

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Lesson 3, Chapters 1 And 2

We ended at Habakkuk Chapter 1, verse 12 last time. There is much to be discussed within the words of that verse, and near the end of that prior lesson I spoke to you about how the concept of eternity did not yet exist among the Hebrews by Habakkuk's time. There's more than one huge concept that is brought out in that verse, so I want to continue with that to begin today's lesson with a bit of review because it is so very important to our understanding of the Old Testament. Here is that verse as written down in 3 different Bible versions: first, the Complete Jewish Bible, next the New American Standard Bible, and finally the Young's Literal Translation.

CJB Habakkuk 1:12 *ADONAI, haven't you existed forever? My God, my holy one, we will not die. ADONAI, you appointed them to execute judgment. Rock, you commissioned them to correct us.*

NAS Habakkuk 1:12 *Art Thou not from everlasting, O LORD, my God, my Holy One? We will not die. Thou, O LORD, hast appointed them to judge; And Thou, O Rock, hast established them to correct.*

YLT Habakkuk 1:12 *Art not Thou of old, O Jehovah, my God, my Holy One? We do not die, O Jehovah, For judgment Thou hast appointed it, And, O Rock, for reproof Thou hast founded it.*

Notice the quite different translation and interpretation approaches each of these Bible versions take. What I want us to focus on (of the differences) is how each defines God's state of existence. CJB: existed forever. NAS: everlasting. YLT: of old. The Hebrew word that each is translating in its own way is **qedem**. Christianity has always used this word in this circumstance, to mean eternal, or everlasting (meaning, without time), or forever (meaning both inside and outside of the dimension of time). But listen to what the Hebrew lexicons say the word means. It means "East, antiquity, or front". So, why do Christian scholars say it means eternal or some such word denoting that same concept of existence outside the boundaries of time? It is because they want to read the New Testament mindset and meaning back into the Old.

We could just as easily read the opening words as: “Art not thou ancient of days?” And that would also be correct. As the YLT phrases it “of old”, it is just another exchangeable word for antiquity. All these terms strictly mean that something is measured according to the dimension of time. As another example, listen to Psalm 93 in the NAS and then the YLT.

^{NAS} **Psalm 93:2** *Thy throne is established from of old; Thou art from everlasting.*

^{YLT} **Psalm 93:2** *Established is Thy throne since then, From the age Thou art.*

Interestingly the Hebrew word that all the usual English translations again make eternal or everlasting is **olam**. Now listen to the Hebrew lexicon on the meaning of **olam**: long duration, antiquity, futurity. Quite similar to **qedem**. The bottom line is there is no ancient Hebrew word that expresses the concept of eternal... without time. It is something that Christianity stuffed back into the Old Testament to try to make it read the way they wanted it to. I want to be clear: I am not saying that God is not eternal. Of course He is. Rather, it is that such a concept never yet developed in the Hebrew mind or vocabulary at least through the era of the Minor Prophets.

Continuing with the next part of verse 12, is “My God, my holy one, we will not die”. Rather it says in the original Hebrew: “My **Elohay**, My **Qadoshi**, we will not die”. Briefly, as discussed last week, **elohay** is the singular form of **elohim**. And, although both Christianity and Judaism tend to nearly universally want to translate this as God, that’s not correct. There is only one word in Hebrew for God, and it is **yah**. **Elohim** is an office; it involves a particular role. It seems that in one usage it might even be speaking of the highest class of the created heavenly beings (with other beings like cherubim, archangels, and angels below them). The **elohim** are the members of the Divine Council of which God is the chief and head. Thus, He is often called **elohim**, but the real sense of the word is as the chief administrator of Heaven and all it contains, but also as the chief head of the Earthly realm. So, if he

elohim are the administrators of Heaven, who are the administrators of the earthly realm with God as its chief head? Humans!

