

Habakkuk and the Problem of Suffering: Theodicy Deferred

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Abstract: A theological reading of the book of Habakkuk offers insight into the problem of suffering. Approaching the text canonically, this study aims to explore Habakkuk's theological response to suffering, and the potential to relate this to Christian and classically theistic attempts to articulate a theodicy. Although Habakkuk puts forward no theological objection to the idea that the suffering experienced by God's people is, in some sense, deserved, he nonetheless questions the extent of the suffering and the justice of the God who permits it from a perspective of faith and eschatological hope. The answers to the questions posed by evil and suffering are apparently deferred by Habakkuk, who persists in faith despite the present lack of resolution to these questions. Such a reading lends support to models of theodicy that prioritize the practical dimensions of suffering, and challenges accounts that would insist on satisfactory explanations for suffering as a condition for faith.

Keywords: Habakkuk, suffering, evil, theodicy

I Decontextualization and the Book of Habakkuk

The Book of Habakkuk is at once concise and one of the most startling in the OT for a reader committed to faith in a benevolent God. Habakkuk questions God repeatedly concerning the suffering of the righteous, and although the book ends, tentatively, on a note of hope, it is unsettling and much more ambiguous in tone than, for example, the confident affirmation of the psalmist that he has never seen someone righteous abandoned, nor their children begging for bread (Ps 37:25). Notably, Habakkuk deals with the questions of theodicy not in an abstract manner, but in an existential way that to some extent undermines traditional theodicies. The decontextualized nature of the book of Habakkuk in its canonical form and setting invites the reader, too, to engage empathetically with the issues raised and thus makes the book especially

germane to theological interpretation. A careful examination of the question of the suffering of the righteous in Habakkuk has a wider resonance with attempts to understand philosophically and theologically the nature of suffering, and may fruitfully be brought into dialogue with some Christian and theistic theodicies.

The book of Habakkuk provides few clues as to its historical origins and referent. There are thus numerous open historical and critical questions attached to the study of the book. When did Habakkuk prophesy? Who are the oppressors of God's people in 1:2–4? Are they foreign or domestic? And what relation do they bear to the Chaldeans of 1:6? Who are the “wicked” and the “righteous” (1:4, 13; 2:4) who feature in Habakkuk? Different solutions have been proposed for these questions, leading to different proposed settings. I suggest the most convincing proposal is that the historical setting of the book is shortly prior to the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 597 BC. These are the “Chaldeans” of 1:6, who are “raised up” as a punishment for a domestic oppression, referred to in 1:2–4.¹ This proposal is not without a few difficulties,² but provides a reasonably coherent setting for Habakkuk. An alternative suggestion is that the oppressor in 1:2–4 is a foreign power — for example, (as in Nahum) Assyria.³ In this case, the

¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Habakkuk*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), xiii-xiv. Cf. Theodore Hiebert, “The Book of Habakkuk: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” *NIB* 7:623-55, 624; Elizabeth R. Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi*, IBC (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox, 1986), 32; Mária Eszenyei Széles, *Wrath and Mercy*, ITC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 3-5; Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, trans. David E. Green (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978), 201; Paul L. Redditt, *Introduction to the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 293: “The prophet Habakkuk anticipated that fall [of Jerusalem] and depicted the cruelty and idolatry of the Babylonians, showing that they deserved to be punished too.”

² See Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 449. However, Childs shows that alternative explanations, such as Duhm's relation of the book to the period of Alexander the Great, or suggestions that the oppressor of 1:2–4 is Assyria (as in Nahum) and thus not domestic, also suffer from difficulties (449-50).

³ E.g., George Adam Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*. 2 vols (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), 2:115-124.

moral dilemma of the justice of God in Habakkuk is even sharper, since the “Chaldeans” are not sent as a punishment for Judah’s own unfaithfulness, but as an intensification of an already-existing foreign oppression. Given that the precise injustices referred to are often, in the Latter Prophets, those of a domestic nature, I suggest that the “foreign oppressor” reading of 1:2–4 is less probable. Habakkuk complains of “violence” (חַמָּס) and “destruction” (רָשָׁע) in 1:3, terms used to describe internal corruption in Ezek 45:9 and Amos 3:10, and his concern for “justice” (צִדְקָה) fits more easily with domestic oppression.⁴ The historical and critical questions are not unimportant, but difficult to resolve given the paucity of evidence regarding the precise setting of Habakkuk and the circumstances of its author. Michael G. O’Neal is correct to highlight the reality and significance of these questions, arguing that a theological reading of Habakkuk cannot simply ignore historical, literary, and form-critical questions: “The book begins as a theodicy and ends like a psalm. Why is this the case?”⁵ Why this is so is really a question pertaining to the theology of Habakkuk and requires an examination of how the questions of theodicy are posed and responded to.

The precise date of Habakkuk is difficult to determine because of the lack of political detail and the nonspecific ways in which the oppressors and victims are referred to.⁶ This nonspecificity is striking when compared with other books in the prophetic corpus, and perhaps suggests Habakkuk in its canonical form is deliberately decontextualized (as opposed to

⁴ Achtemeier relates the term צִדְקָה to “that order ordained by God for the society of the covenant people,” as in Isa 42:1–4 and Jer 5: 1–9 (*Nahum-Malachi*, 34). Hiebert suggests, specifically, that a lack of justice is “the abuse of power in the administration of King Jehoiakim” (“Habakkuk,” 631).

