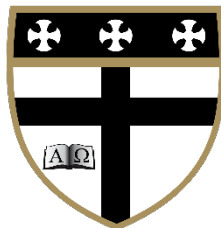


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A HISTORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

“Habakkuk’s Prophecy: A Prologue to the New Testament”¹

by

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¹ Roderick O. Ford, *The Apostolate Papers* (unpublished research papers, 2015 to 2022). www.roderickford.org.

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² Roderick O. Ford, *The Apostolate Papers* (unpublished research papers, 2015 to 2022). www.roderickford.org.

Introduction

The Prophet Habakkuk is an obscure 7th century prophet, because, other than what is found in the Book of Habakkuk, nothing is known about his life.

The Book of Habakkuk is written in the form of a dialogue between Habakkuk and God. Habakkuk comes across as being very frustrated with God's seeming inactivity while the kingdom of Judah descends into moral, social, political and ethical catastrophe.

Habakkuk even questions why God has designed the universe in the manner in which it appears: the wicked and the corrupt always seem to go unpunished. But God assures the Prophet Habakkuk that divine Providence will ultimately result in justice upon earth, and that the "just shall live by faith." Habakkuk 2:4.

The Book of Habakkuk leaves us with two important prophecies. First, there is the prophecy of the rise of the Babylonians. God informs Habakkuk that he shall raise up the Babylonians to discipline and humble the kingdom of Judah. Secondly, there is the prophecy of God's ultimate deliverance of his people through his "anointed one," the Christ. Habakkuk 3:13.

The theological system present in the Book of Habakkuk is universal. God is sovereign. He rules, although mysteriously; and his ultimate judgment is certain. Therefore, just persons *shall live by faith*.

In addition, the theological system present in the Book of Habakkuk is both Jewish and Christian—since it is clear that God loves and saves "his people" and that he does so with his "anointed."

However, the Christians construe the word "anointed" in verse 13 to be Christ Jesus. For instance, both Augustine of Hippo and John Calvin associate Habakkuk's prophecy in chapter 3 with the restored Israel, the Christian Church, and the Messiah (i.e., Christ Jesus).

Chapter One

“The Just Shall Live by Faith”

From the Prophet Habakkuk we have received the most important theological doctrine, “*the just shall live by faith.*”³

This means that the just must trust God; they must trust God’s word and promises to fulfill the terms of his everlasting covenant.

To best understand this theological concept, it will be helpful to understand the nature of the Prophet Habakkuk’s two fundamental questions that he presented to God, to wit:

A.

Habakkuk’s First Complaint (Question):

² How long, LORD, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, “Violence!”
but you do not save?

³ Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.

⁴ Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.⁴

³ Habakkuk 2:4 (“... but the just shall live by faith”); Romans 1:17 (“... as it is written, The just shall live by faith”); and Hebrews 10:38 (“Now the just shall live by faith....”)

⁴ Habakkuk 1:2-4.

There are few persons of genuine faith who have not felt Habakkuk's frustrations.

Justice never prevails; and the oppressors always seem to get away with wrongdoing and crime!

The Prophet Habakkuk now seems to be at the point of disbelief, and he seems to be asking God, "why do you let these things happen? When are you going to render justice?"

No doubt, Habakkuk appears to be at the point of exhaustion from carrying the burdens of himself and perhaps very many others who have been victimized by unrepaired wrongdoing and injustice.

B.

After God promises Habakkuk that he is sending the corrupt and wicked Babylonians to chastise and punish the corrupt and wicked Jews in Jerusalem and throughout the southern kingdom of Judah, the prophet is still left in a state of confusion.

He seems to ask God, "why do you select such corrupt and wicked ministers as your servants to mete out punishment against the Jews?"

Habakkuk's Second Complaint (Question):

¹² LORD, are you not from everlasting?
My God, my Holy One, you will never die.
You, LORD, have appointed them to execute judgment;
you, my Rock, have ordained them to punish.

¹³ Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;
you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.
Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?
Why are you silent while the wicked
swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

¹⁴ You have made people like the fish in the sea,
like the sea creatures that have no ruler.

¹⁵ The wicked foe pulls all of them up with hooks,
he catches them in his net,
he gathers them up in his dragnet;
and so he rejoices and is glad.

¹⁶ Therefore he sacrifices to his net
and burns incense to his dragnet,
for by his net he lives in luxury
and enjoys the choicest food.

