

H.L. Rossier

Comments on the book of the Prophet Habakkuk

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By H.L. Rossier

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CHAPTER 1

The Holiness of God's Ways Towards Israel and Towards the Nations.

Verse 1

Introduction.

‘The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.’

Everything in Scripture serves as a lesson to us, whether it speaks or remains silent. It is silent regarding the person of Habakkuk and the date of his prophecy. The meticulous research of critics has led to the most contradictory conclusions as to when the prophet wrote. When the data of the Word are clear enough to allow us to situate the prophecy within the context in which it occurred, we receive much light and edification from it; when God does not speak, the research of scholars, however interesting it may be, is of very limited value to the Christian.

According to certain indications, however, it seems quite likely that Habakkuk prophesied during the reign of Josiah. Two circumstances might confirm this view. Firstly, the idolatry of Israel is not mentioned in Habakkuk; secondly, the Chaldeans (not the Assyrians, as under Manasseh) are identified there as the enemy of the people.

Be that as it may, the moral significance of this book stands out all the more strongly because the Spirit of God omits the circumstances of its composition. Indeed, Habakkuk reveals very little of the prophetic events, but describes the character of God in His dealings with regard to the moral state of the people and the nations. He then reveals to us the effect this revelation had on the prophet's heart. The latter thus becomes a kind of model of the moral state of the Remnant in the last days. All this is of great interest and profound significance for us. With the historical context removed, we find ourselves immediately dealing with principles that govern people today just as much as those of that time. In the light of these principles, God's perfect ways in His government and the holiness of His character are vindic-

ated, and, as they contemplate these things, the faithful cannot but adore His divine perfection.

The moral state in which Habakkuk lives is as follows: in Israel, a whole procession of vices, without any mention of idolatry, as in Zephaniah; among his enemy, the Chaldeans, a crude form of idolatry, yet dominated by the exaltation of man; in the prophet, an indignant spirit and a sorrowful heart, yet enlightened by divine teaching. He learns to live by his faith whilst awaiting future glory, yet overflows with praise even before receiving the promised things.

As we have said, the analogy between the days of Habakkuk and our own is striking, and thus his prophecy takes on immense importance for us. This observation is confirmed by the fact that, in the New Testament, quotations from this prophet support and illustrate the entire doctrine of the Apostle Paul concerning the righteousness of God, faith, life, the resurrection of Christ, and his coming, the wrath of God revealed from heaven, and finally glory! The mystery of the Church, hidden in the Old Testament, is the sole exception to this list.

Thus is affirmed the constant harmony between the various parts of the Word of God. They form a whole, a unity on which we have emphasised elsewhere. The constant study of this harmony will preserve Christians from giving credence to critical scholars, adversaries of the Word who do not understand it, men devoid of sense, who believe they can interpret Scripture with their own understanding, and of whom God Himself declares: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will set aside the understanding of the intelligent.’

Verses 2–11

God is not indifferent to the iniquity of his people. He will judge them through the Chaldeans.

‘How long, O Lord, shall I cry out, and you will not hear? I cry out to you: “Violence!” and you do not save. Why do you make me see iniquity, and look upon oppression? Devastation and violence are before me, and there is strife, and discord rises. Therefore the law remains powerless, and righteous judgement never sees the light of day; for the wicked surround the righteous; therefore judgement comes out perverted’ (vv. 2–4).

Let us note, from these very first verses, a distinctive feature of Habakkuk among the minor prophets. Micah allowed us to witness a dialogue, in the form of questions and answers, between the Lord, his prophet and various other interlocutors, a dialogue which ends with a plea in which the accused appears before his judges. In Nahum, the Lord alone addresses, in turn, the various figures involved. Here, we witness a very intimate conversation between the prophet and his God. Habakkuk speaks to the Lord, and the Lord answers him. In this respect, there is a parallel between him and Jeremiah, but the entire drama unfolds within the prophet's heart and conscience; and no personal incident interrupts it, as occurs in the course of Jeremiah's prophecy. Anxiety grips him at the sight of what is happening, but the circumstances themselves do not seem to affect him personally. They raise such agonising questions within him that he feels the need to pour out his heart before the Lord, to be delivered from the deep distress they cause him. Habakkuk is a man of faith, and his first words, 'How long?', prove it, but his faith needs to be sustained and enlightened. It is mingled with weakness, and so it finds a merciful response,

for God rebukes unbelief, but not the weakness of our human nature. Our weakness meets with the sympathy of Him who was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15); only in our case, sin is always mingled with it to a greater or lesser extent. The apostle himself could take pleasure in his infirmities and glory in them, insofar as they were not mixed with the flesh (2 Cor. 12:9, 10), for the Lord found in them, by inflicting them, a means of accomplishing His power in His beloved apostle.

The phrase ‘How long?’ is, as we so often see in the prophets and in the Psalms, the cry of faith. This faith expresses the certainty that God will answer in due time, but, in the meantime, it accepts tribulation as a necessary trial. This will be the cry of the afflicted Remnant of Israel, passing through the great tribulation of the end, with the certainty that it is the final word of God’s judgements and that it prepares the way for the glorious coming of the Messiah, a reign of freedom, justice and peace. Here, however, the situation is somewhat different. If the prophet is a witness, set apart from the people, he does not personally suffer violence like the Remnant, but witnesses it and

observes it. It is not the idolatry of Israel that is at issue here, but rather that which has characterised, from the very beginning of human history, man depraved by sin (Gen. 6:11): violence, with its accompanying procession of iniquity, oppression, devastation, discord and strife amongst the people (vv. 2, 3). Nowadays, as in the days of the prophet, every heart concerned with the Lord's interests is able to observe these things. They are 'before us' just as they were for Habakkuk. What increases our anguish is that we see them occurring, as in former times, amongst those who still claim to be God's people, at a time when the Lord has already forsaken them. So, if our soul, like that of the prophet, has not yet learnt why God allows all this evil to continue without putting an end to it, we cry out: 'Why do you make me see iniquity?' and: 'How can you look upon oppression?' In speaking thus, we forget two things, noted by the prophet Nahum (1:3, 7): 'The Lord is slow to anger'; 'The Lord is good'. We cry out to him: 'I cry out to you: Violence! and you do not save.' We would like to see God intervene, in the face of a moral state that we know is an abomination to him. Deep down, there is always a certain selfishness in this

weakness, even though it is also an expression of our love for the faithful who are going through these disastrous times!

‘You do not save!’ What is at stake here is not spiritual salvation, but temporal deliverance. The anguished soul would like to see peace restored, the violent judged and removed. Violence is there, before our very eyes, and God does not respond! I repeat, this is not a lack of faith, but the anguished cry of a soul not yet firmly established, faced with a problem hitherto insoluble for it. Why does God permit evil? How does He seem to forget His own, defenceless amidst all this display of human wickedness? The prophet will receive an answer, but one different from what he might have imagined. He will have to go through a time of painful instruction, yet one that is a great blessing to his soul, before he understands what God intends to bring about in the hearts of His own as they pass through these days of trial.

‘That is why the law remains powerless’—the law, once given by the Lord Himself, and intended to break man’s will. ‘Righteous judgement’, which man should have learnt to practise un-

der the law, never comes to pass; on the contrary, ‘the wicked surround the righteous’. Note this word: ‘the righteous’. We shall encounter it again in chapter 2. The prophet is conscious of his integrity, as will later be the case with the Remnant of Israel when it passes through the judgments of the end, but he has not yet received the answer and does not see the victory of evil over good. He addresses his ‘Why’s’ to God, but he would not ask them if he did not trust that God would answer him. How is it that ‘judgement never comes to light’, and that, when it finally does, it is the opposite of what a pious and upright soul might expect: it ‘comes forth perverted’, and the faithful, wherever they turn, encounter nothing but injustice and iniquity.

The Lord will answer this question, but in the meantime, the righteous can only observe what God has always observed, ever since sin first appeared. Apart from those who are justified by faith, there is not a single righteous person in the world. As for the national character of Israel, Scripture tells us that, during the reign of Rehoboam, there were still ‘good things in Judah’ (2 Chron. 12:12); that, under the reign of Hezekiah,

Judah, however guilty it may have been, ‘still walked with God and with the true saints’ (Hosea 12:1); but this was no longer the case under subsequent reigns. Under the reign of Josiah, we learn from the prophet Zephaniah what God thought of the ‘nation without shame’, of the city that was ‘rebellious, corrupt and oppressive’, of its princes, its judges, its prophets and its priests (Zeph. 2:1; 3:1–4). The same is true here: the moral state of Israel, at the end of its history, was no better than that of man at the beginning of his history. This state had, in essence, never really changed. Critics who conclude from the description given here that it can only refer to the state of the people under a bad reign, such as that of Manasseh, are therefore entirely mistaken.

