

# CONFESSIONS OF A SEMINARIAN

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## HABAKKUK 2:4 IN ROMANS 1:17

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**HABAKKUK 2:4** - *BEHOLD, HIS SOUL IS PUFFED UP; IT IS NOT UPRIGHT WITHIN HIM, BUT THE RIGHTEOUS SHALL LIVE BY HIS FAITH.*

**ROMANS 1:17** - *FOR IN IT THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IS REVEALED FROM FAITH FOR FAITH, AS IT IS WRITTEN, THE RIGHTEOUS SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.*

This is my thesis paper on Paul's usage of Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17. This is a direct quotation of the text itself, although there are some difficulties I will address later in making that claim. My contention is that Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4 here because he wants to show that the faith in YHWH Habakkuk describes has now been shifted to faith in Christ as YHWH. That means that Paul is declaring that the righteous will walk in faith in Jesus Christ and that anyone, Jew or Greek, who has that faith is reckoned righteous.

Before looking at Paul's usage and arguing my point there, it is important to look at Habakkuk in its original context considering the original audience. Doing this first allows us to catch the full impact of Paul's quotation of it, and also allows us to test the validity of the claim I just made in stating my thesis. First we will consider the original audience and dating of Habakkuk. Some scholars favor a view that looks at Habakkuk as a collection of parts with different dates for each part. "Chapter 1:1-11 was likely written in 600 B.C. during the reign of Jehoachim. Chapter 1:12-2:8 was likely written shortly after the captivity. Their view was also that chapter three was an addition from the

Maccabean period” (Smith, Ward, and Bewer pg.4-5). While this is not an uncommon view, there are other approaches to the book of Habakkuk that may be more helpful in determining authorship and dating. “New perceptions emerging from hermeneutics, have fostered approaches which take books as “wholes”...I incline to the view that the struggle and its resolution imaged in this book are the product of one person” (Rast 170). So while some see reason to split up the book into separate parts, there is precedent to treat the book as a unified whole written by one person. That is the view that I will take in addressing the material in this book. However, I will allow for the possibility of short temporal gaps in the writing of this book that follow the course of the author’s lifetime, almost like a journal. So Smith, Ward, and Bewer’s assertion that the first two sections were likely written several years apart, all around 600 B.C., fits with the concept of the book as a journal, especially in light of 2:1 where Habakkuk is waiting on the Lord to answer.

So now that we have settled on an author and a date, we must turn to the event of that time in the life of the covenant community to understand what world Habakkuk lives in. “At this time the destruction wrought by the armies of the new Babylonian regime produced not only serious social and political upheaval, it also fostered a spreading doubt regarding the workings of the God of Israel” (Rast 169). Since Genesis 11, Babylon has been the great enemy of God’s decree in the world. That they should have any victory against God’s people left the covenant community asking questions about God’s power and ability they never had before. This is the sense of doubt and fear with which Habakkuk accuses God of not working in and on His people. It also shapes the answer that God gives in response to the accusation. God responds to Habakkuk in such a way

that harkens back to the Decalogue given to Moses at Sinai. “This vision now revealed to Habakkuk compares in significance with the original giving of the law to Moses.

Perhaps with good reason Jewish tradition declared that the 613 laws of the Pentateuch had been reduced to one by Habakkuk” (Robertson 56). Robertson is keying in on the fact that God asked Habakkuk to write this down on some tablets, language that would have referred back to the giving of the law to a Jewish reader. Also, the usage of tablets would have indicated that the message given was intended to last for some time. Again, more specifically stated, Patterson reiterates this point of the importance of the text.

“Rabbi Simlai had asserted that the 613 commandments received by Moses had been summed up by David in eleven commandments (Ps 15), by Isaiah in six (Isa 33:15), by Micah in three (Mic 6:8), by Isaiah again in two (Isa 56:1), and finally by Amos in one (Amos 5:4), but that Rabbi Nachman ben Isaac had substituted Hab 2:4b for Amos 5:4 as the summary in one commandment” (Patterson 211).

However, Moses wasn't the only biblical character that its readers were reminded of in this divine word. Habakkuk's complaint against God shows his impatience in seeing God's story played out, specifically looking for the deliverance of his people from the Babylonians. “Once Abraham the first father of God's people had to be weaned from expecting too sudden a solution to the tension of his childlessness despite God's promises. His experience forced him by faith to look beyond the current experience to his day to the distant future. Now Habakkuk struggles with an identical tension” (Robertson 57). Not only does Habakkuk's struggle remind the reader of Abraham's impatience, so does God's response in 2:4 that the righteous shall live by faith.