¹⁷ Is he to keep on emptying his net,
destroying nations without mercy?⁵

Without question, the Prophet Habakkuk questions why God would select the Babylonians as his method of carrying out his divine will.

Habakkuk criticizes God's created natural order of things, saying the human being are no better off than the fishes of the sea, with the big fish eating the smaller fish, and so on.

The way Habakkuk sees things: the stronger person or faction of persons do whatsoever they will, and there is no justice or order in the natural order and course of human affairs.

According to Habakkuk's observations, human beings, who are no different than the fishes of the sea, are without a ruler.

C.

For it was in response to Habakkuk's frustrations that God responded by saying, inter alia, "*the just shall live by faith.*"⁶

God also bolstered this answer with further explanations regarding how, and why, his divine Providence would lead to ultimate justice in upon the earth.

⁵ Habakkuk 1: 12-17.

⁶ Habakkuk 2:4.

Chapter Two

The Rise of Babylon (Chaldean Dynasty, 626 – 539 BC)

When the Prophet Habakkuk's prophecies, the southern kingdom of Judah is just a couple of decades away from going into captivity to the Babylonians.

As punishment for Judah's sins, God raised up the Babylonians for the purpose of humbling and chastising the Jews.

God tells the Prophet Habakkuk:

Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, the ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own.⁷

Here, God was referring to the neo-Babylonian dynasty called the Chaldean Dynasty, 626 to 539 BC.

CHALDEAN DYNASTY Kings	Reigned from	Reigned until
Nabopolassar	22/23 November 626 BC	July 605 BC
Nebuchadnezzar II	August 605 BC	7 October 562 BC
Amel-Marduk	7 October 562 BC	August 560 BC

⁷ Habakkuk 1:5-6 [NIV].

Neriglissar	August 560 BC	April 556 BC
Labashi-Marduk	April 556 BC	June 556 BC
Nabonidus	25 May 556	539 BC

Under the Chaldean dynasty, the Jews went into captivity to the Babylonians in 597 BC when King Zedekiah was king of Judah.

The three major prophets who lived during the period of Jewish exile were the Prophet Jeremiah (c. 650 – c. 570 BC); the Prophet Ezekiel (c. 622 – c. 570 BC); and the Prophet Daniel (6th century BC).

Chapter Three

Divine Providence Governs Human Affairs

In addition to the rise of the Babylonians, God also assures the Prophet Habakkuk that his divine Providence is in complete control over human affairs.

“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea,” God promises.⁸ “But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.”⁹

God assures Habakkuk that even though the wicked and the oppressors seemingly are arrogant, puffed up, and mighty, they will be brought low and utterly punished.

God assures Habakkuk that even the oppressed will rise up and overthrow their oppressors! “Will not your debtors suddenly arise? Will they not wake up and make you tremble? Because you have plundered many nations, the people who are left will plunder you.”¹⁰

God assures Habakkuk that wicked men and wicked empires ultimately collapse. “Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by crime!”¹¹

And, finally, God assures Habakkuk that justice will ultimately prevail against the wicked. “You will be filled with shame instead of glory.”¹²

For these reasons, the theological doctrine “**the just shall live by faith**,” is at the heart of the Habakkuk’s faith. He concludes his book, stating:

Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen

⁸ Habakkuk 2: 14 [NIV].

⁹ Habakkuk 2:20 [NIV].

¹⁰ Habakkuk 2:7-8 [NIV].

¹¹ Habakkuk 2:12 [NIV].

¹² Habakkuk 2:16 [NIV].

and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.

The Sovereign LORD is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.¹³

This is the Prophet Habakkuk's great statement of faith! No matter how bleak things may appear outwardly, he shall live by faith in God.

¹³ Habakkuk 3:17-19.

Chapter Four

Habakkuk's Prophecy of the Christ (Verses 12-13)

Finally, we turn now to Habakkuk's final resolution to trust and believe in God. He begins the last chapter of his book with the words:

Lord, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds,
O Lord.
Renew them in our day,
In our time make them known;
In wrath remember mercy.¹⁴

According to Augustine of Hippo, these words of Habakkuk's signify "the Lord Christ... What is this but the inexpressible admiration of the foreknown, new, and sudden salvation of men?"¹⁵

I believe that there is one other verse wherein the Prophet Habakkuk speaks of Christ most clearly, to wit, verses 12-13, wherein he writes:

In wrath you **strode through the earth** and in anger you
threshed the nations.
You came out **to deliver your people,**
To save your **anointed one.**¹⁶

Now the word "anointed one" clearly denotes Christ or the Messiah.¹⁷ The method of salvation, that of threshing the nations, appears to have been done historically, as when God delivered the children of Israel during the times of Moses, Joshua,

¹⁴ Habakkuk 3:2 [NIV].

