

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Lesson 5, Chapter 2 Continued 2

We'll pick up in Habakkuk chapter 2 at verse 5. We began to discuss it last time, recognizing that verses 4 and 5 worked together. This means we shouldn't see verse 5 as a separate thought from verse 4, but rather as an extension of it. Before we get into the remainder of chapter 2, let's look again at verses 4 and 5.

CJB Habakkuk 2:4-5 ***⁴ "Look at the proud: he is inwardly not upright; but the righteous will attain life through trusting faithfulness. ⁵ Truly, wine is treacherous; the arrogant will not live at peace but keeps expanding his desires like Sh'ol; like death, he can never be satisfied; he keeps collecting all the nations for himself, rallying to himself all the peoples.***

The "proud" of verse 4 are the "arrogant" of verse 5. And then, the idea of drunkenness is raised and called treacherous because it can blind the mind and thus cause destructive decisions resulting in rash actions. The first point that I made was concerning the term "the righteous". "The righteous" is set over and against the proud and arrogant. However, what gets overlooked is that the righteous are not just random individuals that properly worship Yehoveh; rather in the current context it is the faithful remnant of Israel that is given the title of "the righteous". So, "the righteous" identifies a collective... a group. And in this context, the group is that part of Israel that has remained loyal and upright before God.

Then, because it will relate to the Chaldeans (Babylon), no doubt this issue of wine as being treacherous can be directly connected to how Babylon would first be God's agent of judgment on Israel. But then, later Babylon would be judged for their harsh treatment of Israel (of Judah to be more specific). And we can read about what happened in that regard in Daniel.

First, we read of Belshatzar, King of Babylon, having a huge drunken banquet for all of his leading men.

CJB **Daniel 5:1** *Belshatzar the king gave a great banquet for a thousand of his lords, and in the presence of the thousand he was drinking wine.*

Then we read of the result.

CJB **Daniel 5:30** ³⁰ *That very night Belshatzar, the king of the Kasdim, was killed.*

This happened when the arrogant, proud and unprepared Belshatzar and all his leading men were quickly overrun by the invading Persians, and it was the end of the Babylonian Empire that now became the Persian Empire. Thus, the remainder of Habakkuk 2:5 goes on to explain the insatiable desire of Babylon for more and more power, wealth and territory that is likened to **She'ol**... the grave... that metaphorically has an insatiable desire to consume the living. Belshatzar was a typical empire builder that comes and goes throughout history. Just as it was for Nimrod, so it is today for the likes of world leaders whose intents are to build a new empire, or to rebuild a former empire (as Recep Erdogan wants Turkey to rebuild the Ottoman Empire). The Japanese sought to do this same thing a mere 80 years ago as did the Germans under Hitler. It will never stop until Yeshua returns to put an end to such things. But the thing is that God considers empire building as a bad thing. It's the occupation and goal of the proud and arrogant that want to keep collecting all the nations he can for himself. Even though the tyrants that run these empires try to make it sound as though this is an altruistic effort on behalf of his people... in fact it is all about personal power and wealth and control.

Here is perhaps the main lesson to be learned from verses 2 – 5. First, while it doesn't specifically say so (and thus there is no unanimity of Bible scholars on the matter) there is a strong consensus that the offending tyrant is going to be Belshatzar and his nation is the Babylon, because should we try to fit some other tyrant or nation into what would happen to Judah not long after Habakkuk's prophecy, nothing comes close to fitting. And, yet, we also have to acknowledge that these oracles of "woe" to this gentile nation are general enough, and the kinds of things the leader does that are wicked are so typical of history right up through our day, that over time it could be applied in several contexts and situations about different empires and tyrants. That is,

the prophecy was built and spoken in such a way that it could accurately be fulfilled more than once, with one occurrence no more valid than another. I contend this is the underlying nature of all biblical prophecy except perhaps for a couple of them that are extremely specific and based upon a particular, one-time-only, set of circumstances.

Let's reread the remainder of Habakkuk chapter 2.

