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**Sovereignty of God in Habakkuk:
Its Significance for Today**

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Introduction

The theology of Habakkuk focuses on faithfulness to God in times of troubles. Habakkuk seeks to find out how one handles a short-lived triumph of the wicked over the righteous while the good

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and sovereign God seems to be indifferent.² The Prophet addresses the theme of theodicy. This marks him out from the preceding prophets and the rest of the Twelve Minor Prophets. In Habakkuk's view, the Judean community is damaged by sins of idolatry as well as by acts of injustices orchestrated from within and outside Judah. Such damage breeds multiple sins and generates other aspects of human sufferings, including the inevitable invasion of the Chaldean (Babylonians) presented in the Book as a divine instrument to judge and punish the unrighteous. No doubt, for centuries this problem has remained a hallmark of any exegetical and critico-theological discussion of evil down through the ages. It troubles Habakkuk, who decisively carries the burden of his people (1:1) and engages in a dialogue with God (vv. 2-11). Habakkuk does not understand why and how the good, holy, just, powerful and sovereign God of all creations would select the wicked Chaldeans to judge and repair Israel's brokenness (1:2-4; 1:12-2:1).³ At first sight, the prophet thinks the direction of things in this universe does not seem to reflect a majestic and compassionate God.⁴ He does not understand why the wicked would circumvent the just. Habakkuk's experience is that of crisis faith.

It is an experience that turns out to be a mystery beyond Habakkuk's or any human comprehension. Habakkuk watches and quickly realizes this fact in a vision (2:1-20). He comes to terms that in the long run, the reign of God prevails in spite of temporary tragedies, sufferings, calamities and injustices. The prophet also has come to appreciate the truth that the just person (*tsaddiq*) shall live only because of his or her fidelity, firmness, steadfastness and spiritual trustworthiness (*'ēmūnāh* 2:4) against temptations and trials. Habakkuk's *'ēmūnāh* and reliability in God's plan is further expressed

² By the "Sovereignty" of God in this study we shall be referring to God's superiority over all other "gods," hence, God is the ruler of all nations. We are also referring to his immutability, infinity, holiness, omnipresence, omniscience, omnipotence, dominance and control over all his creation including human affairs and history.

³ Additional comments will be made on the Chaldeans in the pages ahead.

⁴ See Francis I. Anderson, *Habakkuk: A Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25; York: Doubleday, 2001), 11 for his discussion of how the two realities-God and the world sometimes does not seem to fit.

in his prayer (3:1-19). In this prayer God is not only a divine warrior but the sovereign of all creation and the giver of life.

Habakkuk has been approached differently in the past by various scholars and theologians.⁵ This time, the primary focus of this study is limited in scope to a theological exposition of the theme and elements of divine sovereignty in the face of human sufferings and temporary success of the wicked which *ab initio* worried Habakkuk so much. Methodologically, the study begins by addressing the settings of Habakkuk's theodicy, then discusses its laments framework and highlights God's responses and divine judgment. It concludes with the argument that Habakkuk's realization of the sovereignty of God and its theology of the righteous to faithfully persevere in moments of crisis and troubles is paradigmatic for the daily lives of the righteous today.

A. Setting of Habakkuk's Prophecy

In his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Harold S. Kushner explains why he took this title. It was because of his personal family tragedy and calamity, his son Aaron's progeria, "rapid aging."⁶ The sad news of this illness was difficult for him to handle. He knew he was trying his best to live a good and committed good life as instructed by God. More, still if God existed, if God was fair, just, loving and forgiving, how could he allow his son to fall sick, causing pains and anguish to the entire family?⁷ Kushner's question is as old as the biblical Habakkuk and Job, who were also confronted with injustices, calamities and sufferings of their time and culture.

The language of Habakkuk's dialogue with God seems to date and locate the prophet's life situation (*Sitz-im Leben*) in the context of suffering calamities. This is why Grace Ko has noted that the setting of the theology of Habakkuk "is closely related to the identification of

⁵ For past and older studies on themes and methodological approaches on Habakkuk, different from this new approach see Oskar Dangel, "Habakkuk in Recent Research," *Current in Research* 9(2001):131-168.

⁶ Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York; Anchor Books, 1981), 3-8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

the “wicked” and the “righteous” in the Book.⁸ It was at a critical junction of Israel’s history that Habakkuk prophesied.⁹ Many scholars also see the time of King Jehoiakim’s reign (609-598 B.C.), as the most likely late-pre-exilic period of Habakkuk’s ministry and laments.¹⁰

This was a period of difficulties when Israel’s hope of joy and restoration was dashed following King Josiah’s loss of the battle at Megiddo as well as his life (2 Kgs 23:28-30). As if Josiah’s death was not enough, the Assyrians were not saved. Neco of Egypt also replaced Jehoahaz with Jehoiakim as the successor of Josiah, king of Judah for personal gains of tributes from the vassal. Truly Jehoiakim, the newly appointed head of the Egyptian vassal, was the complete opposite of his father Josiah who had embarked on reforms and pure worship of YHWH. Injustices and public breakdown of morality became the order of the day on Jehoiakim’s watch. He was also very corrupt and merciless in taxing his people especially the poor, in order to pay tribute to the colonialism of Egyptian empire (2 Kgs 23:33-36). Habakkuk’s contemporary, Jeremiah also indicted Jehoiakim of oppression and exploitation, especially in building his cedar place by forced labor, in the following words:

Woe to him who build his house on wrong, his terraces on injustices; who works his neighbor without pay, and gives him no wages. Who says, “I will build myself a specious house, with airy room,” who cuts out windows for it, panels it with cedar, and paints it with it vermilion (Jer 22:13-14).¹¹

⁸ Grace Ko, “The Ordering of the Twelve as Israel’s Historiography,” in *Prophets, Prophecy, and Ancient Israelite Historiography*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Lissa M. Wray Beal (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 327.

