

## Judgment as Divine Justice: A Theological Investigation of Habakkuk 1:2-2:4

### Habakkuk's quarrel with God

2 O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not hear?  
Or cry to you "Violence!"  
and you will not save?  
3 Why do you make me see iniquity,  
and why do you idly look at wrong?  
Destruction and violence are before me;  
strife and contention arise.  
4 So the law is paralyzed,  
and justice never goes forth.  
For the wicked surround the righteous;  
so justice goes forth perverted.

The book of Habakkuk offers one of the most striking testimonies of the difficulties that arise when God and humans interact in a world of sin. As it is, the book places the ethical-metaphysical problem of evil in the historical context of the Egyptian-Chaldean conflict.<sup>1</sup> Habakkuk, a prophet of which we know little about, reports of a prophetic vision, an encounter between him and Yahweh.<sup>2</sup> The content of this encounter includes accusations "typical of individual laments" found in other parts of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most striking phrase in the book, *ad-'ānāh* ("how long," see 1:2), is also found throughout the Old Testament in instances where a "complain" is raised concerning the behavior of another person.<sup>4</sup> Unlike most of the Old Testament instances where *ad-'ānāh* is used, Habakkuk uses it to articulate his frustration against Yahweh himself. The prophet's

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<sup>1</sup> Jimmy J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1991), 83.

<sup>2</sup> Francis I. Andersen, *Habakkuk: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, Volume 25 (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2001), 88.

<sup>3</sup> Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 89.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 88. Roberts suggests three groups of texts where *'ad-'ānāh* is used 1) by God when complaining about Israel (see Ex 16:28; Num 14:11); 2) by humans when complaining about other humans (Ps 62:4[3]; Job 18:2; 19:2); 3) by a believer when complaining about God's actions (Ps. 14:2[1]).

concern is undoubtedly challenging: he sees “iniquity,” “trouble,” and altogether “hardship”<sup>5</sup> falling upon either him or other faithful believers in Judah. In his first prayer (1:2-4), the prophet expresses himself in “highly emotional outburst,”<sup>6</sup> summarizing the precarious moral situation of Judah, namely: how the law is being perverted and the righteous are suffering the hands of the wicked:<sup>7</sup>

Habakkuk describes the judicial situation [of his time] in two ways: (1) Because of the basic spiritual condition, the operation of God’s law was sapped of the vital force necessary for it to guide man’s ethical and judicial decisions. Accordingly righteousness did not characterize Judahite society, and justice was never meted out. (2) Because the society itself had become godless, wicked men could so hem in the attempts and actions of the righteous that whatever justice existed was so twisted that the resultant decision was one of utter perversity.<sup>8</sup>

It does not seem to be the case that Habakkuk found the current situation in Judah strange. His problem lies with God’s inaction to save the righteous while putting a definitive stop to evil. It is not surprising, then, that the prophet was “unhappy, perplexed, and greatly frustrated.”<sup>9</sup> Habakkuk’s complain (*rîb*) was against God himself. God sees the evil in Judah, and yet, He stands idly watching (*tabbîṭ*).<sup>10</sup> Habakkuk seem certain that because God had not promptly execute judgment against the wicked (I theme found also in Jeremiah),<sup>11</sup> He has

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>6</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 102.

<sup>7</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 141; see also Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, Word Bible Commentary, Volume 32 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1998), 32.

<sup>8</sup> Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1991), 138-139.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 125; see also Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan. 1978), 225.

<sup>10</sup> Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 89.

<sup>11</sup> See Jeremiah 15:15-18.

effectively rendered the law (Deuteronomistic?) ineffective in establishing social justice.<sup>12</sup>

Habakkuk's complain includes a charge against God due to his failure to take action, and how this inaction has promoted the evil in Judah.<sup>13</sup> As it stands, Habakkuk's cry for justice amid perversion is an echo of the laments in the Psalms and in the Prophets, and even Deuteronomy.<sup>14</sup>

For this reason, the prophet is raising a covenant lawsuit (*rîb*) against Yahweh. Since God has failed to act (thus failing the covenant),<sup>15</sup> or has failed to do so in a timely manner, Habakkuk is demanding an action that would help explicate "why" God has done so. The prophet stands as the magistrate awaiting evidence to either absolve God or determine His culpability. As Anderson puts it:

The considerable amount of legal terminology (*rîb*, *mišpāt*, *šaddîq*) gives the prayer a forensic character, as a plea for justice. The protest has moved from complaining about "the wicked" to blaming God. The prophet has already got beyond intercession; he has tried that without result (v2 2). We have argued that the "misery" (v 3) is the prophet's own, made worse by perplexity about God's apparent indifference to the situation. The question "How long?" is not a request for information; it is the complaint of a very desperate person who cannot endure much longer.<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, Habakkuk puts God in the "role of defendant and judge."<sup>17</sup> This suggests a philosophical-theological problem with the proliferation (not so much with the existence) of evil and the existence of Yahweh, the omnipotent and omniscient God of Israel. It suggests a particular use of *rîb* as a covenantal tool for humans to declare the righteousness

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<sup>12</sup> Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 90.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 90. Andersen suggests that "the gravamen of his [Habakkuk's] complaint is that by his negligence God must now bear responsibility for the spread and perpetuation of evil" (*Habakkuk*, 118). See also Trevor MacGowan, "The Theology of Habakkuk". 1980, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Humbert, *Problèmes du livre d'Habakkuk* (Neuchatel, Switzerland: Université de Neuchatel, 1944) , 103.

<sup>15</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 125.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 126

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 119.

of God. Through the *rîb*, God can explain his reasons to the prophet with the hope of offering solace and to ease the perplexity of those who seek to understand his righteous ways.

There are several elements that support the interpretation of *rîb* as a covenant laws instead of simply “a quarrel.” Habakkuk’s complaint rest on the assumption that his prayers have gone unanswered. “He has cried for relief from injustice; he has not been answered.”<sup>18</sup> The relationship between human prayer and actions is demonstrated very early in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, when the Israelites where under Egyptian bondage, they prayed to God (Exod 2:23) and God listened (v 24). The liberation they were praying about was a historical event that required historical development, and as such, it did not come immediately. But with the advent of Moses as God’s spokesman served as evidence that God was fulfilling (in a historically, progressive sense) Israel’s hopes, even if they could not witness the consummation of their prayers yet.

More Biblical data could be given to exemplify this phenomenon, where believers cry for divine assistance and God intervenes in their favor.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, prayer is considered as the “the framework in which all the burdens of God’s people may be poured out before the Lord.”<sup>20</sup> This theological tradition was made particularly obvious in the response of Yahweh to Solomon’s prayer in occasion of the temple’s dedication (1 Kings 8-9:9). Solomon asked God to “hear,” “to listen,” “to pay attention” to his people when they prayed to Him. It is

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<sup>18</sup> Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 138.

<sup>19</sup> See Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 140. Examples of the pray-answer motif is thoroughly found in the Bible. To mention a few in the Hebrew Bible: Moses prayed for God to desist of His plans to destroy Israel in the desert (Exo 32:7-14); Joshua asked the God to delay the passing of the day so he could defeat all the enemies of Israel (Jos 10:12-13); Israel asked God for deliverance in more than one occasion after possessing Canaan (Judg 4:1-23; 6:1-8:35; 10:10-16); Hannah asked God for a son, who came to be known as Samuel (1 Sam 1:10-20); Elisha prayed so that the shunammite’s son could come back to life (2 King 4:32-37). Prayer is not always answered positively, however. For instance, Moses prayed that he might enter the promised land, but his request was denied (Deut 3:23-29).

<sup>20</sup> Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 138.

understandable, then, why Habakkuk is concerned with God not responding to his prayer, or at least is not doing it in a timely manner.<sup>21</sup> Without a morally sufficient reason, such an action on the divine part would certainly constitute a breaking of the covenant!

There was also an stipulation in the covenant that would justify God from not listening to Israel's prayers. The prophet Isaiah clarified the Israel's sin will result in God "not listen" to his people's prayers (1:15). Isaiah's charge against Israel echoes God's prophecy against Israel in Deuteronomy 31:17-18 due to Israel's breaking of the covenant. Thus, assuming the separation between God and Judah due to sin, it is understandable that God is not answering Judah's prayer. But it was not Habakkuk's contention that God was not listening to Judah. It was, however, that God was not listening to his own prophet. Did that mean that God was displease with Habakkuk too? When viewed from that perspective, Habakkuk's confusion "take on an extra emotional and spiritual dimension."<sup>22</sup> As such, Habakkuk's initial prayer could be construed as "How much longer will you refuse to listen to me, even though I have cried out for help."<sup>23</sup>

Habakkuk's prayer has a particularly individual tone. His thoughts seem to be of a private nature. And yet, Habakkuk stands in corporate solidarity with the *rest* (sera) of Judah, with the faithful remnant. He is indeed a member of the community of faith.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, "he identifies with the victims on whose behalf he prays."<sup>25</sup> This community is part of a bilateral agreement, a covenant that stipulated bipartisan responsibilities since the very

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<sup>21</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 109.

