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Sovereignty of God in Habakkuk

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Abstract

Man is confronted with numerous and diverse problems, many of which he can neither explain nor understand. But then, there is the sovereign God who has the knowledge, absolute power and control over every issue in the world. Habakkuk was a prophet in Judah who could not understand why so many things were happening in his society. He even struggled to understand the nature and character of God. Therefore, this paper examines the sovereignty of God in

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Habakkuk with a view to have a glimpse of all that the prophet went through and how God helped him. It is discovered that prophet Habakkuk did not hide his feeling and he learnt to wait upon God who demonstrated His sovereignty over his affairs. Indeed, God is in charge of every situation and all that man has to do is to wait upon Him. The historical method is adopted in this paper.

Introduction

The book of Habakkuk which is the eighth of the so-called Minor Prophets is one of the short prophetic books of the Old Testament. The book has three chapters and it deals with the age-long problems of evil and human suffering. Specifically, the book addresses the problem of lawlessness and violence in the nation of Judah. Unfortunately, the same problem is equally found in our contemporary society as the problem of evil in its various manifestations remains a major concern of humankind. The book of Habakkuk is very unique. Unlike other prophets who declared God's message to people, this prophet dialogued with God about the people.¹

A. Personality of Prophet Habakkuk

The name Habakkuk appears nowhere else in the Bible beside the book that bears his name (Habakkuk 1:1; 3:1). The name is probably connected with the Hebrew verb *habaq* which means to clasp or embrace.² Habakkuk belongs to the "Judean prophetic tradition" that served at the central temple in Jerusalem³. The prophet had a connection with the temple (Hab 2:20:31). It is most likely that he was among the prophets who witnessed the temple reformation of Josiah (2 Kgs 23:1-3).

Habakkuk is described as a visionary prophet. While it is correct that prophets in the northern kingdom saw visions, the visionary method of divine-human communication was particularly common in the southern kingdom.⁴ Incidentally, Habakkuk received his vision when prophecy was on the decrease and apocalyptic was on the increase.

Furthermore, Habakkuk can be seen as a prophet who had wisdom literature at his disposal and he used it intelligently. This is the argument of Donald E. Gowan who points out that Habakkuk has

much more affinity with wisdom literature than the other Prophetic books⁵. Finally, Habakkuk can be described as a philosopher, who presented his case before God in the form of lament Psalms, such as Psalm 73. He was a prophet of social justice who wrestled with God in questioning and courageous prayer; and at the same time having an unshakable faith and hope in God.⁶

B. Historical Background to Habakkuk's Prophecy

The historical setting of prophet Habakkuk can be located in the kingdom of Judah, from the fall of the Assyrian Empire to the Babylonian captivity. The reign of Sargon (721-705 BC) concluded the Assyrian's conquest and expansion. The empire continued her supremacy till the last quarter of the seventh century⁷. But unfortunately, the last forty years of the Assyrian history were marked by constant warfare. Ashurbanipal (668-627 BC) was the last great king of Assyria.

He captured Memphis and Thebes in 661 BC. His interest in education led him to establish a library from which many important documents have since been found⁸. The late seventh century BC witnessed the fall of the mighty Assyrian empire. The largeness of the empire made it impossible for a proper supervision and control. The vassal states fought for their independence one after the other.

The empire that became very prominent was the Neo-Babylonian. The Chaldeans dominated Babylon more than two centuries under Merodach-Baladan (721-711)⁹. They had tried many times to free themselves from the Assyrians but each attempt failed. Fortunately, at the death of Ashurbanipal, their prince and able leader Nabopolassar (626-605 BC) was the viceroy in the southern Babylon. He then took the advantage and established the Babylonian empire. In 9/10 October 626 BC, he defeated the Assyrians who tried their last time to capture Babylon. He officially ascended the throne on twenty-sixth of Marcheswan (22/23 November 626 BC).¹⁰ Having ascended the throne, he ordered that all the commercial documents from Babylon, Ereh, and Ur to be dated by his reign. By 616 BC he was in full control of Babylon and other places in Mesopotamia.

Judah too was not left out in seeking for freedom. The long reign of Manasseh and his son finally came to an end. Josiah (640-609 BC)

was enthroned by the people of the land who were always “involved whenever the natural succession of the Davidic line was brought to jeopardy.”¹¹ Josiah was eight years old when he became king. He began to seek the God of his father David at the age of sixteen (2 Kgs 22; Chron 34). One suspects that Josiah took advantage of Ashurbanipal’s death to enlarge his kingdom without any opposition. His temple reformation which was “a purge of all non-Yahwistic cults and practice” was prophesied before he was born (1 Kgs 13:2)¹². He committed himself and his people to the renewal of the covenant with Yahweh (2 Kgs 23). Josiah’s reform was the last though a significant one in the history of Judah. Unfortunately, the bright and brilliant reign of Josiah came to an end abruptly. Josiah’s death was so deeply felt that a day of remembrance was set aside for generations (2Chron 35:25). It was a different period for the people of Judah. The kingdom witnessed the reign of three kings between summer and fall of 609 BC. Jehoahaz became the king of Judah after Josiah (2 Kgs 23:31-35; 2 Chron 36:2-4). Prophet Habakkuk prophesied during this crucial period of 609-8 BC, when power was shifting from the Assyrians to the Babylonians. It was a turbulent period in Judah.

