

HABAKKUK

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Very little is known about this prophet but he is only one of three of the so-called minor prophets who described themselves as prophets, the others being Haggai and Zechariah.

This prophet asks two basic questions namely Was evil to remain unpunished? And how could a holy God use unholy instruments to achieve His will?

From references in chapter 3, it has been assumed that Habakkuk was in the Temple choir in Jerusalem and a Levite. His name means to embrace, one who takes his people into his arms to comfort and reassure.

However, the period in which he wrote is not clear to some commentators and his dates have been widely speculated. Some have even placed this book in the era of Alexander the Great of the fourth century BC since, in chapter 1 verse 9, it speaks of the faces of the aggressors directed to the east which could speak of Alexander's forces from the west looking east rather than Nebuchadnezzar who would be looking from the east to the west. It has further been suggested by some scribes that the word Chaldeans is an error and it should read Kittim, the land of the Greeks and Cypriots. As it does almost certainly refer to the Chaldeans, the book could be dated about 605 BC and Habakkuk would be a contemporary of Jeremiah.

Habakkuk was clearly a highly intelligent man and his writings are his talking to God; he was concerned about God's dealings with His people.

The first chapter, verses 2 to 4, expresses Habakkuk's complaint, Why is lawlessness unchecked? It is a question we can ask today. The prophet says, Why do I have to look at violence and trouble? Why is there so much iniquity? All that I see is violence and devastation; the law is of no effect and we are numb; the wicked surround the righteousness and justice is not done.

We, too, can be troubled that God should allow wickedness to continue. The reforms of good king Josiah had been forgotten and, as a result, sin reigned. The prophet here is deeply concerned that God has not answered him and what Habakkuk felt, so did much of the populace. The evil of the people of Judah had brought about Divine retribution and even the godly were suffering because of the evil of their fellows. So it is with us today.

One of the main problems was that the ruling class and other leaders in Judah were not interested in what was right. Even the priests turned a blind eye to temple prostitutes and earned more money from the subsequent sin and trespass offerings. Today, there is a denomination where penance is usually reciting some scriptures which allegedly cleanses them from their sin and so to sin again is easy.

As in the prophet's day, we who try to live godly lives are in a hostile scene. Even in Christian circumstances, we are opposed by other Christians for being both old-fashioned and irrelevant and also being so far behind the times that we are not getting people in. There is the wonderful story of a Pentecostal minister who visited Dr Scroggie in the last year of his life. This young minister bragged about his church being full and having lots of young people in every Sunday. The young pastor said, "The trouble with you and your generation, Dr Scroggie, is that you are so old-fashioned and you have taken preaching back many years. I have been in the ministry for eighteen months had many converts, lots of them. Dr Scroggie replied, "I have been in the ministry for 60 years and I have not had one convert... but the Lord has had a few!"

We live in a permissive society in which decency and morality has been rejected. Adultery, fornication, homosexuality, lesbianism and abortion are regarded as blameless and those of us who explain that these things are utterly wrong in God's eyes are again found to be in a hostile word and it is asserted that both the Bible and we are behind the times, utterly out of touch and irrelevant.

Verses 5 and 6 speaks of the prophet's shock at the surrounding warlike nations whom God is raising up to bring Divine judgement on His people. We read that these evil nations would make pyramids of severed heads along the way, boys and girls were to be sexually abused and burned alive, men were to be flogged and impaled, blinded or deprived of their limbs or ears and noses, attractive girls and women were to be captured for sexual pleasure and the city of Jerusalem would be plundered and destroyed. This is all set out in Professor Sayce's History of Assyria and the Nations.

Habakkuk describes the Chaldeans as a hasty and bitter nation and verses 7 and 8 calls them terrible and dreadful; their horses are swifter than leopards and fiercer than wolves and the horseman are very fast and eager to devour.

Verses 9 and 10 say that the Chaldeans are coming for the purpose of violence and they will take captives as sand. They ridicule the royalty and laugh at every Jewish fortress and stronghold realising how inadequate they are. They probably followed the custom of the day and put captive royalty in cages and verse 11 talks of their actions which imputed power to their god. The Chaldeans had no thought for the true God and that is the same for all who have false gods and are into idolatry and have no respect for the morality and teaching of the Bible and are and remain pagan and heathen. Such people are concerned with self and their wants.

The next two verses have Habakkuk's lament. How could the Lord God, who is pure, establish the grossly impure as punishment? Judah could be wiped out and be no more. God was Judah's Rock. Surely God would not break His covenant with His people.

God was and is infinitely pure and cannot tolerate iniquity or look upon sin and yet was allowing the Chaldeans to castigate His people.

Verses 14 to 17 has the prophet referring to God making the captives to be like caught fish or creeping insects. And the invaders rejoice over the conquest of Judah and burn incense to their gods. One of the industries of the captors was as fishermen and with the captives they continually used the hooks and nets as would a fisherman. How cruel many are to the people of God and, in our day, it is not only Jews who are persecuted but Christians are also persecuted by left wing politics, pagans and Communism.