CJB **Genesis 1:26** *Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, in the likeness of ourselves; and let them rule over the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the animals, and over all the earth, and over every crawling creature that crawls on the earth."*

Humans are to rule over...be the equivalent of... the heavenly **elohim**. When God is speaking of "let us make humankind in our image", He is speaking to His Divine Council of **elohim**. How do I know this? Because Genesis 1:26 does NOT say God said this: it says "**Elohim**" says this. This verse is speaking of God in the role of the chief head and administrator of His creation... particularly of His living creatures both physical and spiritual... one of the many roles God holds and carries out.

Qadoshi indeed means "my Holy One" and so most Bible translations get that much correct. But what is the sense of "we will not die"? What has this to do with this conversation between Habakkuk and Yehoveh? The Hebrew Masoretic Text is literally "we shall not die". But many Bible critics believe this statement is out of place, since they say this is referring to immortality. And Hebrews certainly did not think they were immortal. Their understanding was that, as humans, our lot is to die but with the hope of resurrection. Now, hang in there with me. The oldest Hebrew sages of antiquity are virtually unanimous that there is a minor copyist error in play that has major implications. While the Masoretic Text (from about 1000 A.D.) reads **lo namut**, it should read **lo tamuth**. The first reads "**we** will not die", the second reads "**you** will not die". That is, just as God is "of old", He also does not age and eventually die as do humans. Time does not affect Him like it does us. It continues the thought of God existing within the dimension of time from His beginning and continuing on endlessly... but again within the realm of endless time... not outside of time. God is unlike humans in that indeed, He is immortal, and that is what Habakkuk is declaring. Frankly the nearly unanimous Christian-based understanding of "we will not die" is taken to mean God won't completely destroy His people. But, while that is a good thought, and indeed such a thing

is true, that falls outside the context of this verse, even this paragraph, and so this isn't what is being addressed here.

Continuing with the next part of verse 12 it is: "For judgment that has appointed it". The Hebrew says: "For **mishpat** thou has appointed it". As we've discussed in other lessons, it is not wrong to translate **mishpat** as "judgment". But, for our day and age, it is better to choose the word "justice". The reason is that within the Western Christian and English-speaking world, judgment is a purely negative word. It means some kind of bad thing is coming to us as a consequence of our bad behavior. But technically judgment only means to render a decision. And that decision could be in our favor or against us. As mostly used in the Bible, it is a neutral word, and it speaks of God's justice system as reflected in the Law of Moses.

Thus, what is going to happen to Israel and to Babylon and ultimately to the whole world comes because of the cause of justice. God has set the time (He has appointed it) for His justice to be administered. And finally, to end this verse we find: "And thou, O Rock, for reproof thou has founded it".

First notice that yet another office or role of God is "Rock". Over and over in this verse and the previous ones, we find God The Father's formal name used: Yehoveh. So, obviously He is the Rock. The idea that Christ is the Rock is nothing new in the Bible. Again, it is a role, it is a characteristic or attribute of God. And, Yeshua, as the Father's agent also carries that assigned attribute or role that was already ancient by the time He was born.

Next, what is being said is that the actions God will at some appointed time carry out, are meant as corrective. But corrective upon who? Again, the standard Christian interpretation is that the Chaldeans (the Babylonians) are going to be used by God as a corrective punishment against Judah. Yet, we have yet to read such a thing. In Yehoveh's response to Habakkuk in verses 5 – 11, there is nothing in them that says explicitly that He is sending the Chaldeans to judge anyone. And while looking back, we can see that this is what God did, Habakkuk at this point did not seem to have this understanding, so (of course) this affects his response to God. He sees the Babylonians as so wicked that he cannot fathom any justification for God postponing punishing

them and instead using them as an instrument of His wrath against Judah... God's own set-apart people.