When it comes to the kings, the leaders responsible for Israel, God made the blessing of the people dependent on their conduct. Thus, under certain reigns of the kings of Judah, we see evil restrained, justice established, piety towards God recognised, and temple service restored, without the nation’s heart having been changed. On the other hand, the rule of a wicked king further aggravated this deplorable moral state by introdu-

cing or encouraging shameless idolatry, to which the perverted hearts of the people immediately succumbed. The passage we have just quoted may therefore refer to any reign whatsoever, though perhaps most likely to that of Josiah, since the idolatry of Israel is not even mentioned here (*).

(*) See also, regarding the state of the people: Micah 7:2, 3; Jer. 5:15–29, 7:5, 6; 20:8.

‘Look among the nations and see; be utterly astounded; for I am doing a work in your days which you would not believe, even if it were told to you’ (v. 5).

Here we find the answer to the prophet’s question, an answer addressed not to him, but to the wicked of whom he has complained. These wicked people are invited to ‘look among the nations’ and to consider in amazement how the Lord will repay their misdeeds. At this point the Assyrian has not yet been destroyed, but the Lord is about to raise up the Chaldeans. He will subject the other nations to this power, but above all, the people of God. The latter might have believed that, once delivered from the yoke of the Assyrian, they would be rid of the op-

pressor; but, on the contrary, they were to fall under a yoke far heavier and crueller, and, in an even more terrible judgement, the Lord was to take away power from Israel and entrust it for the first time to Babylon, the ‘head of gold’ of the Gentile monarchy. Such was the fate that awaited this wicked people, but it was at the same time the answer to the prophet’s cry: ‘I cry out to you: “Violence!” and you do not save’. The Lord answers, showing his servant that if he does not save the righteous from the violence of the wicked, it is because punishment is about to fall upon them. Israel, both the people and the land, will succumb to the blows of Babylon, and then be reduced to slavery.

But the Holy Spirit gives this prophecy a much broader scope, as we see in chapter 13 of Acts. Having arrived with Barnabas in Pisidian Antioch, Paul delivers a speech in the synagogue, and its content, if one looks closely, is based on this very word of our prophet. Where there was ‘no salvation’, and where the prophet said, ‘You do not save’, God had raised up for Israel, as Saviour, a Jesus who died and rose again. The word of this salvation was sent to those very people who had rejected Christ. They all heard this word, and those among them who

feared God were called to receive it (Acts 13:23, 26). The people had not known Jesus, nor the voices of the prophets who announced him; indeed, they had judged their Messiah, thus fulfilling what Habakkuk had said of them: ‘Judgement goes forth perverted’ (1:4). So the apostle applies to them the word ‘of the prophets’ and particularly of our prophet, but he quotes and comments on it in relation to the condition of those to whom he is speaking: ‘Behold, you scoffers, and be astonished, and be utterly destroyed; for I am doing a work in your days, a work which you would not believe, even if someone were to tell it to you’ (13:41). They no longer had to ‘look among the nations’, for the Chaldeans had long since been replaced by other powers, and then by Rome, the last of them all. Since the days of Habakkuk, the yoke of the nations had weighed upon the people; at the time of Paul’s preaching, Israel was enslaved to the fourth Gentile monarchy. Thus the apostle does not say, as our prophet did: ‘I will do a work in your days’. God was doing the work, and this work was not judgement. The great salvation was announced, first to the Jews, and if they spurned it, if they were ‘despisers’, the apostle would

turn to the nations. It would then be the nations who would look upon the Jews and see the judgement of that people for having refused the grace in Jesus. This is what happened in that very city of Antioch, where the Jews, having rejected God's salvation in Christ, judged themselves unworthy of eternal life. The apostles 'shook the dust from their feet against them and went on to Iconium' (vv. 46, 51).

Thus, according to Paul, the Gospel was the answer to the prophet's complaint: 'You do not save'. It was salvation when the people had deserved judgement; but if they spurned grace, a judgement far more terrible than the Babylonian captivity, than even the Roman yoke, was in store for them: the destruction of Jerusalem and the definitive scattering of the Jews among the nations.

Here we have an example of God's use of His own Word, and we shall find others in the course of this study. From this inexhaustible source, God draws truths hidden from human eyes and brings them to light—truths that proclaim grace when the

world could expect nothing but judgement. But what will this judgement be if man resolutely rejects grace?

It is important to note here, as indeed when interpreting all prophecy, that the coming judgement by the Chaldeans foreshadows a future judgement of which it is, as it were, the prelude, and that temporal deliverance has become, in the apostle's teaching, the image of eternal salvation.

‘For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that cruel and impetuous nation, which marches across the breadth of the earth to take possession of dwellings that do not belong to them. They are formidable and terrible; their judgement and their dignity proceed from themselves’ (vv. 6, 7).

The Lord takes care to make it clear to his prophet that in stirring up the Chaldeans, it is not that he has discovered any moral qualities in them. Quite the contrary, they are a cruel nation, and how could God approve of them? They are impetuous, they strike first, they march across the breadth of the earth, they invade the world and take possession of homes that do not belong to them. Does this thirst to seize another's territory and

annex it differ from what we see today? No, but the Chaldeans are God's rod and His punishment upon Israel as well as upon the nations. 'Look among the nations,' the Lord had said. This overflowing torrent sweeping across the world, this deluge of God's judgements, must reach Israel; but before engulfing it, formidable and terrible, it will sweep away everything in its path. There is cause enough here to fill hearts with dread.

'Her judgement and her dignity proceed from herself.' Her own will constitutes what the Chaldean calls her right; the same applies to her dignity. She takes no account of that of others, but considers herself to possess, in and of herself, a dignity that elevates her above them. Her own pleasure and her boundless pride guide her. Do we not have similar examples before our very eyes? The believer might wish that this pride were brought low, but God says to him: Do you not see that these judgements come from me and that, whilst beginning with the nations around you, they are intended for you?

Next comes the vivid and terrifying description of the Chaldean might: 'His horses are swifter than leopards, more

agile than evening wolves; and his horsemen charge proudly, and his horsemen come from afar: they fly like an eagle hastening to devour. They all come for violence; their faces are all turned forward; they gather captives like sand. And he mocks kings, and princes are a laughingstock to him; he laughs at all the fortresses: he will heap up dust and take them” (vv. 8–10). Jeremiah has similar traits and often uses the same expressions (see 4:13; 5:6, etc.). The Assyrian and the Chaldean share common traits, but in the former we find, it seems, less organisation for invasion and slaughter: their speed and agility are like those of a pack of hungry wolves, advancing with hurried steps, without a sound; their gleaming eyes shine in the darkness; they are certain to reach their prey. At the precise moment, here comes the charge of the horsemen, coming from afar, swift as eagles; the furious attack, as it has already appeared to us in the prophet Nahum (2:3, 4; 3:1–3). ‘They all come for violence.’ The prophet, appalled by the state of the people, cried out to the Lord: ‘Violence!’ God shows him that this violence will find its just retribution in the violence of Babylon. ‘He gathers captives like the sand and mocks all the fortresses.’ Have we

not witnessed such spectacles in our own day? History repeats itself, men say to console themselves. Undoubtedly, we reply, but because the character of sinful man, repeating itself ad nauseam, defies God's holiness and throws down the gauntlet to Him. Has there ever been, in the past, a clearer manifestation than today of a power that mocks all strongholds? Yet, when the power of Babylon in turn falls, 'its kings and princes' become a laughingstock to others, just as the kings of the nations had been to it.

'Then he will change his mind, and go his own way and sin: the power he has become his god' (v. 11).

