

Habakkuk 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Habakkuk chapter 2. I will take my stand at my watch post and station myself on the tower and look out to see what he will say to me and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

And the Lord answered me, write the vision, make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time. It hastens to the end. It will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it. It will surely come. It will not delay. Behold, his soul is puffed up.

It is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith. Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. His greed is as wide as Sheol. Like death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples. Shall not all these take up their taunt against him with scoffing and riddles for him and say, Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own for how long and loads himself with pledges? Will not your debtors suddenly arise and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be spoiled for them because you have plundered many nations. All the remnants of the peoples shall plunder you for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them. Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm. You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples. You have forfeited your life, for the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond. Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity. Behold, is it not from the Lord of hosts that peoples labor merely for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink. You pour out your wrath and make them drunk, in order to gaze at their nakedness. You will have your fill of shame instead of glory.

Drink yourself, and show your uncircumcision. The cup in the Lord's right hand will come around to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory. The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, as will the destruction of the beasts that terrified them, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them. What prophet is an idol when its maker has shaped it?

[2 : 3 2] A metal image, a teacher of lies. For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols. Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake, to a silent stone, Arise! Can this teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it. But the Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him. The book of Habakkuk has two key sections. The first two chapters contain a dialogue between the prophet and the Lord, and the final chapter, a prayer or psalm of the prophet. Habakkuk was distressed by the rise of the Babylonians, and the way in which it seemed as though the Lord was passively permitting the guilty to triumph over the righteous. In chapter 1, he made a complaint to the Lord, articulating his dismay at the Lord's apparent failure to act. Such questions of theodicy continue to be at play in this second chapter, where the Lord speaks to Habakkuk's concerns. In chapter 1, the prophet addressed the Lord directly, but in verse 1 describes his situation, positioning himself as a watchman at his watchpost, waiting for the Lord's response to his complaint. The prophet is described as a watchman in places like Ezekiel chapter 3 verses 17 to 21 and 33 verses 1 to 9. He scours the horizon, looking for approaching dangers, and warns the people concerning them. The prophet depended upon the word that he was given, and had to wait to receive direction from the Lord. Some have suggested a possible dependence of these opening verses upon Isaiah chapter 21 verses 6 to 8. For thus the Lord said to me,

Go set a watchman, let him announce what he sees. When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs, riders on donkeys, riders on camels, let him listen diligently, very diligently. Then he who saw cried out, Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord, continually by day, and at my post I am stationed whole nights.

The case for a direct literary dependence is not especially strong, although there are certainly parallels between the two passages to be observed. When the word of the Lord comes in verse 2, Habakkuk is instructed to document and to disseminate the vision as an official message, making it plainly legible on tablets so that the messenger could run to proclaim it, to read it not to himself, but as a public pronouncement, as Francis Anderson makes clear. We also need to consider what the vision that is to be written is. Is it merely verse 4, verses 4 and 5, the rest of chapter 2, chapter 3, or even chapter 1, verses 5 to 11? From our reading of chapter 1, it seems unlikely that chapter 1, verses 5 to 11 would be the vision in question. The prayer of Habakkuk in chapter 3, while containing visionary elements, seems primarily to be Habakkuk's response to the vision, rather than the vision itself. It seems most likely that the vision concerns the rest of the chapter.

As Thomas Wrens notes, not that much need rest upon precisely what parts are directly included. He observes that verses 4 and 5 seem to constitute the core message, with the rest being exposition and application. If this is the case, then verses 6 to 20 would be involved by implication, even if they weren't the revelation more strictly considered. While verse 3 is tricky to understand, and commentators differ in their renderings and interpretations of it, read in context, it is not that difficult to discern its primary sense. It gives the reason for the immediate proclamation of verse 2. The Lord declares that there is an appointed time for the vision, following this by five terse statements concerning it. As Marvin Sweeney notes, in addition to referring to a festal occasion, an appointed time could refer to the time that an important event would take place, and O. Palmer Robertson observes that by the time of Daniel, the terminology had clearly assumed eschatological connotations. The meaning of the verb in the first of the five statements has been disputed, while traditionally commonly taken as breathe or pant, providing the sense of hastening, commentators increasingly now hold that the verb means to witness, yielding something like he witnesses to the end, and he will not deceive. What, or who, exactly is it that witnesses to the end?

[6 : 52] Again, commentators hold various positions on this question. Many, such as Robertson and Renz, take it to be referring to the vision itself. However, Anderson makes the case that the pronoun should be understood to refer to the Lord. He is the one whose arrival is expected, not merely the appointed time of the vision. The vision or the coming of the Lord might seem at times to delay, but the Lord or the vision won't be late, and the coming of them is sure. As Anderson remarks, the book of Hebrews uses this verse in a messianic manner, developing its meaning in a way that goes beyond, while still being faithful to its original sense. In Hebrews chapter 10 verses 36 to 39 we read, The core of the vision is given to us in verse 4 and likely also in verse 5. Verse 4 presents us with the contrast between two kinds of persons, between the righteous person and the one who is not.