⁹ Mária Eszenyei Széles, *Wrath and Mercy: A Commentary on the Books of Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987), 3.

¹⁰ Some of these scholars include, Széles, *Wrath and Mercy*, 2-5; D. W. Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 44-45; O. P. Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990), 36-37; Charles L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 205; J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 82-84; Paul R. House, “Dramatic Coherence In Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah,” in *Forming Prophetic Literature: Essays on Isaiah and the Twelve in Honor of John D. W. Watts*, ed. James W. Watts and Paul R. House (JSOTSup 235; Sheffield: Sheffield Press, 1996), 195; K. L. Barker and W. Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (NAC 20; Nashville: Boardman & Holman, 1998), 259.

¹¹ I have drawn all my biblical citations in this study from *The Catholic Study Bible: The New American Bible*, ed. Donald Senior and John J. Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Jeremiah paid a price for this prophecy. He suffered bitterly and fled into hiding to avoid death. Jeremiah's scroll was burned (Jer 36:1-26). Those who shared his prophetic views and values were punished as well. For example, the prophet Uriah, son of Shemaiah, from Kiriath-Jearim was captured from Egypt, slaughtered and buried in a common grave because he joined Jeremiah and other pre-exilic prophets to condemn the corruption and injustices perpetuated by Jehoiakim (Jer 26:20-24). It is under this atmosphere of violence, murder, corruption, iniquity, injustices, wickedness, economic and political deprivations to Judeans that Habakkuk laments and dialogues with God concerning the mystery of such evils and the whereabouts of God's divine sovereignty (1:2-2:5).

B. Habakkuk's Laments and God's Initial Response

The questions of theodicy and divine sovereignty are of paramount importance to Habakkuk. These form the backdrop of Habakkuk's dialogue with God. It begins with the following laments:

How long O LORD? I cry for help but you do not listen! I cry out to you *violence!*" but you do not intervene. Why do you let me see *ruin*; why must I look at *misery*? *Destruction* and *violence* are before me; there is *strife*, and *clamorous discord*. This is why the law is *benumbed*, and judgment is *never rendered*: Because the wicked *circumvent* the just; this is why judgment comes forth *perverted* (Hab 1:2-4).¹²

Many scholars have found a great delight in commenting on this prayer (Hab 1:2-4).¹³ They see it as a passionate prayer of a man who is desperate. It is a form of an individual psalm of lament and complaint common in the Old Testament Theology. This type of lament often leads to God's response. This is why Claus Westermann testifies for the important role prayerful laments played in the earlier events of the exodus which resulted in the liberation of the chosen people of God (Exod 1-15).¹⁴ Hence, Habakkuk as a man of prayer

¹² I have also italicized in this quotation those things that troubled Habakkuk namely, violence, ruin, misery, destruction, strife, clamorous discord, benumbed laws, denial of justice and perverted judgment.

¹³ Anderson, *Habakkuk*, 123.

¹⁴ See details in Claus Westermann, "The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," *Interpretation* 28(1974): 20-38.

and in a traditional fashion complains that God does not intervene to save the righteous (*tsaddiq*) and punish the evil doers (cf. Jer 11:18-23; 12:1-4; 5-6; 20:7-18; Job 18-19).¹⁵

Habakkuk is clearly concerned about human and divine justice. When he looks through the window he sees violence/wrong (*chāmās*), ruin/disaster (*āven*), trouble/misery (*āmāl*), and destruction (*šōd*). He also sees strife (*rīb*) and clamorous discord (*mādōn*, vv.2-3). Consequently, the law (*tōrah*) is benumbed (*pûg*) and judgment (*mišpāt*) is never rendered while the wicked (*rāšā'*) are busy surrounding (*makîr*) the just persons (*haššddiqîm*, v. 4). This explains Habakkuk's specific questions and laments; "how long O Lord" (*'ad-ānāh 'ādōnāh*)? And why (*lāmmah*) would a loving and sovereign God remain silent or indifferent in the face of pains and injustices committed against the faithful ones? Commenting on Habakkuk's complaint (vv. 2-4), Széles rightly notices that perhaps the prophet who undergoes a crisis of faith is not doubting the ability of God to save humanity. What troubles Habakkuk, she rightly suggests, is why it has taken so long for God to respond to the voice of his cry as well the apparent success of the evil people as against the suffering and deteriorating situation of the good people of Judah.¹⁶ Of course, God's seeming indifference, which worries Habakkuk, had troubled other prophets and biblical figures in the past (Job 19:7), except that with his watchfulness (2:1-5) Habakkuk will live to embrace God's sovereignty in his divine response.

God is far from being indifferent. He responds to Habakkuk and invites him "to look over the nations and see, and be utterly amazed! For work is being done in your days that you would not have believed, were it told...." (vv.5-11). It is a mystery to Habakkuk that God announces the Chaldeans (Babylonians) as his instrument of divine justice. The prophets lamented this as acts of scary injustice (vv.2-4).¹⁷ The description of these Chaldeans must be threatening and disturbing to Habakkuk. The Chaldeans as described in the text

¹⁵ See also Harold Holmyard, "The Sovereignty of God in the Book of Job: God Used Job to Change Theology," *Testamentum Imperium* 2 (2009):1-19.