There comes a time when the leader of the Chaldean nation, the one regarded by the Lord as responsible for the judicial mission God has entrusted to him, will change his mind. Instead of seeing himself as an instrument, he will overstep his mission and sin. It is not that he had not sinned a thousand times before through his cruelty, his pride and his idolatry, but, at a certain point, his own strength will take the place of God for him. The power that the Lord has placed in his hands has become his

god. He worships strength, his own strength. It is in this strength that he places his trust; it is to this strength that he pays homage. This ruler of the Chaldean empire does not stand alone. In the history of the last days, the direct successor to Babylon, the Roman Beast ‘healed of its mortal wound’, will have no other religion than this. It is this religion that the philosophy of a Nietzsche advocates and that the military leaders of the day proclaim. In the final history of humanity, there will be far less question of crude idolatry than of the worship of man, whom the world will make its idol. The idolaters of old worshipped, in his attributes of power, love and justice, an unknown God, to whom their imagination lent a human or animal form; future idolatry will worship man in the idol. This tendency appeared early in the history of empires (Dan. 3:6, 7, 11) and reached its climax in the past in the deification of the Roman emperors. But the deified man cannot himself do without a god. The Antichrist, who demands to be worshipped as God, will be the worshipper of the forces that Satan has brought under his control (Dan. 11:38).

Verses 12, 13

The prophet vindicates the character of his God and His ways towards Israel.

‘Are you not from of old, O Lord, my God, my Holy One? We shall not die! O Lord, you have established him for judgement, and you have founded him, O Rock, to punish. Your eyes are too pure to look on evil, and you cannot tolerate wrongdoing’ (vv. 12, 13).

Although the word of God announces only judgments (vv. 5–10), the prophet’s heart overflows with gratitude towards the Lord. The divine communication assures him that God is his God, his Holy One, a God who relates to him—a weak, frail, ignorant man, so unfamiliar, however much of a prophet he may be, with His secret thoughts. This God is ‘the God of old’, and therefore the One of the promises made to Israel. He takes Habakkuk, the representative of His people, under His protection; He has given Himself to His prophet, and it is to Him that the prophet belongs. What a privilege it is when the soul can speak to God with such intimacy! And how much greater still

is it for us who know a God fully revealed in Christ and can say: My Father, my Lord, my Saviour!

‘We shall not die!’ How can we doubt, when we know such a God personally, that life—eternal life—belongs to us? Habakkuk, not having, as we do, the full revelation of the ‘word of life’, cannot go as far as we do, but he knows that God’s people ‘shall not die’, that the divine punishment that befalls them will not end in their annihilation. He has received the answer to his first ‘why’ and now understands what, for him, was a mystery: If the Chaldean is ‘established’ and ‘founded’, it is for the sake of judgement and punishment, the consequence of the people’s violence and iniquity. He has been raised up for this purpose, but this proves that the Rock of Ages, the ‘stone of Israel’, has not forsaken his people forever. When a father chastises his child, it is not to kill him, but to mould him in his own image. God acts in the same way towards us, so that we may share in his holiness. A most comforting thought! God recognises us when he chastises us, and chastises us because he recognises us as his children. But it is impossible for him to consent to look upon evil without dealing

with it; he must reject it; his eyes are too pure to behold it. ‘Why do you make me see iniquity and look upon oppression?’ the prophet had said in v. 3. He has now learnt that although God has ‘made him see iniquity’ (and how else would he learn to judge it?), God cannot tolerate it in his presence; that his eyes are content only with what is perfectly pure, and can rest only upon perfect goodness. It is upon the latter, indeed, that his gaze rests with inexpressible delight: here on earth, amidst circumstances that were nothing but darkness, sin and defilement, he has encountered a man brought low to the very lowest point, yet perfect in that lowliness, and it is in him that his love has found its delight. The prophet also learns, in answer to his question: ‘Why do you look upon oppression?’ (v. 3), that God ‘cannot look upon oppression’ (v. 13). What blindness had therefore taken hold, even of a prophet, that, having to do with the government of God, he was unable to understand this riddle? Ah! it is because, to understand it, one must know God! Contemplating evil never enables us to know the character of God; contemplating God instructs us on the true character of evil.

Verses 13–17

Will God be indifferent to the enemy's wickedness?

What the prophet had just learnt had stirred his deep sympathy for his people. At first he was concerned only with the dreadful state into which they had been plunged; now he understands God's concern for Israel, whilst at the same time having been taught the principles of God's government regarding this people. But enjoying fellowship with his God, as we have seen in v. 12, he took courage to ask another question, to utter a second 'Why'. 'Why do you look on those who act treacherously, and remain silent when the wicked devours one who is more righteous than he?' (v. 13). If you cannot 'behold oppression', yet here you are, beholding, without being moved, the one who acts treacherously; here, far from intervening, you seem indifferent to the evil afflicting your people, who, however guilty they may be, are more righteous than their enemies. Indeed, amidst much evil in Israel, there were certain 'good things' which the surrounding nations did not possess, and such as were seen during the reign of Josiah—things of which Habakkuk was a living example. In this respect, Israel was

more righteous than its adversaries. The prophet also wishes to understand this enigma. If God recognises some good in those whom the wicked oppress, why does He favour the wicked in their undertakings? However, before receiving the divine answer, the prophet understands one thing: ‘You make men like the fish of the sea, like the creeping thing that has no one to govern it’ (v. 14). If God has entrusted government to men, He has the right to deprive them of it entirely—just as He deprives the fish of the sea and the countless beasts that crawl upon the ground—and to deliver them as prey to the one in whose hands He places power. This was to be the case with the nations conquered by Babylon; and the same fate was to befall Israel, once organised under God’s government and which, having forsaken the Lord, was to be left without a king, without a prince and without recourse against the enemy (Isaiah 63:19; Hosea 3:14).

‘He brings them all up with the hook; he draws them into his net, and gathers them into his dragnet; therefore he rejoices and is glad; therefore he sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his dragnet, because, through them, his portion is rich and his

food is succulent’ (vv. 15, 16). The prophet continues to understand part of what is to come. He is in communion with God’s thought expressed in v. 11: ‘This power he possesses has become his god.’ He sees that the adversary has used the power entrusted to him to turn his net and his dragnet into an idol, and that he invokes the instruments of his victories to worship them. We might well ask ourselves whether, in another form, things are any different today? And, if so, ‘will he therefore empty his net, and will he always slaughter the nations, sparing none?’ Will God tolerate this profane and idolatrous use of force, and will the oppression of the nations last for ever?

The two great questions posed by the prophet are therefore those of God’s rule over his people and of that same rule over the world. In the New Testament, the First and Second Epistles of Peter provide the answers.

These questions from the prophet reveal a deep intimacy with God, alongside an admission of ignorance and a great desire to be taught by Him. He already senses, but will soon come to fully realise, that to know God’s ways, one need only know

Him. Without this knowledge of His person, what happens in the world will always remain an indecipherable mystery to us.

CHAPTER 2

The Lord's answer to the question posed in chapter 1: 13–17.

Verses 1–5

Judgment will certainly come upon the oppressor, but the righteous must live by faith.

Verse 1. — Now the prophet takes his stand ‘on the watchtower’ (Matsor) (*), that is to say, prophetically at the very place where the enemy will lay siege to his people. Instead of standing aloof, he visualises in his mind the judgement about to be revealed; but he does not position himself there with the intention of offering resistance to the adversary, for he knows that the word of the Lord must certainly be fulfilled. In taking up his post of observation, he has two aims: to see what

the Lord will say to him in the face of the imminent enemy attack; and what he, the prophet, will reply.

(*) ‘Matsor’ is always a place established for the purpose of withstanding a siege.

In view of this coming event, Habakkuk therefore awaits a new revelation of God’s will. He has not yet learnt all that he needs to know. Whilst he knows that God cannot tolerate Israel’s iniquity and will judge them through the Chaldeans (1:6); and though he knows, on the other hand, that God cannot tolerate the iniquity of the Chaldeans, he does not yet know what God intends to do with them; but, above all, how He will be able, in judging both sides, to deliver the righteous who have trusted in Him. He therefore expects to have to reply, as Moses did of old, when the Lord contended with him concerning Israel’s making of the golden calf (Ex. 32:7–14; 33:12–16). But his resolve to ‘replies’ will meet with such an absolute and unchallengeable response that the prophet will have no further need to make any remark, as he had intended. The second desire of his heart, ‘standing on the tower’, could not be fulfilled, because he did not encounter a God who was contending with him.