⁵ Michael G. O’Neal, *Interpreting Habakkuk as Scripture: An Application of the Canonical Approach of Brevard S. Childs*, SBL 9 (New York: Lang, 2007), 3.

⁶ Hiebert, “Habakkuk,” 625. The date of Habakkuk’s prophecy might, on the immediately pre-exilic proposal adopted above, be close to the battle of Carchemish 605 BC, when it became apparent that Babylon was a serious military power. William Holladay suggests a date between 605-594 BC in “Plausible Circumstances for the Prophecy of Habakkuk,” *JBL* 120 (2001): 123-30. How close this might be to the date of composition of the book of Habakkuk is impossible to determine.

dehistoricized).⁷ This decontextualization certainly permits, and perhaps even invites, later readers to relate situations contemporary with themselves to the text, as the Qumran community did in 1QPHab, Paul and the author of Hebrews did, and as Christian and Jewish readers continue to do so today.⁸ As J.H. Eaton rightly observes, Habakkuk's "message is expressed in such general and typical terms that in essence it is readily understandable. For this reason it speaks with relevance to other ages."⁹

There is none of the biographical detail we find (for example) in Hosea or Amos, or in Jeremiah. Those biographical details that remain are all directed towards the matter at hand, and towards Habakkuk's dialogue and complaint with God.¹⁰ Thus, the book invites the interpreter to read Habakkuk as addressing a common experience of faith, namely, the problem of God's apparent injustice given the lawlessness and oppression present in the world. This means that if we are to understand Habakkuk, our efforts are better spent approaching it in this way than trying to identify the historical setting or establish the precise referents of the "righteous" and

⁷ Childs, *Introduction*, 450. To term the text "dehistoricised" suggests Habakkuk never had an historical referent to begin with, rather than the text referring to an actual event in nonspecific and generic terms.

⁸ J.A. Sanders, "Habakkuk in Qumran, Paul, and the Old Testament," *JR* 39 (1959): 232-44, 237. The Qumran Peshier of Habakkuk relates details of chapters 1—2 of the prophecy to the obliquely named characters of the "Wicked Priest" and the "Teacher of Righteousness" (1QPHab 1:13-14) and the "Kittim" (1QPHab 2:12—16). For an introduction, translation, and commentary on the scroll, see William H. Brownlee, *The Midrash Peshier of Habakkuk* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 19-36, 37-219.

⁹ J.H. Eaton, *Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah: Introduction and Commentary*, TBC (London: SCM, 1961), 82. Sanders argues that this reading is implicitly what both Paul and the author of 1QPHab have done in appropriating Habakkuk's theology for their own situation ("Habakkuk," 237).

¹⁰ As recognized by Childs: "The traditional complaint and answer sequence is thus integrally tied to the personal experience of the prophet" (*Introduction*, 451). Cf. O'Neal, *Interpreting Habakkuk*, 128-31.

“wicked.” Rather, the “righteous” and the “wicked” could be interpreted, as in Ps 1,¹¹ as typifying two ways of life: the life of faith in the God of Israel and the life that stands opposed to this in its autonomy and/or refusal to believe.¹²

II Habakkuk’s concern with apparent divine injustice

This makes sense within a theological reading of Habakkuk as addressing the attitude of the “righteous” person in the face of the apparent injustice of God. Rikki Watts goes so far as to claim that “it is universally acknowledged that Habakkuk is wrestling with the problem of theodicy.”¹³ Yet, Habakkuk is not a theodicy in the traditional sense of the Christian theological tradition, as Elizabeth R. Achtemeier reminds us;¹⁴ he does not seek (in the words of John Milton) to “assert eternal providence and justify the ways of God to men,” but, nevertheless, to address how the righteous person should behave in a situation in which divine providence appears slow, inactive, or unjust. Neither does the prophet question the existence of God, nor God’s ability to act.¹⁵ Habakkuk’s dilemma is *not* that of Epicurus, posed here by David Hume: “Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?”¹⁶

¹¹ Cf. Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*, FC 108, trans. Robert C. Hill (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 266-67.

¹² Cf. Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 1.5-6 (NPNF¹ 8:2).

¹³ Rikki Watts, “‘For I am not ashamed of the gospel’: Romans 1:16–17 and Habakkuk 2:4,” in *Romans and the People of God*, ed. Sven K. Soderlund and N.T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 4.

¹⁴ Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi*, 31: “Habakkuk ... is not a justification of the ways of God to human beings. It is taken for granted ... that God is just.”

¹⁵ Julia M. O’Brien, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, AOTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 73.

¹⁶ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2nd ed. (London, 1779), 186.

