

Exegetical Study of Habakkuk 2:4 and Its Implications for the African Christian Faith in the 21st Century Church

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INTRODUCTION

The 21st century Christianity needs to revert back to an old-time religion where absolute trust in the LORD was prevalent among the patriarchs and the prophets. 21st century is an era that is highly challenged on almost every side. This is an era that demands much from the pastoral ministry and entire Christendom. Faith is an essential ingredient needed for survival today. It is a period of great and enormous challenges. Ministering in the 21st century calls for exercising faith in the LORD to combat the challenges posed by the peculiarities of the period. This is a period of great population explosion with the devil launching his fiercest battle. Society is morally bankrupt; there is social decadence, insecurity, socio-political-economic instability and advancement of technology to mention a few.⁵⁷⁹ The 21st century Christianity is faced with challenges of great exploitation on the part of political and even spiritual leadership. Sub-Saharan Africa in which Nigerian society exists can be taken as a case study to represent Africa. Africa especially Nigeria society is such that is bedeviled with almost “nothing works” syndrome. Government and its officials cannot be

⁵⁷⁹Titi Irele and Jonathan Ola. Ojo. *Sunday School Empowering Churches for Kingdom Growth*. (Ibadan: Sceptre Prints Limited, 2004), 10.

trusted for truth is far from them. There is absolutely failure of almost everything (especially social amenities) – bad roads giving rise to carnages on Nigerian roads, power failure, inadequate water supply, unfavourable government policies crippling the economy and government insensitivity to the plight of the populace. There is generally palpation and fear of the unknown occasioned by the insecurity. There exist youth restiveness in the Niger Delta area, insurgence of terrorist groups in the northern area, civil unrest and political thuggery and politics of bitterness, menace of Fulani herdsmen attack and incessant kidnapping in almost everywhere. No one really seems to be secure. People really need faith, an absolute trust in the LORD to survive in a country like Nigeria. Concerted efforts in demonstrating faith among Nigerian Christians are needed in order to win the battle. Hence, the 21st century ministry needs to embrace the revelation of God to Habakkuk in the 5th century B.C. This is because for anyone to survive in the contemporary sub-Sahara African society (Nigeria as a case study) there is the need for a great faith.⁵⁸⁰

The church is not fairing well as it has not lived up to expectations. The church is filled with infightings (power struggle: visible and invisible), bitter rivalry and unhealthy competition within, graspers (hijackers), complainers, self-proclaimed prophets, to mention but a few in the church. The society is filled with individualism and egocentricity, which has affected the church to a large extent.

This work is set out to furnish the 21st century Africa Christianity with the solution to the seeming unending prosperity postures of the wicked of the society and the suffering of the righteous believers. Habakkuk provides a model for the 21st century church that God will ultimately vindicate his own. He saw a distressful problem. Instead of complaining or wallowing in self-pity and grief, he took action by engaging God in a dialogue.

⁵⁸⁰Dale A. Robbins, “Principles of Great Faith.” March 25, 2008.

<http://www.victorius.org/robbins.htm>.

This work is meant to bring into clarity the rightful place of faith in all human endeavors and what can be achieved through the grace of God. It is set to balance up mental and intellectual acumen with spirituality for Christian faith calls for a commitment to scholasticism.⁵⁸¹ The covenant people of God needed to demonstrate absolute trust in God for them to accomplish their set goal(s). As a matter of fact, the book of Habakkuk provides an extraordinary picture of the righteous person's selfless effort in searching for answer to the righteous suffering with the seeming prosperity of the wicked and sinners. The significance of the study is seen in what it is designed to achieve. It will be of significant benefit to the 21st century African church where faith is needed to cope with the growing challenges of life's vicissitudes. It will also benefit the civil society as there is an assurance of divine intervention in their lots and the seeming temporal progress of the wicked.

Exploring the Book of Habakkuk

Habakkuk was the author of the eighth book of the Minor Prophets. The meaning of Habakkuk's name is uncertain. It was probably derived from a Hebrew word meaning "to clasp or embrace."⁵⁸² According to Hampton Keathley IV,⁵⁸³ the name means "embrace" or "wrestle" which can be seen from the fact that he was wrestling with a difficult issue. If God is good, then why is there evil in the world? And if there has to be evil, then why do the evil prosper? What is God doing in the world invested with the oppressed down-trodden? A similar thought can be seen coming from the Israelites in Zephaniah 1:12. They said God did not do good or evil. They thought of an absent God who was not care about the running of the universe (deism) and so they continued in their sin.

⁵⁸¹Jose Comblin, *Being Human: A Christian Anthropology*. Transl. Robert R. Barr. (Kent: Burns & Oates Ltd., 1990), 141.

⁵⁸²A. G. Nute, "Habakkuk," in *The International Bible Commentary*. Ed. F. F. Bruce. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 943.

