

THE MESSAGE OF HABAKKUK

J.K. McKee

The Book of Habakkuk is a text that is not read by today's Messianic community, yet it has profound and important lessons to teach us as the people of God. Struggling with the problems of corruption and wickedness in the world, and why unrighteous people seemingly get away with things, is not something at all unique to the Twenty-First Century. The Prophet Habakkuk not only spoke against these grave sins, but even wrestled with God in dialogue as to why He somehow appears to allow them. Understanding Habakkuk is important for any Believer to have a well-rounded view of the actions of God toward people, and where those who are righteous and loyal to Him fit in the cosmic scheme.

It is agreed among many conservative commentators that Habakkuk prophesied sometime before the fall of Judah to Babylon, perhaps near the end of Josiah's reign (640-609 B.C.E.) or the beginning to Jehoiakim's reign (609-598 B.C.E.). This was a period of great prosperity for the Southern Kingdom (as seen in other prophetic books), as well as wantonness and oppression of the poor. Looking back on this time period, God judging Judah not only for its idolatry against Him, but also the exploitation of the less fortunate at the hands of the rich, was inevitable. But it did not necessarily seem this way for Prophets such as Habakkuk.

Habakkuk issues His first call before the Lord, citing things that are not at all uncommon to any person who has cried to Him. He cries, "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails" (1:2-4a). Habakkuk is surrounded by unrighteous behavior, manifesting itself in harmful activities. He is in a situation where "the Torah is weakened and justice never emerges" (ATS). Somehow, God's Divine Instruction is supposed to be upheld as a standard for order, yet all that is manifested is anarchy.

The Lord answers Habakkuk's first cry before Him, asking Habakkuk to look at the bigger picture of what He is about to do. He no doubt listens carefully to the Lord: "Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told" (1:5-6). Specifically, the Lord tells Habakkuk, "I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own. They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor...They fly like a vulture sweeping to devour; they all come bent on violence. Their hordes advance like a desert wind and gather prisoners like sand. They deride kings and scoff at rulers. They laugh at all fortified cities; they build earthen ramps and capture them. Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—guilty men, whose own strength is their god" (1:6-7, 8b-11).

If Judah thinks that it is going to get away with ignoring the clear imperatives of God's Law (1:4), and let gross unrighteousness prevail, then God is going to turn them over to the mercy of the Babylonians whose "justice and authority¹ originate with themselves" (NASU). Their actions speak for themselves as Babylon is a power that laughs at Earthly kings and rulers, spreading its hordes out like a plague. Having achieved so many military victories, their "own might is their god!" (RSV). Because of Judah's gross sin against the Lord, it now happens to be one of the next targets on Babylon's hit list, and will one day find itself deported away from its homeland.

Habakkuk's first question is answered; God is going to judge the evil of Judah by sending the Babylonians. But Habakkuk is never told by God *when* this judgment will come, and the Prophet does have a great burden for what He is seeing happen to the people living *right then* in his day. In his second cry to the Lord, he exclaims, "O LORD, you have appointed them to execute judgment; O Rock, you have ordained them to punish. Your eyes are too pure to look upon evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" (1:12b-13). If God is One who is "from everlasting" (1:12a) and is perfect, how can He then tolerate those like the Babylonians who commit worse sins than His own people?

Habakkuk feels that he has to remind the Lord as to what Babylon will do to those of Judah:

"The wicked foe pulls all of them up with hooks, he catches them in his net, he gathers them up in his dragnet; and so he rejoices and is glad. Therefore he sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his dragnet, for by his net he lives in luxury and enjoys the choicest food. Is he to keep on emptying his net, destroying nations without mercy?" (1:15-17).

The Babylonians are likened to the fisherman who worships the net that he uses to catch fish. God is clear to tell Habakkuk, "the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay" (2:3). The Lord's perfect timing for the judgment He has said will come upon Judah cannot be hurried; it will only be released after an ample amount of warning has been issued. And, Habakkuk is not

¹ Heb. *mishpato u'se-eto*.

the only prophet seen in Scripture that is displeased with Judah's lack of righteous behavior. God's judgment via the hand of Babylon will only be enacted when He is ready.

It is at this point that the Lord tells something very poignant to Habakkuk, which would not only have important meaning for his generation, but for many others to come:

"Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, **but the righteous shall live by his faith.** Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples" (2:4-5, ESV).

Babylon has been advancing by gobbling up nations into its empire, but it is to be considered a power that is "puffed up" (NIV) that is drunk on its own power. Its arrogant desire to conquer the world will ultimately be its undoing, as it will die and be consumed by *Sheol*, the shadowy world of the (now-condemned) dead. The answer for any person not wanting to suffer the same fate as Babylon is clear: "the righteous will live by his faith" (2:4). Whether this is the faith a person places in God, or perhaps the *emunah* or faithfulness God displays toward His people, it is clear that the LORD God and not any human achievements or idols are the focal point. In order to have an eternal life that has overcome the power of Hell, one must trust in God, and have confidence in His promises by demonstrating the fruit of a godly life.