It reminds me so much of Jonah and Nineveh. It seemed absurd to Jonah that God would send him to the horrible, wretched, evil Assyrian capital with a message of repent and be delivered. Only after God used extreme measures did he ever go, and still Jonah couldn't fathom what God was doing. Only later in time could it be well understood what God's motive was. This is an important lesson for all of us who study God's Word to discern truth. We should be very careful to insert meaning, when plain textual meaning is not there. And provided the translations are correct, when God clearly says in His Word something that He intends, it is not for us to judge whether He ought to or ought not to do that thing, and necessarily assume we know why. We need to be humble and be careful not to fill in blanks with too much speculation. Habakkuk is just one example of God telling him something, but it was not within the context or life experience of that person to exactly get what was intended. Prophets were not perfect people. They simply recorded God's oracles, passed them on, and in some cases included at least some of their conversation with God.

Let's move on to verse 13 and further.

RE-READ HABAKKUK 1:13 to 17

Verse 13 is another that must be looked on with nuance and not just casually read. For one reason, the translation from the Hebrew to English can give us a wrong impression. Here I'll call on a couple of different Bible versions to suggest the issue.

^{NAS} **Habakkuk 1:13** *Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, And Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor. Why dost Thou look with favor On those who deal treacherously? Why art Thou silent when the wicked swallow up Those more righteous than they?*

^{YLT} **Habakkuk 1:13** *Purer of eyes than to behold evil, To look on perverseness Thou art not able, Why dost Thou behold the*

treacherous? Thou keepest silent when the wicked Doth swallow the more righteous than he,

Although the NAS has the subject of this verse correct (God), in fact the subject is not stated in the Hebrew, so the YLT has the opening more literally correct. It is for us to assume from the context that this verse is describing attributes of God and not someone else. The more interesting matter is the next words. Is what God is doing is to “approve evil” or to “behold evil”? The Hebrew word in question is ***ra’ah***. And while simplistically we can ascribe the meaning as see or behold, what it more means is: to perceive something, consider it, take it seriously, and then decide what to do about it... if anything. To study evil goings-on and to acknowledge it for what it is, in this case. So, this does not at all mean to look upon evil deeds favorably.

This verse is a little problematic in that it doesn’t seem very attached to the previous verse nor to the next verse. So, it’s less an issue of if it doesn’t belong there, but more about what the intended sense of it is. The central issue is that Habakkuk believes he knows some things about God, but that makes God’s lack of action even more confounding. How can God realize the evil He sees is happening and against His covenants and even against the Natural Law, and sit by idly? But who are those treacherous people that Habakkuk is calling out? From Habakkuk’s perspective it is the Chaldeans. Clearly just as God beholds what Judah does, He beholds what the Chaldeans do, because He is God of all the earth, and not just of Israel.

Habakkuk readily acknowledges the sins of the people of Judah; but he also regards the sins of the people of Babylon as relatively greater. Thus, he broadly classifies the Chaldeans as “wicked” and the Judeans as “the righteous”. It is by no means that degrees of goodness or faithfulness are intended. Rather, it is that when the Babylonians as pagans are held up against the God-fearing Judeans, how can God allow those wicked Babylonians to overcome the people of Judah that He has called righteous? Or maybe better, as bad as Judah had become, still Babylon is God’s people’s adversary.

It’s interesting: I think whether Jews or Christians, people who claim to follow God tend to think in those same kinds of terms. “Things are going so well for

that guy, and yet he's a far worse person than me... and I'm having all kinds of problems". It approaches that age old question of why bad things happen to good people. What doesn't usually get taken into account is whether those people that are considered "good" by certain humans, also are considered good by God according to His standards? The New Testament comes closest to giving us a definitive answer.

CJB Romans 3:22-23 *...for it makes no difference whether one is a Jew or a Gentile, ²³ since all have sinned and come short of earning God's praise.*

Or, as we find hundreds of years earlier in the Old Testament:

CJB Ecclesiastes 7:20 *For there isn't a righteous person on earth who does [only] good and never sins.*

Nonetheless, Habakkuk sees a differentiation between pagan gentiles and the Judeans that God ought to recognize and then also differentiate how He deals with each. Yet, that doesn't seem to be happening in reality.

