

**BABYLON THE OPPRESSOR
ALSO LACKS JUSTICE**

HABAKKUK 1:12 – 2:20

The Chaldeans are not just

¹²Are you not from of old, YHWH my God, my Holy One? You shall not die. YHWH, you have marked them for judgment; and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment. ¹³Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing; why then do you tolerate the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?

¹⁴You have made people like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. ¹⁵The enemy brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net, he gathers them in his dragnet; so he rejoices and exults.

¹⁶Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet; for by them his portion is lavish, and he enjoys the choicest food. ¹⁷Is he then to keep on emptying his net, and destroying nations without mercy?

^{2:1}I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my argument.

Once again Habakkuk objects. Earlier he complained about the rampant injustice of the king of Judah and his administrators. Here he complains about the injustices in the way the Babylonians are treating the conquered nations. This complaint fits better with a time when Habakkuk has experienced the atrocities carried out by the Babylonian army, which perhaps places these words after the invasion that he had predicted had actually taken place (that is, after the capture of Jerusalem in 597). What is God doing choosing an unjust instrument to punish Judah's lack of justice? Bad as the leadership in Judah has been, Babylon is worse (verse 13).

God seems to have created humanity as an unruly mass that has no organisation and can so easily fall victim to the greed and military might of others (verse 14). The Babylonian army treats the conquered nations like fishermen. They hook them, snare them in their nets, collect them and drag them to their death (verses 14-15).

At least the leaders of Judah had some understanding of the transcendent majesty of YHWH, even if they lacked the fidelity to live by the covenant. The best the Babylonians could do was to worship their own military might and luxuriate in the benefits of empire (verse 16). Was God going to let this go on? How does this advance the cause of justice? What does this say about the traditional acceptance of God using foreign armies to punish injustice in Israel? How can the Eternal and Holy One (verse 12) allow such evil?

Habakkuk is eager to hear how God will respond to his 'argument' (תוֹכַחַת, *tôkahat*). Clearly a teaching that sees world events in terms of divine reward and punishment cannot stand up against the fact that the righteous are not rewarded and the unjust can live apparently prosperous lives.

This contains the essence of God's response to Habakkuk's second complaint. His answer is defined as a 'vision' (רִיבּוֹן, ḥāzôn; 2:2,3; see 1:1). God is enlightening Habakkuk. Verse 2 instructs the prophet to write down what he sees. It is something to be preserved. He is also instructed to run with it (compare Jeremiah 23:21), for he is YHWH's herald, called to share his enlightenment with the people.

Before hearing the answer, Habakkuk is assured that what he is about to see is guaranteed as true by God. It may not be immediately apparent, but it will surely come, and soon. Habakkuk must be patient and encourage to be patient those to whom he communicates God's revelation.

The essence of the answer to Habakkuk's inquiry is contained in verse 4. On the one hand, there will be those who are too proud to listen. They won't be patient and they won't trust YHWH. But neither will they be right in their spirit.

On the other hand, there are the 'righteous' – those who are in a right relationship with God, and so with themselves, with others and with the world. These are the ones who truly 'live'.

There is an interesting ambiguity in the final key phrase 'by his faithfulness'. If the 'his' refers to God, we are being encouraged to put our trust in the faithfulness of YHWH and the trustworthiness of his word, even though we cannot comprehend the mystery of God's justice. As verse 3 insists, we will see it at 'the appointed time'.

If the 'his' refers to the righteous person, we are being encouraged to be faithful to the covenant we have with God, to walk in the truth, trusting that all will be revealed.

Instead of 'his' the Septuagint has 'mou' – with the same ambiguity: it could mean 'my' [God's] faithfulness to the righteous person, or it could mean the righteous person's faithfulness in regard to 'me' [God].

It could be that Habakkuk is calling for trust in YHWH's faithfulness, and calling also for his audience to remain faithful themselves.

²Then YHWH answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a herald may run with it.

³For the vision is a guarantee for the appointed time; it bears witness of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.

⁴Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous lives by his faithfulness.

⁵Moreover, wealth is treacherous; the arrogant do not endure. They open their throats wide as Sheol; like Death they never have enough. They gather all nations for themselves, and collect all peoples as their own.

⁶Shall not everyone taunt such people and, with mocking riddles, say about them,

"Woe to you who heap up what is not your own!" How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge?

⁷Will not your own creditors suddenly rise, and those who make you tremble wake up? Then you will be booty for them. ⁸Because you have plundered many nations, all that survive of the peoples shall plunder you – because of human bloodshed, and violence to the earth, to cities and all who live in them.

⁹"Woe to you who get evil gain for your houses, setting your nest on high to be safe from the reach of harm!" ¹⁰You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. ¹¹The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork.

¹²"Woe to you who build a town by bloodshed, and found a city on iniquity!" ¹³Has not YHWH of hosts determined that peoples labour only to feed the flames, and that nations exhaust themselves for nothing? ¹⁴But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of YHWH, as the waters cover the sea.

In verse 5 Habakkuk describes the ravenous greed of the oppressor, Babylon. In verses 6-20 we hear the oppressed nations addressing their oppressor, Babylon. There are five oracles pointing out different aspects of Babylonian imperialism. Each begins with 'Woe!' Habakkuk is drawing attention to people's experience that tyranny always ends up coming to nothing. Though not explicitly mentioned the recent collapse of Assyria is a case in point.

In verse 6 this whole section is called a 'taunt'. The nations are ridiculing the pretensions of imperial power.

In the first taunt (verses 6-8) they speak of Babylon's accumulation of wealth. The Chaldeans are fooling themselves. The oppressed nations will one day reclaim their possessions, and Babylon will itself be plundered.

In the second taunt they accuse Babylon of being willing to do anything to bolster its security (verses 9-11). Their rapacious greed will haunt them.

In the third taunt they speak of Babylon's use of violence (verses 12-14).

The second part of verse 13 appears to be a quotation from Jeremiah 51:58 and verse 14 is a quotation from Isaiah 11:9.

In the fourth taunt (verses 15-17) the subject nations ridicule Babylon's pursuit of fame and honour. It will inevitably lead to shame – the kind of shame associated with drunkenness and nakedness.

¹⁵“Woe to you who make your neighbours drink, pouring out your wrath until they are drunk, in order to gaze on their nakedness!” ¹⁶You will be sated with contempt instead of glory. Drink, you yourself, and stagger! The cup in YHWH’s right hand will come around to you, and shame will come upon your glory! ¹⁷For the violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you; the destruction of the animals will terrify you – because of human bloodshed and violence to the earth, to cities and all who live in them.

In the fifth and final taunt (verses 18-20) they mock Babylon's trust in idols.

¹⁸What use is an idol once its maker has shaped it – a cast image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in what has been made, though the product is only an idol that cannot speak! ⁹Woe to you who say to the wood, “Wake up!” to silent stone, “Rouse yourself!” Can it teach? See, it is gold and silver plated, and there is no breath in it at all.

All this is true, but in the final analysis, we are called back to 2:4. We must put our trust in the faithfulness of YHWH.

²⁰But YHWH is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!