“Abraham's belief in God had a very specific focus in that ancient context. He believed

God respecting the promise of a seed (Gen 15:4-5), and so his faith was reckoned as righteousness. This blessing of a seed finds its full meaning only in terms of a salvation for God's people accomplished by a singular saving hero (Gen 3:15)" (Robertson 59). God has reminded Habakkuk of the history of his people and God's faithfulness to them. He encapsulates the whole purpose of the divine story in one reference.

As Williams discusses in his book *Far as the Curse is Found*, there is a profound sense among God's people of the story God is weaving through history, and this passage brings to light those covenant heads. So in light of the immediate difficulties that Habakkuk was facing, "the declaration 'but the righteous one will live through his steadfast faith' must consequently be seen as a new kind of challenge to holding on before the vision was fulfilled and the oppressor dealt with" (Rast 173). God basically reaffirms that He is still in control of the story, and that nothing can change that. While both Abraham's impatience and Habakkuk's are related to a possible failing of the covenant promises God has made, God's reassurance here is in the face of near total defeat at the hands of the enemy.

This new situation leads one to wonder about the nature of the righteousness imparted by God to the faithful one. Does the new situation force a new understanding of God's usage of the key terms "righteous" and "faith?" "The judicially righteous of Habakkuk 2:4b therefore are those justified precisely as was Abraham. He *believed* God, and it was *reckoned* to him as righteousness. The 'just' of Habakkuk 2:4b therefore are the 'justified-by-faith' (Robertson 65). There doesn't appear to be any significant change to what God has meant by the righteousness given and the faith required. In both cases it means a trust in God even when all evidence points to God's covenant promises being

left unfulfilled. He keeps His covenant and no one can undo His work, even the mightiest nation of the day. There is a distinction made by this verse between the righteousness received and the faith of the believer. “The phrase” the righteous shall live by faith “explains the way by which the gift of life is received rather than the way by which a sinner is declared righteous” (Robertson 63-64). This important distinction brought out by Robertson shows that at every stage through God’s working with his covenant people, it has always been on a basis of God’s work given to man. But because God’s covenant story is headed somewhere, there is an expectation that He will continue to be faithful in the future.

As God has reminded His people about his steadfastness in the past, the fact that God’s covenant is yet to be fulfilled would be remarkably clear to the readers of this oracle. So there is an eschatological aspect to this passage, and that is that “the thrust of the second oracle is toward an anticipated outcome, delayed for the moment but assuredly to come about, when God would act anew” (Rast 173). The assurance given through this oracle, looking back at what God had done, pointed forward in such a way that encouraged hope among the covenant members that God would remain faithful. However, because this was a new situation, there was the forward expectation that God would respond in a new fashion. Along with this new action expected in the future is a renewed vigilance to keep a watchful eye open for how God might fulfill his word. “Now the prophet understands why the vision must be written. It is for the appointed time set by God. Its realization awaits events that are yet future” (Robertson 57). The eschatological fulfillment of God’s word at the appointed time carries with it implications for the immediate difficulties with the Babylonians. “While the odds might be strongly

against them in the face of the seemingly all-powerful Babylon, God will vindicate his people by giving them life, both temporally (in contrast to the Babylonians who would soon disappear from the world stage), and eschatologically” (Baker 60). Because God will not be thwarted in His work, Babylon cannot completely prevail against God’s people. While the victory Israel was looking for will not come in the form they were expecting, it will come. God’s people will not be completely wiped out and Babylon will fade out of existence. This solution is significantly slower than Israel wanted but it still proved their God faithful. It is because of this that “Habakkuk, although a small book, is nonetheless a turning point on the way toward a grand-scale visionary interpretation of the workings of God which finds expression in later books such as Daniel.” (Rast 174)

While this more or less handles the material in the Hebrew text, some interesting aspects are brought to light when comparing it to the Greek rendering in the LXX. The LXX says “my righteous one,” focusing on a person rather than a people. But once again, as the text points backward ultimately to Genesis 3:15, the promise of the one seed that would crush the serpents head is in view in this text. “So the personification of the hope of salvation by the translators of the Septuagint should not be viewed as a strange perversion of the words of Habakkuk, even though the Hebrew text does not appear to specify so pointedly a reference to a “person” who will bring about the fulfillment of the prophecy” (Robertson 59). The covenant community that received this text knew full well where the story was headed, and as they translated this text, they saw fit to include that aspect of the story in it. It is precisely that view that Paul brings out as he addresses this passage in Romans 1:17.