<sup>22</sup> Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 141.

<sup>23</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 109.

<sup>24</sup> Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 136-137; Andersen, 126.

<sup>25</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 127.

formation of the nation in the desert.<sup>26</sup> In view of this, and taking into consideration how central Israel was to God's plan to bless all the nations (Genesis 22:18), "how can he refuse to provide deliverance in such desperate circumstances?"<sup>27</sup>

Another element that give Habakkuk's *rîb* a covenantal nature relies on the prophet's qualification of the divine attitudes. First, God is a God who listens (Exodus 3:7; 6:5). He promised that he would listen to humble prayers (2 Chronicles 7:14-15). How, then, can it be that God is relinquishing answering the prayer of his righteous prophet?<sup>28</sup> Second, God is a God who sees (Deuteronomy 26:7; 32:19). It is because God "saw" that He was able to rescue Israel, his chosen people, and establish a covenant with them after the Exodus.<sup>29</sup> Third, God is holy (see Leviticus 11:44). Iniquity is something that his eyes "cannot stand" (Habakkuk 1:13, NLT). How could it be that a God who listens to prayers, that a God who sees everything, that a God that is holy, could stand idly while evil is destroying the nation, swallowing justice and oppressing the righteous? Thus, as a covenantal lawsuit, Habakkuk's personal concern rises to a cosmic level. Roberts describes how Habakkuk's prayer could be easily construed as a formal complaint (legal): "Because God did not uphold the sanctions, the credibility of the law's demands had been undermined, and thus justice never emerged."<sup>30</sup> In this sense, God is accused of being responsible for the proliferation of evil in the land.

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<sup>26</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*,

<sup>27</sup> Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 140.

<sup>28</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 101: "Habakkuk is reproaching God for not listening and not looking—for not noticing the iniquity, the wretchedness and all the other bad things listed in v 3. Ps 94:9 affirms that God does both listen and look, using the same verbs as Habakkuk 1:2-3."

<sup>29</sup> See Exodus 2:24-25. In describing the place of the religious tradition of Israel in relation to Habakkuk's complaint, Roberts adds: "while the prophet or other righteous individuals in his society are oppressed; though he sees the wrongdoing, God does not do anything about it. The prophet cannot understand why, because Israelite religious tradition affirmed that Yahweh's eyes were too pure for him to idly watch while evil was done" (*Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 89).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 90.

Habakkuk's agony is perhaps compounded in the present if we take into consideration how some theologies describe the way God relates to humans. A just God that "reigns in justice" is to be trusted to keep his promises. And yet, the righteous pray in God does not answer.<sup>31</sup> It is the crisis of faith that originates when our hopes and dreams concerning God are met with silence and confusion.<sup>32</sup> I would like to suggest that a meticulous understanding of providence is one of the theological factors that could contribute to the feelings of confusion, betrayal, and abandonment some of the saints have experienced throughout the ages. If God is the ultimate source of every decision made in history, even the ones that have brought so much suffering to the world, and He does it for His own glory (however we interpret it), how could we freely love and freely trust his good intentions?

#### **A divine answer (a divine solution?)**

5 "Look among the nations, and see;  
wonder and be astounded.  
For I am doing a work in your days  
that you would not believe if told.  
6 For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,  
that bitter and hasty nation,  
who march through the breadth of the earth,  
to seize dwellings not their own.  
7 They are dreaded and fearsome;  
their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.  
8 Their horses are swifter than leopards,  
more fierce than the evening wolves;  
their horsemen press proudly on.  
Their horsemen come from afar;  
they fly like an eagle swift to devour.  
9 They all come for violence,  
all their faces forward.  
They gather captives like sand.  
10 At kings they scoff,  
and at rulers they laugh.  
They laugh at every fortress,  
for they pile up earth and take it.  
11 Then they sweep by like the wind and go on,

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<sup>31</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 127.

<sup>32</sup> See *ibid*, 131.

guilty men, whose own might is their god!”

