

12 Prophets - Habakkuk Part 2

"Prophets distilled the 613 mitzvot into a list of primary commandments....."

Chavakuk came and established the mitzvot on a single one:

A righteous person shall live by his faith" (Chavakuk 2:4)

In our last study we discussed how Habakkuk asks HaShem the question of how he can stand by, looking at the evil that is being perpetrated in the Land of Judah (and the wider world too) and how He can stand by and let these things take place without taking any action.

A considerable part of the overall argument here is that the lack of action makes the Torah impotent and powerless; any sort of justice that is enacted has in some way been twisted to allow corruption to become the dominant force and for the hope of the people to be diminished, if not removed altogether.

That is why decision fails
And justice never emerges;
For the villain hedges in the just man—
Therefore judgment emerges deformed.

These are all questions that we could ask of the circumstances that we find ourselves in today.

In Habakkuk's time, the leaders of Israel and Judah had been dominated by the forces of Egypt and Assyria. In particular, Assyria had become a force for domination and cruelty. However, their domination in war had also brought an arrogance spiritually, which we discussed in our studies of Nachum. It is this arrogance that is about to become the downfall of Assyria as the Chaldeans become the new dominant world empire.

Who among all the gods of those nations that my fathers devoted to destruction was able to deliver his people from my hand, that your God should be able to deliver you from my hand? Now, therefore, do not let Hezekiah deceive you or mislead you in this fashion, and do not believe him, for no god of any nation or kingdom has been able to deliver his people from my hand or from the hand of my fathers. How much less will your God deliver you out of my hand!"

[2 Chronicles 32:14-15](#)

The sages express Habakkuk's dismay in the following manner:

How can HaShem use an evil instrument like Babylon to punish his own poor people who are surely more righteous than Babylon?

What we see from the scripture is that Judah being swept up into the turmoil of the prevailing force that is the nation of Babylon, is only because of their unwillingness to adhere to the principles of Torah. This has led them into the position where their reliance has become dependent on the "stronger" countries around them with which they have made alliances. This has not only compromised their power and authority in the region but has also led them into religious practices contrary to the instructions they received at Sinai and during the wilderness wanderings. Whoever the prevailing force is, and whatever the righteous indignation of the prophet might be, the answer is about to come. Despite all that seems to be evident to the eyes of Habakkuk and the people, HaShem sees beyond their perception and understanding.

"Look among the nations and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.

[Habakkuk 1:5](#)

Can we accept that the same could be said today, or is this purely historic narrative?

For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own.

Habakkuk 1:6

Historical Context

The Chaldeans were a combination of the Medes and the Babylonians who were under the Assyrian kingdom until they gained independence under the leadership of Cyaxeses and Nabopolasser, the father of Nebuchadnezzar. The battles that ensued were not only between the Assyrian and the Babylonians but also the Babylonians and the Egyptians; the battle of Carchemish being the moment of the great defeat of Egypt by the Babylonians.

While Judah is watching all that is occurring around it, there is still no sense of repentance from the leadership and the priesthood. Ultimately Judah becomes a vassal state under the leadership of Eliakim, but they have not removed the false gods that they worship, even after the work of Josiah to remove the false idols and places of worship. They are only reinstated by those who sit on the throne after him.

The Chaldeans are now the “rolling thunder” of HaShem across the nations and ultimately against Judah.

Have we ever considered that the nations that might rise and be dominant are mandated by HaShem to do so?

This is the nature of the vision of Nebuchadnezzar that was interpreted through the prophet Daniel, who is closely associated, albeit apocryphally, with the prophet Habakkuk.

The Chaldeans (Kasdim in Hebrew) are described by HaShem as “bitter” or “fierce”, “גִּזְרִי” – the same word that is used for the word “myrrh”. With the benefit of biblical hindsight, we can see that this “bitter” nation is also going to be used as an instrument by HaShem to scatter the people of Israel and Judah among the nations, but also be an instrument that cleanses the nation of Israel from the idolatry of the temple in Jerusalem. Unlike Assyria, their king will show favour to the Hebrews when he is shown that his power is only bestowed on him by the Creator of the Universe. By the same token, Babylon will lose its power when it believes that it can dismiss the holy things of the Creator as playthings in their idolatrous worship.