As we move into Romans it also benefits us to look at the audience and the context of the quotation. The audience was a mixed Jewish and Gentile congregation that Paul had never visited (Barclay 1-3). As a result, Paul chooses his words carefully, making them accessible to any listener. Without wasting any time, Paul dives right into the heart of his message that he explains in further detail through the course of the letter, but that we get to read in brief right at the beginning. “With these verses we begin the first main section of Romans, chapters 1-8. These chapters are really an exegesis of 1:16-17...1:16-17 is the theme; then 1:18-8:39 is the exegesis of that theme” (Schaefer 22). While Schaefer is certainly correct in declaring these verses to be one of the themes of this letter, verses 1-15 of this chapter add a full understanding to the impact of how Paul understands that theme. Some commentators isolate these two verses, and as a result declare that “the apostle does not set forth the details of his ‘gospel’” (Johnson 330). This view is in opposition to what we discussed in class regarding Paul’s beginning to this book. To anyone familiar with the development of the biblical story up to this point, as the Jews Paul was addressing certainly would have, Jesus being appointed the Son of God is Paul’s gospel. This calls upon the building of the biblical story’s idea of the Son of God from Adam as Matthew 1 tells, through Exodus 4 to the people of God being His Son, and to the Davidic King as the Son of God in 2 Samuel 7. That a Davidic heir had not sat on the throne since the Babylonian captivity was obvious to any Jew, but Paul’s declaration in the first part of chapter 1 is that Christ is appointed to be that heir as a result of his resurrection from the dead. In essence, Paul’s gospel is that the Davidic heir has come and that through Him God’s covenant promises find fulfillment.

So we see how important it is to keep these two key verses in the context of the whole letter Paul has written. As we focus in on the two verses themselves, there is much debate as to Paul's meaning in verse 17a when he says "the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith" (NASB translation). Johnson does a good job of discussing all of the theories regarding this phrase of Paul's, however in my mind he does not settle on one that fits the context of the gospel that Paul finished declaring in the first 6 verses of this chapter. Nevertheless, he states that "It is the opinion of some that the first phrase refers to saving faith and the second phrase to the life of faith. Others have suggested that the two phrases mean from God's faithfulness to man's faith. [E. H. Gifford] thinks Paul is saying that faith is the source of the revelation, and that, as the revelation progresses, it leads to increasing faith. C. K. Barrett" interprets it as "faith from start to finish." And finally, "Stifler...thought the first phrase indicated source of righteousness and the second indicated the goal for which God's provision of righteousness was designed. The divine righteousness is *out of* faith, that is, it has its origin in the believing heart" (Johnson 336-337). As I mentioned before, none of these interpretations are satisfactory in light of the groundwork that Paul laid regarding his gospel. Whatever interpretation we choose to take must connect Paul's gospel to what is to come, namely his quotation of Habakkuk. This is where the original significance of Habakkuk 2:4 aids our interpretation for what Paul is communicating to the Roman church.

As we look at the phrase "ek pisteos eis pistin" in the Greek, rendered above by the NASB as "from faith to faith," certain aspects of the Habakkuk quotation shed light on Paul's meaning. "Why does the Apostle employ a double prepositional phrase, when the first of the two, ek pisteos, corresponds to the propositional phrase of the quotation of

Hab 2:4, ek pisteos, from which it may have been derived” (Waetjen 447)? Waetjen asks a valid question whose answer ultimately will shape our understanding of the phrase as a whole. If ek pisteos refers to Habakkuk 2:4, what might eis pistin refer to? Take into consideration that “the second prepositional phrase, eis pistin, occurs nowhere else in [Paul’s] writings” (Waetjen 447). Paul must be communicating something significant with this phrase, and we must assume that it is coherent with the rest of the letter up to this point. As Waetjen develops the argument for his interpretation of Romans 1:17a, he seeks to understand more about what Paul means when he writes regarding “ek pisteos.” In Romans 5:1 “Paul proceeds to draw the consequences, ‘Therefore, being justified ek pisteos, we have peace towards God through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Accordingly, the phrase ek pisteos is especially linked to Abraham, the grand patriarch of Israel, and it indicates the basis of his relationship to God and attendantly his justification by God” (Waetjen 448). The fact that Waetjen begins to draw in to his understanding aspects of Abraham’s faith lends credibility to his position on ek pisteos because of the connection that we can then draw back to Habakkuk. Habakkuk 2:4 also linked the reader to Abraham, a fact that Paul must have been keenly aware of.

