

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK
AND RECENT TURMOIL
- A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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The Book of Habakkuk and Recent Turmoil – A Theological Reflection

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Introductory Remarks

As Christians we strive to be constantly informed by the Biblical worldview as we attempt to make sense of events happening around us. Ready accessibility of information in the 21st century brings with blessings and curses. News from one corner of the globe instantaneously reaches another, which also means that we can be easily inundated. “How should we then live?” – the title by Francis A. Schaeffer for a book and film series published in the 1970s, captures Schaeffer’s reaction to the decline of Western culture at that time. The probing nature of that title is no less apt today if we seek to live sagaciously according to Biblical guidance. But the task is never easy. It starts with diligent study of the Biblical texts in their original contexts, followed by sensitive deliberations about their current relevancy. It is necessary to avoid naïve wholesale imposition of Biblical data¹, and on the other hand, simplistic conjectures of causality about events and characters strain credibility. Even God’s prophets were sometimes sorely mistaken; Habakkuk was a case in point.

In this essay, we will take a brief literary-critical reading of the Book of Habakkuk, see what message the prophet had to convey to his contemporaneous generations. We will take note of the kind of faith that God’s people were asked to exercise in times of tumultuous upheavals. And what consolations one might expect from the assuring prophetic words. In our world, there has been no shortage of cataclysmic events as of late. At time of writing, the atrocious invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation is still raging. The global economy is reeling from the lingering effect of a pandemic. Many people are apprehensive of a virus resurgence, others in various parts of the world are still in the thick of it. Then Hong Kong, a city holds a special place to this writer, has forever changed – it becomes a showcase of oppressive erosion against human dignity². We will reflect on these momentous events from the vantage point of the Habakkuk’s message, and consider the faith lessons for Christians living in “in-between” time. May it be as an act “to reckon our days rightly so as to know how we may be led to enter a/the heart of wisdom” (Psm. 90:12)³.

History is not in an aimless cycle of repeating itself but is directed towards its goal, when “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ ...” (Rev. 11:15)⁴.

The message of the book of Habakkuk

A. Historical settings

Most commentators date the Book of Habakkuk after 609 but before 597 BCE, since there appears to have no reference to the surrender of Jerusalem in the prophet’s words. Some take the writing as reaction to Judah’s humiliation in 597 BCE⁵, when King Jehoiachin was bound and carried to Babylon together with

¹ In a similar vein as James Barr warned against “illegitimate totality transfer” in semantics; cf. James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Glasgow, Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 218.

² The list of current calamitous events in the world is inexhaustible: earthquake in war-torn Afghanistan, interethnic violence and civil war in Ethiopia, migrants died in human trafficking in Texas, ... all around the same time. Media coverage (in the Western world) of these tragedies is quickly eclipsed by other news that grapples more attention - itself a kind of inequality that prejudiced against the less privileged.

³ Writer’s own rendition.

⁴ Bible quotations hereinafter are taken from the English Standard Bible (ESV) unless otherwise stated.

⁵ Cf. James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 273; also, Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament, Third Edition* (ANET³) (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 563-564.

Jerusalem's elites⁶. Such precision, however, is not necessary. In his own words, the prophet characterizes his ministry as "in the midst of years" (בְּקִרְבֵּי שָׁנִים) (Hab. 3:2), giving a sense of "in-between" time.

The tragic death of pious king Josiah in 609 (2 Kgs. 23:28-30; 2 Chr. 35:20-24) was the ominous event marking the irretrievable decline of Judah's national fortune. His two sons, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, who reigned in Jerusalem for the most part of the next two decades, soon reversed the religious reforms instigated by Josiah. Though in reality, the reforms started early in Josiah's reign (640-609), and was reinvigorated by the finding of the Book of the Law in the temple in 622, had probably never taken root in the wider society. There were reforms, but little revival. The indictment of rampant religious infidelity against Judah was acridly and unremittingly levelled by the prophet Jeremiah, Habakkuk's contemporary, as in his lament: "... Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares YHWH" (Jer. 3:10). While First Testament prophets often excoriated both Israel and Judah for the sin of idolatry, what was practised was more sinister in the form of syncretism that corrupted true worship. In the monotheistic universe of Abrahamic-Christian faith, failure to yield exclusive allegiance is tantamount to outright rebellion. Despite being warned assiduously by YHWH through his prophets, the spiritual condition of the Judean society in the years leading to the sixth century had become so degenerated that the only recourse was for YHWH to "hurl" the nation into exile (cf. Jer. 11:7-8; 16:11-13). The same fate that met the northern kingdom more than a century ago. Yet, in the prophetic messages there was not without hope of restoration.

In the Biblical narratives, from the calling of the patriarchs to even the time of New Testament Church, the history of God's people was interwoven with geopolitical circumstances of surrounding nations. As prosperous and powerful as Israel was under the united monarchy of Solomon, relationship involving treaties or alliance with Egypt (1 Kgs. 3:1), then the superpower to the south, was necessary to guarantee security and stability. Such diplomatic balancing act became most acute when geopolitical powers ebbed and flowed, as it was in the ancient Middle East during the latter half of the 7th century BCE, when Judah was subjected to vassal status under different neighbouring suzerains (Cf. 2 Kgs. 18:14ff.; 23:34-35).

The rule by Ashurbanipal (669-631) of the Assyrian empire suffered a conspicuous rupture when his brother Shamash-shum-ukin revolted in 652. This precipitated a slow decline of Assyrian Imperial influence in the Levant. The death of Ashurbanipal in 631 unveiled the jostling for power among three regional superpowers: Egypt, a waning Assyria, and an emerging Babylonia. For a time, the multipolar order created wiggle room for Josiah's reforms, which began at his twelfth year in the reign (2 Chr. 24-25). Given the existing state of decay, his religious reform was audacious but ultimately ineffectual. Josiah might have held sway in cities of formal northern kingdom of Israel now dominated by Assyria (2 Kgs. 23:15ff.), but his political impact was far less certain⁷. Worthy of note were the implications of international strives to foreign policies internal to Judah, that is, within its court and among the officials. As external powers vied for influence, factions that were more sympathetic to one over the others caused conflicts with tragic consequences (Cf. 2 Kgs. 24:1; Jer. 37:7, 11)⁸. Diplomatic vacillation fomented outright rebellions against foreign overlords that, at a geopolitical level, led to the deposal of Jehoahaz II (609) by Egypt⁹, capture of Jehoiachin (597) by the Babylonians, and eventually killing of Zedekiah (587) and the fall of the Judah state.

Meanwhile, the fall in 614 of Asshur, Assyria's capital, and Nineveh in 612 by the Medes and Babylonians signalled the eventual demise of imperial Assyria. Political calculations forced Egypt and a weaken Assyria

⁶ Cf. Habakkuk's complaint about people "like fish, ... crawling things that have no ruler. ... brings all of them ... with his net, ... in his dragnet..." (1:14-15, ESV) as reminiscent of Judahites being led to their captivity.

⁷ Cf. Brad E. Keel, *Judah in the Seventh Century in Ancient Israel's History*, eds. Bill T. Arnold, Richard S. Hess (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2014), p. 370ff. See also Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel, Second Edition* (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), pp. 375-376.

⁸ Keel, *Judah in the Seventh Century*, pp. 379-382.

⁹ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, NICOT*, ed. R.K. Harrison (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), p.13. See Sara L. Hoffman, *The Battle of Carchemish and Seventh/Sixth-Century Regional Politics in Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament*, eds. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academics, 2018), p. 319.

to form an alliance, with Pharaoh Neco II becoming the senior partner of the erstwhile adversaries. Yet the emergence of Babylonia as a dominant power in the Near East continued unabated. In a decisive defeat of the joint Egyptian army at Carchemish by then crown prince Nebuchadrezzar in 605¹⁰, Babylonia's hegemony for nearly three quarters of a century in Ancient Near East was cemented.

Another relevant aspect to a reflection of Habakkuk's message is the social conditions of Judah amidst foreign aggression, subjugation, and internal political conflicts. Extra-Biblical source on livelihood of ordinary Judahites in the 7th century BCE¹¹ may be scant but prophetic indictments in the Bible about social ills are scathing. Snippets of condemnations against injustice, oppression, and immorality in Israel and Judah from 8th/7th century prophets can be gleaned in the following:

“... and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed,
for righteousness, but behold, an outcry! ...
...
Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,
who put darkness for light and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!
...
who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
and deprive the innocent of his right! ...” - Isa. 5:7-23ff.

“... Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil on the beds!
...
They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them away;
They oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance. ...” - Mic. 2:2f.

“... because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals –
those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth
and turn aside the way of the afflicted;
a man and his father go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned; ...” - Amos 2:6c-7f.

“... Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of deceits;
therefore they have become great and rich; they have grown fat and sleek.
They know no bounds in deeds of evil;
they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper,
and they do not defend the rights of the needy. ...” - Jer. 5:27-28ff.

It was similar discontents against which Habakkuk decried as he saw before him “violence”, “iniquities”, and injustice (1:2-4) in the Judean society at the end of the 7th century. Combined with the precarity of an encroaching imperial power, one which was known not for its benevolent disposals but cruel and violent exploits, such upheavals formed the backdrop of Habakkuk's woeful protest seeking cosmic justice.

¹⁰ A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Locust Valley, NY, J.J. Augustin, 1975, Reprint, Winona Lake, IN, Eisenbrauns, 2000), p. 19, 99 – Chronicle 5, obverse, lines 1-7. Cf.

¹¹ See Avraham Faust, *Social Stratification in the Iron Age Levant in Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament*, eds. Greer, Hilber, Walton, pp. 482-491 for an interesting analysis of socioeconomic life of ancient Israel based on archaeological findings. An interpretation of such findings postulates that social inequality was most evidenced in cities and less so in rural areas.

B. Macrostructure

- 1:1 – 1st editorial note
- 1:2-17 – The prophet's compliant¹²
 - 1:2-4 – The prophet's complaint - upper bracket
 - 1:5-11 – A rhetorical excerpt of YHWH's previous disclosure
 - 1:12-17 – The prophet's compliant – lower bracket
- 2:1 – A prophetic impasse
- 2:2-20 – Record of YHWH's responding oracle, enclosing satires of woes from the oppressed
- 3:1 – 2nd editorial note
 - 3:2-19a – the prophet's change of perspectives and response in faith
 - 19b – consignment of a confessional hymn for communities in distress

C. The Complaint (1:2-17)

The two editorial notes in 1:1 and 3:1 clearly demarcate the book of Habakkuk into two main sections. However, the prophet's own narrating in 2:2 about YHWH's answer highlight the thrust of the whole book, of which 2:4-5 are probably the illocutionary fulcrum. After an exclamation remark (How long!) and a vocative (O YHWH!), the prophet launches right into complaints. The language used is startling, essentially Habakkuk is accusing YHWH:

“I have been crying for help – but you do not hear;
I have been shouting to you about violence – but you don't show up;
I see all this iniquity and trouble – but you look idly by,
Violence and carnage,
conflicts and chaos;
and the Torah (the law that you gave for the constitution of the nation, the functioning of the society) is in disarray, even justice is perverted.”

He ostensibly did not mince words. The condition and prospect of the society in general at the time could not be more dire. One can sense Habakkuk's frustration in his pithy descriptive language as he had been pleading YHWH to intervene. The insuperable crumbling of Judah, from the court (civil) to the cult (religious), to the widespread decays of institutions and morality in the community, were all vividly portrayed by his contemporary writing prophets such as Jeremiah, or Ezekiel at a later time. What contributes to breakdown of societal order is always multifaceted. For Habakkuk it was the confluence of internal turmoil and the potential devastations by powerful foreign nations nearby. Underlying all this is the overarching theological theme of a nation in breach of covenant – Judah was unfaithful to YHWH (cf. Lev. 26:2ff).

Rhetorically Habakkuk underscores injustice within Judah in vv. 2-4 as he bewails the numbing of the Torah. He then builds his case against YHWH by citing, possibly excerpting selectively (vv. 5-11), an earlier revelation from YHWH. It is made clear in the citation that the instigator of Judah's calamitous fortune is none other than YHWH himself, who raises up the Chaldeans to chastise. Although Habakkuk admits to a disciplinary end in v. 12b, no statement of purpose is recorded in the excerpt (i.e., vv. 5-11). Instead, what the prophet recalls YHWH as saying focuses on the brute strength, belligerence, invincibility, and arrogance of the Babylonian military machine.

¹² The reading here largely follows the structure proposed by Thomas Renz, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, NICOT, gen. ed. R. L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2021), p. 199. This departs from those by many commentators and translations (see, e.g., headings inserted in ESV, NIV), which takes the first two chapters as two cycles of dialogues between the prophet and YHWH. Reading chapter 1 as a unit strengthens the rhetorical force of Habakkuk's compliant, which possibly emphasizes certain aspects of YHWH's previous oracle to buttress his argument.

“What Judah needs now is justice, perhaps another messiah-like leader like Josiah. Certainly not more violence! Least still from the Chaldeans!” – Habakkuk would have thought. The double imperatives (be astonished) in v. 5a have certainly achieved its illocutionary intent, for the prophet cannot take in what the oracle pronounces. That the emergence of the Babylonians as a geopolitical power was not what astonished him. The shifting of fortune to the Babylonians’ favour had started probably close to a decade before Habakkuk came on the scene. The surprising aspect was the explicit intention of YHWH to raise up the Chaldeans as his instrument.

So, Habakkuk’s complaint continues, bracketing YHWH’s earlier disclosure to lay the matter squarely at YHWH’s feet. His tactics change from bemoaning YHWH’s inattentiveness to questioning his being consistent to his own nature. The multiple vocatives: “O YHWH” (2x), “My God”, “my Holy One”, “O Rock” signal the prophet’s appeal to YHWH’s revealed self and the covenantal relation he has established with his people. On the other hand, he is building a persuasive case about the incongruence of what he sees with what he knows. Far from upholding justice and establishing fairness, raising up the Chaldeans only exacerbates current ills and increases evil and treacheries. Invasion of this ruthless foe from afar is tantamount to “a wicked one swallows one who is more righteous”. This adds exploitation to oppression and Habakkuk sees in it no corrective or disciplinary value at all. Besides contrary to the character of a righteous and holy God, a triumphant Neo-Babylonian Empire embodied in its king even usurps the prerogatives of YHWH, who is the true ruler of people (cf. v. 14) and the rightful receiver of accolades and gratitude (cf. sacrifice and offerings in v. 16). A rhetorical question (v. 17) closes off Habakkuk’s complaint and expresses the untenability of the situation that demands YHWH’s address.

D. The Impasse (2:1)

Rebellious episodes of prophets in the Bible are not a rarity, most notable are probably Jonah, Ezekiel, and the unnamed prophet in 1 Kings 13. While their revolts are narrated in the third person, none is so bold as Habakkuk who records his confrontation with YHWH with his own statement. But Habakkuk’s challenge to YHWH is of a different nature. His dispute is more akin to sentiments expressed in the genre of laments or protest psalms¹³ in the Psalter (see e.g., Psm. 22; 44). These psalms are candid, deep-seated quests for resolutions and comfort of the faithful in the midst of abject pain and bewilderment. The poets have no second thought that the One to whom they bring their complaints has the answers.

With daring words Habakkuk makes his stand, commensurate with the accusatory tone with which he begins his complaint. He braces himself in military imagery (watch post, rampart), ready for YHWH who may come unrelentingly with reprimand, seeing him almost as the vanguard of the invading foes.

E. The Response (2:2-20)

Instead of a reprimand, YHWH’s response to Habakkuk came as a command to inscribe on tablets the revelation he was about to give. The revelation itself as it is recorded in the canonical book is very terse, even enigmatic, as contained in verse 4 (maybe also v. 5). It is then followed by a series of five “woe” pronouncements (some see as taunt songs or satirical sayings) in the voice of the oppressed (vv. 6-20). It is notable that within YHWH’s answer in these verses of mostly reproachful tone, three separate lines (v. 4b, v. 14, v. 20) stand out as distinctly positive. Altogether, it was enough for Habakkuk to have his perspective turned around and caused him to subsequently express a most memorable prayer of confession.

¹³ See John Goldingay, *Psalms, Vol. 1: Psalms 1-41, BCOT*, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI. Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 62-63.

In the Ancient Near East (ANE), as in some occasions today, words or sculptures inscribed on tablets rather than being written on parchments signified the importance or permanence of the message to be conveyed. Such practice was common for kings or potentates as means to promulgate laws and decrees, or to record their feats in warfare. Whether for legal purposes or historiography, inscriptions on stone or clay tablets suggest Infrangibility and durability. In our context, probably both senses are included when YHWH, as universal sovereign, disclosed his inexorable judgments to be executed at an appointed time (v. 3a). Yet, documenting the revelation on tablets also meant that its fulfilment might not have been imminent (v. 3b). For Habakkuk's generation and the next, YHWH's words became assurance and comfort amidst absconding from warfare or forced migration to foreign lands. The immediate efficacy of the revealed words was for those hearers who lived in in-between time to persevere (that "he may run who reads it" (v. 2d))¹⁴.