C. Prophet Habakkuk and His Contemporaries

For a better understanding and appreciation of the message of Habakkuk, attempt is made here to examine briefly the life and message of each of his contemporaries in the seventh century. First on the list is prophet Zephaniah whose generation is traced back to the fourth generation (Zeph 1:1). The lengthy genealogy of Zephaniah may be as a result of a long period of time, about three quarters of a century that separated him from Isaiah. Therefore, the genealogy is intended to link him with the last canonical prophet of the eighth century BC. Zephaniah was one of the central prophets in Jerusalem who played a part in Israel’s political and religious establishment.¹³

The historical background to the book is understood against the religious and social situation in Judah under the long reign of Manasseh (687-642 BC).¹⁴ The reign of Manasseh witnessed a height in power and glory of the Assyrians but marked a period of silence of the canonical prophets.¹⁵ The reign of Manasseh was directly opposite to that of Hezekiah his father. His fifty five years of reign were

marked by evil practices in the sight of Yahweh as highlighted in 2 Kings 21:1-7.

The prophecy of Zephaniah was against the whole world (1:2-3) with specific references to Judah (1:4-13), Philistia (2:4-7), Moab (2:8-11), and Assyria (2:13-15). The main focus of the prophet was the day of Yahweh which is the day when Yahweh will reveal himself in judging evils and fulfil his great purposes of redemption among men. In other words, there is the message of hope for the remnants of Judah (2:7), Israel (3:13) and Jerusalem (3:9-20).

There are some similarities between Habakkuk and Zephaniah. Both of them used a cultic expressions (Zeph 1:7 and Hab 2:20). Also, the concept of “the appointed time” in Zeph 2:2 has the same connotation with that of Hab 2:2. Furthermore, the concept of seeking and trusting God in humility and righteousness in Zeph 2:3, 3:2, 12 is the same in the prophecy of Habakkuk which is centred on the righteous one who will live by faith in God.¹⁶

Another contemporary of Habakkuk was Nahum of whom very little was known. But then, Nahum’s message was simple and unique. It was the inevitable judgement of God upon Nineveh while Judah would be exonerated. In other words, the judgement of the sovereign God on the Assyrians was a triumph of faith for the people of Judah who had been suffering under their oppression.¹⁷

The book Nahum has some ideas that add to our understanding of the history and message of Habakkuk. For instance, the title of Nahum, ‘oracle’ and ‘vision’ (Nah 1:1) is similar to Hab 1:1. Also, the concept of patience, faith and hope expressed in Nah 1:7 makes a good connection to Habakkuk’s message. Most importantly, Nahum affirmed the sovereignty of God as he declared that God has knowledge of those that trust in him.

The book Jeremiah, the third contemporary of Habakkuk contains very comprehensive information on the key events of the last quarter of the seventh century and early sixth century BC. Jeremiah was born into a priestly family of Hilkiah in Anathoth. He was a true prophet like Moses, a spokesman of the word of God to the people of Judah. He witnessed the reformation and death of Josiah, the reigns of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. Outside Judah, he

saw the fall of the mighty Assyrian empire, the domination of Egyptians, and the Neo-Babylonian.

Unlike Zephaniah and Nahum whose ministries were some years before that of Habakkuk, Jeremiah delivered some of his prophecies at the same time as Habakkuk. One of such prophecies is Jer 7:1-15 which is like a commentary in the first lament of Habakkuk in Hab 1:2-4¹⁸. Perhaps, the evil practices which Jeremiah accused the people of Judah in Jer 7:1-15 led to the destruction and violence that Habakkuk saw¹⁹. In other words, Jeremiah and Habakkuk addressed the same situation in 609/8 BC. For Jeremiah, the requisite for living was trusting and obedience to the law of Yahweh (Jer 5:5-7; 26:4-6). Habakkuk in a different phrase said that the righteous one who does not break the law of God will live.²⁰

D. Structure and Message of Habakkuk 1-3

Hab 1-3 is comprised of laments, divine oracles, woes and a hymn. In other words, Hab 1-2 is made up of dialogue between the prophet and Yahweh which reached its climax in 2.4. Chapter 3 is a distinct hymn that examines the distress of the prophet as well as a theophany of deliverance from Yahweh. The uniqueness of the book of Habakkuk is centred on his lament and dialogue with Yahweh and Yahweh's response to him. The struggle of faith in Habakkuk starts its expression from the beginning of the book in form of lament (Hab 1:2-4).

