

HABAKKUK



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The book of Habakkuk is an example of prediction in the name of the Lord, the God to whom weal and woe are attributed in the Hebrew Bible. The explicit matrix of the predictive performance is an I-thou relationship of prophet and said God. The persona of the prophet is not however that of a lone individual. He represents a nation. Indeed, the prophet casts himself as a citizen of the world. Vis-à-vis the world he experiences, vis-à-vis the God in whom he trusts, he complains. His complaint resembles a lover's complaint; the ensuing dynamic is likewise comparable. Remonstrance leads to escalation; escalation leads to waiting; waiting leads to more waiting.

Habakkuk is still waiting at book's end. Nonetheless, his waiting is pregnant with hope. Within and beyond his lifetime, in line with the predictions vouchsafed to him, the Lord escalates the violence around him to a double conclusion: first Judah is destroyed, and

then her destroyer, the Babylonian war machine, is cut off forever. The book of Habakkuk was recopied and became part of the national literature of the Israelite people because the predictions attributed therein to the nation's patron deity came to pass. To be sure, after Habakkuk and contemporaries passed away, not before, Babylon fell. Only then was it possible for Habakkuk's people to know that a prophet had been in their midst.

No one knows what the future holds. Precisely for that reason, media outlets offer predictions as news, and columnists, no matter how often their predictions turn out to be wrong, confidently make more predictions. People are attracted to predictions that confirm their hopes and fears. Whether the predictions come true is of less consequence than one might suppose. Predictions generate more interest than facts. The predictions of the book of Habakkuk, on the other hand, were not designed to match expectations. Their

worth is meant to lie in their truth value alone.

To this day prediction in the sense of wish projection is typical of political and religious rhetoric. As noted, the media also qualify as a towering locus of prediction in today's world. Like Pinocchio's nose, of the making of prognoses there is no end. On the bright side, there is no reason to believe that augurs and sellers of snake oil were less ubiquitous in antiquity.

What distinguishes those strands of the religion of Israel which came to be preserved in the Hebrew Bible from the norm, say, in ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Israel itself, is the insistence on setting a mediating conception of justice and truth at the base of the predictive enterprise, an insistence that privileged interpersonal techniques of prediction over mechanical techniques. The inspection of entrails and the flight of birds has no place in biblical faith. The selfsame Urim and Thummim, though

mentioned, have little “air time” in biblical literature.

It is not about reading tea leaves in the Bible. The predictive word of the sole deity of interest is given without exception interpersonally, in an I-thou relationship; the deity’s identity, and the identity of the prophet, are always at stake. The political, for this God, is personal, and the personal is political.

Drawing straws makes more sense than predicting when and how an empire or person will bite the dust. An empire, nation, or person may circle the drain, after all, for a very long time. All the same, prediction is an ineluctable human need. The prophets met that need by predictive performance in the name of the Lord, agent extraordinaire of truth and justice, obstreperous meddler in the affairs of this world, on which basis they sought to divine cause and effect.

Common Misunderstandings

It is false to think of the book of Habakkuk as sentimental literature. It is not, as one commentator put it, “an intensely personal testament.” The personal, as already noted, is political in the book of Habakkuk. We know nothing about Habakkuk beyond what he reveals to us in the stylized language of the religious and political tradition to which he adhered.

It is false to think that prophecy is about forthtelling (assertion of divine will), not foretelling. Prediction is essential to prophecy. If the foretelling is inaccurate, the forthtelling associated with it is deprived of cogency.

Contrary to a standard misapprehension, the book of Habakkuk is not about theodicy. It concerns the justification of humanity before God, not the justification of God before humanity. The question of God’s justice is raised in Habakkuk (1:2-4, 12-17)—in service, however, not of apologetics, but of in-

tercession. Habakkuk's question is closer to that of Luther: "How can I get a God of mercy?" (note Hab 3:2). The book is an object lesson with the following content: faced with injustice the way to maintain a right relationship with God is to reprove and contest, wait and watch, and rely on the divine word of promise.