¹⁶ Széles, *Wrath and Mercy*, 17; Feinberg, *Minor Prophets*, 206.

¹⁷ The Chaldeans according to Feinberg, *Minor Prophets*, 207 "were the inhabitants

are bitter (*mar*) and unruly/impetuous people (*hoggôy nimhāar* v. 6). They are terrible (*'ayom*), dreadful (*nôra'*) and insubordinate (v.7). And “nothing keeps them in check, in either a legal or moral sense. They are also a law unto themselves, a law that knows no rules”¹⁸ Their horses are like leopards, wolves and eagles who speed to prey on food and perceived enemies (vv.7-8), causing inevitably violence (*chamas*, v.9). This “super power” is also cynical, sarcastic, and scornful to their subjects (vv. 10-11). Even though the power of God who controls national and international affairs is hidden in this mysterious announcement and description of the Babylonians (v. 6; Isa 52:15-53), this was not yet made known to Habakkuk. As a result of this hiddenness of the mystery of God, the prophets press on with further complaints against the Chaldeans. Their coming, Habakkuk believes, would bring further untold hardship to the righteous people.

Habakkuk’s language throughout the text is theologically fascinating. Like the prophetic questioning “how long O LORD” (*'ad- 'ānāh 'ādônāh*), and why? (*lāmmah*) of the earlier complaints episode (1:2-4), this time Habakkuk uses the interrogative particle. He asks, “Are you not” (*hālo'*) to indirectly highlight God’s incomparable attributes to the injustices committed by the Chaldeans. He laments again, “Are you not from eternity, O LORD, my holy God, immortal? O LORD, you have marked him for judgment, O Rock you have readied him for punishment. Too pure are your eyes to look upon evil...” (vv.12-14).

Széles observes that this periscope of laments showcase once again Habakkuk as one who is sympathetic to his community. It shows a prophet who spiritually stood his ground. It also confirms the prophet’s ethical concern and deep empathy for humanity presented in form of a personal psalm of prayer and lament.¹⁹

Combined with his empathy and compassion, Habakkuk is aware of God’s historical presence in the affairs of Israel and in that of other nations. He is not only the sovereign of all creation, but God is supposed to be holy and immortal with pure eyes who dare not admire evil (v.13). His creative acts are not limited to humankind. God is also

¹⁸ Széles, *Wrath and Mercy*, 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*22.

the maker of fishes of the sea (v.14).²⁰ Habakkuk uses this fish metaphor to further complain and portray how the “wicked” Babylonians maltreated other people and nations. They dragged and snared them in hooks and nets as fishermen would do to fishes caught for their own pleasure of nutritional and economic benefits (vv. 15-16).²¹ The prophet concludes his prophecy wondering how God could remain silent in the face of the merciless attack of the evils ones on the innocent (v.17).

Additionally, Habakkuk’s prophetic lament and dialogue with God portrays him as a man of God who in the midst of national crisis and tragedies (political, socio-economic and religious) stands on the side of the poor defending the oppressed in the market square. Habakkuk serves as an intercessor, a conduit of hope and a conscience of the people. He is not a theorist nor does he shy away from the daily events of life. His appeal and intercession are not only heard by God, but Habakkuk’s patience, endurance and personal watchfulness for God’s response is exemplary to all (2:1). His very language in verse 1 is a *cohortative* language of determination and resoluteness.²² Habakkuk reflexively says, “I will stand (*’e’emodhāh*) at my guard post (*mishemeret*), and station myself (*’etyatstsebāh*) upon the rampart/watchtower (*mātsōr*), and keep watch (*’ātsappēh*) to see what he will say to me, and what answer he will give to my complaint.” According to Andersen, this is not only a language of resolution, but of soliloquy because Habakkuk refers to God whom he is appealing to, in the third person.²³ But for Széles, the prophet’s *cohortatives*, “*I will stand or let me stand*” (*’e’emodhāh*) and “station

²⁰ See Genesis 1-2:4a and Psalm 8.

²¹ For extensive comments on this verses and fish metaphor see Széles, *Wrath and Mercy*, 27-28; Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, 104 and Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 189-190.

²² For non-expert readers “*cohortative*” in biblical Hebrew grammar is volitional verbal conjugation or imperfect used in an indirect imperatival sense to express a wish, request, or command either in the first persons singular or plural (1cs/1cp). For further basic examples see, Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1971), 118-122 and Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew: Grammar* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 218-218.

