

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Lesson 6, Chapter 2 Concluded

Habakkuk chapter 2 contains 5 woe oracles mostly concerning nations and peoples that have been invaded and conquered by a tyrannical nation... or better, empire. This was introduced by a statement made in verses 5 and 6.

CJB Habakkuk 2:5-6 ***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. ⁶ Won't all these take up taunting him and say about him, in mocking riddles, '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!***

We've spoken about this in some detail in our first two installments of commentary about chapter 2, but as we begin our third installment, a brief reflection is in order. We've so far covered woe oracles 1 and 2 and began woe oracle 3 to end our previous lesson. God describes the nation that has ruthlessly captured these many other weaker nations using terms like arrogant, proud, boastful, treacherous, and having never-satiable desires for more. Combined, these terms describe everything that is anti-God. Even more pointedly, it describes this tyrannical nation that sits at the head of an empire as rejecting the most fundamental principle of "the righteous shall live by faith". Interestingly, God is requiring no more... and no less... from the nations (meaning the gentile nations) than what He has required of Israel. Of course, the entire reason for Yehoveh sending a long string of Prophets to Israel was because they were not keeping the spirit of this grand principle, which is carefully laid out in the Law of the Moses. That is, the expectation of God on humans was given in much greater detail to Israel, who in turn was to carry it to the remainder of the world.

As with most prophecies, their fulfillments happen at least twice, often 3 times, and each time the scope and intensity of that fulfillment increases, until some of them become universal... meaning world-wide. In the first fulfillment of Habakkuk's prophecy, it would be Babylon that took the brunt of it as that

tyrannical nation. And, so, we can read these woes as involving the nations and peoples that Babylon had captured, but only insofar as it being the first fulfillment and it happening within a decade of Habakkuk pronouncing them.

Because of the central place Babylon took as being one of Israel's greatest historical oppressors, over time Babylon not only was referred to in the Bible as a specific place and people, but went on to become a symbol for peoples and nations who violated every faith principle God demanded and commanded. Even in the New Testament writings, Babylon became the primary representative "bad guys" alongside Rome, even though Babylon during that era was irrelevant. Thus, when it comes to the End Times of our future, the Bible speaks of the world tyrant that we call the Anti-Christ as coming from the bowels of Babylon, and the world system he will be the head of as Babylon. Very likely, the actual place or city or a nation called Babylon will not exist, but it cannot be entirely ruled out. Rather Babylon has become a negative term for the universal and ultimate expression of worldliness and wicked behavior.

Keep this in mind as we continue through these woes. And keep in mind, that as much as it bothers Christians to have to hear it, God is a jealous, vengeful and wrathful God. However, His jealousy, vengefulness and wrath operate within His system of righteous justice, unlike humans when these terms are applied in entirely unjust ways. And, no, this did not change with the advent of Yeshua. The End Times expression of God's jealousy, vengefulness and wrath will be the greatest He has ever perpetrated among humankind. And His agent for carrying this out will be none other than Christ.

Let's continue now discussing this third, very short, oracle of woe that we find in Habakkuk chapter 2, verses 12 – 14. First, however, we'll reread chapter 2 beginning at verse 12.

RE-READ HABAKKUK CHAPTER 2:12 – end

It is better to look at this third woe in its wholeness and entirety than piece by piece so that we don't get lost in the details (even though the details do matter). This woe expresses a general God-principle that the head of the

ruthless empire that seeks to capture and oppress other nations and peoples around them is not only an enemy of those nations and peoples but also an enemy of Yehoveh. They all will eventually pay a fatal price for their evil, as will the head of the government that rules them.

Part of this principle includes the longer-term reality that knowledge of God will eventually replace the present and past earthly experience of living under the thumb of one tyrant or another and whatever rules and doctrines that tyrant sets in place. This is the hope that God repeats through most of His Prophets and it is one that still in the 21st century we all can hold onto. As dark as things seem to be at times, there is light in our future, which makes life worth the living.