YHWH's revelation succinctly contrasts two opposite characters – one is portrayed as arrogant and unscrupulous (v. 4a), the other as righteous and faithful (v. 4b). While the rest of the revelation in v. 5 and expositions in the following woe statements will elaborate the traits and destiny of the first, the righteous one is promised to sustain in life (חַיִּים, to live) by faith/faithfulness. Literally, the Hebrew text is constructed:

- Behold proud not she-is-upright soul-of-him in-him
- But-righteous-one by-faithfulness-of-him he-shall-live

The contrasts are seen as:

- Not upright (or injudicious)¹⁵ vs. the righteous one;
- Proud in soul (swollen appetite)¹⁶ vs. by faithfulness shall live

The short statement: "the righteous shall live by his faith", the first of three wholly positive utterances of YHWH's response, is paradigmatic of the entire book. It is a direct answer to the prophet's question of whether "the wicked will keep on swallowing up ...", or the aggressor "mercilessly killing nations forever" (vv. 1:13b, 17). Amidst the turmoil, there is not without hope – an affirmation from none other than the One who is "from everlasting", "holy", and all-wise in ordaining and upholding (v. 1:12).

A synchronic reading of the text requires the meaning of the term "righteous" (צַדִּיק) to be found first within its context, even though it is imbued with rich connotations from intertextual references and later theological developments. The term last appears in v. 13 (and v. 1:4b before that) where Habakkuk clearly uses it in a relative sense. The picture is one of a topsy-turvy world in which the strong harass the weak, the powerful oppress the powerless, where might makes right both domestically and internationally. This, the prophet saw as unjust even though he acknowledged that the oppressed was no less deserving judgment and reproach (v. 1:12). Twice the "righteous" is put in contrast with the "wicked" (vv. 1:4, 13). YHWH declared that the one transgresses with impunity would, in due course, get the just deserts, whereas the righteous – those at the receiving end of unjust treatments, would live by faithful trusting. Here, the way to deliverance for the righteous is pointed towards a disposition of faith. Although the object of such faith is not explicit, the fact the revelation embeds the call to faith and the prophet's commission to inscribe make YHWH's entire speech-act, and ultimately the giver of oracle himself, the locus of faith¹⁷. Those who depend on the trustworthiness of YHWH's revealed purpose shall prevail.¹⁸

¹⁴ Thomas Renz, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, pp. 276-277, who helpfully cites Isa. 40:31 as context for the verbs "רוץ" (to run) and "עָבַד" (to toil), and "יָעֵיף" (to be weary). The latter two appear in Hab. 2:13.

¹⁵ Cf. translation by Thomas Renz, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, NICOT, gen. ed. R. L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2021), p. 284.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

¹⁷ LXX has "... the just shall live by my faith."; many English versions have "... his faith", taking the noun as subjective genitive.

¹⁸ Later quotations/allusions to Hab. 2:4 by NT writers: Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:12; Heb. 10:38, provide fertile ground for theological deliberations. See discussion by Renz, "... The righteous will live because they faithfully cling to the reliability of the revelation given by a faithful God." (*Habakkuk*, p. 289). Here, it is focused on Habakkuk's contextual background and is not to question the plausibility of further developments

In verse 5, the “proud” one is further characterized as one who is insatiable in appetite (שָׂבֵר) (same word used in V. 4, translated as “soul” and “greed” in ESV). Wine as a metaphor is used as something that typically betrays (בִּוְגָד, same participle used in v. 1:13b – ones deal treacherously). An analgaesic, wine masks sensation of pain; and as an intoxicant, it lures one to overindulgence. Both qualities nudge the inebriated deeper into unsatiable desires until the downfall is wrought. Here, the proud and greedy is like one intoxicated with self-assertion and power – as Sheol and death whose craving for more is never quenched. Until poetic justice is served when “the cup in YHWH’s right hand will come around”, and the wicked will surely drink in full to their “utter shame” (v. 16). Notice that thus far the identity of the “arrogant” is purposely ambiguous, except in the last line of v. 5 where this character is associated with international aggression. Along with a tacit response to Habakkuk’s complaint about the Chaldean imperial power personified in its king (“... he gathers peoples in his dragnet”, v. 1:15), the ambiguity allows YHWH’s oracle to apply equally to oppressors internal to the Judean society.

What follows are five stanzas of woe statements or taunt songs. It is not sure if they form part of the revelation Habakkuk was instructed to inscribe, but that they are part of YHWH’s response is without doubt. These “woes” are in effect pronouncements against certain phenomena exist in social mores or in the geopolitical scene. The sardonic tone is magnified when it is the oppressed (“all these” refers to those being gathered and collected, vv. 5-6) that are given the voice to pronounce the judgments.

First woe – denunciation of imperial ambition:

This dovetails on the last line of v. 5, and the Neo-Babylonian empire embodied in King Nebuchadnezzar was clearly the target. Even though the First Testament in some passages name the Babylonian king as YHWH’s servant (Jer. 25:9; 27:6; 43:10; cf. Hab. 1:12b), to be an agent of the sovereign God does not exempt one from judgment for wrongdoings. One day the table would turn and Babylonia would be answerable to its voracious imperial aggression. The plunderer would be plundered. The last line of the statement (v. 8b) highlights the flagrant offences: bloodshed and violence, trampling on human lives, habitation, and livelihood. Reading this passage with a postcolonial sensibility surely adds nuance for sobering second thoughts.

Second woe – denunciation of predatory pursuits and possessive gains in the name of security:

The voice of the oppressed turns now to something less sanguinary than military atrocity but no less oppressive: socioeconomic exploitations. The person(s) is denounced for evil accumulation of riches while disregarding or at the expense of others’ pains, all for a false sense of safety or security (“to be safe from the reach of harm”, v. 8c). This was no obscure condemnation of prevalent social injustice at Habakkuk’s time (see Historical settings above). Even the pleas of the exploited be silenced or their rights snuffed out, the stones and woodwork with which the houses are built through illicit gains will cry out in protest, just as Abel’s blood cried to YHWH from the ground (Gen. 4:10).

Third woe – denunciation of communal cruelty, social inequality and injustice:

In ancient time as it is today, towns and cities were focus of civic activities as well as targets for military conquests. For good or ill, these communities of dwellings have been hallmarks of civilization and cradles for human flourishing. What is denounced in this third woe is the cruelty, abuses, and bloodletting that often accompany these humanist pursuits (builds ... with blood, founds ... on iniquity)¹⁹. This oddly echoes the story of Cain, the first city builder in the Bible, who named the city after his son Enoch to preserve his renown (Gen. 4:17). The taunt ends with probably a conflation of two contemporary aphorisms. The first, v. 13, also appears in Jer. 51:58d with slight variation in an oracle against Babylon, speaks of the triviality of human-centred strives for progressions. Unchecked ambition to advance, while exploiting the weak, will see their fruits of labour and exhaustion result in consuming fire and emptiness. And there is no dubiety that behind this

theologically or Christologically the theme in Heb. 2:4b. See discussions on Pauline development in J.A. Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 175-177.

¹⁹ Refer to Avraham Faust, *Social Stratification in the Iron Age Levant in Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament* in note 11 above.

judgment is the YHWH of hosts (v. 13a). Modern readers should take a pensive note that it is among the world's major cities, some are of unimaginable sizes compared to ancient ones, where poverty, inequality, and homelessness are most severe.

An expansive statement about YHWH's glory concludes this woe pronouncement and can be regarded as an interlude²⁰ in this series of taunts. It might be a proverbial saying that expresses the prospect of pervasive presence and full acknowledgment of YHWH's glory, a reality as natural as waters cover the sea. In context, this provides some sorts of resolution to current turmoil and impending chaos. It gives reason to the trusting faith of which the righteous are asked. Though for a time empires may sweep far and wide, and injustice seems to have the upper hand, yet YHWH's power and righteous judgment will prevail and pervade. Toiling for human eminence and exertions in political intrigues are ultimately empty, but the weighty glory of the universal sovereign Lord will be fully disclosed and acknowledged.

Fourth woe – denunciation of neighbourly trickery and malice:

Honour and shame were viewed very differently in ancient cultures (ANE or Greco-Roman) than in the modern Western world. For societies that esteem tribal or communal solidarity, honour represents intrinsic worth or value encapsulated in the personhood as it relates to that person's standing in the household, inheritance, and the clan. To acclaim honour is an essential ingredient for social cohesion, whereas to deprive another of due honour is tantamount to grievous personal injury²¹. In the fourth woe, the social currency of honour and disgrace are explicitly and implicitly mentioned. The offence, however, is painted as one who robs neighbours of their rightful respect through trickery and deceits (“... pour out wrath ... make drunk ...”). *Lex talionis*, or the law of retribution in kind, will greet the offenders. Those who wallow in the enjoyment of seeing others suffer in disgrace, will have YHWH's cup of judgment come around to them. They confirm their disqualification from the covenant community (“... show your uncircumcision”) by their treacherous and malicious actions against neighbours.