⁵⁸³Hampton Keathley IV "Habakkuk." March 18, 2018.
<http://bible.org/byauthor/3/hamptonkeathleyiv>.

Habakkuk was a prophet and could have been one of the temple singers (3:19), and he may have come from the tribe of Levi. His prophecy is said to be true to his name in that he embraced a strong faith in Yahweh (3:17-19).⁵⁸⁴ His name is not found elsewhere in the Bible; his name appears to be non-Hebraic and believed to be a derivative of Akkadian word for a garden plant.⁵⁸⁵ Nothing is known about Habakkuk apart from what is mentioned in his book. Several legends attempt to give accounts of his life. However, they are generally regarded as untrustworthy. One writing describes a miraculous transporting of Habakkuk to Daniel while Daniel was in the den of lions. A Jewish legend makes Habakkuk the son of the Shunammite woman mentioned in 2 Kings 4:8-37. That legend apparently is based on the tradition that she would “embrace” a son. Chronological difficulties make both accounts unlikely. Further suggestion linked him with Isaiah’s watchman (Isaiah 21:6).⁵⁸⁶

The book is said to be “one single prophecy arranged in two parts.”⁵⁸⁷ It is not a collection of oracles and condensation of several prophetic addresses into one discourse. Peckham says it “is a composite unity ... an unusual blend of liturgical and sapiential texts... concerns with world affairs and their cosmic repercussions.”⁵⁸⁸ The first part of the work is under the form of a conversation between God and the prophet. This contains the announcement of the judgment which God is about to bring through the Chaldeans instrument. The second is the overthrow of the Chaldeans, who had puffed up themselves to the extent of deification of their power. The prophet prayed for the

⁵⁸⁴ Youssouf Dembele, “Habakkuk,” in *Africa Bible Commentary*. Ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo. (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 1063.

⁵⁸⁵ Simon J. De Vries, “The Book of Habakkuk,” in *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*. Ed. Charles M. Laymon. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 494.

⁵⁸⁶ “Habakkuk,” in *iLumina Database Software* © 2003 Tyndale House Publishing.

⁵⁸⁷ C. F. Keil, “Minor Prophets,” in *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*. Vol. X. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch. Tr. James Martin. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, N.D), 53.

⁵⁸⁸ Brian Peckham, “The Vision of Habakkuk,” in *the Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. 48, 4, (October 1986): 617-636.

fulfillment of the judgment. The announcement of the judgment is simply an expansion of the thought that the unjust and sinner will perish, while the just shall live by faith (2:4). Though the prophecy may tarry, it has the divine stamp of coming into fulfillment at the appointed time.⁵⁸⁹

Habakkuk lived in the period during the rise of the Chaldeans at the end of the 6th century B. C. (Hab. 1:6), that is, during the reigns of the Judean kings Josiah and Jehoiakim.⁵⁹⁰ His prophetic activity probably took place between 612-589 B.C. The book of Habakkuk reveals a man of great sensitivity. His deep concern about injustice and his prayer (Hebrews 3:1) reveal his profound religious conviction and social awareness.⁵⁹¹ He was a contemporary of Jeremiah, while Jeremiah challenged the royal court directly; Habakkuk directed his passion and despair at God rather than the king.⁵⁹² His character is disclosed through his confessional conversations with God. His messages evolved from personal anguish – struggles with evil, God’s justice and silence. He had prophetic ability to be angry with his people but yet plead for their salvation.⁵⁹³

The original text was a lament but the second chapter loses its connection with the lament and becomes another iteration of theme.⁵⁹⁴ The book is in most part poetry in three different genres: a dialogue between Habakkuk and Yahweh (1:2-2:5), a series of five woes (2:6-20) and a prayer psalm complete with liturgical instructions (3:2-19). The theme of the book is regardless of present appearances, human violence will ultimately be defeated by divine power. There are some

⁵⁸⁹Keil, 53-54.

⁵⁹⁰Southwell, P. J. M. “Habakkuk: Theology of,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*. Vol. 4. Ed. Willem A. VanGemeren. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 688.

⁵⁹¹“Habakkuk,” in *iLumina Database Software* © 2003 Tyndale House Publishing.

⁵⁹²David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk*. Ed. J. A. Motyer. (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 203.

⁵⁹³Prior, 353.

⁵⁹⁴Peckham, 618-621.

elements of Jeremiah's confessions (Jer. 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21) and the argumentative sounds of the Psalter's laments (Ps. 44; 69). Habakkuk's contention is similar to that of Job's agony – how to understand God's righteousness in a life-and-death struggle.⁵⁹⁵

In a nutshell, the book can be said to such that starts from worry to worship. This is because the book begins with the problems (1:1-2:20) and closes with praise (3). It opens in gloom: begins with an interrogative mark (?) and closes in glory: ends with an exclamation mark (!) It also starts with faith troubled: a wail and an inquiry but ends with faith triumphant: a song and an affirmation. It takes off with 'what is God doing?'