Rather, Habakkuk's complaint has to do with God's *willingness* to act on behalf of the people of Israel and to enact divine judgement: "His complaint seems to be that 'justice delayed is justice denied.'"¹⁷ This is exemplified by Habakkuk's initial question:

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save? (1:2, NRSV)

Habakkuk addresses God directly with the lament, "How long?" which is frequently found in the OT on the lips of those seeking an answer to the problem of God's apparent inactivity or slowness in dealing with evil.¹⁸ This lament implies "a sense of impatient waiting and urgent longing."¹⁹ The prophet is concerned with God's apparent silence in the face of injustice (חַוְלָה, NRSV: "violence") and the oppression described in Israel in 1:2–4. This language recurs throughout chaps. 1 and 2, and strongly suggests the book be read as addressing the problems of theodicy.

However, the fact that Habakkuk phrases his complaint in such a manner implies a certain attitude to the question of the suffering of the righteous. To ask how long injustice will be allowed to continue implies both that there is a God, and that God is able to act to end the injustice. The implication is also that the oppression has frequently been complained of to God, that God is well aware of it, and that action to redress the injustice is expected of him. However, the manner in which the question is posed does not immediately presume that justice will be done, but hopes for it as a future event, which is desired to arrive soon. Habakkuk asks God to intervene and deliver the "righteous" from their oppression. Our writer does not engage in a removed, prophetic critique of society from a divine perspective in the same way as many other prophetic texts, as can be seen from his use of a lament as the form of his opening. "In doing so," Theodore Hiebert argues, "Habakkuk has ... assumed instead the role of the victim whose case

¹⁷ Redditt, *Introduction*, 302.

¹⁸ E.g., Pss 13:1–2; 62:4; 89:46; Job 18:2; 19:2. Cf. Donald Gowan, *The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1976), 20.

¹⁹ O'Neal, *Interpreting Habakkuk*, 82.

has not been redressed by divine intervention and who can only appeal to God for aid.”²⁰ Such use of a lament is not unique (cf. Jer 15:10–21), but is striking in response to a situation of injustice that is elsewhere responded to by a prophetic announcement of impending judgment. Habakkuk thus gives voice to the question of the “righteous”: How long until God enacts judgment upon the “wicked” and restores justice?

Even more striking and strange to the reader is God’s reply to Habakkuk, conventionally interpreted as saying that God will enact judgment by sending the “Chaldeans” against Israel (1:5–11), who will defeat her and who come forth intent upon yet more violence (חֲזָקָה).²¹ The link between the sending of the Chaldeans and God’s enacting judgement is to be inferred by the reader, rather than made explicit by the text. However, given the placement of this oracle after Habakkuk’s first complaint, and the theological assumptions Habakkuk shared with those prophets who did make this link explicit, this is a reasonable supposition.²² The injustice complained of by Habakkuk is to be intensified. This is understandably not what Habakkuk had expected,²³ and in 1:12–17 he questions the justice of this. As Bernhard Anderson puts it, “It is bad enough to see ‘violence’ within the community of Israel, where those who wield power

²⁰ Hiebert, “Habakkuk,” 632. Cf. Calvin: “The Prophet may have spoken thus, not only expressing his own feeling, but what he felt in common with all the godly; as though he had undertaken here a public duty, and uttered a complaint common to all the faithful” (*Commentary*, 17).

²¹ Calvin, *Commentary*, 23-37; Széles, *Wrath and Mercy*, 20-24; Hiebert, “Habakkuk,” 634-36; Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi*, 37-41.

²² The placing of Habakkuk in the Book of the Twelve also confirms this. Invasion by foreign powers and exile are interpreted as expressions of divine judgment on God’s people in numerous texts in the Twelve. The position of Habakkuk within the Twelve, with Nahum and Zephaniah, lends strength to this supposition. On the arrangement of the Twelve, see Paul House, *The Unity of the Twelve* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 63-109; Walter Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 211-13.

²³ Achtemeier calls it “astounding” (*Nahum-Malachi*, 38).

oppress the weak. But the prophet also sees violence magnified to a colossal world scale” in the Babylonian oppression.²⁴

Habakkuk’s second complaint is in response to the prospect of impending invasion (whether from Babylon or Assyria). The idea of God’s judgment on the “wicked” in Judah, extending as far as invasion and destruction by this foreign power, is unwelcome, and is even questioned by Habakkuk. How, we might ask along with him, is this fair or just?

Your eyes are too pure to behold evil,
and you cannot look on wrongdoing;
why do you look on the treacherous,
and are silent when the wicked swallow
those more righteous than they? (1:13 NRSV)

In this verse, it might be the case that “the wicked” now refers to foreign invaders, and the implication is that even the corrupt in Judah are “more righteous.”²⁵ Or Habakkuk may still be referring to the wicked and righteous within Israel, arguing that God still appears to be silent on this issue. The former seems to be more likely, but the latter is not impossible.²⁶ Significantly, Habakkuk questions the justice of this punishment for Judah’s crimes. From his perspective, this seems excessive. This is not, strictly speaking, unique to Habakkuk. In Lamentations some expressions of the sentiment that the suffering occasioned by the fall of Jerusalem and the exile is excessive (e.g., Lam 2:20) can even be found coupled with the general acceptance that Judah’s sin deserved punishment.²⁷

The Lord is in the right,
for I have rebelled against his word;

²⁴ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 247.

²⁵ So Hiebert, “Habakkuk,” 638.