RE-READ HABAKKUK CHAPTER 2: 6 – 20

Verse 6 begins a carefully structured section of Habakkuk that consists of 5 woes that will be applied to the Babylonian oppressors but remembering that each time this prophecy is fulfilled it will be a different nation that is being referred to and judged. And, generally speaking, these 5 woes will be brought against Babylon using those captured and captive nations of their empire.

Because of the effects of Hebrew poetry on our correct understanding of what we are reading, I need to point out that these 5 woes are presented quite symmetrically with each woe as its own stanza, and each stanza consisting of 3 strophes, but each woe presented is of different length and word count. It is actually quite likely that, when taken together, this was intended to be a song... much like the Song of Moses. It predicts the destruction of the wicked oppressive empire (in this case the Babylonians) and in a joyful sense of release and restoration (joyful for Israel). This is presented according to Habakkuk's unique style of poetry, so it is unlike any other Prophet's poetic utterings. I won't present you with more technical details than that, other than to say it does matter, and because Christian (and often Jewish) commentaries overlook the strong effects of Hebrew poetry, we get some strange conclusions about the meaning.

Verse 6 needs to be divided into 2 parts for the sake of study. This first part is:

CJB Habakkuk 2:6 *Won't all these take up taunting him and say about him, in mocking riddles...*

I think this is better said in a couple of other Bible versions, one of which is:

^{JPS} **Habakkuk 2:6** *Shall not all these take up a parable against him, and a taunting riddle against him,*

When we read what it is that these oppressed nations of Babylon's empire are going to "take up" against them, the Hebrew word is **mashal**. Technically it can mean either a proverb or a parable. Although proverbs and parables are different things in literature, the commonality between them is that they use a story or an analogy or a brief saying to impart wisdom and truth to the reader. That is, these are not new laws or commandments. So, perhaps a better approach would be to have the opening words read something like: "Shall not all these take up a wisdom saying against him". Essentially the idea is that what Babylon was doing was to defy what is known wisdom, thinking it won't apply to them. Empires built in such a manner and motive and ruled over with such arrogant leaders and lacking compassion and a sense of history, don't last. They all eventually die out after a relatively few glory years. That the empire rots from the inside out and the top down, the oppressed among them rise up, or another opposing geopolitical power emerges, is simply how the world works because it consists of humans; and for this simple reason it will never be any different despite what the tyrant convinces himself.

Where we next read about what it is that is "taken up" against the tyrant, it is in Hebrew **meliytsah chiydah**. This is so difficult to translate into English, no two Bible versions have the same translation. A **meliytsah** is essentially a song that mocks an enemy. **Chiydah** is some kind of a perplexing saying. So, please insert whatever English words that you think best fits with that understanding in mind. We just need to have a mental image of an oppressed people being freed, and they are now enjoying seeing the shoe being put onto the other foot. Their oppressor is getting their just deserts, and so the freed people are hurling insults of all kinds against them, including telling them how deluded they were to think that historic wisdom didn't apply to them and somehow, they would escape the inevitable.

The 2nd half of verse 6 begins the first "woe" of the song.

CJB Habakkuk 2:6 ...'Woe to him who amasses other people's wealth!- how long must it go on?- and to him who adds to himself the weight of goods taken in pledge!

So, God sees this empire as one who is wrongfully taking other nations' wealth away from them. Of course, this was a process that had gone on for millennia. Tribalism being the main form of social structure in the world in the Old Testament era was itself based on the economic principle of Zero Sum. That is, they see it that there is a set amount of wealth in the world... or at least in the region of the world they operate in. It doesn't grow or diminish. So, for a tribe to become more wealthy, they had to take from another tribe, thus making the losing tribe poorer. It was a wealth transfer from one tribe to another... economic musical chairs. These ancient empires thought more or less the same, although they also knew enough to try to mine for more metals or to have their kingdom produce more as a way to attain more wealth. So, the usual mode to make more wealth was to take it from somebody else.