CJB Habakkuk 1:14 *You make people like fish in the sea, like reptiles that have no ruler.*

First, the word "people" ought to be something like "humankind". The Hebrew is *adam*, and in that form it more usually means mankind/humankind in general as a whole. And, while we must allow that Habakkuk is comparing humans to fish and reptiles, it is obviously metaphorical. Even so, one wonders if Habakkuk actually knows that humans are supposed to rule over the fish and the reptiles, and we are anything but on the same level of value with them? But there is one other thing going on here: the blame game is quite apparent. Habakkuk says, "hey God, it's YOU that made humankind the way it is". It's you that has made humans, or at least allowed humans, to more resemble fish and reptiles who acknowledge no one to rule over them. What I can say is that our Prophet chooses the words he does (such as "makes" and "rules") because they are part of the vocabulary that we find in the Book of

Genesis as regards creation in chapter 1. This is the intended connection Habakkuk is making.

This image of people as fishes continues as verses 15 – 17, and he expands the use of the metaphor with the concept of what fishermen do. Those verses have to be taken together, and really should not have been separated but left as one long statement.

CJB Habakkuk 1:15-17 ***¹⁵ The evil haul them all up with their hooks, catch them in their fish net, or gather them in their dragnet. Then they rejoice and make merry, ¹⁶ offering sacrifices to their fishnet and burning incense to their dragnet; because through them they live in luxury, with plenty of food to eat. ¹⁷ Should they, therefore, keep emptying their nets? Should they keep slaughtering the nations without pity?***

I could offer you a different translation that is more literal, but really the CJB captures it well enough. When we read that the “evil haul them all up with their hooks”, the “all of them” is mankind since they are compared to the teeming fishes in the sea. Three different ways of catching fish are described, and the CJB does a good job of differentiating them. The first is **chakkah**, which means hooks. The second is the most general word for net that can indicate a net used to capture most any kind of animal (other Bible verses describe capturing birds with a net). The word is **cherem**. Yes, for those of you who know a bit of Hebrew, it is the same word as used to describe what is called the ban. That is, things humans are not to keep for themselves when captured from the enemy as booty in the prosecution of a Holy War. And lastly, **mikmereth**, which refers directly to the type of net used only by fishermen.

In truth, the reason that 3 different words are chosen for the ways to catch fish has to do with the literary structure of the Hebrew poetry Habakkuk is using. For those of you that are curious enough, the poetic structure of verses 14 and 15 consists of 8 tricolons, and the first 3 tricolons are the 3 ways of catching fish. So, it’s a bit contrived and we shouldn’t make any more of it

than that. There is no special deeper meaning in the use of 3 or in the 3 separate types.

After the fishermen have caught their limit, so to speak, they rejoice and thank their gods by offering sacrifices and burning incense to their nets. But do not think that this is describing some known actual ritual of pagan societies. Remember, the entire fish and fishermen pairing is metaphoric. What this is more pointing towards are the weapons of war used by that pagan nation that is causing such havoc and fear... not just for Judah, but also for other pagan nations that the Chaldeans are invading and absorbing. That is, it makes the Babylonians love and devotion to their weapons of war worthy of being treated almost as though they were gods. Of course, there is some amount of hyperbole used here, since one of the great reasons to employ poetry is to communicate emotions and to rouse feelings above what actual information-based narrative can do.

Verse 17 ends this 1st chapter with a question. It is: God, should you be allowing this brutal and ruthless nation (the fisherman) to keep emptying his nets? That is, to keep fishing and every time that net dives beneath the waterline, it comes up full? The metaphor is fully unveiled when the final words of this verse are spoken: "Should they keep slaughtering the nations without pity?"