When we begin with verse 12, the woe is addressed to the city-builder. Well, more often than not in the Bible, the city-builder was not presented in a good light; more often they were along the lines of Nimrod. That is, this is a person whose bent is to challenge or defy God, and instead to do things that benefit and glorify himself. So, it almost goes hand-in-hand that if widescale bloodshed of the citizens was needed to expedite the city building, then there was no hesitation of the tyrant to employ it and any other means to achieve his end.

Most times when the term "city" is used in the Bible, unless it is obviously something else it means Jerusalem. Here in Habakkuk, Jerusalem (at the very least) is included in the group of cities built through the atrocities of its leader. Habakkuk is certainly not the only Prophet to point this out.

CJB Micah 3:9-10 ***⁹ Hear this, please, leaders of the house of Ya'akov, rulers of the house of Isra'el, you who abhor what is just and pervert anything that is right, ¹⁰ who build up Tziyon with blood and Yerushalayim with wickedness.***

Compare that with Habakkuk.

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

Micah said this 100 years before Habakkuk. Since Abraham was chosen by Yehoveh to begin a set-apart race of people to serve God, it has been made clear that neither the Patriarchs nor anyone of Israel had some special merit that made them different from everyone else. Rather, it was by God's grace that He chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob called Israel. So, then, just as today, as much as we ought to stand by Israel and the Jewish people, we are never to think that they have merited God's or our support. We support them, because God chose them... and nothing else. We do it as an act of obedience and love. The reality is that their election is the ONLY difference between Israel and everybody else. So, Israel was always susceptible to falling, and their history is mostly moving from failure to failure in their obedience and faithfulness to God, which made them very much like the pagan gentile world. God is pointing this out through Habakkuk, and I don't imagine his people thanked either of them for it.

Verse 13 explains that the people who are subjugated and laboring to bring about the tyrant's grandiose dreams and building plans, are putting out all this effort for something that is going to burn and blow away much sooner than the city-builder could have imagined. The results of the forced labor of the hundreds of thousands won't stand. It will pass away as God's purposes and His Kingdom advance. Everything that God does, beginning with Creation, was meant to glorify Him; not any of us mere mortals whether we are kings or wood choppers. So, none of it will be lasting except for that which is directly Kingdom oriented.

I suspect that verse 14 was taken directly by Habakkuk from Isaiah, as was the habit of prophets to do.

CJB Isaiah 11:5-9 ***⁵ Justice will be the belt around his waist, faithfulness the sash around his hips. ⁶ The wolf will live with the lamb; the leopard lies down with the kid; calf, young lion and fattened lamb together, with a little child to lead them. ⁷ Cow and bear will feed together, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. ⁸ An infant will play on a cobra's hole, a toddler put his hand in a viper's nest. ⁹ They will not hurt or destroy anywhere on***

my holy mountain, for the earth will be as full of the knowledge of Yehoveh as water covering the sea.

It is in this same context of God bringing the entire world under submission to Him, as a sort of substitution for all tyrants and their ungodly ambitions, that Habakkuk has in mind. So, he just borrowed what was probably a pretty well-known passage from Isaiah (who wrote it around 80 years or so before Habakkuk), added one word to it (glory) and used it as a short-cut to get his meaning across. One other comment.

The phrase “the glory of the Lord” in Habakkuk 2:14 is very often used in conjunction with a theophany (an appearance of God). The fact is that this part of Isaiah’s and now Habakkuk’s prophecy has yet to occur in history. So, this must be an End Times happening. Further, many times the term “glory”, especially when the article “the” comes directly before it and the glory is in reference to God, then “The Glory” becomes a proper noun and the name for a certain manifestation of God. It’s harder to see in the CJB as they have reorganized the words a bit, but when we read the NAS and a number of other Bible versions, it becomes clearer.

^{NAS} **Habakkuk 2:14** ***"For the earth will be filled With the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, As the waters cover the sea.***

Since the waters of the sea were seen as essentially present over all the earth, then this reference in Habakkuk brings on the concept of universality... the whole earth. Let’s move on to verse 15.

^{CJB} **Habakkuk 2:15** ***"Woe to him who has his neighbor drink, adds his own poison and makes him drunk, in order to see him naked.***

This begins the fourth woe oracle. This, too, amounts to 3 verses... 15 – 17. So, as with the previous woe, it is best to see this in its entirety and not piece by piece.