Purpose and Theological Teachings of the Book of Habakkuk

The main purpose of Habakkuk's prophecy is to explain what a godly person's attitude should be toward the presence of evil in the world. It also addresses the nature of God's justice in punishing moral evil.⁵⁹⁶ Baker sees the message as portraying the prophetic role in bringing a nation and its leadership back to obedience to the covenant which God made with his people at Sinai.⁵⁹⁷ Hill and Walton see the purpose of the book as "God's justice on a national plane."⁵⁹⁸ In fact, they seemed to differ in constructing for Habakkuk complaints which to them stemmed from reconciling the fact of Assyria, the rod of God's punishment, passing from the scene. They felt Judah remained unpunished for her offences against God. However, God responded that the Babylonians would be the divine means of punishing Judah. This researcher tends to agree with Hill and Walton for their explanation will solve the tension created by 1:4 and 1:13 about 'the

⁵⁹⁵Catherine C. Kroeger and Mary J. Evans (eds.) *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 478-479.

⁵⁹⁶iLumina.

⁵⁹⁷David W. Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: an Introduction and Commentary*. Ed. D. J. Wiseman.(Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 47.

⁵⁹⁸Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton. *A Survey of the Old Testament*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2000), 517.

wicked.’⁵⁹⁹ This is because it was agreed upon that references were made to two different groups. The first group could either be Assyrians or Egyptians (1:4) while the second reference could be that of Babylonians.⁶⁰⁰

The teaching of the book is set forth in an interesting pattern of crucial questions by the prophet about God’s activity in history. His questions may reflect deep doubts and concerns, or they may be a literary device for reflecting the questions that people in his society were asking. The question is based on theodicy. Habakkuk was concerned about God’s justice at the prosperity of a wicked nation like Babylon. This can be compared with Job’s question of God’s justice at the suffering of a righteous individual.⁶⁰¹

God responded to Habakkuk’s question concerning usage of Babylon as rod of chastisement. This help puts things in their proper perspective. The first part of the answer is given in 2:4-5, this addresses individual responsibility. When all things seem awkward in the world; there may be confusion and God’s purposes and plans look so obscure, the righteous has to comport himself/herself with integrity. At such a time, faithfulness to God and trusting him are most difficult and yet they are most significant. Hill and Walton’s observation is right in saying that; “In the shadow of trying circumstances, the integrity and faith of a righteous person shine like a beacon.”⁶⁰² The second part of the answer is that God would punish the Babylonians for their wickedness. In the psalm at the end of the book, the prophet shows that he has reached an understanding of God’s purposes, and he rests in utter submission to God. One of the prophet’s chief problems was the seeming inactivity of God, as evil continued unpunished. God’s answer was that he does punish evil in his own time and with his chosen instruments. The world is not an

⁵⁹⁹Baker 46.

⁶⁰⁰Ibid.

⁶⁰¹Ibid., 47.

⁶⁰²Hill and Walton, 517.

arena in which evil continually triumphs. History testifies to the fall of tyrants and wicked nations. The godly person thus interprets history in terms of faith - trusting God and affirming his righteous rule in the world.⁶⁰³

The book of Habakkuk does not explain why God has allowed evil in the world. It does affirm that a righteous person will see God's activity in history through the eyes of faith. Chapter 3 eloquently expresses that theme as Habakkuk looks at history and recounts God's gracious activity on behalf of his people. One of the most important theological concepts in the book is that of God's sovereign activity in history. Habakkuk affirms God's control of all history and demonstrates that even the godless nations are subject to his control. Their rise and fall is determined not by the fortuitous course of events but by God.

Southwell⁶⁰⁴ identified these theological themes:

1. Habakkuk was sure of God being at work on the stage of international history.
2. Habakkuk learnt to turn doubt and grief into prayer (1:2-4, 12-17; 3:2-19; cf. Ps. 73:16-17), may be in the temple (Hab. 2:20). Worship led him into joyful faith in the power and goodness of God.
3. In Habakkuk God condemns evil. In chapter 2, he condemns drunkenness, greed, theft, violence, oppression, debauchery, abuse of nature (2:17), and idolatry. In his conception of a time fixed for judgment (2:3), there is an anticipation of later apocalyptic.
4. Habakkuk 2:4 is a famous text cited in the New Testament (Rm. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38-39) and

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ Southwell, 690.

given an almost Christian interpretation by 1QpHab
(*Pesher on Habakkuk*).

Analysis of the Hebrew Text of Habakkuk 2:4

Transliteration: *hinneh 'up^elah lo^yas^erah naf^so bo w^etsaddiq
be'emunato yih^eyeh.*

Rough translation: Behold she swelling up not upright her soul of his
towards him, but the righteous in her firmness remains alive.

