence then becomes the abuse of power, whether economic, social, political or religious. The word "iniquity" (1:3a) is usually associated with the translated word "injustice" in the Old Testament (Ps. 55:11; Job 4:8; 15:35; Isa. 10:1). It can also be translated as "fraud." Are there limits to this even in our time? There is fraud at all levels in many cultures today. Fraud in business is regarded as good business, financial fraud is as prevalent as its lack, and even fraud in food safety has become a known fact.

The words "plundering" and "injustice" (1:3b) appear together in several places in Scripture (Jer. 6:7, 20:8; Ezek. 45:9; Amos 3:10). The word "plundering" encompasses any forced act including but not limited to kidnapping in all its forms, slavery, human trafficking and the use of civilians as human shields in war. As if these things weren't tragic enough, Habakkuk added to them strife and contention (1:3b). The word "contention" refers to legal complaints and lawsuits. The word "strife" refers to conflicts, whether between individuals, communities or peoples—the most painful of which come from relatives, friends, churches or citizens of the same country.

If we inquire about the opinion of those charged with keeping and enforcing the law, we find that the law is "powerless." In other words, the law has no grip. There is no judgment, and even if there were, it would be unjust. During Habakkuk's time, the maintenance of order and justice was the prime responsibility of the king (Isa. 42:4, 51:4). Today, however, presidents and governments are designated with the role of enforcing the law and bringing justice. But is this really what is happening in our society? Evil seemed to be very prevalent during Habakkuk's time, reigning everywhere; the righteous were nowhere to be seen.

What was Habakkuk's primary concern as he saw these things? There were three problems he faced. First, his main issue was not with the people, but with God himself. He was unable to understand that God "looks at" evil and only observing what is going on among his people:

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?

- Habakkuk 1:2-3

Habakkuk's second concern was that God, who is expected to listen to the appeals of His servants, seems to have closed his ears and no longer hears the sound of Habakkuk's distress: "O Lord, how long shall I cry, and you will not hear?" (1:2). It wasn't that Habakkuk's distress was silent and dim. He was shouting out loud (the word "cry" originally means "to shout"). \*

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The dilemma of pain and suffering has always been a subject of discussion for theologians, philosophers and ordinary people. This dilemma becomes more complicated when it is related to God's holiness, love and mercy. Many questions come to mind when we face pain and suffering. We even become frustrated with God himself as we ask him "Why?" and "How long?"

This book, that was born out of the so-called "Arab spring" particularly the Syrian crisis addresses these and other questions from the perspective of an ancient prophet called Habakkuk. Will we be able to find the right answers? Will God respond? This is what you will discover as you read this book. But I must caution you that it is not an easy one.

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