CJB Habakkuk 2:15-17 ¹⁵ *""Woe to him who has his neighbor drink, adds his own poison and makes him drunk, in order to see him naked. ¹⁶ You are filled with shame, not glory. You, drink too, and stagger! The cup of Yehoveh's right hand will be turned against you; your shame will exceed your glory. ¹⁷ For the violence done to the L'vanon will overwhelm you, and the destruction of the wild animals will terrify you; because of the bloodshed and violence done to the land, the city and all who live there.""*

As the leaders of empires tended to do, when they conquered nations, they would strip them of everything valuable. The people themselves were seen as little more than disposable labor. Therefore, when the empire eventually began to deteriorate, and the opportunity to successfully rebel arrived, the vengeance and hatred the conquered peoples held against their tyrant and his native country were terrible.

Everything the offending nation did to its subjects was eventually reversed and turned back upon them. The first 2 verses are filled with expressions, similes and metaphors, as is common in Hebrew poetry. So, for instance, in verse 15, it is not that the Babylonians enticed their neighboring nations that they had plans to conquer to drink to get drunk in order to see them nude. Rather, these are mostly idioms of the era.

Throughout the Bible, the words drink, cup, staggering, and naked work together to form a picture. The idea is that getting drunk makes the drunk person stagger around. They become irrational, unstable, and make bad decisions. Because of this, they make themselves vulnerable. To see someone naked means to see someone in their shame. And recall: shame does not mean they are embarrassed and ashamed. Shame is not an emotion; it is a societal status. A person in a status of shame is not just humiliated; they are shunned by the community until they can find a way to regain their honor. And, in the typical shame and honor-based society of the biblical era, there was little worse than to lose your honor and become shamed. Not only you but your entire family were tarred with the status.

Since the context of these woes is usually about nations, then it might seem as though this is referring to political actions of country against country. But it needs to be seen more as individual-based. Entire nations were not normally spoken of as having shame or honor. For instance; Israel observed the various peoples of Canaan involved in all sorts of vices but did not think in terms of entire tribes or ethnic groups as swinging back and forth from honor to shame. Rather it was more typically person by person. A mention of their ethnic identity was not so much about characterizing an entire nation or people, but rather about helping to know exactly who was being spoken about in terms of what people they belonged to.

It must also be noted that God was attempting to make Israel a guilt and innocence, law-based society, which is part of the reason that He gave them the Law of Moses on Mt. Sinai. God was trying to eradicate among His people the idea that one could have their honor offended and then have to go do deadly harm to the offending neighbor to get their honor back. This effort by God represented a radical departure from the norm for that day, but Israel never could seem to fully escape it due to their constant flirtations with their pagan neighbors. Therefore, we are to see the word "neighbor" in verse 15 as a connection to the Law of Moses... it is part of covenant vocabulary. Babylon, along with earlier and later evil empires, did not obey the basic command to "love your neighbor as yourself".

In the end, what is being described here is the Chaldean's terrible abuses to their victims, which itself connects back to chapter 1 when the topic is the behavior of the people of Jerusalem and Judah.

CJB Habakkuk 1:2-4 ² Yehoveh, how long must I cry without your hearing? "Violence!" I cry to you, but you don't save. ³ Why do you make me see wrongdoing, why do you permit oppression? Pillage and cruelty confront me, so that strife and discord prevail. ⁴ Therefore Torah is not followed; justice never gets rendered, because the wicked fence in the righteous. This is why justice comes out perverted.

So, the connection between the bad behavior of the Judeans and the bad behavior of the tyrant nation is cleverly and poetically made, and this is one of

the greatest points we are to take from Habakkuk's prophecy. Instead of Israel being a light to the nations and a people who operate so very differently from all other nations, they have become just *like* the nations and so, God is going to treat them that way.

Verse 16 is so close to verse 15 in tone and meaning, and use of similar metaphors and similes, that they must be taken together as a poetic couplet. That is, there is nothing substantially new being introduced in verse 16, it is mainly there to achieve the rather typical Hebrew poetic structure and style. It is also that verse 16 speaks of the reversal that is coming of the very things Babylon is doing to the conquered nations, that is now happening to them. Again, we are to understand this not as simply, and only ever, referring to the nation of Babylon, but also to the other fulfillments of this same prophecy that lay ahead. The pattern of it will remain the same regardless of the nations involved.