²⁶ Marvin Sweeney suggests that the “wicked” are the Babylonians throughout the book of Habakkuk (*The Twelve Prophets*, 2 vols. [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000], 2:455). This, however, I do not find compelling, given the arguments above in favor of seeing 1:2–4 as referring to domestic oppressors.

²⁷ Cf. Childs, *Introduction*, 596.

but hear, all you peoples,
and behold my suffering;
my young women and young men
have gone into captivity.” (Lam 1:18 NRSV)

The theological interpretation of Judah’s misfortune as deserved punishment from God is not called into question here or in Habakkuk, but the *magnitude* of suffering involved is. In addition, this oracle “does not solve Habakkuk’s principal problem” of a lack of justice in human affairs.²⁸ Michael Thompson’s analysis that “Habakkuk was calling into question the Hebrew prophetic doctrine that Yahweh was using the Chaldeans as his agents”²⁹ is thus overstating the case. Habakkuk is rather calling into question whether God’s use of these agents is just. However, Habakkuk may well be an example of what James L. Crenshaw has suggested as a popular-level questioning of an “official” theology of the justice of such events,³⁰ and certainly undermines or qualifies any simple assertion of the straightforward equation of the fall of Jerusalem and Babylonian exile with the victims’ deserved punishment for their sins. Readers of the NT might think here also of Jesus’s apparent denial of a supposed direct link between personal sin and misfortune with regard to those killed by Pilate or in the collapse of a tower (Luke 13:1–4).

That such a potentially impious text as Habakkuk has survived as canonical in itself is remarkable, and perhaps attests to the vividness and persistence of the memory of the horror of defeat and exile in exilic and postexilic Judaism. Yet Habakkuk’s question still strikes many as impious, or as offending Jewish or Christian sensibilities: “Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?” In some later Jewish traditions Habakkuk is referred to as acting impiously in his second complaint, or presented in a less embarrassing light. For example, the tenth-century AD *Midrash Tehillim* lists Habakkuk with Jeremiah, Moses, and David as having chided God (Midr. Teh. 90:2) and elsewhere softens somewhat Habakkuk’s second complaint, making it more respectful

²⁸ Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi*, 40.

²⁹ Michael Thompson, “Prayer, Oracle and Theophany: The Book of Habakkuk,” *TynBul* 44 (2003): 33-53, 35.

³⁰ See James L. Crenshaw, “Popular Questioning of the Justice of God,” *ZAW* 82 (1970): 380-95, 380.

in tone and emphasizing that Habakkuk was no doubter of God (“thou hast cried out to me, but hast not doubted me.” Midr. Teh. 77:1).³¹ Francis Ian Andersen, too, feels Habakkuk’s language “lacks the courtesy” that is customarily used in addressing a superior (still less, God).³²

Whether this is the case, there is a “progression” in the argument of the book,³³ and Habakkuk “keep[s] watch to see” what God will say to him (2:1). Habakkuk cannot be seen as thoroughly impious, for he is sincerely interested in what answer God gives concerning his complaint. Instead, Habakkuk’s questions are not opposed to faith, but the questions *of* faith.³⁴ Insofar as it is a question of the righteous, it is a question of faith, as Dante reminds us:

That as unjust our justice should appear
In eyes of mortals, is an argument
Of faith, and not of sin heretical.³⁵

This faith in God’s justice is hard to reconcile with the situation (whatever it may be) in which the prophet finds himself, but is nevertheless affirmed in what I take to be the central passage of 2:1–4:³⁶

I will stand at my watch-post,
 and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
 and what he will answer concerning my complaint.
Then the Lord answered me and said:

³¹ William Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, Yale Judaica Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 18.

³² Francis Ian Andersen, *Habakkuk*, AB 25 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 110.

³³ Thompson, “Prayer, Oracle and Theophany,” 33.

³⁴ So Theodoret, *Commentary on Habakkuk*, cited in *The Twelve Prophets*, ed. Alberto Ferreiro and Thomas C. Oden, ACC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 186: “Some have doubts as to whether the God of all takes an interest in human beings; others have faith in the talk about providence but are at a loss to explain why God conducts things in this fashion. The remarkable prophet Habakkuk adopted the attitude of the latter.”

³⁵ Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Toronto: Bantam, 1986), 4.67-69.

³⁶ See Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi*, 44; O’Neal, *Interpreting Habakkuk*, 100.

Write the vision;

make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.

For there is still a vision for the appointed time;

it speaks of the end, and does not lie.

If it seems to tarry, wait for it;

it will surely come, it will not delay.

Look at the proud!

Their spirit is not right in them,

but the righteous live by their faith. (NRSV)

The response Habakkuk receives is that God's justice "will surely come," and that he ought to wait patiently for it. This waiting is done in the attitude of faith (2:4b), and it is this mode of being that characterizes the righteous. It is, as Calvin phrases it, the attitude that says, "I will quietly wait until God shows his favour, which now is hid; for he will speak peace to his people."³⁷ Thus, one should not understand "live by faith" in the sense of "find life" by faith (contra Joseph A. Fitzmyer³⁸) since "faith" is an attitude that describes the mode of living rather than the condition of receiving life.

