

HABAKKUK.¹

OUR subject is the prophecy of Habakkuk. Very little is known about the writer of this prophecy. The title of the book is short, and does not tell us who his father was, or where he was born; it does not tell us even when he lived and worked. It runs: "The burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see." The name is unusual; nobody else in the Bible bears it. It is supposed to be derived from a Hebrew verb, which means "to embrace"; and ingenious scholars have tried to find some significance in the man's name. Indeed, there are commentators and critics who think that it is not a proper name at all, but an appellation devised by later editors to indicate the book and the form of it, and therefore that it specifies the character of the book. If the right word is the verb meaning "to embrace," then the name may mean "a man embraced by God," a man specially favoured, made His confidential friend by God. That would be the likeliest interpretation. Another suggestion is "the man who embraces God"; *i.e.* wrestles with Him, struggles to find out God's meaning in the actual course of events. A third suggestion concerning the interpretation of the name is that this prophet's special function among his own people was to comfort them, and undoubtedly that is much the best way of indicating the special character of this prophet, *viz.* "the comforter"; for it is a prophecy of the most extraordinary and pathetic comfort. In a book of Luther we read: "What Habakkuk does in his prayer is to caress his people and take them in his arms; *i.e.* he comforts and cheers them as one caresses a poor, weeping child or fellow creature that it may be hushed and contented, because it shall soon, if God will, be better." Really, that homely

¹ A lecture.

passage puts you in possession of the key-note of Habakkuk's message to his time.

There are a great many ridiculous legends about the man in the old Jewish rabbis and the early Christian Fathers. They know, for instance, that he carried, in a supernatural way, food to Daniel in the lions' den; and they tell us where his birthplace was, and other things of the kind. One idea is that he was a Levite, and had to do with the musical service in the temple, because his book ends with a hymn that is set to music, as he speaks of "my stringed instruments." And because reference is made to "*my* stringed instruments," people emphasize the word "my," and think that Habakkuk himself played some musical instrument, a strange instrument, in the temple choir. I do not see that at all. I am very dubious whether "my" should be there: it is probably the plural, instead of the singular. We even have to guess the date of Habakkuk's book, the period when he lived and exercised his prophetic office.

Jerusalem is the metropolis that interested him. He is a prophet of the Southern kingdom, the kingdom of Judæa. The dates suggested from the prophecy vary between 650 B.C. and fifteen years into the next century. But we may shut out all the extremer dates. Practically the question lies between the years 630 and 600 B.C. The outstanding thing in the prophecy that guides us to the era when it was produced is the fact that Assyria has disappeared. In the earliest prophets of the eighth century and the opening years of the seventh century, the great, stupendous empire of Nineveh is the world-power that confronts Israel and Israel's prophets. Now it is no longer Nineveh; it is the mighty empire of Babylon.

Moreover, I think the characteristic thought and emotion of the prophecy are best explained, if we suppose Habakkuk to have lived just at the time when the tremendous and

imposing transfer of the world's sovereignty took place, the empire of the nations passing from the great city on the Tigris to the still more mighty metropolis on the river Euphrates. An event of that kind would stir the minds of men everywhere, but supremely it would raise up conflicting emotions in the breast of a devout Hebrew prophet. I am not, however, going to discuss the question of date, because there are far more important subjects to consider.

The two likeliest points where the prophecy may have been produced are these: During Josiah's struggle to establish a religious reform; then it would be between the years 630 B.C. and 626. Or, again, just at the time when Nineveh was destroyed and Babylon began to show the tremendous powers it held for the conquest of the world. That would make the prophecy somewhere between 608 and 600 B.C.; more likely near the latter date. One thing may be taken as tending to show that Habakkuk prophesied before Babylon had displayed its immense resources and military might, and that is in the opening passage in the first chapter, where the Chaldeans are spoken of as if they were a new phenomenon in the world's history.

My own strong conviction is that Habakkuk wrote his book about the year 600; *i.e.* between 605 and 600 B.C.