The retributive disgrace of those this woe is directed is likened to Lebanon being rid of its magnificent cedars, and its forests emptied of beasts through violence and conquest. Possibly another conflation of aphorisms (v. 17) concludes this taunt song, repeating the egregious violence and bloodshed underlined in the first saying (v. 8b). Whether they are from foreign aggression or hatred within the community, gratuitous bloodletting and indignity to human life are equally repugnant to YHWH and the perpetrators are subject to condemnation.

Fifth woe – denunciation of idolatry and its folly:

First Testament prophets were in unison denouncing idolatry, and waxed eloquent in exposing the folly of this prime of sin. In so doing, they simply channelled the disgust against infidelity of YHWH whom they served. This last woe saying, with slight variation in form from those precede, follows the same tradition as other prophets (Isa. 44:9-20; Jer. 7:18-19; 10:2b-5; cf. Isa. 57:3-13) describing in graphic details the making/fashioning of idols so as to amplify the sheer absurdity. The poetic lyrics in vv. 18-19 depict that process in a parody of the creation story in Genesis by repeating words there:

- יִצְרֹן יִצָּר – “one who formed its form” (v. 18c, same word repeats in verb and noun); appears first in Gen. 2:7,8, when God “formed the man of dust ...”
- עָשָׂה – “make” (v. 18d); appears in Gen. 1:7 when God “made or fashioned the expanse ...”
- רוּחַ – “breath” or “spirit” (v. 19d); first appears in Gen. 1:2 as “the Spirit of God” who enlivens

²⁰ Counting from the beginning of the “Woe” statements (רוּחַ in v. 6c) to end of v. 20, v. 14 sits almost at the centre of the series. The tetragrammaton, YHWH (יהוה) in v. 14 is right at the centre, with 87 Hebrew words before and after.

²¹ For Jewish notion of honour and shame in the First Testament, see John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, vol. 2 – Israel's Faith* (Downers Grove, IL, Inter Varsity Press, 2006), pp. 529-532; *Old Testament Theology, vol. 3 – Israel's Life* (Downers Grove, IL, Inter Varsity Press, 2009), pp. 605-607.

It is tragic that human, who is formed distinctly (Psm. 139:14), given the breath of life (Gen. 2:7), being placed in the primordial temple as priest-king (Gen. 1:28ff.), would degrade oneself and make lifeless rubbish as objects for worship. For the folly does not end with idol making; idolaters become what they worship²². They senselessly prod the “dumb things” to come awake and arise as they seek help from idols which their own hands have fashioned. It is as if the idolaters themselves need to be awakened to the fact that these glittering façades have no breath inside.

But YHWH sits enthroned in his holy temple; the only sovereign of the cosmos reigns supreme. He holds court at his abode and dispenses righteous decrees. His presence beckons the whole earth to hush in awe and his rule demands obeisance from all livings. Aggressors, oppressors, and transgressors, both the wicked and righteous, even the complaining prophet, are to yield before YHWH's judgment throne.

Taken together, the three wholly positive statements (vv. 4b, 14, 20) form the scaffolding of YHWH's entire response. They substantiate the woe pronouncements against the arrogant, greedy, wicked and idolatrous. YHWH's own Godhead, his glory, the trusting faith he summons and the life he sustains, constitute the catalyst by which Habakkuk and all faithful who live in in-between time to gain renewed perspectives and strength. The oracle of judgments is interlaced with hope for those who put abiding trust in YHWH's words:

- That the righteous shall live by faith;
- The prolongment of wickedness and injustice is in some providential ways serves to execute YHWH's judgment and demonstrate his glory
- That YHWH is the only sovereign Lord; he is in control and commands reverence and worship.

F. The Confession (3:1-19):

The editorial note of 3:1 serves two purposes: a literary break signifying the silence called for in v. 2:20 and Habakkuk's compliant hush in hearing YHWH's answer. Together with 3:19b, it also marks the adaptation of Habakkuk's personal prayer of confession to a communal hymn in liturgical settings. In its canonical form the editor of the prophetic book implicitly commends Habakkuk's final disposition as the model of trusting faith (v. 2:4b) that is required of the faithful in times of upheaval.

Habakkuk's prayer begins with a startling reversal of heart. In his complaint to YHWH, he accuses him of not hearing (v. 1:2). He bemoans him of looking idly by in face of evil (v. 1:13). Now, it is Habakkuk who hears – “I have heard the report of you ...”. Instead of YHWH's inaction, it is his work that Habakkuk now sees and fears, and looks forward to its revival and triumph (v. 3:2). The same verb on hearing (שמע, to hear) reappears in v. 16 and forms an *inclusio*:

- “I have heard ... I fear” (v. 2a)
- “I hear ... my body trembles” (v. 16aa)

This is similar to the structure found in Habakkuk's complaint (Ch. 1), where two parts of the complaint bracketing a previous divine disclosure. Here, two brief but penetrating confessions bracket a report of theophany in two themes. The prayer, and therefore the liturgical song is in the following form:

- Confession part A (v. 2)
- Vision of theophany in the Sinaitic motif (vv. 3-7)
- Vision of theophany in the holy warrior motif (vv. 8-15)
- Confession part B (v. 16)

²² An intended appreciative reference to Gregory K. Beale's *We Become What We Worship, A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL, Inter Varsity Press, 2008).

- Song of confidence (vv. 17-19a)

Perhaps the prayer was sung at the Temple in cantillation and antiphonal responses during Habakkuk's time, or later at synagogues by the exiles on foreign lands as they strengthened each other to enliven their faith. Across the centuries, this could have been set in the musical language of an oratorio, conceivably begins with a recitative, then double arias, a second recitative and concludes with a chorale from the congregation. Still, the enduring message of trusting faith in the Almighty God at times of turmoil is the same.

The "report" to which Habakkuk refers could be the entire response (vv. 2:2-20) from YHWH, or simply the shattering reminder of YHWH enthroned in his holy temple (v. 2:20). The contents of the report may also be the vision of theophany the prophet is about to recite. More probably, it is a collective reference to the answer to his complaint, which prompted a recall of YHWH's historic salvific acts for his chosen people²³. Remembering is such a fundamental aspect to the Jewish faith, as it is integral to any covenantal relations. Parents are commanded to pass on the memory of the works of YHWH in their midst and on their behalf (Exo. 13:14ff; Deu. 4:9-10; 6:7-9, 20ff; 8:2; 11:18-21; 32:7-9; Psm. 78:1-8; Isa. 38:19; 59:21; Joel 1:3). It might well be just such memory that Habakkuk was jolted to put down, in his own elevated poetic language, as part of his confession.

The Exodus story and the giving of the Torah at Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai) were seminal events that should indelibly sear the psyche of the Israelite nation. The high point in the series of salvific acts was not the crossing of the Red Sea, though that was undoubtedly a spectacular miracle. The climax came when "YHWH came down on Mount Sinai" (Exo. 19:20a) and appeared in holiness to the Israelites with whom he was to establish a covenant. In theophany YHWH displayed himself to the Israelites. There they saw the cataclysms of the natural order (thunders, lightnings, earthquakes, etc.) that often accompany theophanies in the Bible²⁴. They heard YHWH speak to Moses in thunder, but saw no form. The scene and such experience were so terrifying and devastating that they begged Moses to be the intermediary, and not let them be in the direct sound waves of YHWH's speaking. In 3:3-7, Habakkuk seems to be recalling ancestral testimonies of the Sinaitic experience²⁵.

In its original language, these verses form a beautifully balanced structure²⁶. It begins with an annunciation of theophany (3a), then a superscription about the resplendence and profusion of God's glory (3b), followed

²³ Note expansive and different rendering of Hab. 3:2 in LXX.

²⁴ See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament, Vol. II*, Tran. by J.A. Baker (Philadelphia, PA, The Westminster Press, 1967), pp. 15-23, and scriptural references therein.

²⁵ Note different understanding in Thomas Renz, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, pp. 354-356, who asserts "the prayer concerns the present and the future", and "... should allow that any historical reminiscence serves to portray and interpret present or future events". He further comments that "the chapter as a whole focuses on the future glimpsed in ch. 2 rather than on the archaic past". Such understanding seems to make the prayer in 3:3-15 part of the vision (see Renz, p. 355) that Habakkuk was instructed to inscribe (2:2b). This writer, however, see the passage as traditional motifs in the form of communal memories, rendered in Habakkuk's own poetic language. Such memory recall is prompted by YHWH's answer in ch. 2, and is expressed in affirmation that YHWH will act according to his words based on his past faithfulness.