Justification, the assurance of a right relationship with supreme justice, is according to the book of Habakkuk a gift of faith, faith that is both *fides qua* (content-oriented) and *fides quae* (I-thou). From beginning to end, in plaint and prayer and praise, the attitude Habakkuk embodies is 'ěmûnâ, faithfulness to the Lord's word.

The prophet is encouraged by the Thou who addresses him. He is animated by trust in the Lord, the essence of faith according to Genesis 15:6: "He put his trust in the LORD, and he reckoned it to his merit" (NJPS)—merit in the sense of possessing "righteousness," positive standing in the eyes of God. As Habak-

kuk has it, “the righteous person lives by his *’ēmûnâ* [reliance on the LORD] (Hab 2:4b).

If the book of Habakkuk is any guide, nothing is more genuine than putting God on trial from a position of faith. God is either benevolent or he is not. If he is, he should be called to account when he appears not to be. The “whys” that recur on the lips of believers in the psalms, the prophets, and on the lips of Job do not stand in tension to belief but are an expression of belief.

Prophecy and faith are about more than a “personal relationship.” Prophecy and faith are about embodied political experience, in the following sense. The point of departure of Habakkuk’s complaint is that he resides in a “city” he cannot approve of; his God interfaces with the polis and ultimately governs it, but is not identical to it. The metaphysical dualism of this stance over against God and the world is connatural to Habakkuk’s worldview. A source of perennial dissatisfaction, it nonetheless

beats its rival, metaphysical monism, hands down. The latter ends in resignation; the former, in re-signification.

Predictive words from the side of the Lord are what a prophet of the Lord was expected to mediate. The old chestnut, that a biblical prophet was someone who spoke on behalf of deity rather than someone who foretold the future, is a conceit invented by apologists.

Pathologists predict outcomes. Were a pathologist to do nothing more than address an illness on the basis of shared assumptions and shared goals—say, that health is a matter of physical processes the goal being to ameliorate them so as to improve health—no one would take her seriously. On the other hand, if there is reason to believe that a pathologist capably predicts future outcomes, if nothing else because she practices a profession with a proven track record, we also credit the diagnosis she offers.

The same is true of forecasts presented as divine revelation, with the

proviso that the “proven track record” part is open to doubt. One might well take a wait-and-see approach to a forecast provided by a deity through the offices of a prophet. A wait-and-see approach to prophetic forecasts was practiced in antiquity by prophets themselves. The example of Ezekiel is telling. He records a forecast of doom he received from a deity, preserves it though it did not pan out, and records a new and improved forecast of doom from the same deity. The new forecast likewise failed to come to pass. It was preserved for posterity nonetheless (Ezek 26:7-21; 29:17-20).

A deity through the offices of a prophet forecasted the future. If a deity made a forecast that failed to come to pass, the diagnosis behind the forecast might retain paradigmatic value.

The Book’s Content and Author

In words mediated by an otherwise unknown prophet named Habakkuk

(1:1; 3:1), a deity foretells doom, first, on the society and world of those whom he addresses (1:5-11); then, on the agent of doom (2:2-17). The divinity is portrayed as responding to Habakkuk's reproof and resolve to wait for a positive reply (1:2-4, 12-17; 2:1). Following the prophecy of doom on the instrument of doom (2:2-17), a fierce polemic against the objects to which many turned in a time of crisis (2:18-19) and a call for universal acknowledgement of the Lord in his temple (2:20) conclude the first part of the book. A prayer for deliverance designed for recitation in the temple follows (3:1, 2-19a, 19b). The prayer recalls the Lord's past prowess in wreaking havoc on the forces of chaos. In the moment of prayer, exactly nothing changes in the circumstances of the one who prays. It is understood that the status quo will get worse before it gets better. Nonetheless, the status quo is inscribed in a horizon of hope. Despair gives way to confidence.