²³ Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 191.

myself” (*'etyatstsebāh*) rather expresses the swelling of the prophet’s emotion, his perplexity, bewilderment and prayerful request.²⁴

In addition, the two nouns: guard post (*mishemeret*) and the rampart/watchtower (*mātsōr*) are also subjects of attraction to scholars who seek to highlight the unique role Habakkuk plays and his choice of words in arguing with God on behalf of his suffering people. Many think that *mishemeret* and *mātsōr* are the same because of their seeming euphonic resemblance or parallelism.²⁵ Roberts in particular sees a certain ambiguity in the entire verse that has these two words which make it difficult for one to decipher if the terms are metaphorically referring to a specific waiting place of the prophet for God’s oracle or the process of waiting.²⁶

However, Aron Pinker argues that *matzor* in particular, is a corruption of *mitzpeh* found in the prophecy of Isaiah 21:8 which reads, “And I cried as a lion [*aryeh*] upon the watch-tower [*mitzpeh*], O Lord, I stand continually in the daytime, and I am set in my ward all the nights.”²⁷ Earlier on in Isaiah 21:6 the “watchman” was called *metzapeh* and he would keep watch (*etzpeh*) on his duty post. Thus, Pinker affirms that the occurrence of *matzor* in Habakkuk 2:1 is not just for orthographic changes to *atzapeh* (watch) by a redactor but perhaps for theological and metaphorical reasons. Habakkuk requires a *metzapeh* (watchman) and a *mitzpeh* (watchtower/rampart).²⁸

The grammatical analysis of this ambiguous verse notwithstanding, there are antecedent theological episodes in the scriptures where prophets and human servants called by God retreat in solitude in order to discern the will of God (cf. Exod 33:21; Num 23:3; 24:1; 1 Kings 19:11; Mic 4:14; Ezek 3:17-18; 33:7-8).²⁹ Habakkuk would not be an exception. Hence, I consider credible Széles’ suggestion that following the prophet’s dialogue and laments before God Habakkuk must have withdrawn to a certain place or

²⁴ Széles, *Wrath and Mercy*, 28.

²⁵ See Aron Pinker, “A Reconstruction of Matzor Habakkuk 2:1,” in *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 31(2003):161-163 for some of these thoughts.

²⁶ Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, 108.

²⁷ Pinker, “Reconstruction of Matzor,” 164.

²⁸ For the rest of the details see Pinker, “Reconstruction of Matzor,” 164-165.

²⁹ Széles, *Wrath and Mercy*, 29.

room where he awaited God's response. Again this could also have been a sort of withdrawal into inner self for contemplation, prayers and reflection while awaiting divine response.³⁰

C. God's Un-relented Response

Habakkuk's complaints, laments, persistence and watchfulness (2:1), of course, lead to two significant phenomena. First is God's response (vv.2-5). Second, it sheds light on the role or the place of his prophecy in the list of the Twelve Minor Prophets.³¹ We will return to the first phenomenon, God's additional response to Habakkuk. Let's begin with the second. Arguing for the second phenomenon, Grace Ko observes that the seventh position where Habakkuk is placed among the Twelve speaks for the challenges and the unique role Habakkuk played on behalf of his people.³² By standing on the side of his people Habakkuk proves himself as a unique spokesman, an intercessor and a messenger. Unlike Israel's other prophets who usually justify divine acts by accusing and listing people's sins with condemnation, Habakkuk rather challenges God's choice for selecting the Chaldeans as his divine instrument to judge Judah.

Moreover, Ko suggests, this is why Habakkuk is placed at the nadir of the narrative schema of the Twelve to tidy up from a humanistic or existential perspective the "theodic protest" of the righteous.³³ In other words, this is "why bad things happened to good people," during the terrible period of Israel's history.

Returning to the first mentioned phenomenon, however, it is evident in the narrative that while Habakkuk waits, watches in protest, God's response is revealed in the following vision (*hāzôn*):

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ In the MT order we have Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk (the 7th), Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, while Hosea, Amos, Micah, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk (still the 7th), Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi ordering occupies the LXX arrangement.

³² Ko, "Ordering of the Twelve," 326.

³³ Ko, "Ordering of the Twelve," 329. See also Walter Brueggemann, "Some Aspects of Theodicy in Old Testament Faith," PRst 26 (1999):253-268 where the "theodicy protest" particularly refers to human protest against for not executing divine justice according to those promises made during his covenants with Israel.

Then the LORD answered me and said; write down the vision clearly upon the tablets, so that one can read it readily. For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfilment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late. The rash man has no integrity, but the just man, because of his faith shall live...He who opens with his throat like the neither world, and is insatiable as death, who gathers to himself all the nations and rallies to himself all the peoples (vv.2-5).

It is a significant vision. Habakkuk is not only required in this passage to memorize God's assured answer (*'anah*) but to write (*katabh*) them down clearly on a tablet (*luah*) for easy reading and perhaps for wider and universal publicity (cf. Isa 30:8). The vision is of course a clear witness to the handiworks of God in salvation history (*heilsgeschichte*). It is equally imperative to write it down since its fulfilment shall come to pass in the nearest future. God's promise does not fail (vv. 2-3).³⁴

The unfailing promise contained in this vision (*ḥāzôn*) is the center piece and the heart of the entire prophecy of Habakkuk, namely that the righteous (*tsaddiq*) because of his or her faith (*'ēmûnāh*) will live but the proud, the "puffed up" and the faithless (*'uppelāh*) will perish since they have no integrity nor are they upright (*yāshār*, vv.4-5). John J. Collins describes it as "the most famous utterance of Habakkuk."³⁵ The last two concepts (*yāshār* and *'uppelāh*) evidently are used in a moral sense. Puffing up (*'uppelāh*) and not being upright (*yāshār*) bring judgment and God's punishment as was finally the case with the Babylonians.³⁶

In contrast to the faithless and the proud Babylonians, the righteous (*tsaddiq*), the "devout" finds in the reliability or trustworthiness (*'ēmûnāh*) of this vision the strength and energy to persevere in life's vicissitude. In other words, *'ēmûnāh* in this passage communicates faith, firmness, steadfastness, fidelity, trust, reliability and faithfulness of a righteous person that the plan of God will surely come to pass.³⁷

³⁴ Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, 110

³⁵ John J. Collins, "Daniel and the Minor Prophets," in *The Catholic Study Bible, New American Bible*, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Reading Guide, 362.

