

HOW CAN GOD ALLOW INJUSTICE TO GO UNPUNISHED? 1:1

These questions are being asked repeatedly today, and the church's failure to answer them has turned many, especially many of the young, to practical atheism.

As we approach the text, perhaps we should ask ourselves these questions in today's language;

1. How, if there is a Christian God, can He allow economic iniquity and social injustice. Why doesn't He put a stop to such things?
2. How, if there is a Christian God, can He allow war to punish and cripple and deprive "innocent" people?

God gave Habakkuk the answers for which men have long sought. Job discusses the first of these questions as it pertains to the individual. The Psalmist raised it again and again (cf. *Psalm 37, 49, 73*). Jeremiah also addresses it briefly. (*Jeremiah 12:1*)

The apocraphal book of *IV Ezra 3:29-36* concludes there is no answer to the problem posed by these questions. *II Baruch 11:1-7* (also apocraphal) prefers death over God's answer to Israel's dilemma.

How does one explain the seeming inactivity of God in the presence of the cruel historical fact of social injustices and war? Habakkuk received our answer from God. Do we have the faith and the courage to accept God's answer?

Chapter XV—Questions

Preface to Habakkuk

1. Habakkuk is contemporary with what king of Judah?
2. This dates Habakkuk about when?
3. Babylon captured Jerusalem in _____ B.C.
4. Habakkuk demands from God the answer to two questions:
_____ and

5. Restate these questions in your own words.

CHAPTER XVI

HOW CAN GOD ALLOW INJUSTICE TO GO UNPUNISHED?

INTRODUCTION . . . Habakkuk 1:1

RV . . . The burden which Habakkuk a prophet did see.

LXX . . . The burden which the prophet Ambacum saw.

COMMENTS

Habakkuk introduces his written prophecy in words calculated to establish it as authentically from God. Translated "oracle" as often as burden, the introductory noun of verse one is a technical term to describe prophecy. * Cp. *Isaiah 13:1, Jeremiah 23:33-40, Zechariah 9:1, Malachi 1:1*) The prophet saw what he was about to write as a vision. (Cp. *Amos 1:1, Micah 1:1*)

One must either accept the prophecy as God's written word or reject it as the hallucination of a madman. Since history has long since proven its accuracy, the former seems more likely!

THE FIRST QUESTION . . . Habakkuk 1:2-4

RV . . . O Jehovah, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear? I cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save. Why dost thou show me iniquity, and look upon perverseness? for desecration and violence are before me; and there is strife, and contention riseth up. Therefore the law is slacked, and justice doth never go forth; for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore justice goeth forth perverted.

LXX . . . Hoy long, O Lord, shall I cry out, and thou wilt not hearken? how long shall I cry out to thee being injured, and thou wilt not save? Wherefore hast thou shewn me troubles and griefs to look upon, misery and ungodliness? judgment is before me, and the judge receives a reward. Therefore the law is frustrated, and judgement proceeds not effectually, for the ungodly man prevails over the just; therefore perverse judgement will proceed.

COMMENTS

The prophet addresses God, significantly by the name "Jehovah," revealed at the beginning of Israel's national existence. During the days of the patriarchs it was unknown. (cf. *Exodus 6:3*) At that time He was called El Shaddai. (cf. *Genesis 17:1*) Habakkuk's use of Yaweh, or Jehovah, here seems calculated to imply that God is neglecting a nation to whom He owes special concern.

HOW LONG SHALL I CRY . . . v. 2

We usually phrase the question differently, "How can God allow . . . etc." Habakkuk says "How long." How long will God allow . . . etc. The thought is the same. If God is God, and we are His people . . . how, or how long can He allow us to suffer at the hands of unrighteous men or an unrighteous governmental system such as ruled Judah in the days of the prophet?

For a detailed discussion of the specific conditions that caused the prophet to so cry to God, read Amos or Micah. These wrote earlier, but the situation in Judah has not changed since they wrote, *excepting* perhaps to get progressively worse. Those who sought evil gain for themselves at the expense of their neighbors did not desist at Micah's warning of destruction.