As demonstrated by the divine response offered in 1:5-11, God was listening to Habakkuk’s complain. The divine response, however, was addressed to a plural audience instead of an individual, which suggests that as personal as Habakkuk’s concerns were, they stand as the clamor of a community, the faith community in Judah.<sup>33</sup> Not only that, but the divine plan to eradicate evil from Judah would affect the entire community, not only Habakkuk. And the message God is giving the community about their complaint seems so appalling that prophet such as “Isaiah would call [it] a ‘strange work’ (Isa 28:21).”<sup>34</sup>

The divine response to Habakkuk and the faithful community brings to attention an unsuspected element, a foreign agent divinely tasked to bring the balance of justice back to Judah. In his first complaint (vv 2-4), Habakkuk demonstrated a frustrated faith in God for failing to act in order to put a stop to the evil so prevalent in Judah. Now, God is calling Habakkuk (and Judah by extension) to “look among the nations” (v. 5) for the answer he has been praying about. God is “raising” the Chaldeans to solve the problem experienced by the prophet.<sup>35</sup> The answer, however, does not seem to be a proper moral justification of the divine acts since it only offers explanation on what God is doing, and not on why he is doing it in this way.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 141.

<sup>34</sup> Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 94.

<sup>35</sup> Andersen (in *Habakkuk*, 142-143) suggests that there is no reason given in the text for God to raise the Chaldeans, and thus, no textual reason to suggest that they are the divine instrument to bring justice to Judah. Nevertheless, the contextual evidence (verses 5-11 appearing right after Habakkuk’s complaint in vv. 1-4, and the divine imperative to “look”) suggests otherwise.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 143. It has been suggested elsewhere that the purpose of the divine covenant lawsuit is to justify God in his ways. For more information on the subject, see Julien Harvey, *Le plaidoyer prophétique contre Israël après la rupture de l’alliance: Etude d’une formule littéraire de l’Ancien Testament*, Studia, 22 (Bruges-Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1967), 165-166; Richard M. Davidson, “The Divine Covenant Lawsuit Motif in Canonical



There will be an awe, a shock, a general disbelief about the “deed” God was to perform. Speaking from the background of a covenantal relationship with God, it is likely that God was referring to Judah’s inability to reconcile the divine executive judgment against them with the fact that they were His chosen people. After all, despite their general lawlessness and corruption in Judah described by Habakkuk vv 2-4, Judah was still the seat of the “temple of the Lord” (Jer 7:4; cf. Hab 2:20).<sup>37</sup> This false confidence in their impregnability was not, as Jeremiah clearly said to Hananiah, in harmony with the testimony of the prophets (Jer 28: 8-9; cf. 7:2-15). Interestingly, God using another nation to punish Israel for breaking the covenant should not have been an estrange idea for Judah in any case. After all, such a prediction was introduced into the covenant documentation very early in Israel’s history (see Deut 32).<sup>38</sup>

God’s first answer to Habakkuk does not rebuke any of the charges brought by Habakkuk. As such, the divine response would have served as a kind of consolation.<sup>39</sup> God has seen all that Habakkuk has seen. He has heard Habakkuk’s prayer. He does not dispute his prophet on his accusations. God “is fully in sympathy with the prophet’s agony over the suffering righteous ones.”<sup>40</sup> And yet, “if the inactivity of God (vv 2-4) is incomprehensible, the activity of God (vv 5-11) is incredible.”<sup>41</sup> It is possible that God was anticipating a response of disbelief concerning the rise of the Chaldeans to an important military position in the Middle East. It is also possible that God might have anticipated the exact reaction of Habakkuk and his contemporaries to the divine action of raising the Chaldeans. If so, God

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Perspective,” *JATS* 21, No. 1-2 (2010): 69. I agree with Harvey and with Davidson in identifying the purpose of a covenant lawsuit is to demonstrate the righteousness of God in history. This is precisely the way in which Habakkuk employs the term.

<sup>37</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 144.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 141.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 144.

was expecting a reluctance on the part of the listeners to attribute morally acceptable purpose to His actions.<sup>42</sup> In any case, God was aware that his response would generate further confusion, even if this was clearly not His intention.<sup>43</sup> And the “deed” itself would “constitute a crisis of faith for the believer.”<sup>44</sup> Patterson suggests, however, that “had Habakkuk listened as carefully to the last line of God’s answer [v 11] as he did to the extended description of Judah’s chastiser, he might have avoided the second perplexity that gripped his soul.”<sup>45</sup>

God’s response to Habakkuk brings about another concern. God is indeed bringing judgment against Judah (in alignment with Habakkuk’s prayer). But the divine concerns are deeper than those presented by the prophet. The scope of the problem reaches far beyond the Judean territory. This is noticeable in the similarities between the violence done in Judah (expressed by Habakkuk) and the violent attitude of the Chaldeans anticipated by Yahweh (expressed in vv 5-11). This connection is far from fortuitous. God is connecting two different people, two different scenarios, and making them convey in nature and destiny (they are both evil, and they are both going to be objects of divine judgment, see Hab 1:5 and v 11; cf. vv 2:6-20). But the prophet’s concern is only on the immediate situation, on his own people. No wonder the divine response is believed to be “overwhelming.”<sup>46</sup> On this, Andersen adds:

The progression [of the book of Habakkuk] is like that in the book of Job, where questions that arise from one man’s personal anguish are answered by an apparently irrelevant excursion into the realm of nature. The purposes of God for one person or one nation can be understood only in terms of the whole world. This means that God alone understands it all, while humans get glimpses.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 149. More on this on the next section.