I'll put this altogether, now, to get the point across. Habakkuk wants to know how such a just God as Yehoveh continues to allow Babylon such free reign over the continent that they treat the many nations that live there as though they were mere fish and other sea creatures, worthy of nothing more than to be captured and used to make Babylon rich and happy. These nations were nearly defenseless against the onslaught of the great Babylonian military. And, to add insult to injury, God knew and the Judeans knew that as the Chaldeans run over and conquered each nation, they would give credit to their own military skills, superior weaponry, and to their gods. And this, all under Yehoveh's nose as He passively watched it happen. Habakkuk wants to know why God is allowing this? Almost approaching the matter of wanting to know if God really was in control of everything, or maybe those pagan gods of Babylon really did have as much or more power than Yehoveh. While this is somewhat

implied, it certainly... at least to this point... was not said. But it doesn't take much contemplation to see the direction Habakkuk's line of questioning is going and what his mind would, quite naturally, begin to wonder.

Even so, even with unanswered questions and certain doubts that are anything but admirable, in chapter 1 Habakkuk says he will wait in his watchtower, and look to the horizon for, finally, the approach of God's presence. He has faith that Yehoveh will eventually act but is so troubled by the delay that is far beyond what he thinks is reasonable... or maybe even normal.

Judah's society is disintegrating. It is rotting from the inside out. It is their minds and their morals that have gone wanting. Once that happens, it is the beginning of the inevitable end unless there is a great national repentance. On the other hand, the news from God seems to say that the time for repentance has passed and the consequences of the loss of their homeland as punishment is now underway and will not be deterred.

I have often mused that, for me, all the signs of our times so reflect the prophecies of the entry into the End Times, that I cannot conclude any other than we are standing on that threshold, or we have taken the first step over it. But I can no more be sure than Habakkuk was. And if God's great appointed Prophet doesn't know for sure whether the events of his day are indicative of the coming judgment of God on Judah and the nations, there is certainly no way that I, a mere Bible Teacher, could possibly know with certainty. Yet, Habakkuk says he'll keep a lookout for God to move, and that is exactly what we are to do.

In the end, God is God. He and He alone is the Holy One. Whether we fully understand all of His purposes and His schedule matter little. What He said will happen, will happen. How He says it will happen, will come about. Yes, we live in a world of paradox. Yehoveh is a God of life, but we live in a world of death. The righteous are to receive the blessings, but the evil seem to prosper. The theme and promise we must hang on to is the same given to Abraham: The righteous shall live by their faith.

Let's move on to chapter 2.

READ HABAKKUK CHAPTER 2 all

The opening verse is typically presented as a kind of introduction to this chapter. The words make it plain that what follows is Yehoveh's second response to Habakkuk. Within the next few verses, we will encounter what, to me, is perhaps the central theme for the entire book. I won't reveal it now, but I will when we encounter it. It explains why Habakkuk is one of the most quoted or alluded to books in the New Testament and is an obvious favorite in Paul's letters.

The opening words say so much.

CJB Habakkuk 2:1 ***"I will stand at my watchpost; I will station myself on the rampart. I will look to see what [God] will say through me and what I will answer when I am reproved."***

This comment from Habakkuk certainly better balances and explains Habakkuk's mindset as a faithful servant of Yehoveh. His questioning of God and being perplexed in no way negates his faithfulness. He is resigned to the reality that God has only revealed so much to him, and despite Habakkuk's great desire to know more, that is simply not his prerogative. Our prayer, when we want to know something from God, ought to be in that same tone. God, I want to know more. But, only when and how much it is your will to reveal it. In the meantime, give me the patience and faith to stand and wait for your answer and your actions.

There are some interesting nuances, here, worth examining. First, the word watch-post or guard-post isn't really there... at least in the way English speakers think of it. The Hebrew word is ***mishmeret***. It does NOT mean a place or a structure, but rather it's a thing one does. It's like saying, I have the midnight watch. It means it's your turn, or your duty, to be on guard or on watch. I like the way the KJV says it: "I will stand upon my watch".

When the word "to stand" is used, in Hebrew it is based on the root word ***amad***. It means to endure or to take a stand... to decide to do and hold fast to

a principle in a virtuous way. It represents a firm commitment. So, Habakkuk is saying that because of his faith, he is committed to be on the lookout as his duty. In a poetic couplet, the words “I will station myself on the rampart” is added. Typically translated rampart or bulwark, the Hebrew word **matsor** is indeed a structure. It is either a defensive fortification, or it is something built to help your military to put a siege upon a walled city. The point is, it is a place of strength and something that a warrior would man.