Therefore, instead of speaking, he said, ‘I have heard’, and gave thanks to the God of his salvation (chap. 3).

‘And the Lord answered me and said: “Write down the vision and engrave it on tablets, so that the one who reads it may run”’ (v. 2).

God wants the vision sought by the prophet to be written down, engraved so as to endure, to be preserved and read (Isaiah 30:8), for these are matters of the near and distant future, of immense significance. Indeed, Habakkuk receives here, as in chapter 1, not only instruction concerning the ways of God’s government towards His people, but, as he comes to know the final judgement of the nations and the calamities that will befall them, he finds that all these things are for the glory of God, the glory of Christ’s eternal reign. He finally learns what the attitude of the righteous ought to be whilst awaiting this reign, and what the immense work of redemption entails for them. This vision must not only be read and clearly understood, but also swiftly communicated to others, for the time is near. This, we believe, is the meaning of the words: ‘Let him who reads it

run' (*). Imbued with the importance of the divine answer, he will feel compelled to go and spread it throughout the world. This is no longer, as in Daniel, a book sealed until the time of the end (Dan. 12:4), but a clear and distinct communication of God's thoughts, intended to be swiftly disseminated everywhere. This vision, being of an evangelical nature, was certainly not to be sealed. Daniel's vision, once sealed, is no longer so (Rev. 22:10), but Habakkuk's never was.

(*). And not, as many translate: 'Let it be read fluently'.

'For the vision is yet for a set time, and it speaks of the end, and will not lie' (v. 3). This vision undoubtedly foretells the imminent downfall of the Chaldean power that was about to take the stage. The time of its fulfilment is fixed in advance, but the vision goes much further; it speaks of the end, of the glory of the kingdom, and even though these final events are still far off, they are absolutely certain, for the vision given by God himself cannot lie. This is also why God took care to have it engraved on tablets, just as He once engraved the law on stone tablets, the contents of which were never sealed.

‘If it tarries, wait for it, for it will surely come; it will not be delayed’ (v. 3). The Spirit of God points out that the vision, when it speaks of the end, may still be delayed. Its historical fulfilment, now twenty-five centuries old, was then for a set time; as for the end of which the vision speaks, it is delayed and the believer still awaits it today, relying on God’s promise. It will surely come, and the sign that heralds it will not be a deceptive sign. This sign, as we know, is the appearing of the Lord, in judgement. Thus we see the Apostle Paul applying this passage, in Hebrews 10:37, to the appearing of Christ in the last days, when he says, ‘Yet a little while, and He who is coming will come, and will not delay’, whilst Habakkuk applies it to the judgment of the Chaldeans at a specific time. Note once again the way in which the Spirit of God interprets His own Word, as we have already seen in chapter 1 and shall see again in the course of this study. We who have reached ‘the end of the ages’, for it was inaugurated by the cross of Christ, receive a much broader interpretation of the prophecy than the prophet himself, and although we have not yet reached the prophetic times, we are nevertheless in the end times. The coming of the

Son of God (His Parousia) will bring this to an end for us and usher in the prophetic times; the appearance of the Son of Man (His Epiphany) will bring the latter to an end and introduce Christ's glorious reign upon the earth (v. 14). He is always the goal, the end, the final word of prophecy. This passage is, moreover, of the utmost importance in showing us that whilst prophecy has a historical and partial fulfilment, never—as we have so often seen in the course of these studies—is this fulfilment the final word. The historical event finds its full and definitive meaning only at the end of time, and its interpretation can only truly be known by keeping before one's eyes the person of Christ and the glories that will follow his sufferings.

When compared with Hebrews 10:37, this passage therefore completely undermines the claim of an entire school of thought to a purely historical interpretation of prophecy. It also demonstrates that the Scriptures form a whole of which no part can be considered in isolation, each part belonging to this whole and the Spirit of God interpreting it differently depending on whether it concerns future events or the end times. We have already seen an example of this in chapter 1:5, interpreted by

the apostle in Acts 13. The Spirit of God alone can give us the interpretation of what He has revealed to us. Never could the mind of man have surmised the significance of the revelation in question, had not the Spirit of God taken it upon Himself to explain it. The vision is still delayed, and we shall see the reason for this, but it will surely come, and our attitude is to wait for it. The Lord is coming. The passage in Hebrews 10:37 is not about his coming, his Parousia, to take the saints away, but about his appearance, his Epiphany, which is as much the object of our expectation as his coming, since it is then that Christ's glorious reign on earth—the subject of all Old Testament prophecy—will be inaugurated and the faithful will receive their crowns.

‘Behold, his soul, puffed up with pride, is not upright within him’ (v. 4).

The promise just mentioned is a truth entirely foreign to the proud who lack righteousness, an allusion, no doubt, to the Chaldean whom this passage directly addresses, but applicable to any soul who finds itself in the same condition as him.

Man's pride is incapable of understanding the thoughts of God; they are revealed only to men of faith; faith alone makes present the things we hope for and is the conviction of things not seen; thus the Spirit of God adds: 'But the righteous shall live by his faith' (v. 4).

This pivotal passage is the very essence of the entire book of Habakkuk. It is addressed to those who find themselves in the same circumstances as the prophet, for prophecy can be understood only by the righteous, and the world is ignorant of it. It is clear only if one lives 'by faith', and the righteous alone are capable of living in this way. Deliverance will surely come; the glorious reign of Christ will rise like the sun, when the obstacle that Satan opposes to it—by exalting man's pride against God—has been brought down. Faith, watching from the tower, sees this obstacle destroyed and awaits the Lord of glory. Until that moment, the righteous are neither disheartened nor without hope. Their faith sustains them, and it is from this that their life draws its nourishment. Such is the meaning of this passage here.

But in the New Testament, the Spirit of God goes far beyond this scope, and the teaching of the Apostle Paul is thoroughly imbued with this passage. Paul quotes it three times, each time giving it a new interpretation, as has often been noted. In Rom. 1:17, he emphasises righteousness; in Gal. 3:11, faith; and in Heb. 10:38, life. These three words relate to the teaching contained in each of the epistles we have just cited. Let us therefore consider these passages in some detail.

1. Rom. 1:16, 17: ‘For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written: “The righteous shall live by faith.”’ The apostle begins by establishing, in verse 16 of this epistle, the nature of the Gospel: it is God Himself, intervening in power, when man is utterly lost. Under the Gospel, God therefore asks nothing more of man and does not require him to act in order to find a way to be right with Him. It is God who acts; it is His power that is at work on man’s behalf, not to come to his aid, but to save him, for this power

is for salvation. Faith is the means of appropriating this salvation, which concerns both Jew and Greek alike. The Law, given to the Jew, is therefore set aside as a means of salvation, and faith is substituted for it. The Law did not extend beyond Jewish boundaries; faith extends far beyond them, for the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. But the Gospel is (v. 17) this power for salvation, because the righteousness of God (the central theme of the Epistle to the Romans) is revealed therein. The righteousness of God—a new, perfect and absolute reality, forming the most complete contrast to human righteousness—is revealed therein and not demanded, as human righteousness is. There is no other principle than faith for acquiring this righteousness which, from the moment faith has received it, has become, so to speak, the property of faith. The believer is henceforth righteous, with a divine righteousness, not a human righteousness based on works, for man is righteous only through faith. Now, if it is through faith, it is by pure grace, for man believes and receives the revelation of righteousness only by grace.

This passage from Romans 1 does not yet speak of the work of Christ as the sole means by which this righteousness may belong to us—a crucial truth developed later in the epistle—but merely establishes the great fact that a wholly new and absolute righteousness, that of God Himself, is now revealed and becomes the portion of faith. Then the apostle quotes Habakkuk: ‘The righteous shall live by faith’ (or on the principle of faith), to prove the revelation of a new righteousness, belonging to man by virtue of a new principle, the life of faith.

2. Gal. 3:11: ‘Now that no one is justified before God by the law is evident, for “the righteous shall live by faith”. But the law is not on the principle of faith, but: “He who has done these things shall live by them”.