Smooth translation: Behold, his soul is haughty (lit. swollen,
presumptuous), not upright within him, but the righteous will live by
his faithfulness.

Analysis of the Text

The poetic bicolon, two cola of this poem, features semantic and
grammatical parallelism that helps establish its meaning. Each colon
begins with a particle to introduce each statement, הִנֵּה and ו. This
construction establishes a strong contrast between the cola –
“behold...X. but ...Y.”⁶⁰⁵

In the first colon, the terms עִפְלָה and לֹא־יִשְׁרָה are appositional and
therefore complementary. A sort of straw man is created, such-and-
such a person possesses a character (נִפְשׁוֹ), which is haughty (עִפְלָה) and
not upright (לֹא־יִשְׁרָה). This reading understands both terms to be
verbs in the perfect conjugation (which conforms to the Masoretic
reading). The literal translation of these verbs would be "His soul is
haughty, it is not upright." The word order of this colon is a bit
difficult, which no doubt created some problems for translators.
However, the grammar allows little room for variation. Both עִפְלָה
and לֹא־יִשְׁרָה are feminine singular verbs. עִפְלָה is a pu'al
(factative/intensive medio-passive), lit. “it has been made/become

⁶⁰⁵Eric Ignatius Jobe, “Habakkuk 2:4” March 25, 2013.

<http://qatqltqltql.blogspot.com/2007/07/habakkuk-24.html>

haughty.” יִשְׁרָה is a stative verb, (qal perfect 3rd person feminine singular from יִשַׁר – he straightened, was upright, level, right. Hence, she was upright) and therefore performs a function similar to an adjective.⁶⁰⁶

The second colon contains contrastive semantic parallelism, although its grammatical structure is different. צַדִּיק, is an adjective meaning "just, righteous." Semantically, it is in parallel with לֹא־יִשְׁרָה, one being a positive term and the other negative. These two parallel terms are set in chiasm - a, b, b', a'. The outer terms of the chiasm include טַעֲפֹלָה and אֲמוּנָתוֹ. Haughtiness is contrasted with faith. Both terms, however, are set within a verbal context. One "has become haughty." The righteous one "lives by faith." The second term comes complete with an instrumental preposition, ב, and the verb יִחְיֶה "will live."⁶⁰⁷

Commentary on the Text

Putting all of this together, one can see two different types of people generally characterized adjectivally by being either righteous (צַדִּיק) or unrighteous (לֹא־יִשְׁרָה). These types of people are then characterized verbally by either being haughty (טַעֲפֹלָה) or living by faith (בְּאֲמוּנָתוֹ יִחְיֶה). Faith, then, in this verse, is directly contrasted by haughtiness. In other words, faith is defined as being the opposite of haughtiness. Here, then, faith is more than belief or trust, but also includes submission, humility, a willingness to be corrected.

These two types of people are described in detail in the surrounding context. Before this verse, Habakkuk states that he will sit himself on the rampart and watch to see what God will say to him, and how he will respond when he is corrected (v. 2). Afterwards, the haughty person is described in poetic detail in verses 5 ff. characterized by a sort of unbridled greed and abuse of power. The context and the grammar indicate that the state of righteousness or unrighteousness is

⁶⁰⁶Ibid.

⁶⁰⁷Ibid.

a function of a person's actions. The New Testament quotations of this verse further demonstrate this in the life of Abraham and his almost-sacrifice of his son Isaac. Abraham not only believed God, but humbled himself by submitting to the command of the Lord. He obeyed (James' emphasis) through his belief (Paul's emphasis) in the promise of the Lord. Belief characterized by obedience, faith and works operating together in unison to produce character that is pleasing to God. The contrast is also true - the haughty person will be characterized by action in accordance to his/her haughtiness.

The Lord's response (2:1-5), verses 1-3 depict the solemn introduction emphasizing the significance of call for faithfulness and trust in verse 4.⁶⁰⁸ This portion belongs to the third strophe in a lament compose of five-line stanza enveloping two four-line stanzas (2:1-3; 3:2) and comprises of the assurance of being heard (2:1), Yahweh's response (2:2-3), and Habakkuk's reply (3:2). There is an addition of aphorism to the third stanza (2:4) to create a six-line stanza (2:3-4) and to close the strophe, then appended three more strophes to interpret the saying (2:5-8,9-14,15-20). The language of the lament is both physical and sensory – it uses language of vision, audition, action, and emotion. The language of the book as a whole is imaginative and abstract – an abstract language is mostly forensic; the imaginative language defines specific legal problems and occurs in logical discourse and arguments.⁶⁰⁹

The answer came in the form of a command and a statement of reassurance (2:2-5). The prophet was ordered to inscribe on a tablet, in letters large enough so that a fleeing man could read it without stopping his flight, the message that the end was at hand.⁶¹⁰ In 2:2-3,

⁶⁰⁸ Thomas P. Wahl, Irene Nowell and Anthony R. Ceresko, "Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Eds. Raymond E. Brown, et al. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1990), 262.