The prophet looked helpless as there was violence and injustice in the land, the paralysis of the law, and the wicked that seemed to overpower the righteous ones. Unfortunately, the prophet did not specifically identify the wicked ones. It could only be deduced that the wicked ones were not the Assyrians but the people of Judah themselves. They were the people who were violating the laws of God during the early reign of Jehoiakim in 609-8 BC as even testified to in Jer 7:1-15 and 26.

The response of God (Hab 1:5-11) to the lawlessness, violence and destruction which Habakkuk saw is a demonstration of His sovereignty. The answer given by God showed that the situation would continue and indeed would reach its climax with the coming of the Babylonians. God in His sovereignty had the knowledge of the

whole situation and what to do. Probably, the concept of God raising other nations to punish the Israelites was not a new idea to Habakkuk. The concept seemed to have its origin in Deut 28:49 in the third address of Moses where he told the people of the dreadful result of disobedience to the Torah (Deut 28:15-68).

The second lament of Habakkuk is recorded in 1:12-1. It is difficult to state specifically the time span between the first and second laments. However, the prophet could not understand how the everlasting, holy and righteous God should allow the so called pagan nation to punish Judah.

Hab 2:1 does not only introduce the chapter but it also tells us the resolution which the prophet made. The word *mishmar* (watchtower) upon which Habakkuk was to take his stand had its root from *shamar* with the basic idea of exercising of a great care.²¹ The concept of watchtower among the canonical prophets had its origin from Hos 9:8. It was later used by Isaiah in his prophecy against Babylon (Isa 21:8). Ezekiel was made a watchman over the house of Israel (Ezek 3:17-21; 33:1-9). Thus Habakkuk's resolution to be a watchman was in agreement with his faith and confidence in Yahweh. He wanted to be on the alert to the situation around him, to hear the word of God and then to speak it accurately to the people.

Hab 2:2-5 is the heart of the book with 2:4 as the climax of the prophecy. The prophet was instructed to write the vision and make it plain upon the tablet. The vision awaits its time and even if it seems slow, it will surely come to pass. Hab 2:4 is an excellent example of antithetical parallelism as it speaks of the proud one whose soul is not right in him but the righteous shall live by his faithfulness.²² In other words; the proud is strictly antithetical to the righteous. On the one hand, the soul of the proud is not right in him. While on the other hand, the righteous shall live by his faithfulness. Hab 2:4 was a message of consolation, hope and assurance to the prophet and his people.

In a way, Hab 2:6-19 is an extension of the vision given to the prophet. While Hab 2:2-5 is an encouragement and promise to the righteous, Hab 2:6-19 unfolds the series of punishment to the arrogant nation. The Hebrew syntax *hoi* (woe) is originally used in the context of a lament for the dead (1 Kgs 13:30; Amos 5:16, Jer 22:18; 34:5). It

is possible that the woes in Habakkuk have this traditional meaning, yet they are specifically called mocking song and allusive saying in Hab 2:6. This indicates that the woes expressed bitterness against the foreign nations.

Habakkuk 3 is one of the greatest testimonies of faith in the Old Testament. The chapter is titled “a prayer of the prophet on shigionoth”(1:1). The exact meaning of ‘shigionoth’ is not clear but people have connected it with Psalm 7. Also, the use of the musical term ‘Selah’ in verses 3, 9 and 13 indicates that the song was meant for public worship in the temple. Prophet Habakkuk did not ask any question in this chapter. Perhaps he has been satisfied by the divine promise of hope and justice in Hab 2:2-20; hence he simply offers a prayer of praise in recognition of the sovereignty of God. The prophet in this chapter recalled past manifestations of the power of God and he prayed for the speedy deliverance of the people. The chapter is divided into three parts: namely Habakkuk’s prayer for mercy (3:1-2); God’s presence of majesty (3:3-15); and Habakkuk’s hymn of faith (3:16-19).