Traditionally, the characterisation of the wicked figure here has been seen to focus upon his soul, understanding the Hebrew term nefesh in a less physical sense. This is a very common sense that the term has in scripture. However, given the use of the same term in the following verse in a more physical sense, in reference to the wicked person's throat, commentators increasingly argued that it should be taken in the same sense here. A person's throat can be a metonym for various things associated with the sight of the throat, for breath, and hence life, or even soul, for swallowing, and hence appetite, and even desire, for utterance, and hence speech. As the context has both false and proud speech in verse 3, for instance, and gluttony in verse 5, or the swallowing of the righteous in chapter 1 verse 13, the throat here could be understood in somewhat different ways. Perhaps it refers to the boastful and perverse speech of the proud, or to the immoderate appetite of the devouring oppressor. Whatever understanding of the throat of the wicked we adopt, it should be coloured by the contrast that verse 4 draws between the righteous, who lives by his faith or faithfulness, and the wicked. Perhaps the contrast is between the restraint and delayed gratification of the righteous, as Rennes suggests, as the righteous patiently wait for the fulfilment of the vision. Alternatively, the contrast might be between the boastful speech of the wicked and the humble trust of the righteous in the word of the Lord. Much about the meaning of this text is debated, including the reference of the pronoun that is connected to the faith or faithfulness.

Is it the reliability of the vision, the faithfulness of God, or the faith of the righteous person?

Anderson, for instance, argues that the point is that the righteous will live by the faithfulness of God. Rennes helpfully notes that less is at stake in these debates than we might initially think, as these different senses are mutually implicatory. He writes, The righteous will live because they faithfully cling to the reliability of the revelation given by a faithful God. Further debates concern whether it is

the righteous by faith or faithfulness who shall live, underlining the means of the standing of the righteous person before God, or whether it is the righteous shall live by faithfulness, emphasising the means by which the righteous endures.

The latter seems to be correct, as the point of the verse is not the means by which someone becomes righteous before God. However, once again, theologically they cash out to much the same thing.

[10:34] Perhaps a more significant question, at least at first glance, is that of whether we should read the text as referring to faith or to faithfulness. Given the prominence of this verse in New Testament treatments of the subject of justification, many Protestants in particular can be nervous about the possibility of compromising justification by faith alone, by the introduction of works, through faithfulness. Rennes rightly challenges the sharp division that some have been tempted to draw between faith and faithfulness here, as they are inseparably related. The faithfulness should not be focused on good works, but upon a determined and continuing trust in the word of the Lord under pressure. It isn't merely the fundamental posture of trust, but the persistence in it that is in view.

Of course, reading this verse on its own terms and in its own context, there is a strong argument to be made that the faithfulness in view should be understood in relationship to the Lord and his revelation, rather than to the human response. What does it mean that the righteous will live by his faithfulness? Is the living primarily referring to the enjoyment of right standing before God, or to the manner of the righteous person's life, or as Anderson suggests, to enduring through trial, surviving and receiving vindication? I find that the most convincing interpretation.

Habakkuk chapter 2 verse 4 is referenced in Romans chapter 1 verses 16 to 17, in Galatians chapter 3 verse 11, and in Hebrews chapter 10 verse 38. Especially in Hebrews chapter 10, which we looked at earlier, the sense of persistence and trust is very much in the foreground. Discussion of New Testament uses of this verse are complicated by their use of the Septuagint and other Greek translations, with very loose and free rendering of the original Hebrew text, which may be theologically illuminating explorations of the meaning of the text without being at all accurate translations of the original text. As Wren's remarks, Paul might have observed in Habakkuk a double antithesis to genuine faith, both the arrogance of the proud and the shrinking back of those who fail to persevere in faith.

Habakkuk chapter 2 verse 4 was not only treated as a key verse by Christians. Anderson, for instance, observes the way that Rabbi Simle in the 3rd century AD saw this verse as expressing the quintessence of true religion. The one law that encapsulated all others, an understanding quite consistent with Paul's uses of this verse in Romans and Galatians. Perhaps it would be helpful to read the New Testament uses of Habakkuk chapter 2 verse 4 as akin to creative developments of a musical theme which explore its potential. Hebrews chapter 10 explores the eschatological and even messianic dimensions of the verse. As in the case of Habakkuk, when the times look dark, the wicked seem to be flourishing and the upright are hard-pressed, the righteous will be distinguished by an unwavering trust in the sure promise of a faithful God by which they will receive final vindication. A more Christological variation on the theme might even be hinted at in Paul, with Jesus being the righteous one whose unwavering faithfulness leads to vindication as both the example for and representative of his people.