³⁶ See Széles, *Wrath and Mercy*, 31 for detailed analysis of these concepts.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 32-33, Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, 111.

If I may reiterate, Habakkuk's concept of faith is deeply rooted in past covenant and prophetic traditions (Gen 15:5-6; 22:1-2; Isa 7:9). These traditions are in turn widely adapted and reinterpreted in the New Testament by Paul and by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11 and Heb 10:37-39). Paul delights in Habakkuk. He uses Habakkuk in a new context to expand his message on justification by faith. Faith for Paul means believing in Jesus Christ Son of God, and the Savior of the world. For Paul, Christians are called to live by faith by believing in Jesus and experiencing a new in Christ Jesus. Habakkuk's understanding of faith in his pre-exilic time is similar to Isaiah's who had instructed Ahaz, "Unless your faith is firm you shall not be firm" (Isa 7:9). In Habakkuk's spirituality faith is "trusting confidence in God who will surely fulfil his promises and bring about his plan."³⁸ The language of Habakkuk continues to shed light on his theology. This time, the *Qal imperfect* in Habakkuk prophecy, the righteous "shall live" (*yihyeh*) refers to the life of a wise believer in the interim between the vision and its fulfilment. It is a call to perseverance, courage and fortitude in the face of tragedies with eschatological patience and joy that only the certainty of God's coming could give to the righteous. But as to the proud, faint hearted and the wicked who rely on their human power and temporary wealth, sheol and death is their final destination (v.5) This is unequivocally conveyed in the ensuing five woe-oracles against the wicked (2:6-19).

D. Five Woe Oracles (*hōy*)

The set of five woes in Habakkuk points clearly to the sovereign God who responds to Habakkuk's prayer. This chain of woes includes: woe to the person who stores up what is not his or hers (vv.6-8), woe to those who built their houses on ill-gotten goods (vv.9-11), woe to those who build their cities on bloodshed (vv.12-14), woe to those who abused drinks and the dignity of their neighbors (vv.15-17) and woe to those who worship stones and woods (vv.18-20).

³⁸ Thomas L. Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets; Their Stories, Sayings, and Scrolls* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 231.

This type of woe formula (*hōy*) was not restricted to Habakkuk. Several of Israel's prophets contextually employed this formula in various and varied circumstances to articulate their experienced forms of misfortunes, particularly their indictments against Israel's and YHWH's enemies. This has been acknowledged by several scholars, especially the very question of the origins of the formula.³⁹

In the case of Habakkuk, even though the recipients of these oracles are not specifically mentioned, it is evident that Habakkuk in the first woe (*hōy*) is referring to the nations, as well as to the greedy Chaldeans who plundered them. In this section, those who grab power, treasure and material things to the detriment of the poor may not always have the last say. This is true in the very language of the indictment, namely, "Woe to him who stores up what is not his; how long can it last!" (v.6). This judgment speech echoes the initial question of the "how long" of the opening prayer of Habakkuk (1:2). Here, the wicked are not only taunted. The prophet is assured that after the wicked might have reached a certain point in their plundering, loading of debts, encouraging pledging and taking hostages (*'abtî*) of the righteous, his creditors and victims will triumphantly turn against him.⁴⁰ The wicked will in turn become the creditors' prey (vv. 7-8).⁴¹

The second woe (vv.9-11) is as a result of the Chaldeans' pursuit of evil and unjust gains (*betsa'*), exclusively for their household (*beth*). In this context, household (*bet*), clearly points to home and

³⁹ For instance, Erhard Gerstenberger in his work, "The Woe-Oracles of the Prophets," *JBL* 81(1962):249-263 argues that the woe-oracle is form of speech deployed by Hebrew Prophets to express indictment. As a wisdom saying, its origin is traceable to wise men's reflection about the vicissitude of life in the world. Claus Westermann in his *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, trans. H. C. White (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 190-194 sees the woe-oracles as a curses. While R. J. Clifford in "The Use of Hōy in the Prophets," *CBQ* 28(1966):458-464 traces it to the context of laments over dead. But I want to believe that woe-oracle were used in various occasions especially in the context of misfortunes and injustices done to the faithful. This is evident in Habakkuk. See also Michael Ufok Udoekpo, *Rethinking the Day of YHWH and Restoration of Fortunes in the Prophet Zephaniah: An Exegetical and Theological Study of 1:14-18; 3:14-20*, *Das Alte Testament im Dialog*, vol. 2 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 203.

⁴⁰ Some scholars particularly Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 117-18 has curiously observe the use of *māshāl* (saying, wisdom saying, figurative prophetic discourse) and (*'abtî*) in verse 6 as clearly a taunt language which compares the woes that will in turn face the wicked Babylonians (cf. Isa 14:4-23).

⁴¹ See also Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 235-237; Széles, *Wrath and Mercy*, 36-37 for additional comments on these verses.

family interest as against the common good. While the first woe addresses ill-gotten goods by means of plundering, the second woe addresses selfishness in extortion for the sake of personal family security of the Babylonians dynasties. By doing this, they have brought God's retribution and shame upon themselves. They will never gain security by threatening and burgling others' stones and woods in order to build their houses. Interestingly, the stolen material components (stones, sands and woods) of the building will not only fight against each other, they will call out its builders (v.11).