<sup>46</sup> Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 141.

<sup>47</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 141.

It might be difficult to understand God's involvement in history in relation to the rise of the Chaldeans. According to the divine prophecy of vv 5-11, God is rising the tyrant Chaldeans, who are *to be* violent without doubt. In v 11, there is a moral judgment made against the Chaldeans because their of their self-worship. I believe Smith is right when saying that "God allows tyrants to spring up and flourish for a little while, but they become guilty by the abuse of their power and, like a plant before it is firmly rooted, God blows on them and they wither."<sup>48</sup> Divine foreknowledge does not seem to determine the nature of the divine instrument itself. God might be raising the Chaldeans (presumably, to judge Judah), but this divine commission says nothing about condoning the abuse of power or self-worship (i.e., idolatry). There is, then, a difference between 1) the divine commission, 2) the overall character of the subject (given by a revelation of divine foreknowledge), and 3) the actions of said subject (given too by a revelation of divine foreknowledge). On the character of the subject, divine foreknowledge does not count as evidence that would make Babylon guilty of the charges. I argue, however, that the imperialist actions of the Chaldeans do constitute evidence in favor of an executive judgment from God. But these actions have not been actualized as the moment of the divine oracle. As a general rule, divine executive judgment is preceded by either an investigative face or a public demonstration of the particular sin (sins) that is to be judged by the sinner.<sup>49</sup> Thus, it is not until the actions of the *judged-to-be* nation

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<sup>48</sup> Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 32 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1984) 102.

<sup>49</sup> Examples of a divine investigation preceding the executive face of God's judgement include: Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen 3:8-19); Cain killing his brother (Gen 4:8-12); the construction of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:5-9); the destruction of the Canaanites (Gen 15:16); the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:17-21); the death of Pharaoh's firstborn (Exo 4:21-23); the annihilation of Korah and his aggregates (Num 16:1-40); the destruction of the nations (Ezek 25-32; Amos 1:3-4:5; Isa 13-23) The previously mentioned oracles of divine judgment against the nations are based on the unlawful, idolatrous acts of said nations *de facto*. Thus, unless repentance is demonstrated by the specific party referred to by the Lord in an oracle, the oracle itself serves as a testimony

or individual have been actualized in history, that there is evidence to justify the execution of divine judgment.

The question remains, however, as to what God's ultimate purpose behind his decision to raise the Chaldeans is. Most commentators suggest that God is raising them to bring judgment against Judah.<sup>50</sup> This traditional interpretation might find support in Daniel 1:1 and other related texts.<sup>51</sup> If so, judgment is the divine response to Habakkuk's problem and it's God's ultimate solution to the problem of evil. If Judah has done evil, it will receive punishment in return.<sup>52</sup> This punishment is somehow effective at 1) stopping the propagation of evil and 2) eliminate the remaining evil that is still upon the land. As suggested before, this corrective action is a historical event that requires divine actions in history to be accomplished.<sup>53</sup> Why God chose to use the Chaldeans instead of sending an angel and executing judgment right away is beyond the data given in Habakkuk. Regardless of the medium God chose to execute his judgment upon Judah, there is still an investigation needed to be conducted. As such, executive judgment is but the last step in the divine process of determining the culpability of a person/nation and stopping evil from propagating. So, even if

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of the malicious acts of said nations, thus constituting proper evidence to validate God's executive judgment in history.

<sup>50</sup> See Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 167.

<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, Jer 25: 8-11; 46:25-28.

<sup>52</sup> Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 147; see also Smith, 104.

<sup>53</sup> Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 144-145:

In his reply to Habakkuk God seizes upon the very words Habakkuk had used. The prophet had complained that he constantly had to behold evil all around him. But God himself had seen it all apparently with unconcern, because he had done nothing to correct either the people or the condition. God now tells Habakkuk to look, to look at the nations, to take a good look. God is already at work in and behind the scenes of earth's history to set in motion events that will change the whole situation. And when Habakkuk learns what is to happen, he will be utterly amazed. In fact, he probably will not be able to believe it.

as Robertson suggests “swiftness in the execution of judgment is a characteristic of the Lord’s activity throughout the ages,”<sup>54</sup> it still requires a judicial process in history.