Now, first of all, let me put you in possession of the historical situation. When studying Hosea and Joel, we were in the eighth century, and in the Northern kingdom of Ephraim. Now we come down to the seventh century, and stand in the kingdom of Judah. The Northern kingdom has been swept out of existence by the empire whose seat was at Nineveh. The Southern kingdom had a comparatively prosperous period during the reign of Hezekiah, and a pure religion throve under that good and benevolent monarch. His reign came to an end just at the beginning of the century. He was succeeded by Manasseh. During Manasseh's reign Judæa suffered a great many disasters,

and was constantly buffeted by the Assyrian empire. Moreover, Manasseh was a bad king. His sympathies lay with paganism. The religion of Jehovah was corrupted during that king's rule. Amon followed, and he was succeeded by a good king, Josiah, who reigned about 639 on to 608. Josiah began as a young monarch. He was confronted by the ruling classes of his father's time. These were all on the side of idolatry—a corrupt, depraved, and sensualized worship of Jehovah. Moreover, under the bad, loose, tyrannical reign of Manasseh, all sorts of abuses had been introduced; law had been perverted, justice tainted; oppression reigned everywhere; poverty increased, violence and anarchy spread. The young king gradually got the reins into his own hand. He was backed up by one grand prophet, Jeremiah, and there were other noble statesmen, priests, and prophets supporting him. Gradually he formed a party for justice, for righteousness, for religious reform. At length, after he had reigned some eighteen years, he was able to give effect to his own resolves. He crushed the opposite, heathenish party; he suppressed idolatrous worship; *i.e.* he decreed its suppression by law, and to a large extent accomplished it in fact.

Josiah had enforced the new *régime*, and carried it out to a great extent, and the succeeding portion of his rule was comparatively pure, and in a large degree prosperous. He began, in some measure, to recover the old power that used to be wielded by the great monarchs of the ancient time over the surrounding little states and nations.

I will carry the story a step farther, keeping to the internal history of Judæa. The Egyptian army undertook to force its way across Palestine, to strike at Assyria. Josiah imagined that good policy required him to resist the Egyptian advance, and so he went and barred the progress of Pharaoh-necho at Megiddo. It was most disastrous for him; he was wounded at the very onset, and carried

back to Jerusalem, where he died. On his death, all the good he had done crumbled to pieces. His successor, Jehoiachim, was a king of a totally different character from his father, being weak and wicked. Of course there had always been the old pagan party in opposition during the latter half of Josiah's reign, but naturally coveting their old position of privilege and power; and so it happened they got hold of the heir to the throne, and, on his ascending it, reasserted themselves. The religious reforms of Josiah were reversed; corruption, violence, and oppression recurred; and mercenary adventurers and unscrupulous men were put into possession of power. The kingdom went from worse to worse.

Now to a man who had lived through those years of religious improvement, of moral and social amelioration, of gradual renewal of external prosperity—to a Hebrew prophet who had thought this the dawn of the coming final victory for God's kingdom, you can understand how tremendous was the trial of faith, when all the bright promises of a new day were dashed by storm and tempest, and a darker night settled down on the country than ever before.

Now I come to external history. During the latter half of the seventh century the Assyrian empire had grown sick. A malady of weakness was spread through all its immense, gigantic frame. The central imperial grasp upon outlying provinces relaxed. The mighty empire was beginning to break up. And then, in the era of its decay, it was assailed by two formidable opponents, by the Persian power that had been growing up away in the Northern mountains, and again from the South by the rapidly increasing kingdom and state of Babylon. For a long time the old empire of Nineveh held out. It was a slow, protracted struggle. During, therefore, those closing decades of the seventh century the government of Nineveh had enough to do