I would add that I think this verse is misplaced. It ought to be connected to the final verse of chapter 1 and not used as the first verse of chapter 2. Verse 17 of chapter 1 asks God a question, and this next verse says what Habakkuk will do as he awaits an answer. So, remembering that verse numbering and chapter breaks are manmade, and not invented until 1000 years after the Bible was closed up, then we can question where the verses and chapters ought to begin and end without questioning God. Listen to what happens when we do this:

CJB Habakkuk 1:17; 2:1 *Should they, therefore, keep emptying their nets? Should they keep slaughtering the nations without pity? I will stand at my watchpost; I will station myself on the rampart. I will look to see what [God] will say through me and what I will answer when I am reproved.*

The connection is obvious and we are not obliged to follow how the Bible was divided up into verses and chapters according to the opinions of human institutions.

When we read that verse in the CJB, it says, “I will look to see what God will say through me”. That is an incorrect approach. Better, again, is the KJV that says: **“and will watch to see what he will say unto me”**. It is not “through me” but “to me”. Technically, the Hebrew reads “in me”, but that is rather nonsensical when we convert it to English. So, Habakkuk is not saying I will wait for God to tell me what to tell you. Rather, he is merely saying that he will wait for God to speak to him to answer his inquiry.

Lastly is the matter that Habakkuk is fully expecting to be corrected. He has stated how he sees things, but yet allows that as bothered as he is over what seems to be God's inscrutable attitude and inaction, that it is he, Habakkuk, that is probably in the wrong. And, when he is reproved, how will he respond back to God? Answer? To be determined.

Verse 2 is:

CJB Habakkuk 2:2 *Then Yehoveh answered me; he said, "Write down the vision clearly on tablets, so that even a runner can read it."*

Another connection back to the more ancient times is meant here, and in this case, it is to Mt. Sinai. So, the wait is over, and God has now come back (after some unknown amount of time) with His response to Habakkuk. There are so many Hebrew poetic nuances we could discuss in this section, but I fear it is too distracting. I'll only remind you to keep in mind that this is given in poetic form and we must allow for that in our understanding. The words are designed to maintain a certain literary structure, and that will dictate how it will sound to us.

A most important aspect of this verse is the words: "Write down the vision clearly on tablets". This is meant to remind the Judean people of the words of the Torah, and especially of Deuteronomy 27 when God speaks to Moses.

CJB Deuteronomy 27:8. *You are to write on the stones all the words of this Torah very clearly."*

The point is that what God said to Habakkuk was to be written down and not only passed along orally. In Habakkuk's age and for centuries before that, among the Hebrews when something was to be inscribed on tablets, it didn't mean it in the same way that the Mesopotamians thought of it. In that society tablets were small clay tablets that used a stylus to make marks on wet clay and then set aside to dry. We are more familiar with this as cuneiform and the literally scores of thousands of these tablets found in the Middle East. They were kept mostly as private records. But, when the Hebrews thought to inscribe something that was considered as heaven-sent, it was to be written

large on stone (that is the meaning of “very clearly”) and put in a place where the public could easily read it. It acted as a public memorial.

Thus, the vision (the message) God was about to give to Habakkuk was to be written clearly (meaning large) on stone. But more, large enough “so that even a runner can read it”. This idea of a runner reading it means that someone walking by those tablets swiftly (even running), would be able to read it because the letters were so large and prominent and alongside a traveled public path or road. This does NOT mean that the entire book of Habakkuk was to receive this treatment. Rather it was God’s response to Habakkuk that we read in chapter 2 that was to be written down in such a manner. What that means to us is that this is an especially important part of what God had to say to Habakkuk to pay attention to.

We’ll continue with Habakkuk chapter 2 next time.