As previously noted, the execution of divine judgment was part of the covenantal agreement between God and his people. The breaking of the covenant on the part of Judah would bring the covenant curses upon them.<sup>55</sup> As it seems, Habakkuk’s prayer as member of the covenant was a request for God to execute the covenant curses upon his people in order to stop the propagation of evil and finally eradicate it.<sup>56</sup> It was obvious from the covenant curses that God would raise a foreign nation to punish Judah.<sup>57</sup> But what does this mean for Judah as God’s people? Could it be that God’s covenantal nature extends beyond the realm of Judah? And if so, what was the divine purpose with establishing a covenant with Israel in the first place? Furthermore, what is Judah’s standing before God in relation to the covenant after the punishment brought about by the Chaldeans to the land? Are they still God’s people?<sup>58</sup>

As it appears in *The Song of Moses* (Deut 32:1-43), the covenant curse of punishment and dispossession of the land was not to be final. God would have return his people back to the land of their inheritance. Although God has established a covenant Israel at Sinai, He also established a general covenant with the whole earth (see Gen 9:8-17; Isa 24:5-6),<sup>59</sup> Judah is still God’s “treasured possession among all people” (Exo 19:5-6; cf. Deut 7:6; Isa 43:4). They were set apart to be divine instruments in the divine plan to bless all the nations through Abraham’s seed (Gen 22:18; cf. 26:4). And God will bring them back from their exile (see Jer

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<sup>54</sup> Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 146.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 153.

<sup>56</sup> See ibid, 154. It unclear whether Habakkuk was aware of the implications of his call for judgement upon the covenant community.

<sup>57</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 144.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 151. Andersen argues that Judah is still a special people based on the original covenant God established with Israel even if they will now suffer dispossession of the land.

<sup>59</sup> See Davidson, “Divine Covenant Lawsuit Motif ,” 67-69.

16:14-18). But before the restitution of God's people could happen, there needs to be a purge of the sin and evil of the land, and of the people.

### Too much to bear

12 Are you not from everlasting,  
 O LORD my God, my Holy One?  
 We shall not die.  
 O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment,  
 and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof.  
 13 You who are of purer eyes than to see evil  
 and cannot look at wrong,  
 why do you idly look at traitors  
 and remain silent when the wicked swallows up  
 the man more righteous than he?  
 14 You make mankind like the fish of the sea,  
 like crawling things that have no ruler.  
 15 He brings all of them up with a hook;  
 he drags them out with his net;  
 he gathers them in his dragnet;  
 so he rejoices and is glad.  
 16 Therefore he sacrifices to his net  
 and makes offerings to his dragnet;  
 for by them he lives in luxury,  
 and his food is rich.  
 17 Is he then to keep on emptying his net  
 and mercilessly killing nations forever?

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1 I will stand at my watch  
 and station myself on the ramparts;  
 I will look to see what he will say to me,  
 and what answer I am to give to this complaint.

Verses 12-17 are not precise enough to identify any specific event in history.<sup>60</sup> Yet, despite their elusiveness, there are some indicators that might suggest the second prayer of Habakkuk was made after the event predicted in the previously given divine response (vv 5-11).<sup>61</sup> First, Habakkuk's recognizes that God has establish the Chaldeans to bring judgment to Judah (v 12). Then, the prophet asks "why do you tolerate the treacherous?" (v 13),

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<sup>60</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 174.

<sup>61</sup> This is also suggested by Smith in *Micah-Malachi*, 102, and Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 174.

implying that God has witnessed the abuse of power by the Chaldeans in history (just like in v 2-3).<sup>62</sup>

At the beginning of the book, Habakkuk's was concerned with God's unresponsiveness. As we move towards the end of the first chapter, Habakkuk's concern is enlightenment to understand God's perspective.<sup>63</sup> He knows God has appointed the Chaldeans to punish Judah for their sins in a redemptive judgment. But it seems like the divine judgment is so severe that Judah might not survive it at all. Habakkuk is now looking to understand the reason why God remains "silent" (v 13) while the Chaldeans abuse their power against the covenant people.<sup>64</sup> The people of Judah, unlike God, are not everlasting (cf. v 12),<sup>65</sup> and unless God intervenes promptly, they might disappear. The outraged tone of the original complaint (vv 2-4) has deescalated to humble anxiety and fear.<sup>66</sup>

As previously mentioned, the covenantal curses stipulated that God would bring a foreign nation to punish his people for their disobedience. Thus, it seems like Habakkuk is mostly complaining about "the disproportionate scale" of the divine solution at this point.<sup>67</sup> There is nothing morally acceptable about the way the Chaldeans are behaving. What could be the divine justification for employing the them to slaughter their prey? He knows they are

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<sup>62</sup> Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 102.