The question at the center of the woe is "how long"? Without doubt this plays off of Habakkuk's early questioning of God when it came to asking God how long He was going to allow injustice and violence to go on in Jerusalem before He did something about it. So, Babylon conquering and taking over a nation was seen as unjust stealing of wealth that was owned by other people. The angle we need to notice is that the nation that is stealing from and oppressing other nations does NOT make what is taken as now legitimately belonging to the conqueror. Rather, it is stolen property being fraudulently held that ought to be returned. God sees it along the lines of a debt that needs to be repaid.

When the last part of this verse speaks of goods taken in pledge, in Hebrew the word for pledge is **abtit**. This is the only place in the Tanakh that we find this rare word... at least in this grammatical form. Although we will find this same root word but using different vowels and suffixes in other places in the Bible, the only way to obtain meaning for this word in our passage is to see how those other forms of the root worked in other contexts. And what we see is that they all have to do with some aspect of property mortgages or loans made on crops that the property was expected to produce. In the Old Testament times, especially as concerned the Israelites, the value of land was

only based on the food it produced. Vacant and unproductive land having essentially no value. So, here is another case of a nearly consensus scholarly adoption of the word “pledge” as the right translation of a rare Hebrew word, but in reality, that probably isn’t a good translation at all. Rather this word **abtit** is speaking of the produce... the food... that is produced but, the farmer who produced that food owes a loan balance to the one who loaned him money for the seed and probably use of the land. In our case here in verse 6, this is saying that Babylon simply confiscates that produce, gives the farmer nothing in return, and so the farmer is left with nothing, and it is the same for the creditor who loaned that farmer the money to plant the crop, but he never gets repayment.

It was common among the empire builders to virtually drive entire nations into a state of bankruptcy by the wealth and the heavy tribute they extracted from them. Again, these ancient practices are still in play today. As Germany built their empire in the mid-20th century, conquered nations were driven into poverty and starvation. But, in the end it made no sense to do that to a conquered nation because once the existing wealth was extracted, there was no more to take and no means to make more. The Persians (who conquered Babylon) took a bit more enlightened approach and worked out a sustainable plan for tribute from the nations in their empire. But even so, the Persians only held on to their empire for a while. Not the least reason being what we have just discussed; in God’s eyes, what they had committed was theft by conquering other nations and laying claim to the land, the people, and everything produced there. And they now owed repayment to the nations as a debt.

CJB Habakkuk 2:7 *Won't your own creditors suddenly stand, won't those who make you tremble wake up? You will become their spoil*

Without understanding the sense of verse 6 as we have done it, then verse 7 is an enigma. But when we do, we see that this is all about who owes who what, and it is spoken in loan terms of principle, interest, and payments. While in a certain sense, Babylon would be turned from creditor to debtor (the oppressed nations now turning from debtors to being creditors) that is not what is really being said. The word that is being translated is ***noshek***. It

literally translates to “biters”. But, when used in relation to loans of money as the Israelites thought about it, it is meant as a nasty epithet aimed at the one who has all the money, and they loan it very unfairly and with a crippling effect on the one who borrows. Especially among the Israelites this person was regarded as the worst sort because Israelites were to loan other Israelites money at no interest. However, that didn’t happen very often; usually there was interest paid in the form of the creditor receiving some of the produce in lieu of interest, or a non-onerous amount of interest being charged. While this Torah-based system of loan and repayment was certainly to be obeyed, it didn’t take long before it was set aside and interest of some kind was charged on loans among the Hebrews. Bottom line: while this was a uniquely Israelite practice, the other nations did no such thing. It’s just that the Israelites were very sensitive about it and so it is used here in this woe as indicating a terribly dastardly thing that is now going to be experienced by the vile money lender... Babylon... that had been doing it to helpless nations. Taken another way, this means that all that Babylon thought they had profited by their expansionist policies and ruthless quest for wealth would be taken away from them by the very ones they had unfairly profited from.

CJB Habakkuk 2:8 *Because you plundered many nations, all the rest of the peoples will plunder you; because of the bloodshed and violence done to the land, the city and all who live there.*

Clearly, as these words are structured in a poetic fashion meant to impart emotions and not so much any kind of precise information, then poetic use of the word plunder (***shalal***) is repeated. The first use of it speaks of what Babylon will do to the nations, and the second use of it speaks of what the nations will do to Babylon in return.