Verse 17 immediately begs the answer to: what has Lebanon to do with any of this? It might be that, for some reason, Lebanon is called out as one of the conquered nations that Babylon has been especially brutal towards. Yet, the matter and mention of Lebanon in the Bible nearly always had at its core a reference to its magnificent forests of cedar trees. Beyond their sheer beauty and unusual quantity for that part of the world, they were valued for construction. Their size and strength permitted extracting large, solid beams for structural strength, and especially for allowing wide spans of a room to have a roof without there being multiple support posts scattered about the building. They also were valued because wall paneling made from them exposed their beautiful grain.

I suspect that this rather cryptic statement in Habakkuk had to do with Babylon devastating those cedar forests for their own use. When we turn to Isaiah, we find just such a charge.

CJB Isaiah 14:3-8 ***³ Then, when Yehoveh gives you rest from your suffering and trouble and from the hard service imposed on you, ⁴ you will take up this taunt-song against the king of Bavel: "At last the oppressor is stilled, his arrogance is ended! ⁵ Yehoveh has broken the***

staff of the wicked, the scepter of the rulers, ⁶ which furiously struck down peoples with unceasing blows, angrily beating down nations with relentless persecution. ⁷ The whole earth is at rest and quiet. They break into song. ⁸ The cypresses rejoice over you, with the cedars of the L'vanon- 'Now that you are laid low, no one comes to cut us down.'

While this charge of destroying Lebanon's forests was leveled at the Kings of Babylon that reigned in Isaiah's era, without doubt its prophetic message extended to the current King of Babylon of Habakkuk's era, Nebuchadnezzar.

The destruction of the wild animals of Lebanon reminds one of the current battle of the 21st century to rescue forests from greedy industrialists because they are the natural habitat of thousands of species of animal life. So, when the Kings of Babylon were cutting down the forests, they were also destroying vast quantities of wildlife. This violates God's basic instruction to mankind at Creation to be the earth's caretakers, and to administrate the use and care of its many creatures and plants.

The final part of verse 17 is: ***because of the bloodshed and violence done to the land, the city and all who live there***. When viewed in Hebrew, even when taking its poetic construction into account, this verse is exceedingly difficult to make sense of. What we tend to read in our English Bibles has had great liberties taken and emendations made to arrive at something intelligible. How close it is to what was originally intended is very hard to determine. To make it work one has to think that the land, the city, and all who live there are referring to Lebanon. But that very nearly can't be according to any usage of that phrase anywhere else in the Scriptures. "The land" and "the city" have otherwise been exclusive references to the Holy Land and to Jerusalem. Besides; Lebanon is not the name of city.

I, like most other commentators, look at this and feel instinctively that a word has been accidentally dropped or there is a misspelling of the Hebrew by some later copier, because it makes no sense to speak of the land, the city, and the people as referring to Lebanon. I will conjecture this, however: we regularly see God, through Habakkuk, connect the actions of the people of Judah to the

actions of the people of the nations. That might be what is happening here. It's almost as though we're being told that what is happening to Lebanon, even though perpetrated by a gentile tyrant (or series of tyrants), is nothing more nor less than what has been going on in Judah, with all the violence and bloodshed there. This connects us right back to the opening verses of Habakkuk chapter 1 when the Prophet was so upset over the violence and bloodshed occurring in Jerusalem and God's seeming silence and inaction about it.

Before we move on to the 5th woe, I want to share this observation that Walter Kaiser, Jr. made because it so accurately sums up what's at the core of all that has been said thus far.

There are not two systems of morality and ethics in the world; one for the believing community and another for pagans. God requires justice, righteousness, and holiness of all nations regardless of their relationship with Him.