¹⁵ St. Augustine, *The City of God* (New York, N.Y.: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 637.

¹⁶ Habakkuk 3:13 [NIV].

¹⁷ See, e.g., "Habakkuk 3:13," <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/habakkuk-3-13.html>, stating:

Thou wentest forth for the salvation of that people, [even] for salvation with thine anointed
Or, "thy Messiah"; which Kimchi and Ben Melech interpret of Messiah the son of David; and read and give
the sense of the words thus, "as thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, by bringing them
into the land of Canaan, so do thou go forth for salvation with thy Messiah."

and the Judges; and, also, on into the future, which is reflected in the prayer of the Prophet Habakkuk—to wit, through leadership of the “anointed,” or Christ.

For instance, Reformed theologian John Calvin (1509- 1564) has given the following interpretation of verse 13, as follows:

He adds, *with thy Christ*. This clause still more confirms what Habakkuk had in view—that God had been from the beginning the deliverer of his people in the person of the Mediator. When God, therefore, delivered his people from the hand of Pharaoh, when he made a way for them to pass through the Red Sea, when he redeemed them by doing wonders, when he subdued before them the most powerful nations, when he changed the laws of nature in their behalf—all these things he did through the Mediator. For God could never have been propitious either to Abraham himself or to his posterity, had it not been for the intervention of a Mediator. Since then it has ever been the office of the Mediator to preserve in safety the Church of God, the Prophet takes it now for granted, that Christ was now manifested in much clearer light than formerly; for David was his lively image, as well as his successors. God then gave a living representation of his Christ when he erected a kingdom in the person of David; and he promised that this kingdom should endure as long as the sun and moon should shine in the heavens. Since, then, there were in the time of Habakkuk clearer prophecies than in past times respecting the eternity of this kingdom, ought not the people to have taken courage, and to have known of a certainty that God would be their Deliverer, when Christ should come? We now then apprehend the meaning of the Prophet.¹⁸

All of this is to say that the “**just shall live by faith,**” as the redeemer, **Christ**, as Habakkuk understood him in this prophecy, shall fulfill all of God’s promises. Christ, the “**anointed one,**” shall stode through the entire earth, thresh the nations, redeem God’s people, and establish eternal justice.

¹⁸ *Calvin’s Commentaries on the Bible* (Habakkuk 3:13).

Conclusion

The Book of Habakkuk addresses the existential nature of the Christian religion. In this troublesome world, there is so much uncertainty, injustice, oppression, unrepaired wrongs, and the like.

Considering this human condition, it is easy for righteous persons to lose hope in God and in his ultimate plan. This is why the Prophet Habakkuk asked God several existential questions, such as, “Why does God allow so much injustice to go unrepaired and unremedied?”

God assures the Prophet Habakkuk that justice is sure to prevail and that “the just must live by faith.” Upon recognizing this, the Prophet Habakkuk is resolved to keep the faith, even when the outward circumstances yield no sign of hope: “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”¹⁹

What is Prophet Habakkuk’s faith in? It is in this divine Promise:

“In wrath you **strode through the earth** and in anger you **threshed the nations**. You came out to **deliver your people**, to **save your anointed one**.”²⁰

“Thou didst **march through the land** in indignation, thou didst **thresh the heathen** in anger. Thou wentest forth for **the salvation of thy people**, even for salvation **with thine anointed**.”²¹

¹⁹ Habakkuk 3: 17-18.

²⁰ Habakkuk 3:12-13 [NIV].

²¹Habakkuk 3:12-13 [KJV].

This, we in the Reformed theological school, conclude is a prophecy that reflects the theological system of the Christian Church— it is a prophecy of Christ's redemption of God's people and it ultimately reflects his Last Judgment upon the nations.²²

THE END

²² Matthew 25: 31-46; Revelation 19:11-21.

THE END