“All the rest of the peoples will plunder you” is simply a vague way of saying that nations that feared Babylon and lived so long under their harsh rule, will take part in dismantling it and making them poor. Again, think poetry as the reason for what is essentially repetition and don’t try to assign special meaning to it. The final half of verse 8 makes it clear that in addition to the stealing of property and impoverishing people with their greed, they committed bloodshed (unjustifiable killing... murder) and violence to the land,

the city and all who live there. The land means Judah. The city means Jerusalem. And of course, all who live there means the Jews living in Judah. Although some interpreters think otherwise, this doesn't refer to land, cities, and people in general of all the nations that Babylon has made part of their empire. The grammatical form for land and city is singular, not plural, and so it's all about the land set aside for God's people.

The bloodshed and violence of Babylon is parallel to the violence and cruelty that Habakkuk complains to God about in chapter 1, concerning the actions of Jews against one another in Jerusalem and Judah. Don't let this reciprocation be missed that God's hand of judgment (Babylon) is going to do violence and cruelty to the people of Judah because of what they had been doing to one another. Now, once their purpose for punishing Judah is completed, Babylon will receive violence and cruelty for their harsh treatment not just of Judah, but of other nations, too. Verse 9 begins the oracle of the 2nd of the 5 woes.

CJB Habakkuk 2:9 *""Woe to him who seeks unjust gain for his household, putting his nest on the heights, in order to be safe from the reach of harm.*

I like the more literal YLT translation a bit better.

YLT Habakkuk 2:9 *Woe to him who is gaining evil gain for his house, To set on high his nest, To be delivered from the hand of evil,*

This 2nd oracle of woe consists of 3 verses... 9 – 11.

Francis I. Anderson has a most interesting viewpoint concerning this woe. He begins by saying: ***"this woe oracle seems to be incoherent. It is impossible to find continuous sense in it."***

His viewpoint among Bible translators is essentially unanimous. He then goes on to explain that when trying to deal with it (and I would add, when trying to deal with several other verses of the Prophets that, when read literally, you come out with the same lost feeling), there's really only 3 choices. You just skip it as the text is so corrupted it is hopeless to ever extract meaning. Or

you attempt to repair it according to your own beliefs of what it is attempting to tell us. Or you take it as we have it and make as much sense of it as we can by using the context that surrounds it... the verses both before and after it... to see what can be gained. Anderson also points out that because this is Hebrew poetry, which uses poetic couplets along with earlier or later parallel statements, then we should look for those as strong clues as to the overall direction this passage is taking us.

Professor Anderson concludes with this: **"In the 2nd woe oracle, then, we have poetry that is neither lyrical nor classical in form, but contrariwise, nervous, disjointed, and rough in its grammar. There are no indications, however, that these features are either defects in composition or blemishes caused by careless scribes. At least, there is now no obvious way of improving or correcting what we have."**

I think this is quite wise and it avoids the re-construction and re-wording in the translator's own image that 99% of critical Bible scholars think they have the right to attempt. If we choose to take it as we, have it, this may never produce a satisfactory answer, but at the same time we can avoid merely inserting even more agenda-driven human thoughts into Holy Scripture, when it is our understanding that is lacking, and not the text itself.

This much is clear: this 2nd woe oracle is being pronounced upon the evil thoughts and behaviors of the Chaldeans (the Babylonians), and by extension whatever empire or empire-like oppressors of Israel beyond them in the future that would think to behave in these same ways that disgust and anger Yehoveh.

In the first oracle the main thrust of the sin is identifiable as greed, but in the second it is covetousness. We know from the first oracle that the Babylonian mindset revolves around amassing things simply for the sake of having more and more and more, insatiably. Here, they want to satisfy that greed by acquiring things that they have no right to; things that aren't theirs. The Bible defines coveting as having an intense, wrong and wicked desire to have something that belongs to someone else. These people have a nature and a thirst for robbery and plunder to have what they want. It is more than what

they do, it is what they are. When what we do is so indicative of who we, this becomes our identity (whether what we do is godly or ungodly). Yeshua likes to refer to what we do as producing fruit... either good or bad... that is the outward indication of our true identity.