The third woe (vv. 12-14) is further directed against the wicked who build their cities from the bloody booties gained from warring and exploitation of weaker nations (v. 12). This presents another irony. By doing this, they are toiling for the flame of God's punishment who is the sovereign of all creation. This is why Habakkuk rhetorically asks, "Is not this from the LORD of host, people toils for the flame, and nations grow weary for nought" (v.13). Various interpretations have been given to this verse: (a) it is seen to mean that Babylonian oppressions of other nations was the handiwork or God to punish them for their sins (cf. Isa 10:5-6). (b) It could also be interpreted as an echo of Psalm 127:1-2 which says, "If Yahweh does not build the house, its builder's labor in vain on it. If Yahweh does not guard a city, the guard watches in vain."⁴² Either way, for me it points to the glory of the Lord, which is reflected in his creation and to the evidence of his divine power since he "keeps his finger on the pulse of history and direct all things in his sovereign style."⁴³ Commenting on this *hōy* (vv. 12-14) with emphasis on the sovereignty of God, Charles L. Feinberg writes, "of old a kingdom had been set up in Babylon to usurp power and glory (Gen 10:10), but it must pass away and be replaced by God's kingdom and his glory (Rev 11:15)."⁴⁴

In the fourth woe-oracle (vv.15-17) the oppressors in Babylon are metaphorically indicted as those who intoxicate their neighbors with the drink of their wrath while exploiting their nakedness (v.15; cf. Jer

⁴² Cf. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, 122 for details.

⁴³ Széles, *Wrath and Mercy*, 41.

⁴⁴ Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, 214.

51:7). In their human thinking this is a glorious exercise, especially the abuse of power. But the irony here is that the sovereign God, a true king (cf. Jer 22:15-16) will divinely bring shame on the oppressors. He will reverse the fortunes of their victims, including the Lebanese, whose nakedness and forest were violently exploited and mercilessly deforested (vv.16-17; cf. Isa 14:8).

The final woe (vv. 18-20) addresses idolatry in forms of worship of stones, woods and other gods rather than YHWH. The prophets indict, “Woe to him who says to the wood, “Awake!” to dumb stone “Arise!”...Of what avail is the carved image that its maker should carve it? Or the molten image and lying oracle that its very maker should trust in it, and make dumb idols? (vv. 18-19). Clearly, the defense of God as the ruler and sovereign of all creation resounds in Habakkuk’s rhetorical questions. For him, God remains enthroned in his holy temple. And the entire universe must remain silent and respectful to the Almighty God who has not deserted his people, in spite of the invasion of the Babylonians (v.20; Zeph 1:7). He is never indifferent. God has a plan. While waiting for God’s plan the righteous must persevere in faith and worship. This plan of the sovereign God is in full-blown poetic display in Chapter 3, to which we now turn.

E. Sovereignty of God in Habakkuk

In addition to the image of God as the ruler and sovereign of all creation, seen particularly in the preceding chapters of debates, promises (1-2:5) and woes (2:6-20), the central theophanic image of God in the poetic prayer of Habakkuk (3:1-19), is that of a Divine Warrior. The prophet’s prayer (*tʿpillāh*) begins with “O LORD, I have heard your renown, and feared O LORD your work...in your wrath remember our compassion”(v.2). In this prayer, Habakkuk recalls past manifestation of God’s power and acts of sovereignty. He prays that God performs today the deeds and wonders for which he was famous in the past. This is followed by Habakkuk’s reports of God’s response in which he sees in a vision (*hazon*) God’s image of a Divine Warrior coming from Teman and Mount Paran (v.3).

Many scholars have generally agreed that, rooted in ancient Israel’s historical antecedent (Exod 15; Judg 5), Habakkuk sees the

LORD coming from the territories of Sinai Peninsula, heading northward, and crossing over the territory of Edom to Judah.⁴⁵ God's appearance in verse 4 is as bright and dazzling (*nōgah*) as the light of the sun (ʾôr). God's radiance overpowers human visibility since it burst out in rays (*garnayîm*) from his hands (*miyyadô*). These are symbols of power and majesty. God cannot be described in human language either in his being or in his might. God can only be experienced.⁴⁶ In the Lord's envoy are pestilence and plague (v. 5). In the Exodus story, plague and pestilence are weapons used by God to punish his enemies (Exod 5:3; 9:7, 15). Habakkuk's vision rather personifies these phenomena which refer back even to the demonic forces in the Ancient Canaanite culture and religion that brought sufferings to humanity. In Habakkuk's theology, these demons and plagues are inferior to God who only uses them as his instrument to punish the wicked.⁴⁷ God has dominion over pestilence and plagues of all types. God's dominion or majesty is not only limited to diseases, plagues, tsunamis, sandy (s) and typhoons, his very presence causes the earth to convulse and nations to tremble:

He pauses to survey the earth; his looks make the nations tremble. The eternal mountains are shattered, the age-old hills bow low along his ancient ways. I see the tents of Cushan collapse; trembling are the pavilions of the land of Midian. Is your anger against the stream, O LORD? Is your wrath against the streams, your rage against the sea, that you drive the steeds of your victorious chariot (vv. 6-8; cf.10-11)?