simply to defend itself from its own antagonists, from Persia and Babylon. The consequence was that those Palestine states that used to be vassals of Assyria were able to reassert their independence; and, among them, Judæa, under king Josiah, woke up to dreams of its old proud expectations of recovering its freedom and re-establishing the kingdom of king David. But it was not merely the Palestinian states that felt the paralysis away at the centre of the old empire of Nineveh. Egypt, that had played a subordinate part all along to Assyria, woke up to dreams, not of freedom, but of ambition and aggrandisement. There was seated on the throne of Egypt at the time a man of very great ability, remarkable breadth of mind, and boldness of initiative, Pharaoh-necho. He reversed the policy of his predecessors. Instead of shutting up Egypt by itself, he threw it wide open to Greek civilization, science, enterprise, and commerce. He employed skilled Greek officers to remodel his Egyptian army. He enrolled in its ranks an immense number of "free lances," soldiers of fortune. He endeavoured to form powerful fleets, both on the Southern Sea (the Arabian Sea) and the Mediterranean. He actually conceived the magnificent idea of cutting a canal across the Isthmus of Suez, though not in the same direction as the modern canal; it was to run by the Nile, and then to strike across to the Red Sea. He began that enterprise, which was to enable him to concentrate his war fleet either in the Mediterranean or in the Arabian Sea, and he actually carried the work on to a great extent. There is almost absolute certainty that his ships, manned and officered by Greek sailors, circumnavigated Africa, sailed down the Red Sea and by the Cape of Good Hope, and returned through the Straits of Gibraltar.

Pharaoh-necho, feeling the incipient paralysis away at Nineveh, and perceiving the movements of the Palestinian states, determined to become their lord and master, and to

suck their blood in war tribute. He commenced to attack them, was very successful in his endeavours, and at last, about 609 B.C., resolved to carry his conquest right on to the Euphrates. Poor king Josiah tried to bar his way, and was crushed in the attempt. Pharaoh-necho reached the Euphrates, and arrived at Carchemish. In the meantime, Nineveh had succumbed to Persia and Babylon. Persia took all the provinces of Assyria that extended away in its own direction. Babylon received as its share the provinces on the way to the Mediterranean.

There was a tremendous battle, and Egypt was utterly annihilated about the year 605 or 604 B.C. Babylon, having discomfited Egypt, thus rolled on in a triumphal march, taking state after state, town after town, establishing its ascendancy over the old dominions of Nineveh. And, when Jehoiachim found himself confronted with this resistless power, he too succumbed, and became the vassal of Babylon. For years after that Babylon ruled the world, ruled it with a rod of iron; wielded a merciless, cruel, and rapacious sway over the conquered kingdoms; crushed the very life out of them, and so acquired for itself an almost supernatural, devilish, and demoniacal character. It is an extraordinary thing that throughout the Old, on into the New Testament, the standing name and symbol for antagonism to God and goodness, to truth and mercy and justice, the embodiment of all that is fiendish and iniquitous and wicked in the ungodly world, is Babylon—not Assyria, but Babylon. It is a curious thing that, in the very first Bible notice of that great city, the building of the Tower of Babel, the key-note was struck. That tower was built in defiance of God.

I will read you some poetry, which I find magnificently translated in a recent work on "The Book of Isaiah," by the Rev. George Adam Smith. It is a taunt-song or satiric ode, full of passion and powerful thought, written by a

Hebrew prophet, who exults over the expected downfall of Babylon. This is how it runs :

“ Ah! still is the tyrant,
 And stilled is the fury!
 Broke hath Jehovah the rod of the wicked,
 Sceptre of despots:
 Stroke of (the) peoples with passion,
 Stroke unremitting,
 Treading in wrath (the) nations,
 Trampling unceasing.
 Quiet, at rest, is the whole earth,
 They break into singing;
 Even the pines are jubilant for thee,
 Lebanon's cedars!
 ‘ Since thou liest low, cometh not up
 Feller against us.’
 Sheol from under shuddereth at thee
 To meet thine arrival,
 Stirring up for thee the shades,
 All great-goats of earth!
 Lifteth erect from their thrones
 All kings of peoples.”

What tremendous passion, hatred, and satire there is in that!