<sup>63</sup> Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 161.

<sup>64</sup> See Roland K. Harrison, *Introduction to The Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 937.

<sup>65</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 177.

<sup>66</sup> Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 161-163; see also *ibid*, 158. As Andersen (in *Habakkuk*, 171) puts it: "Although the mood of perplexity and reproach continues from the first prayer into the second, the tone is not so strident, and the poetic composition is more disciplined. The structure is evident, the scansion is regular, and the meaning is clear."

<sup>67</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 179. Nevertheless, Andersen suggests that Habakkuk's is complaining about the act of divine judgment against Judah by employing the Chaldeans.

also to be punished, but why have not they being punished yet? Yet again, Habakkuk is having trouble understanding the timing of God's plans.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore,

God's response to Habakkuk was congruent with the message of Habakkuk's contemporary Jeremiah and with the earlier prophetic message of Isaiah. Both of these prophets interpreted the major foreign enemy of Judah in their time as a tool God was using to punish Judah. Habakkuk's questioning of his oracle suggests that he had some difficulty accepting this theological interpretation of history. This understanding may have prophetic tradition behind it, but how can this be just?"<sup>69</sup>

In Habakkuk's mind, there is no significant distinction between what God is intending for by raising the Chaldeans and what the Chaldeans are actually doing. This is specially troubling for the prophet since the Chaldeans worship themselves instead of God.<sup>70</sup> How can God's plan include the exaltation of the Chaldeans to the point of them committing idolatry? God called Habakkuk to "see" what He was going to do, and now that Habakkuk has seen it, he cannot find a justification for God's actions.<sup>71</sup> Again, Habakkuk does not see the divine solution as a complex set of elements converging on a specific point (judgment) that God is actually bringing about.<sup>72</sup> As such, the divine response offer an answer to Habakkuk's concerns in four ways: first, God is eliminating evil from Judah by means of judgment; second, God is fulfilling his covenantal promise to his people (in judgment); third, God is bringing covenantal judgment against his people; fourth, God is bringing judgment against the Chaldeans, which makes the scope of the divine judgment more universal, and thus, more definitive as it relates to the problem of evil.

Habakkuk reaffirms his trust in the divine wisdom despite his perplexity, and puts himself in a the position of a watchman keeping guard, awaiting for an epistemic sign (Hab

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 179-180.

<sup>69</sup> Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 102-103.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 104-105.

<sup>71</sup> Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 158.

<sup>72</sup> See *ibid*, 160



2:1).<sup>73</sup> Evidently, Habakkuk is not convinced about the moral effectiveness of God's solution. To the contrary, it has *apparently* made it worse.<sup>74</sup> In a cry for survival (v 12) Habakkuk appeals to God as creator, and consequently, sustainer of life. Thus, it is his responsibility to make sure life does not descend into oblivion, that humankind (understood narrowly as Judah) does not disappear into the madness of the ruthless conqueror.<sup>75</sup> And yet, God is silent again. As Smith suggests, "times when God is silent (when we think he should be vocal or active avenging the wrong and judging evil) are hard to understand."<sup>76</sup> And again, "sometimes the silence of God can be explained by the people's sins and their failure to repent. But that is not always true."<sup>77</sup>

Habakkuk goes from outrage in 1:2-4 to patience in Habakkuk 2:1.<sup>78</sup> And yet, it is fair to assume that the second prayer of Habakkuk is an indicator that the original theodicy-related problem presented in 1:2-4 has not yet been resolved. Then, Habakkuk is "keeping his own watch" concerning his original altercation with God: the unjust actions of a righteous God.<sup>79</sup> He awaits for God like a watchman awaiting for the sight of a messenger in the horizon. The prophet is waiting for a different, a more acceptable answer to his initial complaint.<sup>80</sup> On this note, Robertson adds:

The prophet is right in the position he takes with respect to his own role in the resolution of his perplexing issue. He will not attempt to reconcile in his own mind the apparent contradiction between the election of Israel by God as the object of his special love and

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>74</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 171.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 184.

<sup>76</sup> Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, 104.

<sup>77</sup> Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, 104.