The other description given of the Chaldeans is “hasty” or “impetuous”, “גִּזְרִי” – the implication of this word being to get things done quickly and with haste. We see this being used both positively, as in the case of Abraham telling Sarah to bake some cakes quickly for their guests, and negatively concerning judgment that will come through disobedience.

"The LORD will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in all that you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me.

Deuteronomy 28:20

".....to seize dwellings not their own"

As with any regime, the aim of conquest is to seek land and to dominate. There has to be a belief that the aim is beyond conquering when domination is this extensive. It is also to export the ideology of the nation and for its culture, religion and authority to be the overarching feature of the newly acquired lands and its defeated people. This is borne out in the next verse.

They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.

Habakkuk 1:7

The JPS translation interprets the same verse in the following manner:

They are terrible, dreadful;

^cLit. *"Their law and majesty proceed from themselves. "They make their own laws and rules."*

To those who are willing to accept the gods of the conquering nation, this is of no great consequence. The ability to add another god to the already overburdened pantheon of deities is of no great hardship. But where the Hebrews are concerned, this presents a major issue.

It may be that it is this stark choice that wakes up the nation to what they have forfeited through their disobedience and complacency. Hence, one of HaShem's purposes being worked out through their exile is to cause repentance among the people because of the circumstances they now find themselves in.

As we study through Habakkuk, we will also observe some of the outcomes of the book being set out in the book of Daniel. We find in the Apocrypha that Habakkuk is featured in the story that is similar to the account in the main canonical text of Daniel in the Lion's den, but in the Apocrypha is in the account called Bel and the Dragon.

Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour. They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand.

Habakkuk 1:8-9

These next verses emphasise the speed and efficiency that is employed by the Chaldeans.

There is a question worth raising here which is whether cruelty begets cruelty. Often, we see that it is not solely warfare that brings about sorrow and suffering as in many cases reported during the great wars of the 20th century. Many acts of kindness were carried out alongside some of the most horrific scenes of barbarity and devastation.

Here we see the comparisons of the war machinery, horses and their horsemen, the main force that surges forward to complete the task of domination and conquest, without mercy, only victory.

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility,

Daniel 1:1-3

At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!"

Habakkuk 1:10-11

When we regard earthly powers and regimes as being the only power, then the principle of "might is right" begins to dominate the landscape. The objective nature of the Creator and the work of His Spirit in the world is the only restraint from tyranny as the consciences of men and women are prompted to act correctly toward one another. When that restraint is removed then the power of men begins to takeover. At the core of this spirit are the words uttered back in the garden "you will be as god", resonating through the minds of all men as they seek to dominate without compassion and mercy.

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.

2 Timothy 3:1-5

Habakkuk's reply

It seems that Hashem's answer to the prophet is not sufficient to appease Habakkuk's concern. But he is understanding of HaShem's position.

Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof.

Habakkuk 1:12

Habakkuk sees that the Chaldeans are HaShem's chosen instrument to bring judgment upon Judah and to the whole world. But there is a sticking point that we need to explore.

You, O LORD, are from everlasting;
My holy God, You ^{Heb.} "we," a change made by a pious scribe. never die.
O LORD, You have made them a subject of contention;
O Rock, You have made them a cause for complaint.

If the traditional text states the words "we shall not die" as being the original text, then Habakkuk the prophet is either wrong/false, or he is speaking to something higher than the physical existence of the people.

What appears to be clear from this is that there is a potential inconsistency in the translation which would in its context give a different emphasis if the change "we", becomes "you". If this is the case then what has preceded it seems unnecessary. Alternatively, it is stating that HaShem is NOT like any of the other gods of the nations which are created by men and can be overwhelmed by an invading army.

A further possibility is that despite the impending arrival of the Babylonian troops, Israel and Judah cannot die because of the covenants that HaShem has made with them and their forefathers.

You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

Habakkuk 1:13

The pure eyes of HaShem, when they turn their gaze upon men will only bring destruction because of His purity. Nadab and Abihu are testimony to this. Unless HaShem manifests Himself in a form that limits this phenomenon, the world would be destroyed because He cannot dwell with any unclean thing. As He see's if He does not see one who is righteous, then the inevitable takes place.

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

Genesis 6:5-8

You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. He 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 is glad. Therefore, he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet; for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich. Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever?

Habakkuk 1:14-17

Habakkuk presents a further argument to HaShem questioning how long this will go on for without there appearing to be any restraint.

In the study next week, we examine HaShem's response.