The forecast of doom on the instrument of doom takes the following shape: The Lord predicts the world oppressor's downfall, prefaced by a command to write the prediction down and await its fulfillment (2:2-3, 4-17). The oppressor is guilty of crimes against humanity. The wheels of justice may turn slowly, but they *will* turn, and they will grind to a fine dust. The deity who promises retribution contrasts favorably with the "mute and powerless" gods of human fabrication (2:18-19). In response to the announcement of reversal to come, the suffering world is summoned to reverent silence (2:20).

The book's structure is clear. Superscripts (1:1; 3:1) and a postscript (3:19b) delimit its parts. A turning point in the back-and-forth between the intercessor and his God comes at 2:3-4. Verses 3-4 of ch. 2 are the narrative's pivot. It comes as no surprise that precisely these verses have had an enormous impact on the traditions of faith

for which the Bible is the foundational resource.

Habakkuk 2:3's language of expectation is reprised in Jewish tradition in connection with the coming of the Messiah: "If he tarries, wait for him, for he will surely come, he will not delay." When systems crash and power reveals its sordid face, the need to wait for Messiah's coming is understood to be greater than ever.

The faith of which 2:4 speaks is reprised in Christianity in terms of belief in the God who revealed his righteousness in Jesus and raised him from the dead: "the righteous person will live by faith." Faith on this understanding is counted as righteousness by the one who justifies the ungodly (Rom 4:3-5; cf. Gen 15:6).

The faith of which 2:4 speaks is construed in Judaism as faithfulness to God's Torah in the sense of rules of behavior affecting all aspects of life: "the righteous person will be rewarded

with life for his fidelity.” Faithfulness to Torah is the obligation that sums up everything to which a Jew is committed (*b. Mak. 23b*).

We know nothing about Habakkuk except that he was a prophet to whom the words of the book named after him are attributed. That is more than enough. The “I” who speaks is possessed of a faith that dares to both trust in God and challenge God. The God who responds to Habakkuk describes a future that will get worse before it gets better. But the hunter *will* become the hunted. The wheels of justice *will* turn. Deliverance *will* arrive.

From beginning to end the book of Habakkuk describes scenes of violence. Violence calls forth violence. Agents of destruction vary. The smashing of skulls is constant. The ultimate avenger to whom the book attends, the terminator, is the God whom the prophet addresses. No Age of Aquarius is promised; no pie in the sky. The grasp of history the book encapsulates is realis-

tic. It is not imbued with feckless optimism of the kind that infects the bulk of human thought.

The Shape of History

The book of Habakkuk survived the ravages of time because its predictions correspond to a particular sequence of events: the unfolding expansion and subsequent destruction of a world power, Babylon; the decimation and subsequent revival of a people who cultivated faith in the deity who speaks in the book. The people who preserved the book for posterity is that people for whom “Hear O Israel! The LORD is our God; the LORD alone” (Deut 6:4) generates identity. Not personal, but interpersonal identity.

History according to the book is that place where violence abounds, a positive violent end to violence included. An early Christian named Paul saw matters similarly: precisely where sin increased, grace super-

abounded (Rom 5:20). The present, insofar as it continues the past, is like it: where sin abounds, precisely there grace superabounds. In a nutshell, that is the book of Habakkuk's take on history.

A philosopher who lived in the incumbent shadow of the Shoah (Holocaust), Walter Benjamin, also sought to capture the flow of history. Here is Benjamin's "Thesis IX" from *On the Concept of History* (1940):

My wing is poised to beat,
I would gladly turn back;
though if I stayed for endless days,
hapless I would remain.

—Gerhard Scholem

Greetings from Angelus

There is a painting by Klee entitled *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted who looks as if he were about to distance himself from something which startles him. His eyes are peeled, his mouth hangs open, his wings are spread.

This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. What appears to us as a chain of events he sees as one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreck upon wreck and hurtles all before his feet. He would like to pause, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise which has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm carries him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of wreckage before him grows to heaven. This storm is what we call progress.

The storm of which Benjamin speaks is the subject matter of the book of Habakkuk. Never once does the book pretend that history is progress except insofar as it is a chain of judgments of which the last is more severe than the next-to-last.