²⁶ The following is a literal translation taken from Lexham Hebrew-English Interlinear Bible (Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004), based on Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, 5th rev. ed. (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, 1997):

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| <p>3 God from-Teman he-came, and-Holy-One from-Mountain-of Paran.
He-covered heavens splendor-of-him, and-praise-of-him she-was-full the-earth.</p> <p>4 And-brightness like-the-light she-was,
two-horns from-hand-of-him to-him
and-there veil-of power-of-him.</p> <p>5 Before-him he-went plague, and-he-went-out plague to-feet-of-him.</p> <p>6 He-stood and-he-measured earth, he-looked and-he-made-leap nations.
Then-they-were-shattered mountains-of eternity,
they-sank-low hills-of everlasting
ways-of everlasting to-him.</p> <p>7 Under affliction I-saw tents-of Cushan,
they-trembled curtains-of land-of Midian.</p> | <p>selah</p> |
|---|--------------|

The structure can be seen as:

by an immediate vision of the piercing radiance (4a, b), yet contrasts with his character of self-restraint (4c). This recalls the encounter at Sinai, where God appeared in fire and lightnings but the mount was wrapped in thick darkness.

A bicolon punctuates in the centre (5), depicting the devastating effect of God's appearance, with clear reference to the plagues of the Exodus. Another subhead in 6a echoes that in 3b, now with God's sovereign power and authority as the subject. A pair of consecutive imperfects (measured, caused shaking) following perfect verbs conjure an image of "earth" and "nations" being subdued by God's mere presence. Ruptures in physical landscape exposit that theme in 6b – even the most steadfast in creation gives way and is overshadowed by his eternal attributes (6bγ).

The short poem concludes with another statement (7) on the awesomeness of theophany as YHWH strides across lands of the nations. Nomadic dwellers are instilled with fear and anguish as connoted by euphemisms of "tents" and "curtains". Such sentiment is in line with that expressed by a later prophet: "... who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. ..." (Mal. 3:2) The unit takes the perspective of a close observer and addresses God (אלֹהִים, Eloah) in the third person.

In the second record of theophanic vision (vv. 8-15), Habakkuk switches his motif to that of the holy warrior. Samples of such literary genre are frequently employed in "victory songs" in the Bible (e.g., Exo. 15:1b-18, 21; Deu. 32:39-43; Jdg. 5:4-5; Psm. 18:6-19, 31-45; 77:16-20; Nah. 1:2ff.). This unit²⁷ is as nicely constructed with references to sea and horses in the first and last verses forming an *inclusio*. Close to the centre (12) there are also references to "earth" and "nations"; but rather than august stillness of divine presence as in 6a, this time there are tumultuous chaos through actions (marched, threshed) of YHWH of hosts.

The poem begins with rhetorical questions (8) accentuating the wrath of YHWH (addressed as second person), thus painting a picture of YHWH as holy warrior galloping across maritime terrains. Such devices of anthropomorphism follow aplenty. Soon, implements of war: bow, rods, arrows, and spear, are brandished as the warrior avenges his foes. Mountains, waters, even the deep are all thrashing and buffeting; nature convulsing in multifold intensity. Sun and moon, the two main celestial luminaries, stand still as if in resignation.

3a – Annunciation of theophany, structured as ABCA'B'B' (with ellipsis of verb)

3b – Processional acclaim I, in ABCC'A'B'

4 – Respondent attribution I

5 – Intervening declarative, in ABCB'CA'

6a – Processional acclaim II, in ABCA'B'C'

6b – Respondent attribution II

7 – Recessional

²⁷ Literal translation taken from Lexham Hebrew-English Interlinear Bible, with punctuations of cola within verses added by the writer:

8 -against-rivers he-was-hot, Yahweh!

If against-the-rivers nose-of-you, if against-the-sea indignation-of-you
when you-rode on horse-of-you – chariots-of-you salvation?

9 Nakedness she-was-laid-bare bow-of-you, curses rods what-is-spoken

selah

Rivers you-split earth.

10 They-saw-you they-writhed mountains, storm-of waters he-has-passed-on;
he-gave the-deep voice-of-him, high-of hands-of-him he-lifted-up.

11 Sun moon he-stood place-DIR to-light-of arrows-of-you,

they-went to-brightness lightning-of spear-of-you.

12 In-fury you-marched earth, in-nose you-threshed nations.

13 You-went-out for-salvation-of people-of-you, for-salvation – anointed-of-you;

you-crushed head from-house-of wicked-one to-lay-bare foundation to neck.

selah

14 You-pierced with-rods-of-him head-of warrior-of-him –

they-were-tempestuous to-scatter-me,

rejoicing-of-them as to-devour poor-one in-the-secret.

15 You trampled in-the-sea,

horses-of-you surging-of waters great. (*brachylogy with ellipsis of the verb*)

More likely, these firmamental bodies of the created order are cooperating in abetment (See Jsh. 10:12-14)²⁸. Thus far, the poet has been describing the scene at the dawn of a fierce battle and its collateral effects, with the holy warrior drawing his bow and arrows in preparation. The mood changes and the clamour crescendos with a reminder that the warrior is traversing the earth in fury (12), making no uncertainty the nations are the targets of his anger. With “marched” and “threshed” in v. 12 the language now packs with actions. In quick succession of resolute verbs – “you went out”, “you crushed”, “you pierced”, “you trampled”, the enemies are decimated and the battle decided. The outcome is never in dispute.

It should be noted that the lines describing the decisive conquest of the wicked (13b and 14a) are sandwiched between two statements that:

- 1) clearly state the purpose of the holy warrior – “for the salvation of your people”, that “of your anointed” (13a)²⁹, also hinted at in 8c: “your chariot of salvation”;
- 2) the conditions of the oppressed under duress (14b)

This speaks of the covenant faithfulness of YHWH, who as the holy warrior comes to the deliverance of the righteous. Now the salvific warfare is won the poem swiftly comes to its coda, but not without a reprise of the theme on “sea” and “horses” as remnants for reminders (15).

The prophet seems to be roused from his reminiscence (16), deeply startled by the ferocity of “your work” (2b). He cannot help but lucidly realizes the terrifying implications to the present moment when YHWH answers his prayer and revives his work. Back with his “hearing” motif (2a), his whole being shudders as if to melt away in the prospect of such happening. Though Habakkuk only had a glimpse of what would happen, he was frightened to the core. The severity of YHWH’s vengeance is beyond words. There is no recourse if the wickedness continues undeterred. What is left for the prophet is to wait in uneasy anticipation³⁰ for the coming of YHWH’s judgment. And he specifies the recipients of such troubles or distress are the Chaldeans who overstep their role and wreak undue violence to their neighbours. Yet, Habakkuk’s uneasiness reflects the same sentiment in his plea to YHWH: “In wrath remember mercy.”³¹

The song of confidence in vv. 17-19 is an appropriate resolution to Habakkuk’s internal turmoil. It is also most fitting as a testimony of the faith community undergoing catastrophe, who look forward with hope to YHWH for reprieve and redress. It is a sonnet for a time when music sounds faint, and light grows dim. The conviction that incites these lyrics is precisely the expression of faithful trusting that YHWH requires in his revelation (2:4b).

One can imagine the city gates are firmly bolted from inside, clamouring is heard day and night over the walls. The siege of the city has lasted for months, and the Babylonians are unrelenting in strangling its supplies³². The arable land for crops, farmsteads for livestock, typically just outside the city, are the first to be ravaged by the encroachers. The city’s fate is gloomy, and livelihood is in doubt. In a steady rhythm that exudes confidence, the poet recounts:

²⁸ Thomas Renz, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, pp. 371, 374, who cites Psm. 77:17 and translates the verb (*piel* imperfect) as “going forward”, thus making the sun and moon as going alongside the lightning arrows.

²⁹ See Thomas Renz, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, p. 374, note o, p; and discussion in pp. 389-390, who sees “your anointed” as the Davidic king as the embodiment of God’s people. The reference to a Davidic king is consistent with the proposal here that 3:3-15 is memory recall of ancient experience. However, the direct object marker here in v. 13 may be explicative, which then reads: “for the salvation of your people, that is, your anointed ones”. An allusion to Psm. 105:15 should not be quickly discounted, esp. the holy war context in vv. 11-15 there.

³⁰ נָחַח (nwh II); see David Thompson, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis (NIDOTTE)*, Vol. 5, gen. ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), p. 59, indicates Hab. 3:16 as the sole OT occurrence of this variant, which has a meaning “to groan”; but vacillates to assign the word with nwh I, meaning “wait quietly”. Most EVs have “wait quietly”, “wait patiently”, “rest”, or “long” (NET), which are not entirely satisfactory. To retain the meaning in nwh II, “to groan”, so the translation “wait in uneasy anticipation” above.