The subject of the law, which is touched upon only quite incidentally in Rom. 1, to be brought fully to light in chapter 7 of the same epistle, is developed in all its breadth by the Epistle to the Galatians. Verse 10 of chapter 3 has shown that all those who are under the principle of the law

are under the curse, according to the truth set forth in Deut. 27:26. For Israel, a people under the law, there was only Ebal, and they were deprived of Gerizim. The apostle then quotes Habakkuk: It is evident, he says, that no one is justified before God by the law, because ‘the righteous shall live by faith’ (or on the principle of faith). It is therefore faith that is emphasised in this passage, and on which Paul insists, whilst not separating it from righteousness or life, but setting it in opposition to the law, which could procure neither. He then proves that the law is not based on the principle of faith, since the law points to the principle of works as the means of obtaining life or righteousness (Lev. 18:5; Rom. 10:5). He concludes by showing how deliverance from the law was effected by Christ: ‘Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”’ (v. 13).

3. Heb. 10:36–38: ‘For you need patience, so that, having done the will of God, you may receive the things promised. For yet a very little while, “and He who is coming will

come, and will not delay. Now the righteous shall live by faith; and: ‘If anyone draws back, my soul has no pleasure in him.’ But as for us, we are not of those who draw back to destruction, but of those who believe for the preservation of the soul.”

The Apostle Paul quotes here the entire passage from our prophet. First, as we noted above, the words: ‘It will surely come and will not be delayed’, attributed by Habakkuk to the Chaldean vision for a set time, are applied by the Apostle to the vision of the end, that is, to the coming of Christ in glory—not to an event, but to a person, to Him who is coming and will not delay. Then we read the quotation: ‘But the righteous (or “my righteous one”, the righteous of God) shall live by faith.’ — This means that the righteous must live by faith until the coming of Christ. This life of faith belongs exclusively to the righteous. It is the main theme of chapter 11 of this epistle, where we see the life of faith described in all its various aspects, whether it be, as in the case of Abel, of drawing near to God through sacrifice and thereby being declared righteous; or, as in the

case of Enoch, of walking with God; or, as in the case of Noah, of exercising patience whilst preaching this righteousness during the long years of waiting whilst the ark was being built; or, finally, as in the case of the patriarchs, of living as pilgrims and sojourners, awaiting a better homeland. Throughout, the apostle demonstrates that the life of the righteous is a life of faith and that it leads to glory.

In these three passages, righteousness, life and faith are therefore inseparable, but each passage emphasises one of these three principles, without neglecting the others, which cannot be separated from it.

This same chapter 10 of Hebrews complements the quotation from Habakkuk in a remarkable way. The prophet had said: ‘Behold, his soul is puffed up with pride; there is no uprightness in him; but the righteous shall live by his faith.’ Paul rephrases the sentence and presents it thus: “But the righteous shall live by faith, and if anyone draws back, my soul takes no pleasure in him.’ This second part of the sentence, as translated in

the Septuagint, corresponds to the words: ‘His soul, puffed up with pride, is not upright within him.’ Paul here contrasts ‘the one who draws back’ with the one ‘who lives by faith’; the former perishes, is lost; the other preserves his life. Habakkuk depicts the former as puffed up with pride and applies this character to the Chaldean enemy more than to any other. The Apostle, using the Septuagint version, applies it amongst the Hebrews to whom he was writing, to those among them who were professing Christians and were in danger of falling away. He transposes the two phrases so as not to suggest that, as in the prophet, this refers to proud nations, but rather to those of Israel who, having known, professed and practised Christianity, have failed in righteousness, and whose Jewish pride has reverted to the religion of works. Here we have one of the many examples of how the Spirit of God makes use of an incomplete, though not inaccurate, translation, for the Hebrew text deliberately leaves a certain vagueness regarding the word ‘his soul’, whilst clearly applying it to the Chaldean. Never is the soul of one who turns back to the law upright, and it is always pride that separates him from Christ and from grace; thus God ‘takes

no pleasure in him’, whereas He takes pleasure in the righteous man who lives humbly before Him by faith.

One cannot emphasise enough the value all these quotations acquire for us through the various applications the Holy Spirit gives them. ‘The righteous shall live by his faith’—this, then, is the central theme of the book of Habakkuk. The prophet’s faith had already been demonstrated, in chapter 1:12, in his relationship with God. But that was not all; he had to live by it to the very end, and the Lord goes on to develop this truth in relation to the Chaldean, the enemy of Israel.

‘And far worse, wine is treacherous; this man is arrogant and cannot keep still, he who widens his desire like Sheol, and is like death, and cannot be satisfied; and he gathers all the nations to himself, and gathers all the peoples to himself’ (v. 5).

This man, the Chaldean, is intoxicated by his own importance and his ambitious lusts. He cannot be content with the successes he has achieved, and is never satisfied (Prov. 30:16; Isaiah 5:14). He makes himself the centre of everything, of nations and peoples. Is this not, from beginning to end, in days

gone by as in the present, the mindset, the desire, the policy of the leaders of nations? The ambitious selfishness of these men may cloak itself in the name of ‘the greatness of their nation’, and seek to make it dominate over other peoples, but at heart it is nothing but pride that sacrifices everything to its own individual greatness. God had given power to Babylon following the unfaithfulness of His people, but He could not tolerate man exercising that power apart from Him and to satisfy his ambitious heart, preoccupied with itself rather than submitting to God.

God will judge him, but first we shall see the curse fall upon him from the mouths of all those he has oppressed. They will unravelling his motives, condemn his tendencies, and curse his iniquity and his pride.

Verse 5 serves as an introduction to the Song that follows.

Verses 6-20

The ‘Song of Misery’ as a prelude to future glory

The ‘Song of Sorrows’ is a true poem, consisting of five stanzas. Each stanza has three verses and, except for the fifth, which deviates slightly from this rule, begins with the word ‘Woe’. The third verse of the first four stanzas begins with the word ‘For’ and evokes the atmosphere of ancient choruses, drawing the conclusion from the ‘Woe’ announced in the first two verses (cf. Ex. 15:20). ‘Will not all those [whom he has oppressed] utter a proverb against him, and a parable and riddles against him?’ (v. 6). We are warned here that what follows is not merely a curse uttered by the oppressed against their oppressors. This song directed against the Chaldean takes us right to the end of time. Not once is the monarch in question named, for the characteristics by which he is stigmatised do not belong to him alone. It is a proverb, an allegory to be understood, a riddle that must be deciphered, and which leads us right up to the establishment of Christ’s glorious reign. The ‘Woes’ are in some respects reminiscent of those pronounced in Isaiah 5 and Micah 2:1, 2, but those were addressed to the people of Israel,

whereas these are addressed to the nations and their leader. This song concerning Babylon and its King is the Lord's final answer to the prophet's second 'Why', concerning the oppressor of his people (1:13). God had begun by answering His beloved servant, who stood watch on the tower to see what his God would say to him, that the first requirement for the righteous was faith. Faith could not hope for the immediate suppression of evil; one had to live by faith and patience, and not rely on the imminent fulfilment of the things one hoped for. And indeed, faith is that fulfilment until it is converted into sight.

FIRST STANZA

'Woe to him who hoards what is not his own: ... how long? ... and who burdens himself with a load of wages! — Will not those who bite you rise up suddenly? And will not those who torment you awaken? And you will be their prey. — For you have plundered many nations, and all the rest of the peoples will plunder you, because of the blood of men and the violence done to the land, to the city, and to all who dwell therein" (vv. 6–8).

The first ‘Woe’ is pronounced upon him who amasses the wealth of others, wealth that does not belong to him. He takes upon himself a burden of pledges against his usurious loans. The same things had been seen in Israel (Amos 2:6–8). The play on words: ‘pledges’ or ‘thick mud’, indicates that these odious depredations of the Chaldean could result in nothing but his shame, that he would reap no other benefit than contempt for the filth of his usury. Such practices are an abomination in the sight of God. How many punishments might the leaders of nations avoid—for themselves and for the peoples they rule—if only they realised the abject nature of such acts!