Habakkuk's response to the violence he sees is counter-intuitive. He

does not turn his back on the posited overseer of the violent chain of events. After protesting one disaster and a second, larger disaster; after hearing of impending counter-disaster; this is how the “I” of the book concludes (3:16-19):

¹⁶ I heard and my bowels quaked,
My lips quivered at the sound;
Rot enters my bones,
I quake where I stand
while I settle in for a day of distress
to come over a people who attack us.

¹⁷ Though the fig tree does not bud
and no yield is on the vines,
the olive crop failed
and the terraces produced no food,
the flocks were cut off from the fold
and no cattle are in the yards,

¹⁸ I rejoice in the LORD
I exult in my saving God

¹⁹ The Lord GOD is my strength!
He made my feet like a doe's,
He makes me tread on heights.

(all biblical translations are by the author)

The Prophet as Intercessor

In biblical tradition, intercession on behalf of human beings in danger of being undone by acts of other human beings, or by acts of the very God to whom one prays, is a form of serving God.

The LORD's servant is said to make intercession for sinners (Isa 53:11-12). Abraham intercedes for Sodom—though he fails to dissuade (Gen 18:17-32). Moses stands between the LORD and Israel—and prevails (Exod 32:11-14; 34:8-9; Ps 106:23). Though they fail to heed him, Samuel prays on behalf of the people (1 Sam 12:23). Amos and Jeremiah “stand in the breach” (Amos 7:1-6; Jer 12:1-4; 14:7-9, 19-22). The LORD complains of a dirth of intercessors through Ezekiel (Ezek 13:3-5; 22:30-31). The “I” of Isaiah 62:1; 63:15-19; and 64:7-11 intercedes on behalf of the nation and calls on the LORD to put an end to a situation of misery and destruction.

The book of Job implies that defense of God before man—theodicy—does not do justice to the human sufferer. Job's friends take this tack, and God's anger burns against them, "because you, unlike my servant Job, have not spoken as you ought about me" (Job 42:7). Defense of man before God—anthropodicy—is expected by God when suffering overwhelms the living, or when oppression characterizes human relations. Job's defense of himself in this sense was acceptable in God's eyes.

Defense of the sufferer is a duty when life and limb are threatened, even if that means calling God's (in)action into question. The non-justification of God is acceptable in the Bible. Psalms 13:2-3; 22:2-3; 88:2-19 may serve as examples. It is not surprising that the give-and-take between Habakkuk and God begins with a frontal attack on the LORD's inaction in a time of social breakdown (1:2-4):

² How long, O Lord, have I cried out,

and you not hear;
I shout to you, "Violence!"
and you not save!
³ Why do you show me pain
and you countenance misery;
havoc and violence are at my door,
strife has prevailed, and contention
with it?
⁴ The law goes limp therefore,
justice does not issue at all;
because a scoundrel encircles the
innocent,
justice now issues twisted.

The text seems to speak of a wicked individual who surrounds the guiltless. If that is correct, who is the scoundrel alluded to?

It is not impossible that the highest authority in the land is alluded to, the king himself. The book of Habakkuk is plausibly dated to the interval of time between the rise of the Babylonian / "Chaldean" kingdom to superpower status under Nabopolassar (626–605 B.C.E.) and the Babylonian invasion of Judah in 597 B.C.E. by his successor Sennacherib (604–562 B.C.E.). Jeremiah, on this understanding, a contempo-

rary of Habakkuk, railed against Jehoia-kim, the reigning Judean king at the time (609–598 B.C.E.): accusations of foul play and lack of justice abound in Jeremiah 22:13-19 (cf. 2 Kgs 24:3-4, if the passage originally tarred Jehoia-kim). If a specific male-factor is alluded to in Habakkuk 1:4, Jehoiakim, who made the 99 per cent shoulder the cost of resisting the Chaldeans, is a conceivable candidate.