If only this is something that Believers could finally accept. Especially Christianity denies in full what Kaiser said. It used to be said that indeed there are two systems of morality and ethics: one for the Jews and one for the gentile Christians. Actually, they believed there was a third system: that of the pagan part of the world. But, with the rise of Evangelical Christianity, the two-system concept of morality and ethics have mostly been overridden by the belief that there as many different systems of morality and ethics as there are Holy Spirit filled Believers. That is, the Holy Spirit will inform each person it inhabits of what is moral and ethical for them, as individuals apart from all other individuals. The belief being Jesus ended any universal standard of morals and ethics for His followers, and now it was based only what each Believer thinks in their own heart. Thus, no one should judge another since there is no longer a rules-based standard to obey.

The Bible, neither Old Testament nor New, ever proposes such a thing. Habakkuk puts the lie to any such thought. The entire world has only one God, one law, one standard, one Savior. And, in the near future, it will have only one King. Moving on to verse 18, we get the fifth woe oracle. And, as we have

done, we'll read the entirety of the woe oracle as a unit to get the best sense of it.

CJB Habakkuk 2:18-20 ***¹⁸ What good is an idol, once its maker has shaped it, a cast metal image and a teacher of lies, that its maker puts his trust in it, and goes on making non-gods, unable to talk? ¹⁹ Woe to him who tells a piece of wood, "Wake up!" or a speechless stone, "Rouse yourself!" Can this thing teach? Why, it's covered with gold and silver, without the slightest breath in it! ²⁰ But Yehoveh is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.***

I will qualify this by saying that while it is usually taken by Bible scholars that verses 18, 19, and 20 form the fifth woe, others confine it to only verses 18 and 19, and I fall in line behind them. To me, verse 20 is simply a conclusion for the series of the 5 woe oracles, or perhaps it is like an "amen" or a brief prayer that Habakkuk inserts.

This woe oracle is structured a bit differently than the earlier 4 in that it doesn't directly state a woe but first asks a question. The next verse responds to that question with the pronounced woe. It looks to me like Habakkuk is "speaking to the choir". That is, he is not directing this to the pagan nations but rather asking the faithful of Israel this question. He is not teaching them; he is validating and edifying what they already know and believe, an understanding that has everything to do with what makes them the faithful in the first place. After all, Israel's biggest stumbling block throughout its history was idolatry. Using idols and worshipping other gods alongside worshipping Yehoveh was still all too common. And, for some, it was less of matter of their worshipping other gods but rather having a great tolerance for those that did... even those who were living alongside them in the Holy Land.

I think the great challenge for 21st century Believers is how to deal with society-wide, if not Western World-wide, embrace of a new virtue we'll find nowhere in God's Word: tolerance.

In fact, God punished His people for their tolerance. We all know that tolerance is applied mainly to 2 things: sexual behaviors along with gender

preferences (what I would call morality), and religion. The world demands that Judeo-Christianity bow down to, and adopt, this new virtue or find itself labeled as haters. Sadly, rather than have the courage to stand against such a heresy, the greater part of Judeo-Christianity has succumbed to it and proudly marches in Pride Festivals, and advocates for Islam as a fine religion because although they pray to Allah, Muslims just don't know they are actually praying to Jesus. As a footnote: if you don't know this, I can only suggest that you venture outside your bubble occasionally to see what has been going on now for quite some time.

Thus, whether one choose to cast verse 18 as a question or more of a thought, it mocks those who make idolatry part of their lives. And, regardless of the confusion of the gentile nations and their sincerity of belief in those idols, God still holds them responsible and guilty of idolatry. Goodness; even in the West we like to say: "Ignorance of the law is no excuse". The world doesn't get a pass because they refuse to know God's law (and Christians and Jews, neither do you get a pass).

The reason that Prophets like Habakkuk were not embraced as popular figures among those of their time (only many decades if not centuries later were they finally given their due), it was because of their lack of tolerance and their frankness of the truth that offended their people's social sensibilities. The first words, "what good is an idol" were fighting words for many Jews. They had idols, or they upheld idols for their friends (pagan or Jew). Idols are worthless fantasies, says Habakkuk. Its use provides no profit. But, just like people of today, we look around and see some people who seem to live charmed lives, or more affluent lives, and have all the luck, and those people will give credit to something like Yoga, or The Power of Positive Thinking, or spending every available hour on how to make more money (faster and easier), etc. The Jews looked around and saw a lot of their friends that used idols doing well and began using them themselves. Or even more, they saw the Babylonians using idols and saw how rich and powerful and admired they were, and how oppressed and living in a declining economy they and many of their fellow Judean countrymen were, and had doubts about what God and their Prophets were telling them.