The ‘How long?’ placed on the lips of the oppressed who sing seems to me to correspond to that of the prophet concerning Israel (1:2). It is the ‘How long?’ of the nations. Through faith Habakkuk has learnt to be patient and knows that the vision will not lie, but the nations that are spared will also have to wait for the fulfilment of this hope. Suddenly, this man who seizes the property of others to enrich himself will be attacked by those he had plundered. Like a thief assailed by dogs, he will be bitten by the nations and will in turn become their prey

(v. 7). Verse 8 is the conclusion and confirmation of what has gone before. This man had plundered; the remnant of the peoples who will be spared to witness the coming of Christ (for, let us not forget, the fall of Babylon is but an allegory of the end times) will in turn plunder the usurper. This vengeance will not be caused solely by the blood of men shed by this cruel nation, but by ‘the violence done to the land, to the city and to all who dwell therein’. Faced with the iniquity of his people, the prophet had cried out: ‘Violence!’ and ‘How long?’ God had replied that this violence would be punished by that which the Chaldeans would inflict upon Israel. But now the time has come when the violence of the Chaldeans against Israel will be punished by the nations. Thus one retribution follows another in God’s governance. The land, the city and those who dwell therein are, without a doubt—despite the assertions of critics—Palestine, Jerusalem and its inhabitants; it therefore seems unnecessary to provide the countless proofs thereof. God never loses sight of his people. If the iniquity committed by the enemy, if the plundering and murder of which he has been guilty towards the nations, find just retribution, how much more so

when his violence falls upon Israel, whom God has undoubtedly forsaken for a time, but with whom he will renew his relationship once the judgments have passed. God never forgets those who belong to him, and, if it pleases him to discipline them, woe to those who seek their own gain in it.

SECOND STANZA

‘Woe to him who gains unjust profit for his house, to set his nest on high, to escape the hand of calamity. — You have taken counsel to cover your house with shame, to destroy many peoples, and you have sinned against your own soul. — For from the wall the stone cries out, and from the rafters the beam answers!’ (vv. 9–11).

The enemy is accused here of making unjust gain to build himself a stable house that need not fear adversity (see Jer. 22:13). In this way, he would seek to ward off all misfortune, and it is then that misfortune overtakes him. Although individuals may apply these reproaches to themselves, they are addressed, throughout, to rulers. A heavy and terrible responsibility weighs upon them, and is not this character of most crowned

heads constantly repeated throughout history? To violate the territory of other nations and seize it for the sake of expansion, then to base the greatness of one's own house on what has been extorted from others, to build one's nest high; to establish the power of one's family—is this not the story of the Napoleons and of all emperors? The same pride drove Edom to build its nest amongst the stars (Obad. 4). All these schemes, so painstakingly devised, ultimately serve only to cover in shame the house that the princes were so keen to raise so high. They find themselves having sinned against their own lives. Every stone, every rafter of the framework of this edifice built upon fraud by ambition and pride will be a living witness against the oppressor. On the other hand, the man of faith never dreams of enlarging his own house; his happiness and glory lie in gathering, as David did, the materials that establish the house of his God. This is what Solomon, Joash and Josiah also did (1 Kings 5:18; 2 Kings 12:12; 22:6) to enlarge and strengthen the temple of the Lord.

THIRD STANZA

‘Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town on iniquity! — Behold, is it not from the Lord of hosts that the peoples labour for the fire, and that the nations weary themselves for nothing? — For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea-bed’ (vv. 12–14).

The first calamity spoke of the nation, the second of the ‘house’; the third tells us of the capital. It is not ‘the city’ (Jerusalem), as in v. 8, but a city, a settlement. In its immediate application to the Chaldeans, this passage speaks to us of Babylon, which had been founded upon the slaughter of nations and the blood of men. The same was true of Nineveh (Nahum 3:1). All this labour of the peoples will end in the fire of judgement, and their efforts will result only in ruin: nothing will remain of it; ‘they labour in vain’. Is it not a solemn thought that all the glory, the riches, the reputation for beauty with which the great capitals of kingdoms are adorned, must vanish and be swallowed up in nothingness? But faith sees and understands this ‘enigma’ and the reason for all these up-

heavals. Christ's eternal kingdom can only be established upon the judgement of evil; for it to be founded, iniquity must vanish and all that rises up against the Ruler of the earth must be brought low and humbled. The way of the Lord can only be made straight by the levelling of the high mountains (Isaiah 40:3–5). Then the glory of the Lord will be known to the whole world and will fill it. Evil will be as though drowned in the depths of the sea. From time immemorial the Lord had announced that these things would come to pass in spite of the judgements He was compelled to pronounce (Numbers 14:21; Isaiah 11:9). Here, in a single verse, we find the picture of Christ's glorious millennial reign, described in such detail by the prophet Isaiah. It will be 'the restoration of all things of which God has spoken by the mouth of his holy prophets of old' (Acts 3:21).

FOURTH STANZA

'Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbour, who pours out his wineskin and makes them drunk, so that you may gaze upon their nakedness! — You have filled yourself with shame rather than with glory; drink, you too, and reveal your uncir-

cumcision! The cup in the Lord’s right hand has turned towards you, and there shall be a shameful vomiting upon your glory. — For the violence done to Lebanon shall cover you, and the destruction that terrified the beasts, because of the blood of men, and the violence done to the land, to the city, and to all who dwell therein” (vv. 15–17).

This stanza describes the abject and shameful debauchery that characterised that proud Chaldean nation. How dare they speak of their glory, when the choir has just celebrated the glory of the Lord? ‘You are sated with shame rather than with glory.’ ‘There shall be a shameful vomiting upon thy glory,’ he cries out with ironic bitterness, and in his vengeful wrath. All this corruption is accompanied by violence; for, since the Fall, these vices have always aided and complemented one another amongst men gathered in society (Gen. 6:11–13). The glory of the Lord will cover the earth, but man’s violence will not be forgotten; it will fall back upon him and cover him. Violence (note the repetition of this word) will meet violence, as we have already seen in chapter 1, and the chorus adds, by way of a refrain, what the Lord feels when his land, his city and his

people are subjected to the violence of the enemy (see v. 8). The prophet Isaiah places this song about the king of Babylon, no longer in the mouths of the nations, but in that of Israel itself, which rejoices at seeing the pride of the king of Babylon descend into Sheol, his sceptre broken! The cedars of Lebanon rejoice over him and say: ‘Since you have fallen, the feller has not come up against us.’ ‘Your pride has gone down to Sheol, the sound of your harps. Worms are spread out beneath you, and maggots are your covering’ (Isaiah 14:8, 11).

FIFTH STANZA

‘What profit is there in a carved image, that the craftsman should carve it? What use is a cast image, teaching falsehood, that the craftsman should trust in his own work to make mute idols? — Woe to him who says to the wood: “Awake!” to the mute stone: “Arise!” Should it teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath within it. — The Lord is in the sanctuary of his holiness;... let all the earth be silent before him!’ (vv. 18–20).

As we have said, the fifth stanza differs from the others in its structure. It seems to me that the reason for this lies in the fact that God is directly involved. It is no longer against the nations, nor even against God's people, that the immeasurable pride of the king of Babylon has been raised, but against the Lord himself. He has set his false images of wood and iron, of gold and silver, against the true God. This is the principal cause of his final destruction. Note that throughout this 'allegory' the Spirit of God takes care not to name the king of Babylon. It is a 'riddle' which, as we have seen, goes far beyond the historical judgement of the Chaldean and extends to the glorious reign of Christ. Revelation tells us that another Babylon, the final development of an idolatrous religion, will appear on the scene in the last days. Her golden cup will be filled with abominations (or idols), and the Roman Empire, the final incarnation of the general monarchies, will have the same idolatrous pretensions as the head of the first empire with its golden statue (Rev. 17:4; 13:14, 15; Dan. 3:1). This idolatry is condemned by all the prophets (see Isaiah 44:9–20; Jer. 2:27; 3:9, etc.).

It is highly significant that it is ‘the nations and peoples’ (vv. 5 and 6) who here pronounce doom upon the worshippers of idols and proclaim the vanity of pagan religions. For their song is a song of the end, when they will have abandoned the paganism of old to turn to the true God and acknowledge his kingdom. The Babylon of the end is implied in this allegory, and this is why the song concludes by acknowledging the Lord alone as the one whom the peoples worship. It is not merely, as in v. 14, the knowledge of His glory that completely covers the renewed earth, but the knowledge of Himself. He will be ‘in the palace of His holiness’, in His temple in Jerusalem, for this term does not apply to heaven, but to His house on earth (Micah 1:2; Ps. 11:4). Now the glory of God, which had departed from the temple (Ezek. 11:22), has returned there (Ezek. 43:4). The whole earth is silent before Him. It is He who reigns, and henceforth no one will dare to raise their voice in His presence and before His Majesty. A fitting conclusion to this Song of the peoples now subject to His power. How beautiful is this ending! How much the prophet’s anxious heart must be reassured by this vision of the future! He sees in advance the

outcome of the faith that has patiently awaited the result of God's ways: Man's pride humbled, the nations delivered and subdued, the people of Israel restored, the Lord glorified, making Jerusalem and His temple the centre of His glory, all creatures falling silent before Him! The prophet himself has forgotten to 'replies' (2:1), and how could he do so when God, instead of disputing with him, has set before his eyes His righteousness in the judgement of evil, His grace towards His people, revealed also in the restoration of the nations, and finally His glory, covering the whole earth—that reign of righteousness and peace before which the whole world can only fall silent!