<sup>78</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 191.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 196.

the devastation of Israel at the hands of the rapacious Chaldeans as ordered by the Lord himself. He will not resort to the resources of human wisdom. Instead, he will watch for an answer that can come only from the Lord. Habakkuk knows that, in accordance with the nature of the prophetic office in Israel, revelation from God alone can answer his perplexity.<sup>81</sup>

Habakkuk is “concentrating all his sense in preparation for the revelation.”<sup>82</sup> He “braces himself for a straightforward rebuke from the Lord.”<sup>83</sup> Habakkuk questioning of the divine plan demonstrates some key ideas about the nature of God’s reign in history. First, even if God’s ways are mysterious and somewhat unpredictable, there are far from being arbitrary. Habakkuk assumes that God’s ways could be understood through revelation, that God can make himself known to human beings. As a matter of fact, He has done so quiet often in salvation history. The most remarkable example of which is, perhaps, the Exodus event.<sup>84</sup> This event set the eschatological hope of Israel in a new historical frame, a moment of profound disappointment in Israel’s history, creating a theology that could help Israel endure through difficult times by affirming the certainty of deliverance from God (a faithful God) regardless the circumstances.<sup>85</sup>

### **A Definitive Answer**

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<sup>81</sup> Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 165.

<sup>82</sup> Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 193

<sup>83</sup> Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 165; see also *ibid*, 166-167.

<sup>84</sup> The Exodus is considered to be the most important theme in the Jewish historiography (see George W. Buchanan, *Typology and the Gospels* [Laham, MD: University Press of America, 1987], 34). Furthermore, the Exodus theme is the most ample historical theme in the Hebrew Bible (Yair Zakovitch, “*And You Shall Tell Your Son...*”: *The Concept of Exodus in the Bible* [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991], 9), and thus the most distinctive source of divine revelation in the Old Testament.

<sup>85</sup> See Jud 6:13; 1 Chr 16:9-36; Neh 9:6-38; Ps 96; 98; 106:1-8, 43-48; 107:1-14, 17-20, 26-43; 136:10-26; Joel 2:21-27; Micah 7:15, 20. The term *alp* (*pâlâ*) is translated in all these texts as “marvelous things.” This marvelous work God is doing is a revelation of Himself and a successful work of judgment that results in the liberation of his people. In each one of them, the term has a connotation of deliverance based on the corporate experience of Israel in Egypt that serves as the hope for the Israelites that lived after the Exodus.

2 Then the LORD replied:

“Write down the revelation  
and make it plain on tablets  
so that a herald may run with it.

3 For the revelation awaits an appointed time;  
it speaks of the end  
and will not prove false.

Though it linger, wait for it;  
it will certainly come  
and will not delay.

4 “See, the enemy is puffed up;  
his desires are not upright—  
but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.

Habakkuk’s use of the term *tôkaḥtî* (“my reproof”) suggest that his second prayer was a “reproof or rebuke of Yahweh.”<sup>86</sup> He “talked back to God” as many other men in Old Testament did.<sup>87</sup> He had to wait for a divine response, for a revelation of God in history.<sup>88</sup> In response, God has given him a vision. This vision was likely about the original issue raised by Habakkuk in 1:2-4; a vision that also included elements of Habakkuk’s second prayer (vv 12-17) A vision likely about his previously announce intervention by means of the Chaldeans, the subsequent judgment of them, with an assurance of God’s protection and deliverance of Israel from oppression.<sup>89</sup>

This vision is truthful in content, and as such, its predictions of judgment against Judah will certainly come to pass (cf. Daniel 1:1-2),<sup>90</sup> and it seems like it was already been happening by the time Habakkuk writes his second prayer. The part of the vision that is still to come is the effective annihilation of evil in Judah, the executive judgment against Babylon, and the miraculous salvation of God’s people. As such, theodicy might be a major concern for

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<sup>86</sup> Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 108.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. Roberts s mentions Abraham, Moses, and latter prophets such as Amos, Jeremiah, and Job.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>89</sup> See Andersen, 205, 207 .

<sup>90</sup> Evidence of the fulfillment of this prophecy are abundant in some of the prophets (like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel), and in the Psalms.

God in his relationship to the world, but it is far from being the only one. The detailed nature of command to write the vision suggests two possible interpretations that are not mutually exclusive: on the one hand, the writing was intended to be as clear as possible so that people could read it quickly (and, properly understand it), on the other, the writing is to be made clear so that people can find refuge in it.<sup>91</sup> Thus, the salvation/deliverance of his people is also portrayed as a divine concern in relation to the problem of evil in Habakkuk.

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<sup>91</sup> Roberts, 110.