I have shown you how the development of the internal history of Israel during that seventh century created a terrible problem for faith. Could the old promise be true? could Israel be God's people, the germ of God's kingdom? Then, again, the external history created a more perplexing problem. During those years when Assyria was crumbling into decay, it looked to the Hebrew prophet as if God were fulfilling His promise; now is the time for Judæa to re-assert herself, to conquer Hebrew nations, and compel them to own the power of Jehovah. But, as Babylon came rolling on once more, there is the prospect of a long, dark, and unbroken night of degradation and subjection to pagan power. Could Israel be God's people? could God be the living God, Jehovah?

This prophecy throws a very remarkable light upon the fashion in which a Hebrew prophet received his supernatural revelation. Nobody can read the book and help seeing that light from heaven did not flash upon a prophet externally or mechanically. God's Spirit dwelt with the man's spirit as God's Spirit dwells with your spirit and mine. Through pain and perplexity, through wrestling with the actual problems of life around him, through the use of his intellect, but infinitely more through the use of his conscience, and best of all through purity of heart guiding a soul made true to God's great purposes in this world, the Hebrew prophet received those Divine intuitions concerning the world's course and God's designs that mark out the Old Testament as a supernatural, inspired book.

Let us trace the stream, the growth of emotion and thought, in this prophecy. Habakkuk looks upon the utter destruction of Josiah's reforms; the downfall of pure religion; the return of idolatry, the very worst kind of idol worship; sensuality eating away the very fabric of social life; injustice, unrighteousness, tyranny, oppression, breaking up the commonwealth; and the questions confront him: "Is God holding His people in His hands? is God, through Israel, building up a kingdom here on earth? How can that be true when Israel has, on the one hand, sunk down into such sin and guilt; and, on the other, has been brought into such utter subjection to a heathen power?" God very often answers one difficulty by showing you another. To be so unexpectedly confronted with this awful perplexity to faith, Babylon's sudden rise and resistless march onward in its conquering course, would have meant despair, it may be, to a half-hearted man. A man that had not entered into the secret of God's government of this world through moral forces, through ethical and spiritual powers, not through mere physical, brute force, would have succumbed. He

would have said to himself, as the Moabite, the Philistine, and the Phœnician said, "There is no government of righteousness in this world. Force carries everything before it; our own gods are helpless before this tremendous Babylon; let us bow down before Babylon, and make the best terms we can; let us abandon all our patriotic hopes, all that was ideal, all that had a future, in the faith and aspirations of the nation." On the contrary, the Hebrew prophet looked at the unruly tide of pagan conquest, and said to himself: "That appalling instrument of penalty has been raised up by God; it is God's weapon of chastisement. This corrupt Israel never could fulfil God's design; and by terrible, bitter retribution, by degradation, by defeat, by humiliation, God will drive the people back to Himself."

Do you see the triumph of faith there was in that? But immediately a new problem for faith was created; for a just, good man, looking at the Babylonian empire, forecasting its course, detecting its character, could not reconcile himself to the idea that that was God's chosen minister of justice in the world. A Hebrew prophet had a very definite idea of what a divinely ordained king and kingdom and government, according to God's mind and will, ought to be. He had comprehended—and it is a grand thing in the Old Testament to find it there—the last secret of enlightened human philosophy and of political economy. He had comprehended that governments exist for the sake of the governed, not the governed for the governments. He had comprehended that power is put into men's hands, not for their own selfish aggrandisement, not for their own advantage or profit, but as a solemn trust. He had comprehended that every earthly rule is a part of the Divine administration, and has to be wielded according to the wishes of God. For the establishing of justice and righteousness, and the promoting of what is ethical, noble, and