Christians are now living in a hostile world. Their beliefs and morals are being laughed at and Christians are often referred to being scum, the enemy of science and against the modern way of thinking and living. Even in some Christian denominations there is a lessening of God's standards and the teaching of the Bible is relegated in favour of entertainment religion and emphasis on self.

Chapter 2 has the prophet waiting for God's reply and setting himself on a watchtower waiting to see what God will say and do and that would refer to the oncoming army. The Old Testament prophets were often compared to watchmen (Isaiah 21.8, Jeremiah 6.17 and Ezekiel 3. 17).

The Lord answered and told the prophet to write all of this down so that all may read it and it had to be made plain. Calvin believed that the clay tablets on which Habakkuk wrote would be displayed in the Temple.

The invasion was slow in coming and not necessarily imminent. When we consider the Second Coming it has been promised for two thousand years and despite many saying it could come at any time, others are saying, "O Lord, how much longer?"

Verse 4 contrasts pride with faith. This is God's estimate of character. The Chaldeans were puffed up with pride and arrogance but God resists the proud as set out in the epistle of James, and yet in our churches we have elements of pride. People stand up and talk about themselves and their previous sinful ways and the emphasis is on self whereas we are only to boast in the Lord Jesus and it is written in Galatians that what God has dealt with and forgiven must not be brought up again.

The righteous man will live by faith and the word for faith here is emunah which means to be firm and steadfast.

The next verse deals with the perils of strong drink and drunkenness. Kelly writes that the evil must be dealt with before blessing can come in power. Wine robs man of his senses and judgment. And to bring this up to date so does drugs. Such problems render people unable or unwilling to perform normal standards and decency. The Chaldeans were not only drunk with wine but with power. And still Habakkuk asks why does evil go unpunished even though God has promised judgment upon all evildoers.

There now follows five woes or laments. The first is against aggressors. In verses 6 to 8 we read, Woe to him who increases what is not his own and loads himself with pledges and property not his. This woe is addressed to the spoilation by the Chaldeans upon every country that they had conquered. They had loaded themselves with written clay tablets extracted from debtors contrary to Mosaic law (Deuteronomy 24.10). But the spoiler will eventually be spoiled and it will be their turn to stumble and tremble. Ultimately, the Chaldeans from Babylon would suffer for all her crimes. The whole area of Babylon would become a desolate waste with very little human habitation but occupied by wild animals of the desert, lions and jackals scavenging among the ruins of what were palaces. The cries of these animals would be heard.

The second woe occupies verse 9 to 11 and condemns self assertion. Woe to him who gains evil gains for his house to set his nest on high... and have devised shame to their house by cutting off many people... for the stone will cry out of the wall and the beams of timber will answer it.

From rapacious plundering to their assertion of dominance and to have authority over all nations. They had accumulated their ill-gotten gains for their own dynasty. The prophet likens the Chaldeans to an eagle who sets its nest on high as a means of security and protection from harm. To elevate themselves they set themselves on high in their pride and self-aggrandisement and there are people and nations like this today. Even in our churches there are pompous empire builders who elevate self and do not acknowledge that in all things Christ is to have the pre-eminence. In order to establish themselves they put the Lord down and dishonour Him. Like the Chaldeans they trample others underfoot but, ultimately, their end is destruction.

The third woe is against violence, verse 12 to 14. Some build a town with blood and establish a city with iniquity but in the last analysis the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. If we look at the inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar, they mainly relate to building activities and the magnificent buildings of Babylon. They used slave labour of their captives which is a feature of conquerors who build cruel empires.

We are exhorted in Scripture to do violence to no one (Luke 3. 14) and yet people like violence on television and the cinema. I hate violence of all sorts and remember that one of the names of the Lord Jesus is Prince of Peace.

But, eventually, the earth will be filled with the glory of God and all the hostile kingdoms of the world would be destroyed.

The fourth woe highlights many issues such as getting people drunk to view their nakedness and how the Lord will punish such voyeurism as well as the violence committed by the evil invaders.

The Chaldeans were noted for their drunkenness and giving drink to others so that they may be putty in their hands. This was done for many reasons including seeing the nakedness of others and indulging in sexual activity. To see the nakedness of anyone other than your spouse was forbidden and nakedness in the Bible does not only mean completely nude but inadequately dressed. In our day, we have women and even schoolgirls dressing provocatively with low tops and short skirts. We have nudity and sex on both the television and at the cinema and pornography is a successful money making enterprise. There is adultery and fornication on a very large scale and alcoholism is rising. Drunkenness can render people helpless and that shames both those who were drunk and those exposed to the shame put on them.

The conquerors had destroyed Lebanon and its forests which was the habitat of animals...but the conquerors would eventually be crushed like a crashing cedar of Lebanon. All who had suffered at the hands of the Chaldeans would be recompensed. The violence perpetrated by the evil nations would bring those nations into severe retribution at the hands of the Lord.