The focus then shifts to what eis pistin refers to, which Waetjen clarifies. “The good news is about the fulfillment of the terms and conditions of the testament that God established with Abraham and the benefits that are universally conferred on all who participate in it. The movement of 1:17, therefore, is ek pisteos, out of the trust of Abraham, eis pistin, into the trust of Jesus Christ” (Waetjen 454). Paul’s phrase “from faith to faith” is tied directly into his quotation of Habakkuk 2:4, leading the reader to understand that the full force of the story that was communicated to Habakkuk Paul is

declaring has been fulfilled in Christ. “From faith to faith” has a direction, pointing from Abraham to Christ, and by quoting Habakkuk Paul conveys to his Jewish readers the long awaited fulfillment of the promises to Habakkuk in Christ.

There is a difference in Paul’s quotation of this passage from the LXX or a strict translation from the Hebrew into the Greek. “His citation follows neither the Hebrew nor its Greek translation, the Septuagint. He may have been quoting from memory or using a version which we do not possess today, or he may have altered the passage to bring out what he held to be its latent meaning” (Best 17). Because of the purposefulness with which Paul quotes Habakkuk, showing the fulfillment of the biblical story, we must assume that Paul was intentional in his quoting the verse the way he did. As previously discussed, there was some difference already in Habakkuk from Hebrew to Greek versions, so whatever change Paul made would have to be one that damages the full range of meaning for us to raise any objection to his usage. Instead we see that “the terms of Habakkuk’s oracle are sufficiently general to make room for Paul’s application of them—an application which, far from doing violence to the prophet’s intention, expresses the abiding validity of his message” (Bruce 76). Since Paul does no violence to the text in his quoting of it, we must assume that it does carry forward the full meaning of God’s promise which sees fulfillment in Christ.

Once again, we must look to see if this interpretation changes our understanding of “righteousness” and “faith” as the story communicates it. “Paul’s concept of faith, like the Old Testament prophet’s is one which emphasizes continual faith. It is a preserving faith, a faith for all time (‘from faith to faith’), and believers (if righteous at all) are righteous by faith” (Dockery 86). Just as Habakkuk 2:4 sums up the whole law, so does

Paul's usage of it here sum up the whole of redemptive history. It does so without changing the biblical definition of righteousness by faith as set up by Habakkuk. So, this means that the church's understanding of justification should look similar to the Old Testament community, even though we now understand our faith to be in Jesus Christ as YHWH. "The church must properly conceive of faith as an ongoing faith related to the Old Testament emphasis on covenant faithfulness" (Dockery 87). By referring to God's promise to bring about the fulfillment of His covenant promises in Habakkuk 2:4, and that righteousness was conveyed to those who believed this to be true, we too must believe in the promises of God's covenant. "The citation of Habakkuk 2:4 at this point is designed to stress the fact that the righteousness of God is received by faith, and that Paul's doctrine is not new" (Johnson 337). Once again, Paul isn't creating a new story of faithfulness, he is seeing the fulfillment of the original and only story. Christ has satisfied the promises of God's covenant, not replaced them. "As we observed in 1:2, there is a unity in the message of the Old and the New Testaments. There are not two religions in the Bible, not two ways of salvation, only one" (Schaefer 25). While there certainly are not two gospels, there are aspects of this stage in the gospel that are different than the early stage in the context of Habakkuk.

Paul takes great pains to talk about the intricate depths of this gospel message that is rooted in a history that has been given to the Jews. However, as I mentioned before, this was a mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles, and the Gentiles might not have known all of Paul's references. I believe it is for this reason that Paul says the gospel is first for the Jew and then for the Greek, not in order of preference but in order of receipt. The Jew receives the gospel first in order that they might communicate it fully to the Gentile.

This allows the Jew to actually live as a priest to all men, as Exodus 19:4-6 says and 1 Peter 2:9 picks up on. This gospel was intended to be missional, because “for Paul there was no other hope for men than that found in his gospel” (Johnson 340). That meant no hope for any man, Jew or Greek. Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, would have been concerned that a church that he had never visited would struggle with the same exclusionary principles that Paul had encountered even with Peter, so by explaining that the Jews position of primacy was for the communication of this saving hope, he sought to stem that segregation. This inclusion was because of the nature of the way God chose to save men through Christ, that anyone who believed could become a member of the covenant people. “Faith, then, is not itself our justifying righteousness, but rather is the outstretched empty hand which receives righteousness by receiving Christ” (Dockery 87). Again, this keeps in line with the understanding of Habakkuk 2:4 regarding faith and righteousness, except this time it is nuanced in such a way that it includes all men on equal footing. So I renew my claim that Paul uses Habakkuk 2:4 to show that God has completed his redemptive work in Christ by quoting it in Romans 1:17.

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