Those who built the luxury of their metropolitan affluence upon the blood of the downtrodden had not repented at the preaching of the earlier prophets.

The drunkenness and excesses of the wealthy and powerful had not diminished since the Shepherd of Tekoah expressed his shock and predicted God's punishment.

Habakkuk's question is simply "why doesn't God do something about the situation?" He has more courage than we moderns. He addresses his questions directly to God Himself. He accuses God of not hearing when he prays. His prayers have lifted the specific sins of violence before God. In return he sees more and more of that about which he has prayed.

JEHOVAH'S ANSWER . . . Habakkuk 1:5-11

RV . . . Behold ye among the nations, and look, and wonder marvelously; for I am working a work in your days, which ye will not believe though it be told you. For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, that march through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwellingplaces that are not theirs. They are terrible and dreadful; their judgement and their dignity proceed from themselves. Their horses also are swifter than leopards, and are more fierce than the evening wolves; and their horsemen press proudly on: yea, their horsemen come from far; they fly as an eagle that hasteth to devour. They come all of them for violence; the set of their faces is forwards; and they gather captives as the sand. Yea, he scoffeth at kings, and princes are a derision unto him; he derideth every stronghold; for he heapeth up dust, and taketh it. Then shall he sweep by as a wind, and shall pass over, and be guilty, even he whose might is his god.

LXX . . . Behold, ye despisers, and look, and wonder marvellously, and vanish: for I work a work in your days, which ye will in no wise believe, though a man declare it to you. Wherefore, behold, I stir up the Chaldeans, the bitter and hasty nation, that walks upon the breadth of the earth, to inherit tabernacles not his own. He is terrible and famous; his judgement shall proceed of himself, and his dignity shall come out of himself. And his horses shall bound more swiftly than leopards, and they are fiercer than the wolves of Arabia: and his horsemen shall ride forth, and shall rush from far; and they shall fly as an eagle hasting to eat. Destruction shall come upon ungodly men, resisting with their adverse front, and he shall gather the captivity as the sand. And he shall be at his ease with kings, and princes are his toys, and he shall mock at every strong-hold, and shall cast a mound, and take possession of it. Then shall he change his spirit, and he shall pass through, and make an atonement, saying, This strength belongs to my god.

COMMENTS

. . . IO, I RAISE UP THE CHALDEANS . . . v. 5

Jehovah's answer is not what the prophet expected. The answer to such prayers seldom is! Rather than magically producing Utopia for the nation by miraculously wiping out all the sin and injustice, God challenges Habakkuk to take a good look at the world situation . . . to consider the nations that lay beyond the border of Judah. The answer to the prophet's question lies beyond his narrow horizons. Just as the question is larger than one man or a single nation, so is the answer.

It is easy to overlook a very basic principle which is apparent again and again in Scripture. The principle is simply that God is the God of the whole world. He is not an absentee creator who has gone away and left us after having set certain forces and laws in operation. Nor is He the local God of Judah alone. Centuries after Habakkuk, Paul will tell the wisest men of his day, ". . . He made of one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons (times) and the bond (boundaries) of their habitation . . ." (*Acts 17:26*)

This Jehovah of Judah is the God of all nations. He is Lord, not just of a single nation, but of all human history. Therefore, the answer to questions that plague all men are to be found in the larger arena of international and world activity, rather than in the confines of local

self-concerns. If we believed this, we would have missionaries in every corner of the globe.

So wide in scope and so universal in application is God's answer to injustice and social exploitation, that He tells the prophet, "*I am working a work in your days, which you will not believe though it be told you For lo, I raise up the Chaldeans . . .*"

The Chaldeans were a Semitic tribe from the south of Babylonia. Galling under the yoke of Assyria, they revolted in 625 B.C. against seemingly insuperable odds, and freed themselves from Assyrian domination. In alliance with the Medes and Scythians, they demolished the Assyrian capital of Nineveh in 612 B.C. (See Nahum) As rulers of the Neo-Babylonian empire, the Chaldeans soon broke off the alliance with the Medes.