elevated; not for ends that are low, degraded, and merely physical, however imposing such things may be made in their show of wealth, of wisdom, or of civilization. He had comprehended that God means by rule on earth to promote happiness, to promote the prosperity of the whole commonwealth, not of privileged classes, not of a few tyrants, not of the monarch himself. With that idea of a true kingdom in this world, that faith that this earth was made by God, that over this confused world of ours, dominating its history, there is the great Divine heart, pure, and just, and righteous, the prophet, when he looked at Babylon, said to himself: "Babylon cannot be God's kingdom; this Babylonian conquest of the world is not God's last utterance in the world's story, and therefore it must pass by; therefore it must be a mere episode in the world's history." And so he fell back upon an audacious certitude of faith. He says to himself, and to the small band of faithful men and women that know God and love righteousness: "Because God is righteous, and wishes to make the world a realm of holiness, justice, mercy, there—in that realm—is the empire of the future; and this Babylon must succumb before it." For Babylon was cruel and merciless beyond any empire that had gone before it. It went out of its way to crush, and destroy, and injure the peoples it conquered. It built up such a wealth, and fabric of luxury, and sensual indulgence in its mighty, magnificent metropolis, that it had to drain every blood-vessel of the conquered peoples in order to maintain its magnificence. It insulted all their national feelings; it outraged their religions. It was not content merely to crush revolt; it strove to make its domination as intolerable, as insulting, and as humiliating as it could contrive to do.

Here was the answer that came to the perplexed, doubting, agonizing heart of Habakkuk, as he wrestled with the enigma, as the darkness fell upon his heart, as the old faith

revived and rose up against it within him. Suddenly, a great light from heaven flashed through it all.

He saw a vision. The developments of time unrolled before him. He was able to forecast the story of that Colossus of the Euphrates, that mighty Babylonian empire, and to foresee the future of the kingdom of God that was buried in obscurity in Jerusalem. He said to himself, and then he said to his fellows, that the vision stretched over a long time; that hope might be protracted and delayed before it came, but come it must, for it rested on the reality of God: the God of righteousness, truth, and goodness.

This is what he saw. "God! not brute force, but God. The God that created this earth, the God that maintains, the God that rules it, the God whose purposes are sculpturing and carving out its destiny, is a God who, through and through, is a holy, just, magnificent, grand, generous, and merciful God. This God is a God spiritual; a God ethical; a God not of mere physical energy, not delighting in earthly magnificence, but finding a satisfaction to His Divine heart only in human character formed in His image: holy, just, pure, righteous, good. Therefore however long the issue may be in being decided, any man, any house, any nation, any world-empire that seeks only its own arrogant pride and ambition, its own cruel self-indulgence, its own earthly aggrandisement, at the cost of misery to mankind, of ruin and degradation to human character, is a defiance of God, an outrage on the Divine will, has against it all the eternal processes of God's government of the world, and therefore must succumb; while the little handful of faithful souls that have known God and have entered into fellowship with Him, that love what He loves, that choose what He chooses, that wish this world made conformable to His will; the just—however weak, impotent, bereft of all earthly resources, all military

might, all wealth, all imposing show of power—nevertheless shall survive and outlive heathen empires, if they persist in their faith. Not material power, not intellectual conviction of the truth of any creed or dogma; but actual fellowship with God, sympathy with Him, obedience to Him, being possessed of Him, the sense of belonging to Him on earth,—that is the faith which justifies to this day still.”

With this master-key to the history of nations, Habakkuk penetrated through the external show of imposing, resistless power in the Babylonian empire, and he detected the Divine emissaries of decay, ruin, and destruction that were beneath it and undermining it. The first thing that he recognised was this: Every forbidden appetite, every lawless, selfish passion carries in it the certainty of its own retribution, for this reason: because it is not regulated by God’s law, because it is a thing monstrous and unnatural, and therefore cannot be controlled; it masters the man who indulges it, like the thirst for strong drink, that the incipient drunkard never meant should be carried to such a dreadful extreme as to master property, health, home, life, everything. So Babylon’s unrestrained lust of wealth, greed of power, appetite for self-indulgence, would drive it on and on until it lost all power of estimating proportion, until it ran to an unbearable excess, until it made this earth such a hell to its vassals that at last, like the outraged debtors of a cruel, bloodthirsty moneylender, driven to desperation, they should rise and crush the tyrant. That is a law of political economy that has proved itself by experiment over and over again in this world’s story.