CHAPTER 3

The Prayer of Habakkuk

“A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, set to Shigionoth” (v. 1). The conclusion of all that the prophet heard from the mouth of the Lord is summed up in a prayer that is at once supplication, thanksgiving and praise, born of a faith fully assured of the

Lord's faithfulness to his promises (*). This prayer consists of four parts.

(*) The word 'Shiguionoth', the plural of 'Shiggaion', 'loud cry' (Ps. 7), seems to indicate, according to a recent critic, a series of cries and exalted praises, comprising what is here called 'a prayer'. This interpretation seems to us very plausible in view of the natural divisions we find in the prayer of Habakkuk.

[Part 1: v.2]

The first part comprises v. 2:

‘O Lord, I have heard what you have declared, and I am afraid. O Lord, revive your work in the midst of the years; in the midst of the years, make it known. In your anger, remember mercy!’

In chapter 1:2, the prophet had said: ‘How long shall I cry out, and will you not hear? I cry out to you...’ How could he have uttered such a word: ‘You will not hear’? In all that follows, the Lord, in his teachings, shows him that he has heard and that he always hears. He explains to him, with an almost fatherly condescension, the justice of the judgments he brings upon his

people and upon the enemies of his people, but at the same time shows him that the righteous are not without a way to endure the judgments, for they shall live by their faith. Finally, He declares to him that God will be glorified and personally exalted in a time to come, and that the whole world will be filled with the knowledge of His glory.

Now the prophet can say: ‘I have heard’, not: ‘you have heard’, for my first question was merely the product of the weakness of my faith; but I now have knowledge of your thoughts; you have given it to me; I need not wait for your reign to understand them; faith enables me to grasp them!

But at the announcement of your judgments, ‘I was afraid’. Indeed, how terrible are your judgments, and designed to fill the heart with a salutary fear! But now I have one thing to ask of you, and how I long for it: ‘Revive your work in grace towards your people! ‘In the midst of the years’, before the time of the end of which you have spoken (2:3), act in grace among us! The deliverance from Egypt marked the ‘beginning of the years’ when the Lord had manifested his work in favour of his

people, and the prophet desires that God should revive it now, before bringing in, at the end of the years, the millennial deliverance. He knows that this is now the time of wrath: all the more reason to appeal to God's mercy, for it is precisely when His judgments are unleashed upon the world that we are called to rely, today as then, on the work of His grace. Habakkuk's prophetic prayer will be answered at the time of Israel's revival, which will result in the formation of a believing Remnant, of whom the prophet is the type before our eyes.

[Part 2: vv. 3–15]

The second part comprises verses 3 to 15. It describes the Lord's past deliverances and his future intervention on behalf of his people.

1st Section, vv. 3–6

This section describes the exodus from Egypt.

‘God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah. His majesty covers the heavens, and his praise fills the earth; and his splendour was like the light: rays shot forth from

his hand; and there his strength was hidden. The plague went before him, and a flaming fire went forth under his feet’ (vv. 3–5).

These verses show us the Lord coming forth from the East, from Teman and from Mount Paran, which overlooks the desert of that name; in short, from the territory of Edom, to come to the aid of his people and deliver them from the bondage of Egypt by destroying the nations that oppress or oppose him (*).

(*) In Deuteronomy 33:2, the Lord comes from Sinai, from Seir and from Paran to deliver his people and give them the Law.

In Judges 5:4, Deborah’s song, like that of Habakkuk, celebrates the intervention of the Lord coming from Seir to destroy the enemies of his people. Psalm 18:7–19 celebrates this same intervention, but it focuses primarily on the enemies of the end times. Psalm 68 likens the deliverance from Egypt to that of the people at the end of time. Psalm 77 draws from the deliverance from Egypt the assurance that the Lord will deliver his people from the great tribulation of the end. — All these passages, then, like the prayer of Habakkuk, celebrate God’s intervention

in the past to redeem his people from Egypt, as a pledge of a future intervention in the last days.

‘He stood and measured the earth; he looked and scattered the nations; and the ancient mountains were shattered, the everlasting hills crumbled’ (v. 6). The nations that tried to oppose Israel were scattered; the ancient power of Egypt was suddenly shattered; the everlasting hills, the authorities firmly established by God himself and which, for that very reason, ought to have lasted for ever, crumbled long ago before Him who came down from his holy mountain to deliver his people.

The prophet adds: ‘His ways are everlasting.’ What assurance this thought gives to faith! What He has done in the past He will do in the future; there is in Him neither variation nor shadow of turning. Whether it be judgement or deliverance, His ways of holiness and love are repeated and unfold, ever the same, to the ends of the eternal hills! (Gen. 49:36).

2nd Section, verses 7–15

In this section we find the similarity between the future prophetic deliverance and that from Egypt, which was but a faint foreshadowing of it.

‘I saw the tents of Cushan in distress; the curtains of the land of Midian trembled’ (v. 7). The prophet now contemplates events that have not yet taken place, but which he regards in vision as past, and relating to future things that his faith holds to be absolutely certain. The regions of Cush to the west and north, and Arabia to the east and south, will tremble before the Lord. The deliverance of the past, when Israel came out of Egypt, is far from matching the scope of this future deliverance. — ‘Was it against the rivers that the Lord was angry? Or was it against the rivers that your wrath was kindled? Against the sea, your fury, that you rode upon your horses, upon your chariots of salvation?’ (v. 8). If He abolishes the boundaries of the nations and strikes the confused mass of peoples Himself, His purpose in doing so is not merely judgement, for His chariots of war are chariots of salvation. Undoubtedly, the judgments must run their course to the very end; the blows foretold by the word of

God must fall upon the peoples, and the boundaries of the nations must be overturned (v. 9) ; that the established powers that rule shall be seized with terror; that the whole world shall cry out in distress, raising its supplicating hands in vain amidst the deluge that shall fall upon it (v. 10); nothing shall be able to halt the battle waged by the Lord against the wicked until their total extermination. It will be as in the days of Joshua, when ‘the sun and the moon stood still until the nation had avenged itself on its enemies’ (v. 11; Josh. 10:12). But, moreover, divine wrath will not spare the land itself, the land of Israel. The unbelieving and apostate people will, like the other nations, receive the blows of the Lord’s wrath (v. 12).

The salvation of Israel—such will be the result of this immense outpouring of calamities. ‘You went forth for the salvation of Your people, for the salvation of Your anointed; You shattered the roof of the wicked man’s house, laying bare the foundations down to the neck’ (v. 13). Is this not a marvellous thing? This small people—and yet it will be represented only by a remnant seemingly insignificant—is so very much the object of the Almighty God’s care that He will turn the whole world upside

down to save it. For Israel is his anointed: he has marked it with the seal of his Spirit; he has acquired it at the cost of his own life; he desires to have it as a companion in his glory, close to him, at the centre of a government where his eternal justice shall reign. Though true Israel is of little account in the eyes of men, it shall be Christ's 'special treasure' on the day of his power. We are not speaking here of the Church, the Bride of the Lamb, whose blessings are exalted above those of Israel, as the heavens are above the earth. The Old Testament never speaks to us of that bride, but our hearts are drawn to 'the Jewish woman' because Christ, the Lord, her Messiah and her King, is drawn to her, beholds her with delight as his precious jewel, and will fulfil towards her all his ancient promises, of which he has never repented. Whatever the nation's unfaithfulness may have been, the heart of her King has never wavered towards her. Though He had to cast her aside for a time as an unfaithful wife, He will receive her again in the near future, after purifying her in the fire of judgement, through that tribulation which, even beforehand, made our prophet's soul tremble with fear. We find the thought expressed in v. 13 in the

marvellous passage from Isaiah where we see the Lord coming from Edom, from Bozrah, marching in the majesty of his strength. He alone trod the winepress and crushed the nations in his fury, for, as he says: ‘The day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year of my redeemed had come’ (Isaiah 63:1–6).