Indeed, what we admire and strive for will often lead to what we become. And sometimes we don't recognize the folly of what we have become (thinking it all a success) until it's too late and now, we have much to overcome. So, God is saying as frankly as He can: idols are just plain stupid! And, once its human maker had created it out of wood or stone, or from cast metal, then all in itself it became a teacher of lies. How many people do you know that have "good luck charms"? Even the owner might say it with a bit of a giggle but make no mistake they absolutely do believe it has power. That, folks, is an idol. A human being made it and now it's very presence is lying to you. It's actually likely that the human maker *does* believe that it has power, and the possessor has put trust in it.

As verse 18 continues, again a Prophet makes it clear that these human contrived idols are non-gods. Not false gods. Not alternative gods. These simply have no life or power or existence in them. They are a delusion that forms only in the human mind. Many other Prophets spoke about idols, and we need to listen closely because there are so many common things in our modern lives that we give credit to and think them the best place to consult for wisdom or trust for blessings. Jeremiah and Habakkuk were very much in tune because of the common era in which they lived, and so they saw the very same things. Before I give you this passage from Jeremiah, please realize that what is being said is neither hypothetical nor exaggerated. This trust in idols was widespread and powerful among God's people.

CJB Jeremiah 2:21-28 ***²¹ But I planted you as a choice vine of seed fully tested and true. How did you degenerate into a wild vine for me? ²² Even if you scrub yourself with soda and plenty of soap, the stain of your guilt is still there before me," says Adonai ELOHIM. ²³ "How can you say, 'I am not defiled, I have not pursued the ba'alim'? Look at your conduct in the valley, understand what you have done. You are a restive young female camel, running here and there, ²⁴ wild, accustomed to the desert, sniffing the wind in her lust- who can control her when she's in heat? Males seeking her need not weary themselves, for at mating season they will find her. ²⁵ "Stop before your shoes wear out, and your throat is dry from thirst! But you say, 'No, it's hopeless! I love these strangers, and I'm going after them.' ²⁶***

Just as a thief is ashamed when caught, so is the house of Isra'el ashamed- they, their kings, their leaders, their cohanim and their prophets, ²⁷ who say to a log, 'You are my father,' and to a stone, 'You gave us birth.' For they have turned their backs to me instead of their faces. But when trouble comes, they will plead, 'Rouse yourself and save us!' ²⁸ Where are your gods that you made for yourselves? Let them rouse themselves, if they can save you when trouble comes. Y'hudah, you have as many gods as you have cities!

Habakkuk chapter 2 conclude at verse 20 with this prayer or at least acknowledgement.

CJB Habakkuk 2:20 ²⁰ But Yehoveh is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.

Although we have a 3rd chapter, essentially this verse concludes the dialogue between God and Habakkuk; chapter 3 is of an entirely different nature.

Habakkuk concludes it very much like Job concluded his conversation with God.

CJB Job 40:4 *"I am too ashamed; I have nothing to say. I lay my hand over my mouth.*

After his complaining rant and somewhat disrespectful questioning of God, Habakkuk realizes that God will intervene as and when He chooses, and we, as humans, have nothing to say about it. And when we do make a comment, we usually wind up ashamed for even thinking it. God lives in Heaven, and He is watching and making note of every sin of everyone in every age. The day of our being judged... every last one of us... will arrive as promised. Even if we don't have the good sense today to sometimes just "lay my hand over my mouth" and be silent before Him, hopefully when we stand before our God in the future we will have learned to do so. If we have trusted in Him and His Son, we will have no reason to defend ourselves. And whatever we have done, good or bad, cannot be undone. So, from whatever point in our journey we are

today, let our good deeds speak for what we truly believe and who we really are, and not do anymore bad deeds that actually reveals the same only in a bad light. We'll begin chapter 3 next time.