Moreover there is a strange, unavoidable retribution attached to ill-gotten gain. A man may coin it, a man may heap it up; but a man never can build up stable peoples on earth with it, he cannot erect an abiding home for ill-gotten gain. This great law the history of man has

writ large, and we see it in the terrible retribution and vengeance which have fallen on houses and nations.

Here is another great law of God's government of the world. Wherever the life of an individual or of a nation becomes predominantly materialistic, holds, as its highest goals and gains, mere luxury and pomp of life, triumphs of invention, of science, of commerce, of industry, of poetry, of painting, of art, of refinement; wherever a nation's life is engrossed in merely material ends; wherever a nation has ceased to represent, and embody, and make patent in the comity of the nations some ideal principle, some ethical end or aim—*e.g.* liberty, freedom, justice, mercy, virtue, religion,—God's wrath will fall on that nation: it will rot, it will decay; it is already a *soulless* body, and its earthly life will vanish out of it rapidly. That law applies to individual men, to houses and families, to states and empires.

You see the shame of it in the expressions used in the passage to this effect: "The Lord has ordered it, that what the heathen peoples build is for the fire, and what the nations toil for is to end in desolation, in destruction." Go to the books that tell you what that mighty Babylon was—wealthier, vaster, than London is now—and read that passage, that inspired intuition of the Divine law of the government of our world, of the certain decay and ruin of a civilization that has not within it a soul of ethical or spiritual potency, and beneficence for the good of the world around it; and then you will feel that the Old Testament is indeed inspired.

Another great moral lesson of history is that oppression ruins the character, not merely of the oppressed, but of the oppressors; *i.e.* any unjust, any tyrannical, any cruel exercise of power or rule in this world that spoils men's lives, that drives them to destitution or poverty, that robs them of their manhood. "Believe me," says Habakkuk,

“it is not merely the victims that are injured; the worst moral harm is done to those who have injured, *i.e.* the oppressors and the tyrants.” Take slavery: do you think it was merely the poor slaves that were degraded in their manhood? The mightiest argument against slavery is the moral contamination and corruption of the slaveholders. How can one man establish relations to his brother man, loved equally with him by God, that involve the destruction of the Divine image in that brother, without making himself a brute, a monster?

Then last, and most wonderful of all, the root of all moral and political wrong and blundering is false religion. How came Babylon, with such a chance of being the executant of God’s purposes, and of making a kingdom of God in this world, to fling away its opportunity? How came it to pass that Babylon was so blind to all the divinely imposed laws and conditions of a permanent and an abiding government? Because Babylon’s gods were such wretched, degraded, foul, sensual, tyrannical, lawless, unjust deities, that could not govern their subjects beneficently, justly. And so Habakkuk ends with his mocking at these dumb, blind idols, that could give no true political guidance or social wisdom to their worshippers. He then reaches the mountain-top of his own faith and certainty.

Now do you see how the whole thought of the book rises up and bursts out with a tremendous glory of exultant music in that majestic poem that pictures God’s omnipotent, resistless sovereignty; God’s glorious march through the world’s story in the past; God’s everlasting sovereignty still; God’s truth, justice, mercy? Ah! the explanation of Babylon’s first triumph is Israel’s unworthiness. God loves His people, but He loves righteousness more; and therefore He will use that brutal tyrant Babylon to chastise His people, that He may have a people that will realize His kingdom on earth.

But, once again, the perplexity of the passing use of Babylon reaches its solution in the certain realization of the living reality, power, and rule of that God who cannot look on iniquity, who hates, who recoils from, oppression, cruelty, sin, and lust.

In that poem all the elements—the contending emotions, the doubts, the fears, the hopes, the longings of Habakkuk’s spiritual experience and wrestling for faith—find their complete, perfect utterance, and their triumphant consummation, in a quiet trust, which will not be dismayed amid the clash and fall of nations and of empires; but which, when all the human props and supports of confidence have given way, can still rest peaceful and happy in the reality and being of God.

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