⁶⁰⁹ Peckham, 623-624.

⁶¹⁰ Gerald A. Larue, "Old Testament Life and Literature (1968): Chapter 20 - From the Fall of Nineveh to the Fall of Judah." March 25, 2013. http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/gerald_larue.

God told Habakkuk the importance of scribbling down the vision/message upon tablets. This is not to prevent only its forgottenness but it was for a wider consumption and subsequent generations. The wider and long-term significance of the message is highlighted by the word translated *vision*, or ‘revelation’ (NIV). The echo of verb translated *saw* (1:1), describes the entire ‘oracle’ or ‘burden’ of Habakkuk’s prophecy. It means, the prophecy is a product of “disciplined watchfulness,”⁶¹¹ it is a vision or revelation from God. He had set out to see what God would say (1); now God had given him a vision in which his mind was revealed. This vision had an immediate fulfillment in Babylonians captivity and also an eschatological application – when God’s judgment on his enemies and enemies of his people is consummated. Hence, judgment of God will come upon the human wickedness (Babylonians) and with salvation of God on all who have faith.

The introductory summon, *behold*, seems to be the central truth on which the rest of the passage is vivid and dramatic commentary. In this instruction, God is opening Habakkuk’s eyes to foundational truth, which is invisible to human perception or reason. Habakkuk is given a *resume* of what an individual is without a personal relationship with (recourse to) God.⁶¹² It depicts how God demonstrates his irresistible adherence to the principle set out in 2:4.⁶¹³ It should be made plain using large letters and legible handwriting. No room should be given to confusion, error or inaccuracy. He who reads or hears these words must be herald of a significant communication as God intends the message to be passed on by everyone who reads/hears it. In Jeremiah 23:21, the ministry of

⁶¹¹Carl E.Armerding, “Habakkuk,” in the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Vol. 7. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1985), 511.

⁶¹²Prior, 238-239.

⁶¹³*Ibid.*, 234.

a prophet is described as running in response to God's sending his servants on errands.⁶¹⁴

lp[- this is a reference to the state of mind. Hence, whosoever swells with vain confidence - fortify self and elated with self-confidence will never finds a tranquil haven, for suspicion or fear disturbs his/her mind.⁶¹⁵ Pride and want of uprightness will bring destruction upon the Chaldeans.⁶¹⁶ Verse 4a can be literally translated, "Behold, inflated, not straight (just), is his throat (soul) within him." שֶׁנֶפֶשׁ is ambiguous and can mean throat, soul, self, life, creature, person, appetite, mind, living being, desire, emotion, passion. A bizarre can be fashioned out thus: the wicked man's "throat," inflated and bloated by greed, mirrors his "soul," which has been wrapped by pride. Conversely, the just trust in God and not in their own ability to accumulate power and riches; they are characterized by their faithfulness, steadfastness which they hold fast even in perilous and confusing times. They shall live by it.⁶¹⁷ The haughty or proud is brought into contrast with the righteous. Hence, the ethical appraisal of two poles is brought to the notice of the cultic community. The proud are vain, presumptuous, conceited whereas the righteous fulfills the demands of right relationship with God, people and the earth.⁶¹⁸ From the context of the passage, the proud is the Babylonian oppressors of Judah who had become puffed up (RSV, NIV) and arrogant.⁶¹⁹ Life awaits the righteous. This desired preservation of life comes to Judah if they show faith, waiting in patient assurance for Yahweh to act as he has promised. The odd might be against God's people in the face of the seeming all-powerful Babylon, God will vindicate his people by

⁶¹⁴ Ibid., 235.

⁶¹⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*. Vol. 4. Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai. Tr. ohn Owen. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 72.

⁶¹⁶ Keil and Delitzsch, 73.

⁶¹⁷ Wahl, Nowell and Ceresko, 262-263.

⁶¹⁸ Kroeger and Evans, 480.