Some scholars have questioned the text of verse 5. The reference to wine as a traitor might recall Proverbs chapter 20 verse 1. Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise. However, many commentators have seen the reference to wine here as strange and jarring in the context. Some early renderings of this verse refer to wealth rather than to wine. The context seems to be condemning presumption and greed. As Renz maintains, though, wine here could be seen as a poetic development of this condemnation. Wine betrays those given to it. Their greed and gluttony will be their literal downfall. As intoxicated by their drinking of the wine, they can no longer stand.

[14:30] The image of drinking and becoming drunk upon wine might evoke a number of elements of scriptural imagery, the cup of the Lord's judgment on the nations, the bloodthirstiness of a violent nation, and gluttony and proud excess more generally. Is wine being personified as an arrogant man, similar to Proverbs chapter 20 verse 1, an understanding that the ESV seems to follow?

Is the claim rather that wine betrays the arrogant man, which would certainly be true? More likely, the reference to the arrogant man should not be directly connected to the wine. Rather, the claim is

that wine is treacherous and that the arrogant man will not endure, contrasting the arrogant man with the righteous, who shall live. The wicked are compared to Sheol and death, with a cavernous and insatiable hunger for destruction, a gluttonous appetite that gorges itself on the nations. The contrast, then, seems to be between the greed and arrogance of the Babylonians and the righteous, whose determined trust in the Lord's faithfulness and the certainty of the fulfillment of his word declared in his vision, will lead to their vindication and life. The rest of chapter 2 consists of a series of five oracles of woe. These should be connected with the vision that proceeds, unpacking the judgment that will fall upon the proud and voracious Babylonians, showing how their condemnation will proceed from their character. The five woe sayings will be the words of the nations that the Babylonians have devoured, declaring her downfall. The increase of Babylon had been achieved through violence and injustice, and such gain could not long endure. Babylon's debt would soon have to be paid, and its violence returned upon its own head. The more excessive its appetite for conquest and blood, the more Babylon accumulated creditors, who would rise up against her, demanding repayment for her transgressions. They would plunder Babylon as she had once plundered them. The second saying concerns the treacherous profit of evildoers. They pursue evil in order to make their own dwelling secure, to be like the eagle, whose nest cannot be reached by predators. However, as they had built their house with wickedness and violence, the very stones and beams of their houses would bear witness against them, securing their condemnation. Babylon conceived of itself as a great building project, the construction of a vast empire and power structure. We should naturally recall the story of Babel, which is important in the characterization of Babylon in the book of Daniel, for instance. However, the means of Babylon's building was iniquity and bloodshed. All such endeavors are doomed to futility by the Lord. All of the efforts of a cruel people like the Babylonians will ultimately be utterly in vain. In the end, it is the purpose of the Lord which alone will prevail. Verse 14 recalls Isaiah chapter 11 verse 9.

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. Gain through evil-doing is short-lived, and any edifice founded upon it is unsound. Yet those who commit themselves to the building of the kingdom of the Lord will find that their labor is not in vain. Babylon ministered the cup of wrath to the nations that it attacked, communicating a violent and degrading intoxication by which these nations were stripped of their dignity and made to collapse in their drunkenness. However, the cup of wrath would return to Babylon's own hand, and they would be forced to drink. We encounter the underlying imagery of this fourth woe in more overt form in Jeremiah chapter 25 verses 15 to 17. Thus the Lord, the God of Israel said to me, Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them. So I took the cup from the Lord's hand, and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it. In that passage, after all of the other nations have drunk, the cup is placed in the hand of the king of Babylon, and he is made to drink. Babylon would suffer the same violence that it had inflicted upon others, not merely upon peoples, but also the violence that it had brought upon land and beast.

The final woe gets to the heart. In chapter 1 verse 11, the Babylonians were described as people who treated their own might as their god. This was illustrated in verse 16 of that chapter, in the fisherman who sacrificed to his nets and offered to his dragnets. Babylon is given to and driven by the vanity and emptiness of idolatry, trusting in non-living images of its own creation and its own might. Yet there is no future for idols and their worshippers. They will all be put to shame. The objects of Babylon's worship would be powerless to help them in the day of the Lord's judgment. Their idolatry would ultimately spell their doom. The only sure and firm reality worthy of trust is the Lord himself, the living God, unrivaled in the heavens. Before him all of the earth must submit.

[19 : 31] The prophet may have been troubled by the rise and the seeming triumphs of the wicked Babylonians, but he and his faithful compatriots must hold on to faith in a determined confidence in the steadfastness of the Lord and the certainty of his promise. Vaunting tyrants would be laid low, but the word of the Lord would ultimately endure.

A question to consider. Rereading Romans chapter 1 verses 16 to 17, Galatians chapter 3 verse 11, and Hebrews chapter 10 verses 36 to 39 in the light of Habakkuk and its original context and message, are there any dimensions of the message of these New Testament passages concerning Christ, the gospel, and faithful believers that might come into clearer view?

