

Prophets and Profits
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August 29, 2007

Habakkuk 1:

Luke 11: 1-13

Ha 'bah kook is a strange name, unfamiliar, different and yet many early theologians discovered in this thin book, one of the bases of our faith today.

So what is special about Ha 'bah kook other than his name is hard to pronounce? He lived in the seventh century B.C.E. and we know very little about him personally except that he was brave, brilliant and a very important resource for such people as Martin Luther, John Calvin, St Augustine, the Apostle Paul and others.

In case you're trying to find him in the bible, his writing is squeezed between Nahum and Zephaniah, very near the end of the First Testament.

Most of the First Testament prophets were distinguished by their bold speech often to an audience that did not want to hear what they had to say—they tended to be critical of the rulers and the wealthy and often warned them to change their ways or suffer the consequences.

What makes prophets special is that they spoke *for God*. God would tell the prophet what to say, to whom to say it, where to say it and when.

You may remember the story of Moses who was picked by God to go to the Pharaoh and tell him to let the people go. Moses stuttered and felt he wouldn't know what to say or how to say it but God assured him that the right words would come out of his mouth.

Jonah, another prophet, didn't want to prophesy to the people of Nineveh in Assyria because he thought they were so evil they didn't deserve a warning just punishment; so he tried to run away. But God brought him back and Jonah delivered the message—stop your cruelty or God will punish you.

It is my impression that the prophets' dire warnings to the rulers to change their behaviors did not often work. Even in the case of Jonah who had initial success, it didn't last long and soon the Ninevites were acting as cruelly as ever. And Jonah got his wish when the Babylonians devastated the Ninevites in battle.

Now along comes Ha 'bah kook, but his speech is not addressed to the rulers; he is speaking, rather critically, to God. This all took place in Judah, where the king at the time was Je-hoy-ah-keem, a nasty piece of work.

The kingdoms that God had the prophets speak to remind me of some Third World countries where there is rampant corruption with no trickle down benefit to the commoners, high taxes and schemes afoot meant to grab money and property from the people to make the rich, richer.

It was not so different from what Jesus faced in the First Century with the likes of King Herod, the Sadducees and the Romans squeezing taxes and tributes from the people.

What I find interesting about this is that throughout the First Testament and the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke at the least, the emphasis is on not taking unfair advantage of the people. Yet despite the growth of Christianity the divide in the world today is growing between the haves and have-nots. What will it take for us to hear God's message?

As we look at the world, I wonder where the prophets are? Who is bold enough to step forward and challenge the powers in the name of God?

There is a huge difference between the prophets and profiteers.

Where Ha 'bah kook fits in is that he didn't speak for God about the unfairness that was rampant in Judah but *to* God, sounding almost scolding God for allowing such behavior to take place.

Listen again to some of Ha 'bah kook's words to God: "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save? ³Why do you make me see wrong-doing? ⁴...the law becomes slack and justice never prevails."

It is so unusual to have someone in the Bible confront God, but I don't think it is that unusual in our own lives. Have you ever been disappointed that your prayers weren't answered?

(PAUSE)

A friend of my son Mark lost her mother with whom she had been very close—heart attack. When I spoke to this girl at the funeral she was distraught and angry but she didn't know who to be angry at for she had been raised never to blame God for human troubles.

I assured her that it was okay to be angry and that some of the psalmists had the same reaction and that God could take it. Just look at Psalm 13 sometime. To me, it isn't a question of right and wrong but God does work in ways that we do not always understand.

Listen to God's response to Ha 'bah kook—these are not comforting words. God says: ⁵Look at the nations, and see! ... Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told. ⁶For I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own. ⁷Dread and fearsome are they...⁸Their horses are swifter than leopards, more menacing than wolves at dusk... they gather captives like sand.... their own might is their god! "

The Chaldeans that God is allowing to attack Judah would soon be crushed by the Babylonians who in less than two decades would take the rulers and wealthy of Judah and march them to Babylon. At the time it felt like their punishment would never end.

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The Second Testament also had a number of prophets, Jesus being the one we know best. The character and the task of the Second Testament prophet changed, however. Jesus, for example, spoke for God as the prophets before him had done, but his was not a message of warning. His message was and is to love your neighbor or simply treat people fairly by reaching out in friendship and caring.

Jesus was a different kind of prophet. He didn't speak loudly and carry a big stick. He spoke softly and offered a carrot.

Jesus' parable in Luke sounds simple enough to understand: if a friend comes to your door and needs a favor and you have in your power to grant it, you should do it--no questions asked, but, typically, there is more to a Jesus story than a one dimension solution.

When the person raps on the door and the householder begrudgingly gets up to answer it, we are not told that the person doing the asking was aggressive or pounded on the door.

So why did the householder disturb his rest, wake up his family and answer the door when he did not seem to want to? Could it be because, if he didn't open the door, the whole village would hear the ruckus, and he would be subjected to gossip and worse, shame!

Although there was much travel throughout the Middle East there were not many places where a respectable family could go. The inns were often bordellos so people stayed with friends—it was expected.

Jesus contrasts God with the unfriendly neighbor; if a person is initially reluctant to help but finally capitulates because of the fear of shame, how much more will God respond to the pleas of the people of God? God can be trusted. Ask, search, knock for God is there for us.ⁱ

Prayer is rooted in the kindness and generosity of God, thus making it possible for every one who follows the teachings of Jesus to have their petitions granted. What they receive is the Spirit, the ultimate resource for mission.ⁱⁱ

I said earlier that Ha 'bah kook though obscure to many modern Christians, was very important to Paul among others. In Paul's letter to the Romans 1:17, he says: "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" Ha 'bah kook 2:verse 4..

So how do these seeming disparate readings fit together? Is there a conflict between them? Jesus tells us to ask, search. Knock--for God is there for us, yet Ha 'ba kook finds God's response much too severe.

Here's how I understand it.

In the First Testament, God, through the prophets has been telling people how they should treat one another and by and large the rulers ignored them. As we know, the history of the Hebrews has had many ups and downs.

Now God is allowing them to be severely punished but there is light ahead--the arrival several decades later of Cyrus, the Persian king, who will free them from captivity and offer them the choice to return to Jerusalem or stay where they have started new lives.

God gives us what we need, when we are ready for it. We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "thy will be done," but we want what we want when we want it!

God responds to our prayers in God's own way and time—which may not coincide with our personal expectations. As Christians, we have chosen God's way as the answer we know we will come to appreciate.

It has happened to me, and I am sure it has happened to you but we may pray passionately for something quite specific and then something else happens that we realize only later was what we needed, but not what we asked for.

God is like that. Thanks God.

Amen.

One more thing—if a situation occurs to you where you prayed for one thing and got something else and you are willing to share it, please let us know during joys and concerns.

ⁱ Charles B. Cousar, et al., *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NSRV, Year C*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 447.

ⁱⁱ Cousar, 448.