⁶¹⁹ Baker, 60.

giving them life both temporarily and in the eschatology. Hence, life promised in this context is political and national; this is in contrast to the imminent national demise of the oppressing nation.⁶²⁰

Examining and putting the “righteous” in context demands exploring the word in the Old Testament. This is a word synonymous with innocent, and right as opposed to ‘wicked.’ The wicked is associated with violence, injustice, wrong, strife, conflict, paralysis and perversion of the law, oppression, destruction, pride and idolatry (1:1-4, 13-17; 2:4a, 5 – 18). Hence, the righteous can be referred to as anyone who lives in conformity with the will of God as expressed in the Mosaic Law.⁶²¹ However, in Habakkuk it refers to all the people of Judah in comparison with the Chaldeans whom God will use as executors of his judgment (1:13). But in 1:4 and 2:4b, it is restricted to the faithful, loyal remnant among Judah who still obeyed God’s law. These righteous will live “by faith” meaning “by faithfulness” – that is, with an attitude of unshakeable trust in God. The word “live” conveys a hope of salvation for the righteous facing the threats of destruction.⁶²²

Habakkuk 2:4 is the climax of the book of Habakkuk but unfortunately it is transmitted in a corrupted text. Scholars agree that it contains the core of God’s answer to Habakkuk, but there is no consensus as to its meaning because of its grammatical and lexical problems.⁶²³ Sweeney referring to Emerton summarizes the problems thus: First, the translation of the Hebrew verb עָפָלָה – “is puffed up” lacks support in the versions and appears nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible. Second, the antecedents of the pronoun “he” and “him” are unclear. Third, although the portrayal of a conceited and unjust (puffed up) figure in 4a contrasts well with the righteous (צַדִּיק) of 4b,

⁶²⁰Ibid., 60-62.

⁶²¹Dembele, 1065.

⁶²²Ibid.

⁶²³Marvin A. Sweeney, “Habakkuk, Book of,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol. 3. Ed. David Noel Freedman, et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4.

however, there is no antithesis to the statement that the righteous shall live. These problems had prompted scholars to advance numerous textual emendations and interpretations that gain no general acceptability.⁶²⁴

The first half of the Hebrew verse reads, literally, “Behold, she (feminine) is puffed up, not right is his soul in him.” In the second half of the verse, a noun form counterpart to *righteous*; the “wicked” will be normal. This is used in the sense that the soul of the wicked is puffed up with pride. Faithfulness should be the accurate word used for faith. This is because the Hebrew word אֱמוּנָה/ is from the root “Amen” - affirms in response what has been said. It is used after the pronouncement of solemn curses (Num. 5:22; Deut. 27:15ff) and after prayers and hymns of praise (1 Chron. 16:36; Neh. 8:6; Ps. 41:13).⁶²⁵ In Exodus 17:12, it is the word first used for the steadiness of Moses’ arms when supported on either side by Aaron and Hur.

It then develops to be used in connection with God or those related to God. In Deuteronomy 32:4, it is used to express total dependability on God and frequently used among the attributes of God (1 Sam. 26:23; Lam. 3:23). Its usage also includes those whose lives God establishes; he expects to see faithfulness in them (Prov. 12:22; 2 Chron. 19:9). In Jeremiah 5:3; 7:28, it is fidelity as opposed to falsehood. In Isaiah 11:5, it parallels righteousness – meaning moral steadfastness. Faithfulness or a life of faith characterized those justified in God’s sight (Hab. 2:4). God’s word of truth establishes human’s way of truth or faithfulness.⁶²⁶ Paul in using the Greek πίστις in Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11, though representing אֱמוּנָה but with different connotation built his doctrine of justification by faith on this text. In Habakkuk the words mean “the righteous survives if he is faithful” or

⁶²⁴Ibid.

⁶²⁵Jack B. Scott, “amen,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Vol. 1. Eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer (Jr.) and Bruce K. Waltke. (Chicago:Moody Press, 1980), 52.

⁶²⁶Ibid.

“if he maintains his integrity.” *Shall live* imply probably on the Day of Judgment, when the wicked perish, the righteous who trust in God will be established (see Isaiah 7:9). The righteous that trust in God will be vindicated.⁶²⁷

This verse is often quoted in the New Testament as the basis of the conviction that faith makes sinners righteous in God’s eyes. Faith precedes works as the fundamental premise of Christian faith. Hebrews 10:32-34 uses this verse as an exhortation for believers under pressure to remain faithful to Christ. It is therefore pertinent to note that Paul used Habakkuk’s theology to construct theology, while the writer of the Hebrews used Habakkuk’s situation to enhance perseverance of saints undergoing similar situation. Hence, faith is the foundation for godly behavior.⁶²⁸

The righteous complain of divine silence before violence, injustice, wrongdoing, oppression, strife, conflict; and injustice of using Chaldeans as instrument of judgment. The righteous continue to live by his faith, rejoicing in Yahweh and his salvation, praying for his help and finding strength in him. The incentive is assurance that God will judge the arrogant, wicked, and violent. He will mercifully deliver the righteous as he has done in the past.⁶²⁹

Religious Teachings and Theological Implications of Habakkuk 2:4 for the African Christian Faith in the 21st Century Church

The book of Habakkuk is highly significant for the faith of sub-Sahara African Christians as it is filled with truths that stand at the core of Hebrew religion. History has its relevance if one judges event from faith perspective. There is the need for uprightness for both

⁶²⁷Charles L. Taylor (Jr.), “The Book of Habakkuk,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*. Vol. VI. Eds. George A. Buttrick, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 988-989.