The final woe (verses 18-20) would be upon the Chaldeans idolatry. One can only conjecture as to why people worship dumb idols whether made of wood or metal. How completely stupid that is. How do such graven images respond? Idols were and are powerless but the true and only God was to be feared and respected. God was in His Holy Temple and about to act and the pagan idols, even those covered with gold, had no power or value.

Idol-worship is an abomination to God. It brought down evil Solomon and split the Jews into two kingdoms.

Chapter 3 is said to be Habakkuk's prayer and it is also said to have been sung. This ode might have been used in public worship. Verse 2 honours God and pleads for a revival and mercy must be remembered. The prophet calls the people to mind previous acts of mercy from the Lord and calls for a revival in the sense of the return to the old days of blessing. There are many who claim that spiritual renewal with its emphasis on charismata is such a revival sent by God and has produced much blessing but that cannot be so because it has produced schism and division and lessened the authority of scripture so that charismatic leaders such as Michael Harper state that doctrine is not important but only love is. The churches have become obsessed with their own ways rather than God's way and using worldly methods instead of spiritual aims. Revival can only come or be effective if we make Christ and His Will our only objective.

O Jesus Christ grow Thou in me
And all thing else recede.
My heart be daily nearer Thee
From sin be daily freed.
May this poor self grow less and less
Be Thou my life and aim ;
O make me daily through Thy grace
More meet to bear Thy Name.

We are not to preach ourselves but Christ and Him crucified (2 Corinthians 4. 5). We do not talk about ourselves or boast except in the Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Galatians 6.14).

Verses 3 to 7 speaks about a reply in the form of a thunderstorm advancing from Edom and Sinai. To stress this, the word Selah is inserted which is an instruction to pause and consider. The brightness and light of the Lord is revealed and the psalmist states that light is the garment of the Almighty (Psalm 104.2). Here the Lord is depicted riding on the storm as the victorious ruler triumphant having defeated

his enemies. Before Him went pestilence and disease often regarded as instruments of judgment and the Lord said that such things would accompany the end-times (Matthew 24.7).

The storm was accompanied by an earthquake of tremendous power. The mountains shook as in Judges 5. 5 and there was also a storm of sorts at the Red Sea (Exodus 15.14ff). The nations close to the Red Sea were probably Cush and Midian which bore the brunt of this amazing event which was the deliverance of the children of Israel.

A Theophany was God talking to a human and Habakkuk, in verse 8, asks God, “Why are you angry with the streams and rivers?” and, presumably, other geographical features. The Lord rode through the storm clouds which He describes as His horses and chariots of victory.

The next section deals, verses 9 to 13, sees Divine judgment in operation. Weapons are ready, the earth has been cleaved, the mountains writhed, there were tempests and the waters of the deep roared. The sun and the moon were still as the arrows flew by. The Lord marched through the land in anger and trod down the evil nations and this was for the salvation of His people. All the enemies were crushed.

In His wrath, God furiously trashed the nations as the ox trampled out the grain on the threshing-floor so did the Lord Almighty trample the nations under His feet (Micah 4.13) and we can look beyond this to matters relating to the Second Coming. Then shall the Lord come and smite the nations with a rod of iron and dash them into pieces like a potter’s vessel (Psalm 2.9). He will be revealed as the King of Kings and Lord of lords and His Name shall be the Word of God.

The Lord used the Chaldeans to bring Judah to their senses but now He will pour out His wrath upon the oppressor. All that set themselves up against the Lord will perish. It may appear unfair for the Chaldeans to be punished when they were the instruments of God but they were always a pagan and evil nation steeped in idolatry which is heresy and would always invoke God’s wrath. The suffering of that evil race would be greater than the sufferings of Judah (Zechariah 14.2) and for the end-times the Lord said that those days were not shortened no one would be saved (Matthew 24.21).

It is all very well people talking about the love and mercy of God but His severity must also be remembered. Because God is a God of love He must also be a God of justice and righteousness.

It may not be a comfort to us now but as verses 14 and 15 state the enemy will be destroyed. In our lives at this present time we are still surrounded by those who hate the God of the Bible but the day is coming when at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that He is Lord. Every atheist, monarch, conqueror, politician, militant, terrorist, millionaire, scientist and people of fame will admit who the Lord is. Victory will be His and true believers will share in it because of their faith.

Habakkuk speaks in verse 18 about his strength being drained. He had heard the Word of the Lord in the storm and probably realised that after the invasion there would be salvation for Judah. He was weak and both physically and mentally exhausted and could hardly walk. In verses 17 to 19 he speaks of the future blossoming of the fig tree, that tree being a symbol of both Israel and Judah but this would be after the invaders had stripped the land bare. Everything will be lost and yet the prophet has faith in future restoration. He implies that it is not helpful to bemoan one’s fate although pessimism would be understandable. In times of trouble, God would be Habakkuk’s strength.

Trust Him when they foes are many
Trust when they friends are few;
Trust Him when to simply trust Him
Seems the hardest thing to do.

We must never forget the all-sufficiency of Christ in all circumstances of life.

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