Verse 9 opens with words that are variously translated as “Woe to him who seeks unjust gain”, or “woe to him that gains evil gains”, or “woe to him that covet evil covetousness” or some variation of one of these 3. The most literal way is when we use the same word twice, because that’s how it appears in the Hebrew text. In Hebrew it is **batsa rah batsa**. The middle word is used countless times in the Bible and means “evil” or “wicked”. **Batsa** means to gain something in wrong ways, even violently. If we set aside trying to use as few words as possible to translate a Hebrew word to English (as it is when translating for the purpose of a creating a Bible version for print), then we could translate it this way that helps our modern English ears to get the point: “Woe to him that seeks to wickedly acquire wickedly profitable things”. That is no less awkward, but it does help us to see that the entire opening part of this verse is condemning Babylon using the strongest possible language to describe both what they wish to acquire and how they wish to go about it. This is far worse than planning to cheat someone in business dealings. This is saying that there is no end or limitations to what Babylon will do to get whatever their evil desires demand.

Who, exactly, gains from this? The next few words say that it is “for his house”. This is a solid English translation. We could quibble over whether this refers to Babylon as the King’s house, or perhaps it is meaning his personal estate, but the reality is that a king owned the country and everything in it so assuming it applies to whatever king over whatever nation is oppressing Israel at the time, whatever the gain is it is essentially his.

But what is this about his high nest? This could be taken to mean a couple of different things. A nest often refers to a stronghold that the person in question sees as impregnable. On the other hand, it can also be in relation to the high-flying eagle’s nest that means the majesty of the nest owner is above everyone else, and he thinks of himself as exempt and safe from ever being

vulnerable to conquest or assassination. Both senses of these words work equally well for this passage.

What is the reason for having the high nest? The final words say: it is “to be delivered from the hand of evil”. Now, in reality, saying “hand of evil” is not the best choice. To begin with the Hebrew being usually translated as hand is **kaph**, and it does not mean hand as we think of it (**yad** means hand and that word isn’t present). Rather **kaph** means to be in the palm of the hand or in a pan... a container. That is, it means to be held in your power, or it is in your reach. The best and most literal we can probably do is “to be delivered from the reach of catastrophe”. The term **ra** means evil in a spiritual sense or a wrong committed by a person, but just as often it means a disaster of some kind. Here the context is, I think, rather clear that this is speaking in a general sense of this king thinking he is well safe from befalling any kind of disaster or catastrophe. He is virtually permanently immune.

So, from the first words that are “woe to you” to the last words of this sentence “safe or delivered from disaster”, it forms a sort of sarcastic irony. The person (the king) is completely confident that he is immune to any bad thing happening to himself, and God says a great woe is about to happen to you because you think and act in a such an arrogant and proud manner.

CJB Habakkuk 2:10 ***By scheming to destroy many peoples, you have brought shame to your house and forfeited your life***

Because, as we discussed a few minutes ago, that this 2nd woe is so very difficult to decipher, we do get a bit of variation on the meaning. However, I think hands-down the CJB expresses the meaning in the best way. Most other Bible versions offer slightly varied renderings that are essentially the same viewpoint as the RSV takes.

RSV Habakkuk 2:10 ***You have devised shame to your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life.***

Babylon would not have schemed a plan to bring shame on themselves... that is just too irrational. Rather it is as the CJB says: they schemed a plan but

ultimately it backfired and brought shame upon themselves. It seems to me that this verse is pretty intelligible just as it stands. And the end result of their wicked plan... that was actually very successful for a long time... was that they forfeited their own life as a sovereign nation.