⁶²⁸Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 378.

⁶²⁹E. Ray Clendenen, “Text, Linguistics and Prophecy in the Book of the Twelve,” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*: 46, 3, (September 2003): 494.

individuals and the nations. This is a great lesson for African Christians as uprightness is really in great need considering the corruption that has engulfed the continent resulting in her backwardness. Wealth is a treacherous means of human dependence on security. Ruthless dealings rebound upon the evildoers. God can overrule an evil nation for his righteous purpose. Evil is bound to fail at long run, though there seems to be temporary victory. There is no might anywhere, trusting in God is the only basis for strength, regardless of external situations. Joy in communion with God is the ultimate end of faith.⁶³⁰ It is thus incumbent upon the contemporary African Christians to exercise their faith in the LORD. The leadership (spiritual and temporal) must imbibe uprightness and put on righteousness as they exercise their leadership oversight.

The African leaders must be aware of these two vital truths as consisted of these unchangeable things. Sin does not go unpunished and righteousness is always rewarded. God was obviously aware of the injustice and oppression done to the people by the leaders, which are emphasized by noting that he has seen the situation (1:3). God sees the world from a different perspective, from the perspective of holiness and purity. Yet, it seems God sees the same wickedness and seems to do nothing about it. God's purity, Habakkuk contends, should not allow silence at seeing a perverted world. The proud and arrogant (both Israelites and Babylonians) think they have no need of God, they are so greedy for wealth and property that they allow injustice to flourish and take advantage of those who have no power to stop them.⁶³¹ African leaders rule ruthlessly, oppressed and exploited the poor masses. They live in affluence and ease, they enjoy basic things of life and live comfortably. African Christians should not be oblivion of the fact that sin will not go unpunished and the

⁶³⁰E. A. Leslie, "Habakkuk," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Vol. 2*. Ed. George A. Buttrick. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 505.

⁶³¹Dennis Bratcher, "Commentary on Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4." March 25, 2015. <http://www.criovoice.org/lectionary/YearC/Cproper22ot/htm=text>.

seeming prosperity of the oppressive wicked will soon end and God will reward the righteous.

The significance of the book is seen in the role it has played in both Jewish and Christian traditions. Habakkuk 1-2 served as the spring board of commentary through which the interpretation of text in relation to the early history of the Qumran community is based. The Qumran *peshet* substituting “wealth” for wine informs the translation in the RSV. The instability of the unrighteous man’s wealth and power is underscored while the righteous man is assured that he will live in the surest and highest sense by maintaining his faithfulness.⁶³² The contemporary African Christians should keep maintaining their faithfulness and faith in God as he is the reward of those who diligently seek him.

In the New Testament, Habakkuk 2:4 serves as the major textual basis for the doctrine of “justification by faith” in Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; and Hebrew 10:38-39. De Vries opined that the New Testament of this passage is based on Luther’s thinking influence.⁶³³ Sweeney observes that the Talmudic Rabbi Simlai identified Habakkuk 2:4 as a summary of all 613 commandments of the Torah. He further says that in Jewish tradition, Habakkuk 3 is understood as a description of the revelation at Sinai and is read as the Haphtarah section for the second day of the Festival of Shavout, which commemorates the revelation of the Torah at Sinai.⁶³⁴ Habakkuk 2:4 provides all the climactic source for Habakkuk’s spiritual quest allowing believers the necessary conclusion both to the quest and the problem of believer’s attitude towards life seeming inequities. African Christians who are the special people called to a life of faith and faithfulness must abandon themselves to their redeemer in absolute trust.⁶³⁵ African Christians must be aware that really “the just shall live by faith.” They must

⁶³²De Vries, 495.

⁶³³Ibid.

⁶³⁴Sweeney, 5.

⁶³⁵Ryken, et al, 357.

continue to do right, maintain equity, justice and peace even in the midst of the perceived perversion, injustice and oppression.

The concept of the necessity of faith, an attitude of the heart rather than outward actions, is not new to the Old Testament (Gen. 15:6; Amos 5:21-24). The gospel preached by Paul is much part of the old covenant as it is of the new.⁶³⁶ Habakkuk prophecy in 2:4 looks back to the giving of the law and forward to the coming of the gospel. Paul's treatment of the principle of faith in Romans has its antecedent and thrust in Habakkuk 2:4 right back to Abraham. The prophet is facing real life circumstances that require action. In this context, the meaning of "faithfulness" seems more appropriate: "The righteous shall live by their faithfulness." This implies that an African Christian must engage in a manner of living in which faith is operative in life. Faith in God, faithfulness to God, is more than a state of mind; it is living out inner convictions amid the vagaries of life. It is no accident here that the righteous shall live by their faithfulness. So, African Christians must live a life of righteousness and faithfulness as they live to exemplify Christian virtues of faith, faithfulness, uprightness and righteousness.