In 609 B.C. the Babylonian army defeated Pharaoh Necho at Megiddo and broke the back of the Assyrian-Egyptian alliance. King Josiah died in this battle in a vain attempt to aid the delinquent Assyrian empire. (Cf. *II Kings* 23:29-30) Three years later the final defeat of Assyria came at Carchemish when Nebuchadnezzar led the Babylonians in a decisive encounter with Assyria and Egypt. (Cf. *Jeremiah* 46:2)

Having cast her lot with the Assyrian-Egyptian alliance, Judah soon fell prey to Babylonian domination. In 597 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar dismembered Judah. He destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586 B.C.

It is this that Jehovah foretells in answer to Habakkuk's first question. Significantly, the Chaldean dominated Neo-Babylonian empire virtually began with the subjugation of Judah and ended when Cyrus, the Persian, in 539 B.C. overthrew the capital and decreed freedom for the Jews. God had prepared the Chaldeans (whose empire Babylon was) to redress His grievances with His people. This done, God raised up Cyrus to wipe out Babylon. We shall see later how this came about in answer to Habakkuk's second question.

THEY ARE TERRIBLE AND DREADFUL . . . v. 7

Here begins Jehovah's description to Habakkuk of the empire He is raising up to punish Judah. We need to read these verses not so much for the details, although they are vividly accurate, but for the overall impression the description made upon Habakkuk. Keeping the prophet's question in mind, we must agree with Jehovah's statement that He is working a work Habakkuk will not believe. (v. 5) Modern man also refuses to believe a just God of love will do such things!

The Chaldeans are described as irresistible in power and military methods. Wherever they went there was havoc. They were famous for

swift cavalry. Their bent for conquest would become the scourge of the earth. Kings and castles, to whom others looked for defense, were to them a laughing stock. They captured cities as easily as throwing up a mound of earth and advancing over it. Ominously, one of their chief characteristics was the taking of numberless slaves.

The Neo-Babylonians were essentially a commercial people, and one of their chief commodities was human chattel. Prices ranged from \$20 to \$65 for a woman and from \$5 to \$100 for a man, and the traffic was strictly controlled by law.

Babylonian slavery is of particular interest to us, for it was into this that Nebuchadnezzar led Judah. Female slaves belonged to their masters completely and most of them bore many children for their masters.

All of a slave's belongings were his master's. He could himself be sold at any moment or pledged for a debt. He could be put to death if it seemed good business to his owner. A reward for his capture was set by law, should he try to escape. He was subject to military conscription and for forced labor on roads. Most of the exquisite cities, especially Babylon herself, were erected by slave labor.

A slave might marry a free woman, and their children's freedom was guaranteed by law. He might be set up in business by his master, as indeed many of the Jews did, and liberated as a reward for faithful service.

The religion of Babylon has already been described in the introductory chapter on Baal worship. This despicable idolatry which earned for Babylon the name "Mother of Harlots," finds its roots in the earliest history of the "land of Nimrod." It flourished in the age of Babylon's great lawyer, Hammurabi (2123-2081 B.C.) and spread like a cancer round the fertile crescent, to Asia Minor, Greece and finally Rome. It seeped into northern Europe, and after the fall of Rome, when the Roman Catholic religio-political monolith ruled over the European dark ages . . . the saints and idols and even the lord to whom Europe prayed was not the covenant God of the Bible or His Son, but the reincarnation of Babylonian deities. As Will Durant so clearly states in his *Story of Civilization*, "Ishtar (the mother of Babylon's gods) interests us not only as analogue of the Egyptian Isis and prototype of the Grecian Aphrodite and the Roman Venus, but as formal beneficiary of one of the strongest Babylonian customs . . . and though her worshippers repeatedly addressed her as "The Virgin," "The Holy Virgin" and "The Virgin Mother," this merely meant that her amours were free from all taint of wedlock. *Note with what fervor the Babylonians could lift up to her throne*