How to understand and translate the final line of 2:4b is the occasion of much discussion. I adopt the sense of the NRSV translators ("the righteous live by their faith"), and if this is correct, it can be linked to Habakkuk's (unanswered) questions of theodicy since he is told to continue to have faith despite the inscrutability of divine providence and the apparent lack of or delay in God's justice. The text-critical problems surrounding 2:4b leave this further open to challenge, however. The LXX texts differ somewhat in their renderings of 2:4b. The reading of codices A and C is the same as that in Hebrews 10:38, but S and W insert μου after ἐκ πίστεως, making the statement about *God's* faith(fulness). If this reading is also Paul's text of Habakkuk, then it is possible that Paul has deliberately dropped the μου in his citation in Rom 1:17 in order

³⁷ Calvin, *Commentary*, 61.

³⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Habakkuk 2:3–4 and the New Testament," in *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 242.

to change the sense “from God’s faithfulness to faith in Christ.”³⁹ This could indeed be the case, but given the existence of different readings in the first-century manuscripts of the LXX, we cannot rule out the possibility that Paul’s manuscript followed the reading of A and C (“my righteous one will live by faith”) or did not contain the word μου at all.⁴⁰

The MT of Hab 2:4b might possibly be translated “the righteous shall live by his faith” (as in the JPSV),⁴¹ as a third-person rather than first-person suffix is used. The NRSV reads “the righteous live by their faith” (the pluralization is an artefact of gender-inclusive language rather than a plural in the underlying text – compare the ESV’s “the righteous shall live by his faith”). This translation is not uncontroversial. Mark Seifrid calls this rendering “illegitimate” and claims it is “read[ing] Paul’s usage into the Hebrew text” and Sweeney claims it “reflects ...

³⁹ Richard Bell, *The Irrevocable Call of God*, WUNT 2/184 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 165n32. The reading of S and W, which Bell takes to be Paul’s text, would indeed make the statement refer to God’s faithfulness. See Alfred Jepsen, “*āman*,” *TDOT* 1:318-19. This might have implications for the πίστις Χριστοῦ discussion.

⁴⁰ See the discussion in Fitzmyer, “Habakkuk 2:3–4,” 236-41; J.A. Emerton, “The Textual and Linguistic Problems of Habakkuk ii.4–5,” *JTS* 28 (1977): 1-18. Some Greek mss. of Habakkuk read αὐτοῦ rather than μου, which coheres much more closely with Paul’s use and with the MT אֱמַן מִיָּהוּ. Adolf Schlatter argues that Paul translated the Hebrew from memory (*Romans: The Righteousness of God*, trans. Siegfried Schatzmann [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995], 26), but this makes the verbal similarity with the LXX difficult to account for, and fails to take into account that Paul does seem to have access to a version of the LXX in composing Romans. One could perhaps argue that Paul *corrects* his text from knowledge of the Hebrew. Luther is quick to criticize the translation of the LXX here (*Lectures on the Minor Prophets II: Jonah, Habakkuk*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, Luther’s Works 19 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1959), 110.

⁴¹ This is the reading of the 1917 edition of the JPS Tanakh. The NJPS (1999), which is in general more periphrastic, renders 2:4b as “But the righteous man is rewarded with life for his fidelity.”

Protestant theological concerns.”⁴² At issue is the translation of אֱמוּנָה, which, broadly speaking, is taken either to mean “faith” as a property or attitude of the “righteous” person, or “fidelity, faithfulness.”⁴³ There are certainly a large number of instances of the word אֱמוּנָה in the HB where this meaning seems intended. The sense of 2:4b would then be that the righteous person lives or finds life by his fidelity to God, or his faithfulness in observing the Torah. However, אֱמוּנָה *can* mean “faith” in the more subjective sense.⁴⁴ I do not believe charges that this would mean reading Paul (or Luther!) back into the OT hold much substance. It could be equally said that alternative readings might be driven by other agendas — in fact, James Barr argues persuasively and at length that certain (neo-orthodox) theological concerns “lurk behind” the “faithfulness” interpretation of אֱמוּנָה and the related verb אָמַן, and that on semantic grounds the understanding of אֱמוּנָה as “faith” is preferable.⁴⁵

It is in this way that the righteous “shall live by their faith”: the manner of life in which they continue to trust in the goodness and justice of God in the face of the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked. “Faith” is meant rather than “faithfulness” in the sense of fidelity to the Torah or to God. Fidelity to the God of Israel is simply assumed in Habakkuk, and obedience to the Torah does not seem to be the issue in this context. Habakkuk, whose attitude the “righteous” here share, has announced his intention to wait on God for an answer to his complaint in 2:1.

⁴² Mark Seifrid, “Romans,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 609; Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, 2:471.

⁴³ Reference might be made here to Martin Buber’s distinction between “Christian” (Greek) and “Jewish” (Hebrew) ideas of faith, respectively, in *Two Types of Faith: A Study of the Interpenetration of Judaism and Christianity*, trans. Norman P. Goldhawk (London: Routledge, 1951), 8-13. This distinction has had a tremendous influence on the discussion of “faith” in the OT in general, and in this passage in particular.

⁴⁴ O’Neal, *Interpreting Habakkuk*, 95: “the notion of trust is also evident in its field of meaning.”

⁴⁵ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 161-205.