This passage further concretely presents God as a military general in battle taking his stance, surveying and directing his troops in the battle field, as a good field Marshall. His enemies of course are trembling and terrified at the sight of his power and manifestation of divine sovereignty. This motif of divine sovereignty found in Habakkuk is common in biblical times as well as among people of ancient cultures (Exod 15:14-16; Deut 33; Judges 5:4-5).⁴⁸ It is also prominent among the prophetic traditions, particularly the Twelve of

⁴⁵ For further study on the location of Teman and Paran see Széles, *Wrath and Mercy*, 46; Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, 151-152.

⁴⁶ Széles, *Mercy and Wrath*, 47.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁸ Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, 154.

which Habakkuk forms a part.⁴⁹ For example, Elijah sees the God of Israel as the ruler of all nations (1 Kings 19:15; 2 Kings 8:13-15). Isaiah, a prophet of Zion prophesied that all nations will come to Zion to be instructed and directed by the Lord (Isa 2:2-4). Isaiah sees Assyria as God's instrument to teach Israel and Judah a lesson (Isa 7:18-20; 10:5) and demonstrates the sovereignty of God over nations through his series of judgment (Isa 13–23). Jeremiah in his part addressed God as the King of all the nations (Jer 10:7).

In the Twelve, of which Habakkuk is a part, there is a general and unified theological emphasis on the rapport that exists between God and his people, Israel. The events of the fall of the Samaria (722B.C) and Judah (586/7B.C) for instance, are interpreted by the prophets in the eyes God's covenant with Israel. Israel had broken the covenant, hence the exiles. God's judgment and deliverance reveals God as the sovereign of all nations and creation.⁵⁰ Additionally, Hosea with his metaphor of marriage with Gomer reminds Israel of God's sense of judgment and punishment to sinner. But he also stresses divine compassion, love, mercy, kindness and restoration (Exod 34:6-7; Ps103; 145:8; Neh 9:17; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).

In condemning injustice and worship without ethics, the prophet Amos pronounced YHWH as the roaring Lion from Judah (1:2), as well as his universal judgment against surrounding kingdoms (1:3–2:3). For Micah, all nations will come to Zion (Mic 4:1-3). This sense of the Lion of Judah and the sovereign of all nations and creations also dominate the theology of Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Zephaniah (1–3) and Zechariah (14:9). Thus, the purpose of the prophetic messages in the Twelve is not only to remind Israel of the need to keep the covenant which God established with them, but also to remind them of the wonders of God in creation; the waters and the seas. For example, in liberating Israel, God divided and took control of all nations and situations in the Red Sea and at the Jordan River (Exod 7–12; 15–18). In Habakkuk God has done it again (v. 8, 15).

⁴⁹ For some of the recent authors who have realized the need to study the Twelve Minor Prophet, including Habakkuk as unified whole especially with regard to their theological themes see: James D. Nogalski and Marvin A. Sweeney, eds."Preface" *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve*, Symposium Series 15 (Atlanta: SBL, 2000), vii-viii.

⁵⁰ Ko, "Ordering of the Twelve," 331.

Habakkuk's continuous vision is filled with military imagery such as horses and chariot, bow and quiver, shelter, flying arrows and flashing spear (vv.9-11). While the following actual military expedition and divine mission occurs to the prophet, Habakkuk acknowledges and says to God:

You come forth to save your people, to save your anointed one. You crush the heads of the wicked, you lay bare their bases at the neck. You pierce with your shafts the head of their princes whose boasts would be of devouring the wretched in their lair. You tread the sea with your steeds amid the churning of the deep waters (vv. 13-15).

Clearly, this theophonic-divine control, dominion and majesty not only strengthen Habakkuk's faith, but his reaction is that of a joyful and righteous person persevering in faith in the midst of calamities and life's challenges (vv.16-19). Habakkuk is quite different from other prophets especially the Twelve. Habakkuk is patient. He is human and gives a voice to the suffering faithful of Judah. He is ready to wait for the day when distress will descend upon those who attack Judah (v.16). Instead of acting like God's mouthpiece in judging and condemning, like others, he chose to employ the form of a song and lament in order to question God's sense of justice and theodicy. The prayer ends with an expression of hope, calls to trust, faith and confidence in the sovereign God that echoes the messages of the preceding chapters and verses, especially Habakkuk 2:3-4. Here the prophet and the righteous are encouraged to live by faith between the time of the vision (*hazon*) and the time of fulfilment. Habakkuk and the righteous must rely on the only sovereign God who saves and strengthens his faithful (vv.18-19).

In sum, and prior to this, God has the ability to control nations and put them to work (1:6). He is the creator of all creation and has control over them (1:14-16). God can also undo the works of pseudo and earthly kings and kingdoms and brings them woes (2:6-19). He keeps his covenant with the house of David, in spite of its national crisis (3:13). With this Habakkuk becomes an embodiment of divine message of faith, endurance and hope as well as a paradigm for all those who suffer and the righteous of all contexts and cultures to imitate.