The Lord tells Habakkuk that even though the Babylonian Empire will be a means of His judgment, the Babylonians will suffer their own penalties incurred from their own ungodly actions:

"Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion! How long must this go on? Will not your debtors suddenly arise? Will they not wake up and make you tremble? Then you will become their victim. Because you have plundered many nations, the peoples who are left will plunder you. For you have shed man's blood, you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them. Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain...You have plotted the ruin of many peoples, shaming your own house and forfeiting your life" (2:6-9a, 10).

In spite of the Lord using Babylon to judge Judah, He is innately aware of their gross sins, telling Habakkuk, "Has not the LORD Almighty determined that the people's labor is only fuel for the fire, that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (2:13-14). Any nation that commits injustice, exhausting itself for its own glory, will come to nothing. For it is "we for the glory of the LORD" (NJPS) that will envelop the world that empires such as Babylon can only attempt to conquer. The day will come when such empires "will be filled with shame instead of glory. Now it is your turn! Drink and be exposed!" (2:16a).

The need for people to live by their faith (2:4), and in turn trusting in His faithfulness toward them, is fully realized by what it is contrasted to: "Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it? Or an image that teaches lies? For he who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak. Woes to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!' Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!' Can it give guidance. It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it. But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him" (2:18-20).

Those who place their *emunah* in the Lord have the ability to live eternally before Him—versus those who are silenced by the futility of the gods that they have made with their own hands, perhaps representing their meaningless human accomplishments.

Habakkuk's questions have not been answered and he understands. All he can do is stand in the majesty of God, exclaiming, "LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy" (3:2). The Lord is the One whose "glory covered the heavens...and [whose] praise filled the earth" (3:3). God as Creator has dominion over what He has made (3:6, 8-11, 15-17), yet while "In wrath you strode through the earth and in anger you threshed the nations. You came out to deliver your people, to save your anointed one. You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness, you stripped him from head to foot. With his own spear you pierced his head when his warriors stormed out to scatter us" (3:12-14).

Habakkuk's questions have now been answered and he understands. All he can do is stand in the majesty of God, exclaiming, "LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy" (3:2). The Lord is the One whose "glory covered the heavens...and [whose] praise filled the earth" (3:3). God as Creator has dominion over what He has made (3:6, 8-11, 15-17), yet while "In wrath you strode through the earth and in anger you threshed the nations. You came out to deliver your people, to save your anointed one. You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness, you stripped him from head to foot. With his own spear you pierced his head when his warriors stormed out to scatter us" (3:12-14).

Having communed with God, and imploring Him for insight, Habakkuk can rightfully say "I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights" (3:18-19). Habakkuk has arrived at a point of peace in his life where he can be patient with the timing of God judgment against Judah, *and later Babylon*, knowing that He has a specific time when this can be properly executed.

What does Habakkuk teach us as the Messianic movement, which we need not overlook? We are a community that emphasizes the role of God's Torah as a standard of proper living. Yet, so did many in the Ancient Kingdom of Judah in which Habakkuk lived, a society where injustice, lewdness, and oppression got the better of it. We have the severe responsibility to learn not to repeat the mistakes of these people, **and not forget the Torah's imperatives that are to create an environment of peace and wellness.** The *shalom* that Yeshua the Messiah brings to us is something that we must emphasize in our faith community, let us one day find ourselves having to be judged by God by some outside force because we failed to look at the *whole Torah*, and only emphasized those parts which made us different from our Christian brethren and thus made us "better." I never want to see the Messianic world fall into a condition where we have forgotten what the

Torah tells us about standing up for the justice of God in the world! God forbid that He ever has to judge *us*, with the ample warnings we have been given from Prophets like Habakkuk.

Those who are truly righteous are those who will live eternally because of demonstrating faith in God (2:4), versus the idols of one's own hand (2:18-19). This is a concept that is built upon by the Apostle Paul in his letters to the Galatians (3:11) and the Romans (1:17). This is not a faith that does not obey God; but is a faith which has a firm confidence in Him versus any idols.

Can today's Messianics avoid the Book of Habakkuk any more? Perhaps the Rabbis of the Talmud can answer this question for us, as they conclude what the most important principle of the Torah is, to be considered:

"Isaiah again came and reduced them to two: 'Thus says the Lord, (i) Keep justice and (ii) do righteousness' (Isa. 56:1). Amos came and reduced them to a single one, as it is said, 'For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel. Seek Me and live.' *Objected R. Nahman bar Isaac, "Maybe the sense is, 'seek me' through the whole of the Torah?"* Rather, [Simlai continues:] **'Habakkuk further came and based them on one, as it is said, "But the righteous shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4)'**" (b.Makkot 24a).