³¹ Note Renz’s rendering of this phrase as “in turmoil you shall remember to have compassion.”, Thomas Renz, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, p. 343.

³² Reminiscence of the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, probably started in late 598 BCE. Cf. II Kings 24:10-17.

Though fig blossoms not
Nor there grape on the vines
Olive produces no oil
And fields yield no food
Folds are empty of flock
No herd is seen in stalls

Yet I in Yahweh exult
In God of my salvation, I rejoice
Yahweh, Lord of my strength
He sets my feet like the deer
On my heights he makes me walk

The two parts of this song express this disposition well. The grim reality of the outside world is not faced with fanciful withdrawal or escape. The poet even recites the ravaged elements one by one. But the song quickly turns to remembering, in a posture of looking back to face forward. The song is in a way a succinct recapitulation of Habakkuk's prayer of confession in 3:2-16, or an apt response of faith by the worshipping congregation. The last verses of the song (18-19a) are allusions or aural quotations of an ancient song (II Sam. 22, esp. v34, and its parallel in Psm. 18)³³, sung no less by King David in praise of YHWH's deliverance. What Habakkuk appropriates from ancient faithful is the characters of YHWH and his trustworthiness. It is the immutable God that is the anchor for trusting faith in changing circumstances. His past deeds in covenant faithfulness are the sure foundation and assurance for his future salvific actions. YHWH is, after all, the only one sits enthroned in his holy temple, and his pervading glory will be fully acknowledged. Here lies the reason for songs in the night (Job 35:10), joy in distress, and strength to go on "in the midst of years".

Reflections on Recent Turmoil

What are we to learn from Habakkuk's message, as we encounter both inside and around us upheavals of various kinds? How do we find our bearings when dark seasons intermittently visit, or when circumstances so easily rattle and overwhelm? What does the Christian faith have to say today in face of blatant injustice or sheer brutality against fellow bearers of God's image? In the time between "it is finished" was proclaimed on Calvary's cross to the day when Jesus said he would return, how does "faithful trusting" look like? For us living in the 21st century, how should we then live?

We note in Habakkuk that faith is not simply fixated on the past in endless reminiscing, though it is acutely informed by YHWH's former deeds. The "yet I" moment comes only when YHWH's words are taken to heart. God has spoken through Habakkuk about his own eternal presence and his sovereign concerns on human affairs, and he speaks even today. Our task is to hearken the Spirit's promptings through the revealed words as we peer "around us when everything is cloaked in the coming shadow of night"³⁴. Living faithfully requires a heart of discernment – a Spirit-led attitude that is grounded in Christian hope. As Paul puts it: "... know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. ... the day is at hand." (Rom. 13:11ff.) In the following, we shall take several momentous world events of late as exercises of reflection, and see what God has to say to our times amidst turmoil, so that we may lead a life of faithful trusting.

³³ Cf. Gary Edward Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan Academic, 2021), p. 426ff.

³⁴ As James K. A. Smith says so eloquently as he discusses "discernment" in his *How to Inhabit Time* (Grand Rapids, MI, Brazos Press, 2022), p. 43. He goes on: "Discernment is first and foremost not a matter of explaining history but looking to forge forms of life in concert with the Spirit's unfolding redemption in time."

A. Invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation³⁵

The naked aggression and flagrant bloodletting in Ukraine by Vladimir Putin of Russia are an affront to human civilization. It is perpetrated in the name of national security and ethnic protection, but in reality, it is a hopeless pursuit of bygone imperial vainglory and compulsive gulping the dregs of crumpled empire. That such act is so appallingly unacceptable to universal values betrays the pathetic delusion of an autocrat and his backers. Behind the cruel threats and rusted armaments, it is stark arrogance and incontrovertible greed through and through.

No one deserves to have one's home arbitrarily razed to the ground, nor a four-year-old girl in her stroller suddenly bludgeoned to death by a missile. Students in many Ukrainian cities are denied their learning because their schools are destroyed. The weak and the elderly are forced to evacuate to underground shelters. Maternity wards are pummelled and women died with their unborn. Millions are displaced, many to foreign lands. Innocent people are maimed; thousands killed. Day and night, munitions drop indiscriminately to terrorize. Long furrows graven on faces mark incessant apprehensions of violence; wounds still unhealed expose the savagery brought on by one's own kind. Tortures, rapes, indignities and murders, the monstrosity is countless.



Liza's bloodied stroller after the Russian missile strike in Vinnytsia. (Efrem Lukatsky/AP)

In Habakkuk, YHWH pronounces woe to the greedy and arrogant, to the one who “gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all people” (2:5c):

“Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own – for how long? – and loads himself with pledges!” (2:6b) The plunderer shall be plundered.

We are not looking to history to repeat itself. The aggressors cowered at the Kremlin are no Nebuchadrezzar of the Neo-Babylonian empire. But YHWH is the same and “in whom there is no inconsistency or shifting shadow”. (Jas. 1:17, ISV). He is against the arrogant and the greedy. Twice in the woe pronouncements a statement of rationale is given: “... for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them”. (2:8b, 17b). From history's first fratricide on (Gen. 4:10ff.), shedding of innocent blood incurs God's wrath and judgment. Not only are perpetrators of war crimes answerable at international tribunals, but also stand indicted before the heavenly court. Political leaders of different stripes who wantonly avail themselves of military strength to harass, pillage, and kill so as to satiate their own ambition, are in effect idolatrous worshippers of human hubris and power. The one who says “Vengeance is mine” (Deu. 32:35) and commands silence on his judgment throne does not look idly by.

³⁵ In condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is difficult not to draw certain parallels with another aggressive war in the 21st century: Invasion of Iraq by the United States-led coalition in 2003. By most measures it fell far short of the criteria for just war.

B. Global COVID-19 Pandemic and the Inequality It Exposes

In many respects, the COVID-19 pandemic has been unprecedented in modern human history. Although the HIV/AIDS outbreak has a cumulative death toll of about 40 million, or the Ebola virus exacts a frightening mortality rate, we need to reach back to the Spanish flu a century ago to find comparable societal impacts caused by a pandemic. While that of the Spanish flu is etched in history books, our collective experience during COVID-19 offers a precious opportunity to reflect on our tattered paths throughout, and on how our lives ought to be after. Many are still reeling from agonizing pain, the turmoil of having one's world turned upside down, the ache of loved ones lost, the lingering sense of internal dislocation. We suddenly realize how dependent we are on the "routines" we have so carefully fashioned; we are in fact addicted to tedious drudgery. None of this is to be trivialized, after all, this is our shared condition. Once our lives are upended by a virus, however, we have to ask whether we have overinvested in our erstwhile cherished sense of normalcy. Or if we have put "progress" and "prosperity" high on a pedestal in the expense of true human flourishing? Like Habakkuk, we are more inclined to question God how he would allow calamity to stifle our plans than to care how it will accomplish his.

The COVID-19 pandemic and responses from various governmental agencies also expose deeply engrained inequalities within societies and among nations. Ample studies³⁶ demonstrate that the health crisis has disproportionately affected those who are vulnerable, underprivileged, marginalized and destitute in societies. Poor living conditions, inequitable distribution of preventive resources, and other measures at times exacerbated the disparities and left these people more isolated or in dire danger. It is not necessary to recite here the data gathered by these studies or the observations they have drawn. Suffice it to point out that the elderly, particularly those living in care-home settings, have borne the brunt of the pandemic's devastating effects. A report³⁷ by the Public Health Agency of Canada at the end of 2021 makes the observation that of the 16,333 excess deaths in 2020 (as compared to averages in previous 4 years), 70% (11,386) was in adults aged 65 or older. And 87% of the deaths in this group were COVID-19 related. Data from other countries support similar observations.³⁸ Behind these cold, hard facts of pandemic deaths, there are innumerable older people who have undergone loneliness, isolation, constant fear, and hopelessness during lockdowns³⁹.