F. Habakkuk: A Paradigm for the Suffering Righteous Today

Habakkuk's determination in trusting God demonstrates to the Judean community that it is possible to live faithfully in times of atrocities, hardships, sufferings and troubles. This, I believe has much to offer us today in one way or the other. In his recent book, *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)* Pope Francis exhorts that the great danger in today's world is that of consumerism as a result of covetousness, pursuit of frivolous pleasure and a blunted conscience.⁵¹ I also agree with Francis that "whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor."⁵² Very few will disagree that the political, social and economic rivalries which have plagued the globe today, and members of the United Nations, are selfishly motivated. These selfish pursuits, like in the case of the Chaldeans, often result in wars, terrorism, injustices, oppressions, conflicts, divisions, and misunderstanding causing untold hardship and sufferings particular to the poor and the weak, who are often excluded, ignored, plundered and exploited since the time of Habakkuk (2:6-19).

The pains of this exclusion and exploitation are often beyond human control except with Habakkuk's God who uses humans as his instrument to alleviate pain and suffering and restore fortunes, at his appointed time and terms. Fittingly, Francis again appeals to scriptures and calls on the Church and Christians of every community to play God's instrument in liberating and including the poor in the socio-economic and political fabrics of the society, in terms of welfare projects, employment, and minimum wage and income redistribution.⁵³ However, while waiting for God's time through his instruments the poor, the weak, the unemployed, exploited and the homeless, the plundered must imitate the patience and faith of Habakkuk that the sovereign God is ever present with the righteous (2:4).

⁵¹ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium Apostolic Exhortation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 2013), n.2.

⁵² *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 2.

⁵³ *Evangelii Gaudium*, ns.187-216

Loss of loved ones and sudden illnesses are also sources of great stress and pains that afflict everyone, the poor and the rich alike. What about the violence in our society especially of those that are structured and organized? What about the victims of those shootings in our nations' class rooms, worship spaces, shopping centers and movie theatres? Recent earthquakes, tsunamis, sandy (s), hurricanes, storms and typhoons, as well as financial and business failures are also sources of great pains and sufferings to the righteous. In all these, Habakkuk's lament framework (1:2–2:5), its theology of theodicy (1:5-11; 2:6-19) and message for the righteous to persevere in faith (2:4) with song of hope in a Divine Warrior (3:3-19) serve as a paradigm for all the suffering righteous today.

Conclusion

This study set out to theologically examine the sovereignty of God in Habakkuk. It addresses the faithfulness (*'ēmûnāh* 2:4) of the righteous (*tsaddiq*) in times of troubles, and sheds light on the ugly truth that Judah has embraced idolatry and internalized injustices. As shown in the study, it troubles Habakkuk that a good, holy and sovereign God would use the enemy Chaldeans to punish or judge Judah. But the irony is that, in Habakkuk's troubles and dissatisfaction lies his theology of the sovereignty of God. He portrays God as directing all nations. But as for the decision to use the Chaldeans, Habakkuk initially thinks such divine choice would double-down the community's sufferings, hence, and sees it as evil. His human thoughts and views separate him from the preceding prophets and from the rest of the Twelve. Habakkuk clearly gives a human voice and a pragmatic complaint to God on behalf of the suffering righteous during his nation's crisis. It was of course, a crisis intensified and mingled with practice of idolatry spearheaded by King Jehoiakim, after the death of his father, King Josiah. Habakkuk confronts this "problem of evil" squarely and searches indefatigably for the proof that God is still the sovereign of all creation.

In his search, Habakkuk laments, debates and complains to God (Hab 1:2-4). Habakkuk thinks that God is indifferent. Of course God is never indifferent. To prove this, God invites Habakkuk to look over the nations and see the amazing works of God (vv.5-11). After

looking Habakkuk is not satisfied. He persists, keeps watch and asks God for a divine response to the merciless attack of the enemy on the righteous (vv.12-17). This makes Habakkuk a man of prayer, an intercessor, a messenger and a champion of his people, who are faced with national crisis.

Habakkuk's perseverance pays off. God responds to him in a vision (*hāzôn*), that the righteous (*tsaddiq*) because of his faith (*'ēmūnāh*) will live, but the proud, the "puffed up" and the faithless (*'uppelāh*) will perish, since they have no integrity nor are they upright (*yāshār*, vv.4-5). This divine response is the key to appreciating the enduring theology of divine sovereignty in Habakkuk, rooted in earlier biblical and prophetic traditions.

This foundational divine sovereignty is further demonstrated as discussed in the five set of punishments or woes to those who stored up what was not theirs (vv.6-8), built homes and houses with ill-gotten money (vv.9-11), built their cities on bloodshed (vv.12-14), abused drinks the dignity of their weak neighbors (vv.15-17) as well as practiced of idolatries (vv. 18-20). The final hymn or prayer of Habakkuk heightens this image of a sovereign God as a divine warrior and divine field marshal (3:1-19).

In other words, Habakkuk has come to realize the hiddenness and the mysterious vision of God which is beyond human comprehension. Why bad things happen to good people is a mystery! The answer is left for God, who has the ability to control nations and put them to work (1:6). He controls creation (1:14-16) as well as undoes the works of *pseudo* kings and kingdoms (2:6-19). God will ever keep his covenant with the house of David (3:13).

Finally, Habakkuk's theology of theodicy has much to offer us today, especially when confronted with injustices, economic and financial burdens or illnesses, structural and organizational violence. Habakkuk teaches us how to endure when we feel the pains of the loss of our loved ones, wars, terrorism, troubles, misunderstandings, rifts and natural disasters. This makes Habakkuk an embodiment of divine messages of faith in the face of difficulties (2:4), patience, endurance and hope in a sovereign and mysterious God. Habakkuk remains a paradigm for all the suffering righteous of all contexts and cultures today.

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