

HABAKKUK on his watch tower

Habakkuk was also a contemporary of Jeremiah – he lived before the Babylonian invasion of Judah. His brief book is made up of a long conversation between himself and the Lord God, followed by an amazing prophetic psalm.

He begins by complaining to the Lord that His people were a really bad lot, and He did not seem to be doing anything about it. “I am surrounded by violence, and the law is paralysed. Justice never prevails”, he moans. “I call for help, but you do not listen!” (see 1:2-4).

God’s answer is precise, and unwelcome. “Just keep watching”, He says. “I am sending the Babylonians. They will bring a terrible judgment on my people!” (see 1:5-11).

This takes the prophet by surprise. Perhaps he had not expected anything so drastic. “Hold on, Lord!” he answers. “Surely the Babylonians are more wicked than the people of Judah. Where is the justice in that?” He decides to stand on his watchtower and wait for clarification (2:1).

A third time God speaks. “Write down the answer”, He says, “so that it will be visible through the centuries” (see 2:2-4). What was the answer? It rings down the millennia, and it is one of the most-quoted verses in the Old Testament. “*The righteous*”, God said, “*shall live by his faith!*” That simple statement tells everything. We cannot hope to understand the way God carries out His plans. He operates on a plane high above our heads. But if we trust Him, and wait for His salvation, we shall live, in the day of His Kingdom. We are not saved by heroic deeds or endless sacrifices, but by faith. It is as simple as that. To satisfy Habakkuk’s curiosity, the Lord went on to explain that in due course the proud Babylonians would be punished in their turn. His purpose would roll steadily on through the years, the kingdoms coming and going, until the day

when “*the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him*”, 2:20.

Habakkuk’s psalm (chapter three) was obviously written to be sung, for it has a musical direction like the psalms of David. It mirrors the poetry of Deuteronomy chapter 33 and Psalm 68. It is based on Israel’s wilderness journey from Sinai to the Promised Land, but it rises above that to portray a similar but grander event at the time of the end. God will march with His heavenly hosts from the south to Jerusalem to save His people, and bring destruction on His enemies in earthquake and fire. It is the same apocalyptic language we have already met in Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. This is Habakkuk’s version of Armageddon, the climactic battle that brings to an end the Kingdoms of Men and replaces them with the Kingdom of God.

Touchingly, the psalmist prophet accepts that trouble lies ahead for his people, but now, strengthened by this vision, he will be able to face the future with confidence, knowing that God is in charge.

“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls” he says, “*yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.*” Habakkuk 3:17, 18

It is an attitude we can grow to share, as we read the Bible, chapter by chapter, and come to put our trust in Habakkuk’s God.