E. Contemporary Nigerian Situation

The prophecy of Habakkuk is very much relevant to the contemporary society that is confronted with numerous problems such as terrorism, war, famine, poverty, injustice and oppression just to mention but few. In fact, the dimension of moral evils in our society is much more terrifying than what was witnessed by prophet Habakkuk in Judah. Speaking of Nigerian situation in particular, our national dailies are filled with various news of wickedness, greediness, lawlessness, violence, and so on. Some of the captions read thus: “renowned preacher, Rev. P. F. Owa shot by robbers”²³, “Gunmen kidnapped seven persons in Onitsha, Anambra State, amidst the worsening security situation in the commercial city”²⁴, “Armed men attack one Oyo ANPP lawmaker, injured his aged mother and went away with over two million naira”²⁵, “The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) alleged that Ibori stole N9.1 billion belonging to the State. He was arraigned on a 103-count charge.”²⁶

The recent cases killings of innocent ones especially children and women have brought a new dimension to the level of lawlessness and

violence in Nigeria. The invaders went to Dogo Hahawa village with genocide in their minds, held the victims hostage between 3am and 6am; set fire to their houses and waited with guns, daggers and knives for their victims to rush out. As residents scampered to safety, they ran into the hands of their invaders who hacked them down.²⁷ Obviously, the level of killings in the country show the low value placed on human life.²⁸ Worried over the killings of innocent people in Jos South Local Government Area of Plateau State, the Inspector General of Police, Mr Ogbonna Onovo has threatened that henceforth, Divisional Police Officers in the State would be held responsible for any outbreak of crisis in their respective domain.²⁹

Again, kidnapping has become the order of the day in Nigeria. It has been reported that the only son of the suspended local government chairman of Oriohmwon local government are, Hon Patrick Aisien was abducted by gunmen suspected to be kidnappers. The son, Mr. Uyi Aisien was said to have been abducted between 6am – 7am at the gate of the University of Benin where he is a final year student of Industrial Mathematics. The kidnappers had contacted the father demanding for N50 million.³⁰ Similarly, there was a pandemonium on 6th of April at the University of Benin Teaching Hospital following the abduction of the Chief Medical Director, Prof. Michael Ibadin, by unknown gunmen.³¹

Asking Rev. Dr. Moses Iloh, a renowned social activist, sportsman and clergyman who turned 80 years recently to compare Nigeria in those days with today, he says:

I am sure God in Heaven is looking at us with amazement. This is a country that used to be a country where no man is oppressed, where you do not care where he came from, where you do not ask what religion he belong. But today what do we have? We are in a bad situation where there is tribalism and everybody is ruling us minus two. The leaders are all thieves. Nigerian politicians will kill and destroy their people...³²

The Prelate of the Methodist Church of Nigeria, His Eminence, Dr. S. Ola Makinde in his Easter message to Nigerians admits:

We live in a country where justice is denied the poor and judgement given in favour of the highest bidder just as a group of Islamic Fundamentalists are prepared to unleash terror on some parts of the country like Lagos amongst other major cities especially in the Southwest. The perpetrators of the crisis in the North, he said, are walking as free men and women and are being protected by

their sponsors while those affected are licking their wounds and counting their losses.³³

He then prayed that the resurrected power of our Lord Jesus will enforce justice for the oppressed.³⁴

Therefore, and in the light of the various acts of wickedness above, the righteous ones are forced to ask several questions which include why should God allow evil on the innocent and godly ones? Why is there much oppression? Why do evil men prosper? Why do the righteous suffer? Why doesn't God do something? Why doesn't God clean up this mess? etc. our understanding of the sovereignty of God is a source of the encouragement to all that is going through one form of suffering or another. The Almighty God is on the throne, watching all that is happening. At the appropriate time He will act to punish the wicked and vindicate the righteous. Also, the concept of the sovereignty of God is conveyed in Isaiah 55:8-9:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Conclusion

In spite of the crucial issues raised in chapter one of Habakkuk, it is clear that the sovereignty of God in the book is unquestionable. God in His sovereignty allowed the nation of Judah to experience violence, lawlessness, injustice, and so on. He even allowed the pagan nation of Babylon to punish the people of Judah. But then, the suffering of the people of God was temporary and only for a short period. The Almighty God sits in His holy temple watching the earth (Hab 2:20). In His sovereignty, He makes provision for a glorious future to those who submit to Him (Hab 2:4) and at the same time the wicked ones are judged (Hab 2:6-20). Writing on the sovereignty of God in Habakkuk, David Malick declares:

Yahweh as a sovereign Lord will judge Judah and the evil of the people by bringing the Babylonians against them; Yahweh in His sovereignty will sustain those who trust in His; Yahweh will deliver Israel from the Babylonians some day; and Yahweh will one day judge the wicked Babylonians.³⁵

Finally, every man has a role to play in the sovereignty of God. Even though man is helpless in every critical situation, yet, his major role is

to wait upon God for instruction. This is exactly what Prophet Habakkuk did (Hab 2:1). In fact, the understanding of his problem and the solution came when he waited upon God. Therefore, the prophet who started his prophecy with complaint was able to note that God was in His Holy Temple and all must be silent before Him (2:20). Most importantly, he was able to conclude the prophecy with a powerful song of trust in Yahweh.

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