Judgment or salvation; pride or faith; death or life; crookedness or righteousness are the ingredients and alternatives described by God's vision given to Habakkuk. God instructed him to write down the vision implies that all of the scripture is written down for instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come (1 Cor. 10:11). In Jesus who is Christ has the end come signaling the dawn of the countdown.⁶³⁷ African Christians must live to document and constantly refer to the great promises of God as enshrined in the scripture. They should begin to lay claim on these promises to reclaim the continent for the LORD. The heart of the oppressed leadership is in the hand of the LORD. The church through faith can pray to God to turn and win the heart of the African leadership and the entire continent back for God.

⁶³⁶Baker, 61.

⁶³⁷Prior, 240.

The under-development being experienced in the continent could be tackled if the heart of the leadership is right attuned to God and they lead and bear rule in the fear and trembling for God.

Habakkuk attacked Babylon's sins in his days. These sins were not violation of God's covenant for Babylon was not part of God's covenant. These sins were against moral conscience, against universal sense of right and wrong which distinguishes the human race. These universal sins include self-centred pride, drunkenness, greediness, theft, extortion, violent war crimes, murder, unjust, cruel and oppressive economic practices/policies, cruel expansionist policies (2:12), and inhumane treatment of the less privileged and prisoners (2:15). God promised the same treatment for a lawless people who ignored all human rights and decency.⁶³⁸ The church in Africa should lead in the vanguard of campaigning and fighting for entrenching of human rights, dignity and sanctity of human lives. Sin in all its ramification should be condemned and eschewed. African Christians should exemplify the Christians virtues of being the salt and the light of the earth. They should live a life that can be emulated and shined forth in the midst of the crooked and perverse generation.

The contemporary African Christianity needs to imbibe the principles of great faith as observed by Robbins.⁶³⁹

1. Great faith begins as a follower of Christ, knowing him personally, realizing his divine authority.
2. The motives of great faith are pure, and are in harmony with the will of God.
3. Great faith has a humble heart, cognizant of the grace and compassion of God, whereby He loves and blesses us.

⁶³⁸*New International Version Study Bible*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1988), 1127.

⁶³⁹Robbins.

4. Great faith has a complete trust in the dependability of God's Word, and accepts it as fact above any other evidence or circumstance.

The church has the mandate of teaching her members to begin to exercise this great faith and usurp the power from the oppressors and liberate the continent from the tyrant rulers. The church should begin to enlighten her members about their civic responsibilities of active involvement and participation in politics. The responsibility of the rulership of the nation should rest upon the shoulder (a part) of the body (see Isa. 9:6). Christian church should lead the nations of the continent in government issues. The answer to the problem of leadership lies with the church.

CONCLUSION

The protagonist in this book is God. Habakkuk only plays a supporting role. The main emphasis is on God's character using Habakkuk as the tool to reveal that character. The plot of Habakkuk is based on a conflict, not in God's character, especially human perception of his character. In the opening section, Habakkuk is questioning God's delay in judging the sinfulness of Judah. God's stunning answer sets him back. The plot is developed further by Habakkuk's pondering over God's use of wicked Babylon to even judge the more seeming righteous Judah. It is completed by God revealing himself and his almighty power in judging the sins of Judah, Babylon and the whole world. He caused Habakkuk to repent and gain a perspective of God's total control of all circumstances. The character development of God is complex. God is certainly portrayed as a round character.⁶⁴⁰ He is not oblivion of the plight of his people even now.

⁶⁴⁰Robert Patterson, "A STUDY in HABAKKUK." March 25, 2008.
<http://www.believersweb.org/astudyinhabakkuk.cfm>

In the contemporary sub-Sahara Africa especially Nigerian situation, the present predicaments call for absolute trust in the almighty God who alone can bring succour to his own. Faith that tunnels through mountains is needed at this period. Faith is the link that binds human nothingness to the divine almightiness. Someone says, “Faith is a lively, rich less confidence in God.” Faith really honours God and God in turn honours faith. Faith in God sees the invisible, believes the incredible and receives the impossible. The poem of McKinney⁶⁴¹ is paramount here:

*Have faith in God when your pathway is lowly,
He sees and knows all the way you have trod;
Never alone are the least of his children;
Have faith in God, have faith in God.*

It is therefore recommended that African Christian faith should be demonstrated in absolute trust in the LORD who is the judge of all the earth. African Christians should live exemplary lives of uprightness, righteousness, truthfulness, faithfulness, purity and selflessness.

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⁶⁴¹B. B. McKinney, “Have Faith in God,” in *Baptist Hymnal*. Ed. Walter Hines Sims. (Nashville, Tennessee: Convention Press, 1956), 253.

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