In 2:5–17 assurance is given that the wicked will not ultimately prosper. Tyranny will fall, and idols will be revealed as nothing. God’s justice will be made apparent. Yet Habakkuk himself must accept this by faith, given the lack of visible justice in his situation.

The relationship of the poetic material found in chap. 3 of Habakkuk to the rest of the book is the topic of much critical debate. It may be that an existing psalm is used here by Habakkuk, that the psalm and the “pronouncement” (אִשְׁרָיָהּ, 1:1) of Habakkuk are grouped together simply by virtue of common authorship, or that some kind of editorial strategy has brought the two together. However, in the canonical form of Habakkuk (and, indeed, as Paul House reminds us, the Book of the Twelve⁴⁶) the two are placed together in a manner that invites the relation of Hab 1–2 and 3. Habakkuk 3 also relates to the theodicy questions raised in the previous two chapters. I suggest that the “theophany” can be read as a vision of God acting on behalf of Israel in the past.⁴⁷ The question (poetically) raised is then, if God acted thus in the past on behalf of the people of Israel, why does God not appear to do so in the situation they now face?

O LORD, I have heard of your renown,
and I stand in awe, O LORD, of your work.
In our own time⁴⁸ revive it;
in our own time make it known. (3:2)

As Anderson demonstrates, many of the Psalms proper make this argument: “the recapitulation of God’s action in the history of the people of Israel was not just a paraphrase of the story found in the Pentateuch. Rather, in worship the story was *retold* with a contemporaneous ring, so it touched the concerns of the people in their present situation.”⁴⁹ Psalms 44:1–3 and 77:11–15 are examples of this. Here, again, Habakkuk must “live by faith,”

⁴⁶ House, *The Unity of the Twelve*, 91-93, 199.

⁴⁷ Perhaps in the exodus and conquest, as the reference to Cush (Egypt) and Midian in 3:7 may suggest.

⁴⁸ בְּקִרְבֵּי שָׁנִים may be translated “in the midst of the years” — I take this to carry the sense of the prophet petitioning God to act imminently, as suggested by the NRSV translators.

⁴⁹ Bernhard Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for us Today*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 43-44.

for no such action appears to be forthcoming. Habakkuk trusts that God *will* enact justice (3:13) despite the evidence afforded him by his present circumstances:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;

I will exult in the God of my salvation. (3:17–18)

Habakkuk thus, as instructed in 2:2–4, looks toward a future vindication of his faith in the justice of God, as God’s justice is finally enacted on the wicked and salvation comes to the righteous.⁵⁰ The resolution to his questions is thus both promised and deferred, and his experience of waiting for the fulfilment is to be one characterized by the mode of faith. Concretely, this may have been his safety in the Babylonian invasion, or the eventual return of (a remnant of) the people of Israel to Jerusalem,⁵¹ but the decontextualization of the book of Habakkuk can invite a later reader to interpret this eschatologically, so that the justice of God is seen as manifested completely in an age to come.⁵² This is perhaps what is going on in Augustine’s allusion to Habakkuk in describing the present experience of the church: “For this reason, although we are the sons of God, nonetheless, that which is now the Church, prior to the appearance of what we will be, lives and toils in afflictions, and in her the just man lives by faith.”⁵³

III Relating Habakkuk to Theodicy

⁵⁰ Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi*, 58-59.

⁵¹ Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi*, 59.

⁵² Certainly there is both a concrete and an eschatological element to the interpretation of 1QPHab as well as in Christian interpretation of Habakkuk.

⁵³ Augustine, *Questions* 81.2 (FC 70, 213).

How then, might a reading of Habakkuk along the suggested lines relate to the questions of theodicy? I suggest that the book of Habakkuk does not offer a fully formed theodicy such as might be developed by a systematic theologian, but can be brought into dialogue with the questions involved in a perhaps challenging manner. The problem of evil can be posed in a number of manners, one of which is atheistic, or at least concerned with the question of the existence of God, proceeding from the position that the existence of evil calls into question the existence of God (see Epicurus/Hume above). As has frequently been observed, however, arguments for the existence of God are not found in the OT.⁵⁴ Neither is the existence of God an issue for Habakkuk; he is concerned rather with the justice and character of God.⁵⁵ Therefore I shall limit my comments to Christian or classically theistic models of theodicy.

The word “theodicy” itself appears to have been coined by Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) as a rational defense of the justice of God in permitting evil. His 1707 *Theodicy* attempts to argue for the justice of an omnipotent and omniscient God who created a world containing evil.⁵⁶ In essence, Leibniz argued that God was not unjust, and that the world was, in fact, the best of all possible worlds. This view, caricatured extensively by Voltaire in *Candide*, has not won wide acceptance either in philosophy or in theological attempts to articulate solutions to the problem of suffering, yet the term “theodicy” is now generally used to describe such attempts. Although Alvin Plantinga suggests a more restricted use of the term “theodicy” to refer specifically to attempts to explain the reason why God “permits”⁵⁷ evil or suffering,⁵⁸ the wider sense of systematic thought about the questions raised by suffering is what will be considered here.

⁵⁴ Cf. Anderson, *Contours*, 52-55.