Variations are often made of a quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: "A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members," but its essential import resonate with Jesus' sayings: "... whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Mat. 25:40, CSB) In the crunch moment, how our elderly people are being treated proves the mettle of us as a society. The many horrific stories of elderly dying of COVID in community homes, even in the world's wealthiest nations, are clarion calls that deficiencies in care are in fact despicable neglect and a latent form of oppression. For Protestant Christians, perhaps there are worthy

³⁶ Stéphanie Vandentorren, Sabira Smaïli, Edouard Chatignoux, Marine Maurel, Caroline Alleaume, Lola Neufcourt, Michelle Kelly-Irving, Cyrille Delpierre. *The effect of social deprivation on the dynamic of SARS-CoV-2 infection in France: a population-based analysis*, The Lancet Public Health, www.thelancet.com/public-health Vol 7 March 2022 e240, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(22\)00007-X/fulltext#articleInformation](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(22)00007-X/fulltext#articleInformation); Bamba C, Riordan R, Ford J, et al., *The COVID-19 pandemic and health inequalities*, J Epidemiol Community Health 2020;74:964-968; Blundell R, Costa Dias M, Joyce R, Xu X. *COVID-19 and Inequalities*. Fisc Stud. 2020 Jun;41(2):291-319. doi: 10.1111/1475-5890.12232. Epub 2020 Jul 14. PMID: 32836542; PMCID: PMC7362053; Mishra V, Seyedzenouzi G, Almohtadi A, Chowdhury T, Khashkhusha A, Axiac A, Wong WYE, Harky A. *Health Inequalities During COVID-19 and Their Effects on Morbidity and Mortality*. J Healthc Leadersh. 2021 Jan 19;13:19-26. doi: 10.2147/JHL.S270175. PMID: 33500676; PMCID: PMC7826045.

³⁷ *COVID-19 and deaths in older Canadians: Excess mortality and the impacts of age and comorbidity*, Public Health Agency of Canada, Dec. 14, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19/epidemiological-economic-research-data/excess-mortality-impacts-age-comorbidity.html>, accessed on Oct. 21, 2022.

³⁸ *International data on deaths attributed to COVID-19 among people living in care homes*, International Long-term Care Policy Network, Feb. 22, 2022, <https://ltccovid.org/2022/02/22/international-data-on-deaths-attributed-to-covid-19-among-people-living-in-care-homes/>, accessed Oct. 21, 2022. Regrettably, many reports cited here are necessarily selective in scope, maybe even myopic in the sense that a large portion of world populations are left out due in large part to unavailability of data.

³⁹ Cf. *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020, Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25663>, accessed Oct. 21, 2022.

lessons to be learned from “the preferential option for the poor”⁴⁰ – a social teaching of the Catholic Church. The contents espoused under that heading are rich and audacious. Sandie Cornish puts it thus:

*“It is an **option** in the sense of being a conscious choice to be in solidarity with those who are poor, marginalized or disrespected, and to work for structural change to transform the causes of poverty and marginalization. Our preferential option for the poor is a core commitment – it is not optional! It is **preferential** because through this option we give preference or priority in our love to those who are poor.”⁴¹*

In his 2015 encyclical *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis adds: “... a preferential option ... demands before all else an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest convictions as believers”. It is high time for a renewal of our vision and a recommitment to our Gospel calling⁴².

A preferential option in action inevitably requires stepping away from one’s privileged position or renouncing one’s own rights. But “rights” is a topic that has gained peculiar meaning in the last half-century since, in a zeitgeist dominated by individualistic sensibilities. Not to risk a digression, we must just segue into a phenomenon during the pandemic where some asserted their rights to “freedom” and protested against restrictions brought on by measures to avert infection. The worrisome part of it was in these protests some wielded scripture verses and did so in the name of a Christian cause. Many were abetted by their ministers from church pulpits. Their main complaint was purportedly government overreach. While there were times in history when threats to Christian freedom legitimated vigorous resistance, and may very well be required in future, this recent contumacy needs to be scrutinized. For the Christian message is foremost about loving God and others, and the freedom we seek and preach is obtained by none other than Christ bounded on a cross. Flaunting one’s rights to aggrieve others is never compatible with the Gospel. The personal choice to vaccinate or not is surely a cherished prerogative in a free society, but in exercising so we must always remember the weak, the sick, and the impoverished, who, after all, are our neighbours. The prophet’s call to “do justice, and to love kindness ...” (Mic. 6:8) is indeed a composite call, and should never be taken singly.

Another pandemic-related topic that prompts our contemplation about how we lead our lives concerns the environment. We were fascinated by strange scenes during lockdowns where wildlife visited urban cities, and animal herds roamed vacant streets. When engines stopped, the air was cleaner, the soundscape quieter, the sky looked bluer, and birdsongs sounded sweeter. When human activities are curtailed, the environment gets a reprieve. Starkly a picture was presented as a vivid reminder of how the ecosystem had been ignored. Our modern lifestyle has wreaked detriments (“violence to the earth”) to the only planetary home we have.

Some years after the exiled had returned to Judea, the chronicler(s) (~ 400 BCE) recounted the history of Israel and commented on the exile to Babylon bluntly: “... to fulfil the word of the Lord ... until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths ...” (II Chr. 36:21). This is, of course, a reference to the holiness codes laid down in Leviticus (see. Lev. 26:33-43), particularly the statutes on the Sabbath year and the year of jubilee (Lev. 25). In its wisdom the Mosaic law instituted an optimal cycle of rest for man and land. The year of jubilee also elicited compassionate neighbourliness and guaranteed economic restitutions in social lives. The more important rationale was the

⁴⁰ First advocated in 1968 by Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe Gondra, “option for the poor” was later embraced by theologians in the Liberation movement. The term “preferential option for the poor” was subsequently adopted by the late Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* of 1991. Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis also extended the concept in Catholic social teachings. See elaborations in U.S. Catholic, <https://uscatholic.org/articles/201501/what-is-the-preferential-option-for-the-poor/>, (accessed Oct. 21, 2022); Aleteia, <https://aleteia.org/2013/02/04/what-is-the-preferential-option-for-the-poor/>, (accessed Oct. 21, 2022); Center for Social Concerns, University of Notre Dame, <https://socialconcerns.nd.edu/content/4-preferential-option-poor-and-vulnerable>, (accessed Oct. 21, 2022); Catholic Social Teaching In Action, <https://capp-usa.org/2021/05/preferential-option-for-the-poor-article/>, (accessed Oct. 21, 2022).

⁴¹ By Sandie Cornish, emphases original. Sandie Cornish was the Director of the Office for Justice, Ecology and Peace of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. She has recently accepted a faculty position with Australian Catholic University’s Faculty of Theology and Philosophy. Her website on Social Spirituality is [social-spirituality.net. https://social-spirituality.net/preferential-option-poor/](https://social-spirituality.net/preferential-option-poor/), last accessed Oct. 21, 2022.

⁴² For a thoughtful discussion on this topic, see ch. 9. “The Starving Christ and a Preferential Option for the Poor” in Bob Goudzwaard and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Beyond the Modern Age* (Downers Grove, IL, IVP Academic, 2017).

essence of Israel's faith in the providence of God. There is, sadly, little evidence of Israelites complying to these regulations before the exile⁴³; the only Biblical record about emancipation of their fellow Hebrew indentured slaves is one that the Judahites quickly reneged (Jer. 34:8ff.). In addition to encroaching army, another reason why Habakkuk bewailed about agricultural sterility (Hab. 3:17) might well be the years of abuse and neglect in the hands of preexilic Judahites. To the chronicler(s), these ominous words beckoned: "As long as it lies desolate [*the land*] shall have rest, the rest that it did not have on your Sabbaths when you were dwelling in it." (Lev. 26:35)

During pandemic lockdowns, we witnessed the earth gained a reprieve, a fleeting rest it had been denied for a long, long time. It would be a pitiable complacency if nothing alters our relationship with the environment in our eager desire to return to normal after the pandemic, if normal simply means the way it was.

C. Assaults on Human Dignity in Hong Kong

We reach back in time to the restive summer of 2019 in Hong Kong, a place always punches above its weight, the implications of its happenings often outstrip the city's size. The social unrest that took place and reactions by the authority carried lasting consequences. What happened there represents worrisome trends in many countries. However, it is not the intent here to offer a sociopolitical critique of the incident, for the like of which is already massive in the academia and punditry. Suffice it to point out the handling of the unrest by the people in power demonstrated utter incompetence and ineptness, or they had been blinded by an ulterior desire to placate the power in Beijing. We must also add that as followers of the Prince of Peace, we cannot condone the use of violence to achieve any political aims; those who abuse their authority to inflict hurts in revenge must be condemned. In the following, we want to focus on several themes that have arisen, which are of theological imports in the book of Habakkuk – justice, idolatry, and Christian witness.