CJB Habakkuk 2:11 *For the very stones will cry out from the wall, and a beam in the framework will answer them.*

The Young's Literal Translation reads this way:

YLT Habakkuk 2:11 *For a stone from the wall doth cry out, And a holdfast from the wood answereth it.*

Obviously, this verse is a poetic metaphor since stones don't cry out and wood doesn't answer anyone. So, what is the point being made here? It is that the stones and the wood are the witnesses to Babylon's atrocities. This is a common biblical pattern due to a basic God-principle that to condemn a wrong doer requires the testimony of a minimum of 2 witnesses. The stones used for defensive city walls, and the combination of stone walls and wood rafters to hold a roof are used when building a residence or a meeting place or even a Temple. The Babylonians in their invasions and sieges caused great harm to these stone and wood structures, so they are a kind of fictional representative witnesses to what Babylon did.

Their crying out is being heard by Yehoveh. They are crying out for righteous justice from the divine law giver and judge. The best illustration of this that makes this interpretation of this verse rather straightforward comes from the Book of Joshua.

CJB Joshua 24:27 *Y'hoshua said to all the people, "See, this stone will be a witness against us; because it has heard all the words of Yehoveh which he said to us; therefore it will be a witness against you, in case you deny your God."*

This concludes the second woe and verse 12 begins the third.

CJB Habakkuk 2:12 ***""Woe to him who builds a city with blood and founds a town on injustice,***

This third woe... the center point or maybe the fulcrum of the 5 woes... is actually the shortest. It comprises verses 12 to 14. There is no better English word to express what this opening verse says than "atrocities," and then what remains of this woe oracle speaks of is the price the perpetrator pays for the atrocities he commits.

I see this particular woe as very general in nature. It doesn't speak of specific punishments for the oppressor, as much as it does of how it doesn't escape the gaze of the God of the Universe nor will it escape God's judgment ... even if it may take more time than most humans see as reasonable. The common thread of the world's worst historical tyrants is their willingness to expend limitless amounts of the blood, sweat, tears, and lives of those they have subjugated... whether of their own people or of a nation they have conquered. We don't need the Torah to go to in order to know that what they did, or in the 21st century this same type of tyrants *are* doing, it is wrong on every level. I've spoken a few times about how following WWII when the Nazis were put on trial, the first thing that the tribunal of judges had to deal with was which law code the Nazis would be put held up against. It is from this trial that the concept of a "crime against humanity" arose, and we hear about that nearly daily in our century. In the end, the Chief Prosecutor won the debate based on the fact that any single nation's law and moral code could not possibly be used because they varied too much. But there was a basic law and moral code understood and shared among all humanity, because it didn't come from humans but rather from somewhere above and beyond humanity. That is exactly what this passage is addressing. I'll recite for you this entire (short) woe oracle so that you can see its unusual, and universal, scope.

CJB Habakkuk 2:12-14 ***¹² ""Woe to him who builds a city with blood and founds a town on injustice, ¹³ so that people toil for what will be burned up, and nations exhaust themselves to no purpose. Isn't all this from Yehoveh-Tzva'ot? ¹⁴ For the earth will be as full of the knowledge of Yehoveh's glory as water covering the sea.***

Some Bible scholars see this woe as applying exclusively to the End Times. I don't see it that way at all. In fact, I would suggest that this is just a very long God-principle that has applied since the first humans built the first towns, cities, and nations. Just as those Justices in the Nuremberg trials probably could not have agreed on God as that outside source of a common code of law and morality for all humanity to go by... a law and a code that overrode any national law and code that defied that universal one... so in Habakkuk the way this same thought is stated is to claim that the entire world will have knowledge of God and His glory to one level or another. And, the truth is, it has always been that way.

Some may attribute this common knowledge of universal morality to our innate human goodness (atheists in particular believe this), or to whomever they worship as their god, the Bible makes it clear that in fact the common source is Yehoveh, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Who else but the Creator of humans could hide deep within us, somewhere, this common understanding? So, why do some born tyrants like Nero, Mao, Hitler, Stalin, and the current leaders of Iran, seem to be immune to what almost everyone else on this planet understands and knows? Because, this is the power of evil, and of the Evil One. We'll stop here and continue with this 3rd woe next time.