It is then that ‘the top of the wicked man’s house shall be broken down, laying bare the foundations even to the neck’ (v. 13), a passage undoubtedly alluding to the Chaldean who had built his house upon iniquity (2:9), but directing our thoughts towards ‘the wicked one’ of the end, whose house shall be destroyed, from the top to the base. The same applies in v. 14: the final conflict takes place there. All the nations ‘come like a whirlwind to scatter’ this poor, afflicted and powerless Remnant and ‘devour it in secret’, for we have pointed out more than once in our prophetic studies that the nations of the end times will not openly display their designs, but will harbour the secret intention of snatching the prey from their allies of the day. But when Christ appears, it is enough for the horses of this mighty warrior to show themselves to sweep through and reduce to nothing the formidable power mustered by Satan

against Him and His people. Chapter 19 of Revelation (vv. 11–16) presents us with a sublime picture of this battle scene, showing it to us in its heavenly aspect, something which Old Testament prophecy never does.

[Part 3: v. 16]

The third part comprises verse 16.

‘I heard, and my insides trembled; at the voice I heard my lips quivered, decay entered my bones, and I shook within myself, that I might have rest on the day of distress, when he who attacks the people shall rise up against them.’

This verse is the conclusion and, as it were, the summary of what precedes it. As the prophet had expressed in verse 2, he had heard and had been afraid at the prospect of divine wrath, but he had interceded for the people, that the Lord might remember His mercy towards them. Now, the whole scene of the end has passed before his eyes. He recalled the judgments once executed upon the land of Egypt and upon all the enemies of Israel, when God sought to redeem His people. His prophetic

gaze then turned to the judgments of the end, and he understood that, like those of old, they could have no other purpose than the salvation of God's people. He saw and realised all this, yet it did not prevent him—far more so than at the beginning of his song—from trembling to the very depths of his being and feeling decay entering his bones, like Daniel before 'the great vision', when 'his countenance was changed to decay and he retained no strength' (Dan. 10:8); a necessary preparation for receiving prophetic revelations and for entering into the thoughts of God. Thus the angel reassures Daniel: 'Fear not, O man greatly beloved; peace be unto thee! Be strong, yes, be strong!' (v. 19). It is the same here in this condensed scene which the Word presents to us. The prophet trembles and undergoes a thorough examination of his own heart, but 'that he might have rest in the day of distress'. This work of conscience, this sense of utter helplessness, this conviction of the corruption of our nature, are indispensable for finding rest, whether in regard to man's past, present, or future history. Here, this rest is future. The prophet desires it for the day of distress which is, as we have seen so often in the course of

these studies, the day of great tribulation for Israel, the day when the enemy ‘will rise up against the people and attack them’. We know, from a multitude of passages in the prophets, who this enemy will be, and what armies will besiege Jerusalem. The prophet is assured of final deliverance and definitive rest, but the Word presents us here with an anticipated rest, the rest of the soul, even in the midst of the cruelest trials, a rest that only complete self-judgement and the knowledge of God’s love and mercy can give.

[Part 4: vv. 17–19]

The fourth part comprises verses 17 to 19.

‘For the fig tree shall not blossom, nor shall there be fruit in the vines; the labour of the olive tree shall fail, and the fields shall yield no food; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no cattle in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will take joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord, the Lord, is my strength; he will make my feet like those of a deer, and he will set me on my high places.’”

In this fourth section of the Song, we find a magnificent expression of the prophet's faith—a faith that had been growing ever since the beginning of his conversations with the Lord. Although, in verse 16, he was looking forward to a future deliverance, this did not mean that it might not be delayed. Thus his faith responded to the word: 'If it tarries, wait for it' (2:3). He therefore awaited it, certain that it would be preceded by distress, but that in the midst of this raging storm there would be for him a sure refuge, a small sanctuary, where he might find rest in the presence of God.

Now this hope is enough for him. He knows that rest will come when the distress has passed. But what is he to do today? The present time is a time of utter scarcity. It corresponds to the current period the Jewish people are going through. The fig tree, the vine, the olive tree—all symbols of this people—are fruitless; nothing is produced for God. Wheat, sheep, oxen—everything is lacking; there is not even a sacrifice left to bring Israel into relationship with God!

Is this not also what our souls should be feeling in the present day? Spiritual scarcity and famine; the extreme weakness of Christian witness; a profession of faith that is lifeless and disconnected from God... ‘But I!’ adds the prophet. — This righteous man who lives by his faith has grasped the promised salvation as something present. But it is not in rest, which he has not yet attained, nor even in salvation, that he rejoices. He has a joy far more excellent than that; he possesses the Lord Himself, the God of his salvation. This God who hides nothing from him, who treats him as a friend, who reveals to him His most secret thoughts, on whose mercy he can rely when all else fails, this God whose blessings are eternal, his Lord, is the One in whom he rejoices and will always rejoice: ‘We will be glad and rejoice in you,’ says the Shulamite; ‘we will remember your love more than wine’ (Song of Songs 1:4). Thus ‘God gives songs of joy in the night’ (Job 35:10). The prophet is now in full communion with the Lord. He understood, from the very beginning, that “the Lord, his God and his Holy One”, is light and that his eyes are “too pure to look on evil” (1:12, 13), but now he rejoices in Him, he savours the perfections of His per-

son, and understands His love, the love of the “God of his salvation”.

But the Lord is not only his joy; He is also his strength (v. 19), when he, the prophet, has no strength of his own. ‘Blessed is the man whose strength is in you!’ (Ps. 84:5). Thanks to Him, in a time of extreme weakness, in a time when none of the promised things has yet been attained, our feet are made like those of does; we can ascend to our high places, and traverse them with a light, joyful, swift and free step. The heavenly places belong to us; they are ours, the domain assigned to us. What does scarcity matter to those who possess the Lord, and His strength, and His joy, to those who enjoy every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places?

‘To the choirmaster. To the tune of Neguinoth’ (stringed instruments).

How, then, should we be surprised that, in these calamitous times, Habakkuk rediscovers worship as in the golden days of David and Solomon? He entrusts his Song to the choirmaster to

be sung with violins and harps. He anticipates the future praise of Israel in its restored temple.

And we, beloved, do we not have the same privilege? The certainty of the absolute nothingness of earthly things draws us towards the Lord, and, when we taste the unfathomable riches of Christ, a single thought takes hold of our whole being: to throw ourselves at his feet and worship him! The worship of God's children can be found amidst the ruins of Christendom.

Let us conclude this exposition with the words of another, concerning our prophet: 'Nothing is more beautiful than this unfolding of the thoughts of the Spirit of God: Amidst the sorrows and anxieties produced by the Spirit, God responds to impart knowledge and strengthen faith, so that the heart may be in communion with Him.'

SUMMARY

Habakkuk occupies a place entirely apart among the prophets, although Jeremiah, whilst embracing a much vaster horizon, resembles him in some ways as regards his personal experiences.

At first the prophet rebels against the reign of violence amongst his people; he cries out: ‘How long?’ But as soon as the Lord announces to him the judgment of Israel by the Chaldeans, the soul of the man of God is deeply grieved for his nation. Like Moses, he takes up, as an intercessor, the cause of Israel before the Lord. God answers him that He will judge the Gentiles whom He has made His rod; but Habakkuk himself learns a personal lesson valid at all times and in all circumstances: ‘The righteous shall live by his faith’. The principle of faith is the only one on which he must rely, even in the most trying of days. This verse forms the central core of the whole prophecy of Habakkuk. From then on, his faith probes the reasons for the judgments, considers past deliverances, realises future deliverances, and endures present miseries with an unmingled joy that is attached to the person of the Saviour, with the strength of God Himself and the free and joyful enjoyment of heavenly and eternal blessings. Enriched by such blessings, the man of faith has found access to the sanctuary, and enters it to worship God.

The path of faith is marvellous, for it lifts us above all obstacles, even above our own experiences, and fixes our gaze upon things unseen, for the things that are seen are temporary, but those that are unseen are eternal!