The evil of authoritarianism as seen in societies that slide from a more participatory form of governance lies in its concomitant erosion of civil liberties, equality, and human dignity. In recent memory, countries like Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Venezuela are cases in point. In its "Freedom in the World" report of 2021⁴⁴, the Freedom House highlights Hong Kong along with Belarus and India as places where the once flickering hope of democracy has dimmed in the previous year. The latest report of 2022⁴⁵ continues to register unfavourable evaluations on the city's recent situation. One usual trick in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) playbook is to subject the legal system to the service of the ruling clique. It is therefore no wonder that the "rule of law" fell an early victim⁴⁶ to the authority's efforts to conform Hong Kong closer to the image of the mainland. "Justice goes forth perverted", not by juridical codes but by the Party's coteries; the laws of the land become expedients in a tyrant's hand. The infringements are innumerable. Since 2019, we have seen miscarriages of justice in partial or delayed administration, denial of fair trial under common law, prolonged detentions without bail, etc. With the enactment of the draconian National Security Law in July 2020, there have been conspicuous cases of political persecutions and exclusions of rights on arbitrary political criteria. In today's Hong Kong, freedom of thought, conscience, and expression are seriously curtailed, and divergent voices are muzzled. Civil society in media, education, private associations, and intellectual space are gradually dismantled. In this new farmstead of a once-vibrant city, some

⁴³ See Isa. 37:30 (2 Kgs. 19:29); Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus, NICOT* (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p. 318; cf. "Sabbatical Year and Jubilee" in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12967-sabbatical-year-and-jubilee>, (accessed Oct. 24, 2022).

⁴⁴ *Freedom in the World 2021 – Democracy under Siege*, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>, (accessed Oct. 25, 2022).

⁴⁵ *Freedom in the World 2022 – The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule*, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>, (accessed Oct. 25, 2022).

⁴⁶ The latest *Rule of Law Index*[®] of 2022 by World Justice Project ranks Hong Kong at 22 among 140 countries and jurisdictions, dropped from 19 of the previous year, and from 16 in 2019. See full report at <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global/2022/> (accessed Oct. 26, 2022)

are more equal than others⁴⁷. Hong Kong is being chiselled to be a society in the morbid mode under CCP's iron-fist rule; people are either swept into its *net* and *dragnet* (Hab. 1:15) in silent obeisance, or voluntarily leave.

The promulgation of the National Security Law in Hong Kong by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress followed in line with recent emphasis, or obsession, on national security of the regime. This might reflect a deep-seated diffidence on legitimacy, but in truth may manifest something more sinister. In the book of Daniel, King Nebuchadrezzar made and dedicated a giant gold statue, and mandated prostrate to it by all of his realm on hearing music of every kind. The text does not disclose on whose image the statue was made; it was the Jews' accusers who equated the image with the king's gods. But more important is that they prefaced their accusation against the Jews for "pay no attention to you" (Dan. 3:12). The king's authority was the real image, even though he did not claim to be god. And Daniel's three companions would not mistake idolatry as otherwise.

In an astute reading of the book of Amos⁴⁸, M. Daniel Carroll R. highlights the prophet's "censure of ... Israel's 'Doctrine of National Security'" under Jeroboam II in the middle of 8th century BCE. At a time when a weakened Assyrian Empire allowed a period of relative stability and prosperity in the region, Jeroboam's successful military exploits (2 Kgs. 14:25) added a sense of invincibility and security. It was this kind of military pretense and its idolatry Amos spoke against:

"Woe to those who are at ease in Zion,
and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria,
...
O you who put far away the day of disaster
And bring near the seat of violence? ..."

In his confrontation with the prophet, Amaziah the priest of Bethel warned Amos, "... never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." (Amos 7:13) The nation's faith was expropriated in the name of the crown; worship was subsumed under the domain of the state. Amos's denunciation "hit at the very heart of the ideology of national power and security"⁴⁹, and pronounced doom to the Israel state (Amos 7:8b-9).

In communist China, national security is the ragged camouflage to protect the Party's rule; it has become dissolute idolatry in a self-styled atheist regime. The National Security Law is the 21st-century version of Nebuchadrezzar's gold statue, acquiescence and allegiance to which is demanded from people of the land. To this the words in Habakkuk is apropos: "Can this teach?" (2:19b). An idol's façade is overlaid with gold and silver, but there is no truth, indeed nothing, inside. Yet Jeremiah's warning still blazes: "Heaping oppression upon oppression, and deceit upon deceit, they refuse to know me, declares the Lord." (Jer. 9:6)

We now come to the last theme in this section on Christian witness, which may also be an appropriate conclusion to our reflections. A regrettable reality throughout the unrest of 2019/2020 in Hong Kong was that the Christian churches had lost their voices. The reasons are probably more complex than we can let in here, but to a large extent it was due less to external threats than internal divisions. Like their counterparts in the wider society, Christians quickly aligned themselves with the respective partisan sides of the conflict. Things were understood as necessarily bipolar, black and white, "for-us" or "against-us", no compromise was possible nor desirable. Soon, proof-texting each other from Bible verses became the predominant praxis in exchange for serious dialogues. Diligent, and oftentimes difficult examination of God's words was eschewed. Some resorted to the sort of intellectual smuggling to say that politics had nothing to do with the kingdom of God. So, situations in the society

⁴⁷ A clear nod to George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (first published by Secker and Warburg published, 1945).

⁴⁸ M. Daniel Carroll R., *Imagining the Unthinkable – Exposing the Idolatry of National Security in Amos in Ex Auditu*, 2008, Volume 24 – *The Idolatry of Security*, ed. Klyne R. Snodgrass (Eugene, OR Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009), pp. 37-54.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 50.

were shunned from Christian conversations, further polarizing the factions. At a season when it was most needed, Christian witness was obscured, its voice silenced⁵⁰.

There was a time before 1997 when the handover of Hong Kong loomed, many congregations intensified their preparations for church lives and faith under a regime known for its suppression and persecutions of religions. These preparatory efforts were largely internally focused and the outlook was more about preservation. At a contextual level, there has been a dearth of studious reflection on how faith relates to the society, particularly one undergoing significant change in many aspects. Two decades on after the handover and under a comparably moderate environment, the proverbial frog was boiled, many had been coerced by a seemingly agreeable new master. Few foresaw the tumults starting in the mid 2010s and culminated with that of 2019; many Christians were ill prepared to properly discern the times.

Effective witness is anchored on the apostolic teaching to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”, and doing so “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love”. (Eph. 4:2-3) Such is a manner worthy of our calling in Christ. The unity Paul calls for does not predicate on uniformity in opinions, for in that case no bearing is necessary. Christ also admonishes that by loving one another, “all people will know” that we are his disciples (John 13:35). It is indeed difficult to see from others’ perspectives when things appear to us so obviously right or wrong. Our internal moral compass promptly kicks into gear and offers “righteous” indignation, that is when our emotions get involved. Alert Christians should know that is precisely a time for discernment. In quoting Reinhold Niebuhr when he refers the example of Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, James Smith⁵¹ suggests the need to attain “detachment”, or “some distance”, in order to “read our present”. For Lincoln, there was in him “a religious awareness of another dimension of meaning than that of the immediate political conflict”⁵², and “the American history was not the only story he inhabited”. That distance gave Lincoln “a vantage point from which to see the irony and horror of the two sides of a war ...”

We who participate in Christ and have been told what it will be,⁵³ are aware that the series of temporal events unfolds before us is not the only story we inhabit. We therefore need to achieve certain detachment at times of turmoil. Not an impassioned kind of distance, for emotions are necessary part in dealing with our own dissolutions or facing brokenness of the world, but a Spirit-led detachment that gainfully channels our emotions and allows maximum room in us for God’s words to instruct. As Gordon T. Smith observes: “... the tensions that undergird the discipline of discernment are kept in equilibrium by an unreserved commitment to the priority of holy Scripture”.⁵⁴ Maintaining a Spirit-led detachment is also a necessary posture for the Church to fulfil her prophetic role in the world. Rather than being swept under the torrents of current affairs, Christian witness entails shining light in the darkness. For Christians, our first allegiance is to God’s kingdom, and his righteousness is our primary desire. That is above all earthly causes.

Especially in times of turmoil, we need the conviction that “YHWH is in his holy temple,” his spoken words still beckon faithful trusting in him who is our salvation and strength. Our Lord is “the same yesterday and today and forever”, and “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of YHWH”.

⁵⁰ This is based on general anecdotes and the descriptions are unavoidably in broad strokes. No intention here to denigrate some often-courageous witnesses in the Christian community. See, e.g., “Church faces its moment of truth over Hong Kong’s repression” in UCA News, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/church-faces-its-moment-of-truth-over-hong-kongs-repression/92798> (accessed Oct. 26, 2022)

⁵¹ James K. A. Smith, *How to Inhabit Time*, pp. 48-49.

⁵² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (1952), p. 587, quoted by James K. A. Smith

⁵³ See beginning reference herein to the Book of Revelation, and the expansive canvas painted by John.

⁵⁴ Gordon T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus – Discernment, Prayer and the Witness of the Spirit* (Downer Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 31. The book is recommended reading in the subject of spiritual disciplines.