⁵⁵ R.N. Whybray, “Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Just? God’s Oppression of the Innocent in the Old Testament,” in *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw*, ed. David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 1-20.

⁵⁶ Gottfried W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. E.M. Huggard (London; Routledge, 1952).

⁵⁷ Although there is debate among systematic theologians as to whether God’s relationship to suffering is best described as “permitting,” “allowing,” “causing,” “creating,” or

The questions raised by Habakkuk are undoubtedly some of those associated with theodicy: Why do the righteous suffer? Why do the wicked continue to prosper? And how can God's sovereign use of evil agents to accomplish the divine purposes in history be justified? Yet nowhere in the book does Habakkuk give or receive an answer to the problem of the suffering of the righteous, at least not in the terms Christian systematic theology has often attempted to provide a theodicy.⁵⁹ In fact, a "theodicy" in the sense of an explanation for God's permission of suffering would be singularly out of place in the HB, which nowhere provides a thoroughgoing explanation of why the righteous suffer.⁶⁰ This lack of explanation itself might stand as a challenge to Christian (or Jewish) theodicies that attempt to articulate such explanations.⁶¹

some other verb, I shall use the word "permit" for convenience; this is not intended to demand a particular understanding of providence and divine causality.

⁵⁸ Alvin Plantinga, "Self-Profile," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985), 3-97, 35.

⁵⁹ Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, 11.16-18, 121-29; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.47-49; Ronald M. Green, "Theodicy," *ER* 12:9113-18.

⁶⁰ One possible exception might be Ps 73, but even there the justice of God is seen as (arguably) only manifested eschatologically. It may be that the turning point from doubt to faith in this Psalm is a "cultic theophany," which would in fact be parallel to the way Habakkuk, in its canonical shape, moves from questioning the justice of God to rejoicing "in the God of my salvation" (בְּאֱלֹהֵי יְשׁוּעָי) — see Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi*, 53. James Crenshaw identifies ten (though perhaps, discounting "atheism," nine) strategies for approaching theodicy in the (Hebrew) canon and ANE literature, yet these are to be inferred from elements within texts rather than articulated explicitly (*Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005]).

⁶¹ An objection might be that in the prophetic claim that (e.g.) the Babylonian Exile is divine punishment for the sin of Judah, an explanation for God's permission of the event is provided. However, Habakkuk may at the least suggest this equation is simplistic; further, such a claim is typically made as a claim of revelation, rather than of rational deduction. In Job, Eliphaz provides an example of one who *incorrectly* claims this explains Job's suffering. Cf. Crenshaw, *Defending God*, 117-31.

Richard Swinburne, for example, may be seen as overconfident from the perspective of Habakkuk when he claims that a satisfactory theodicy can be provided on rational grounds.⁶² The practice of articulating such rational theodicies, as conceived by some Christian systematic theology, has even been critiqued as itself adding to the evil of the world by Terrence Tilley, since this approach devalues the lived realities of those who suffer and thereby adds to their pain, while enabling individualistic accounts of evil that ignore the potential for structures of human society to cause or perpetuate suffering.⁶³ If this critique is (perhaps) unfair to some theodicians, the rationalistic approach involving tidy explanations and dismissal of the victim Tilley opposes does not appear to be what we find in Habakkuk. Plantinga may be somewhat closer to the thought of Habakkuk here: “we cannot see why our world, with all its ills, would be better than others we think we can imagine, or what, in any detail, is God's reason for permitting a given specific and appalling evil. Not only can we not see this, we can't think of any very good possibilities. And here I must say that most attempts to explain why God permits evil ... strike me as tepid, shallow and ultimately frivolous.”⁶⁴ Evil is, to some extent, inscrutable. Yet a consideration of the book of Habakkuk seems to offer something more than this insight.

Kenneth Surin draws a contrast between two approaches to theodicy detectable in Christian theology. One approach, identified with “post-Leibnizian metaphysical theology” is labelled a “theoretical” approach to theodicy, and is distinguished from a “practical” or “praxis-oriented” approach to theodicy Surin identifies with both some Patristic writers and with more

⁶² Richard Swinburne, “Does Theism Need a Theodicy?” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1988): 287-312, 311. Swinburne’s position is that a coherent theistic position does require a satisfactory theodicy. However, this becomes apologetically problematic by suggesting that a failure of a theory of theodicy held by a believer should, logically, lead to the abandonment of their faith. This is the opposite approach to that adopted by Habakkuk, who continues to have faith despite the apparent injustice or invisibility of God.

⁶³ Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 208-14, 251.

⁶⁴ Plantinga, “Self-Profile,” 35.

recent figures such as Jürgen Moltmann and P.T. Forsyth.⁶⁵ What Surin labels as the “theoretical” approach is surely the form of theodicy critiqued by Tilley as “possible only in the context of the Enlightenment.”⁶⁶ The “theoretical” theodicy and the “practical” theodicy differ in approach, seeking either to explain evil in general or in a manner oriented towards the victims respectively, and thus can develop entirely different accounts for the existence of evil.⁶⁷

Although this division is necessarily reductive, and may not do justice to the differences between such “theoretical” thinkers as Plantinga, Swinburne, Alfred N. Whitehead and John Hick,⁶⁸ it does raise the question of the goal of theodicy. Is it enough to avoid self-contradiction in one’s account of evil? For the “theoretical” approach, this seems to be the case. However, as a reading of Habakkuk shows, this may not be satisfying in the “practical” circumstances faced by a believer in God who is, or anticipates, suffering and oppression. Certainly the *attitude* of Habakkuk, characterized as it is by both faith and honest questioning, and the “autobiographical framework”⁶⁹ oriented towards the question of suffering, has a great deal of affinity with some of the more “practical” approaches to theodicy that Surin outlines.⁷⁰ Further, Surin’s proposal that a properly Christian theodicy must invoke a theology of the cross has much to commend it.⁷¹ Indeed, it is possible to draw an analogy between an appeal to God’s acts in history

⁶⁵ Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 13, 70, 112.

⁶⁶ Tilley, *Evils of Theodicy*, 221.

⁶⁷ Surin, *Problem of Evil*, 145.

⁶⁸ As has been noted, Plantinga’s (free-will theodicy) approach is remarkably different from Swinburne’s (natural law) theodicy in that Plantinga is skeptical towards the possibility of knowing (although such a reason may exist) why God permits a given instance of evil or suffering, whereas Swinburne tends to say the theist should attempt to formulate this kind of explanation.

⁶⁹ Childs, *Introduction*, 451.

⁷⁰ Cf. Whybray, “Shall Not the Judge?” 12.

⁷¹ Surin, *Problem of Evil*, 142-43. Cf. Roland Deines, *The Acts of God in History: Studies Towards Recovering a Theological Historiography*, WUNT 2/317 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 195-96.

(preeminently the death and resurrection of Jesus) in Christian theodicy and Habakkuk's appeal to divine saving acts in the theophanic section of chap. 3. Walther Eichrodt suggests this is the "prophetic" approach to the problems raised for belief in the God of Israel by the experience of oppression and defeat: "Prophecy's answer to the attack on its message is not to formulate a theory which attempts to comprehend the incongruous but to point still more earnestly to the decisive deed of the divine judge and redeemer and to call for the decision of faith."⁷² Theodicy, or theological attempts to articulate the meaning of suffering, ought therefore to be primarily pastorally oriented rather than theoretical, given the practical dimensions of faith in which the question most naturally occurs.

However, a complete rejection of the "theoretical" aspects of theodicy might not be required by a theological reading of Habakkuk. Does Habakkuk receive an answer to his initial questions of "how long" and "why"? Not directly. In addition, I have argued above that Habakkuk raises questions about one "theoretical" theodicy that simply relates suffering to justified punishment. However, the book of Habakkuk may be read as reorienting the question towards the future, and thus allowing for a "deferred" theodicy. On such a view, evil and suffering are not wholly inscrutable, but serve a divine purpose. However, since the purpose may not be known (or necessarily knowable) to the believer, the justice of God in doing so must be accepted by faith. A vindication, both of the justice of God and of the believer's faith in a just God, is anticipated in the future — and ultimately, in the canonical framing of Habakkuk, eschatologically.

However, this is not necessarily the same as condoning a simple "suffering now for glory later" attitude. Habakkuk petitions for God's action in the present situation, and even if the shape of the book of Habakkuk invites an eschatological perspective, it is still one in which God is to be shown to be just for the totality of God's actions, including the apparent permitting of suffering now. Thus Habakkuk's perspective differs somewhat from Alexander Pope's formulation of a deferral of theodicy:

⁷² Walther Eichrodt, "Faith in Providence and Theodicy in the Old Testament," in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, ed. James L. Crenshaw, IRT 4 (London: SPCK, 1983), 17-41, 28.

What future bliss, he gives not thee to know
But gives that hope to be thy blessing now.
Hope springs eternal in the human breast,
Man never is, but always to be blest.⁷³

Pope differs from the perspective of Habakkuk in his placing of this blessing in the future experience of the individual but not in history. A static “heaven” replaces an anticipated eschatological action of God in the world to comprehensively bring justice through the vindication of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked. Questioning the justice of God is condemned by Pope, for suffering comes from humanity wishing for a better lot than is intended for them (cf. lines 113-22), whereas Habakkuk feels able to make such questions in his “complaint” to God.

Approaching from the perspective of the victim, Habakkuk adopts a nuanced tone of questioning and faith. His open questioning of the justice of God has led to embarrassment or accusations of impiety with some commentators, both ancient and modern. And yet Habakkuk is no enemy of his God, or a doubter in the existence of God. He strenuously insists that God must be just (2:13) and it is this tension between present visible circumstances and what he knows God must bring about to vindicate this justice that must be filled by faith in the “vision” offered in 2:2. Rather than insisting on a satisfactory resolution to the problem of suffering as a condition for faith, Habakkuk poses his questions from the position of faith. This may be rejected, of course, in a refusal to have such faith, but Habakkuk presents a picture of the acceptance of such faith (3:17–19) and the experiential tension of living in the meantime, with a full explanation and vindication deferred. In this way, a sympathetic theological reading of Habakkuk can be brought into dialogue with systematic theology to challenge certain models of theodicy and lend support to others.

⁷³ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man* (London: 1796), 45.