Most people do not believe the essential affirmations of the worldview they espouse. If they did, they would inveigh against the lack of correspondence between what they are supposed to believe and the facts on the ground. They do not. It follows that they do not believe.

Biblical personae are less polluted by such self-deception. They challenge God from a position of belief when facts on the ground conflict with what God is supposed to be, the God who sees all and oversees all.

The biblical approach might be called belief-based religion. It has more in common with “protest atheism” than it does with run-of-the-mill religion, which, as Marx saw, is, metaphorically speaking, an opiate.

Run-of-the-mill religion takes many forms. It can be about smells and bells, frumpy clothing, and fine speech. It can be about catharsis and emotional spikes. In essence, it is belief-free.

The faith of Habakkuk partakes of religion in all the above senses except that it is not belief-free. For example, to judge by the rubrics in 3:1 and 19, Habakkuk 3 is designed for worship. It appears that the prophet knew all about smells and bells, sophisticated speech, and emotional spikes. Furthermore, like Jeremiah, he did not hang up his emotions on a coat rack before addressing God in prayer. The protests and prayers of Habakkuk (1:2-4, 12-17; 3:2) are no less emotionally charged than those of Jeremiah (11:18–12:4; 15:10-18; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18). At the same

time, the laments of both prophets are evidence of cognitive dissonance.

But doubt is not the opposite of faith in biblical literature. Doubt is the refiner's fire of biblical faith. Doubt is a sign of authentic faith.

Habakkuk's initial protest (1:2-4) elicits a retort from God not unlike the retort Jeremiah receives in response to one of his laments: "If you race with runners and they exhaust you, how will you fare in a heat with horses?" (Jer 12:5a). The worst, in other words, is yet to come.

The God who speaks to Habakkuk is not in the business of giving false assurances. Habakkuk 1:5-11, a reply to 1:2-4, is proof of that:

⁵ Look among the nations and observe,
be astounded, be astonished!

For a worker is at work in your days,
you will not believe it when told.

⁶ For I am rousing the Chaldeans,
that fierce, fleet nation,
who tread the earth's wide spaces
to possess homes not their own.

⁷ Dread and fearsome is he;
a law to himself,
his signal goes forth,
⁸ and his horses run, swifter than
leopards,
fiercer than wolves of the steppe.
The steeds of his cavalry charge,
they come, from afar;
they fly like an eagle, eager to devour—
⁹ the lot of them comes, for violence;
the mass of their van advancing,
he collected captives like sand.
¹⁰ He it is who holds kings in derision,
princes for him are a joke.
He it is who laughs at every fortress;
he piled up earth and seized them.
¹¹ Then the wind changed, he moved on;
but guilt he will bear, whose god is his
might.

A reprieve from violence is not on offer. On the contrary, Habakkuk's God promises to take things to the next level. At the same time, there are hints of judgment to come on the dread Chaldeans.

The God of Habakkuk is not a wish projection. This God is totally other, whose intervention, nonetheless and for that very reason, is worth waiting for.

I am reminded of the testimony of a Baptist friend from the island of Sardinia. She described what it was like to grow up in a pious Baptist family in a close-knit congregation. Faced with the trauma of a young person dying of cancer, the congregation prayed their hearts out for the young person's healing. But it was manipulative prayer—prayer that treated God as if God were a slot machine. In go the coins. Out comes the candy. My friend could not believe in such a god. Such a god was not worthy of her worship. As her family and congregation prayed, my friend lost her childhood faith.

The sick person died. The congregation's prayers went unanswered. Grief filled the air, indigestible.

In the face of unanswered prayer, my friend began to believe. God was other, beyond a human's ability to grasp and control. In this God, my friend could believe.

Foreknowledge of Evil

It is impossible for a victimless society of moral agents to be devised, unless agency is removed, a contradiction in terms.

For example, a portion of those who gamble destroy health and wealth and family in the bargain. The only way to avoid the collateral damage is to disallow gambling.

But gambling is an apt metaphor for life. The pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness sows, to varying degrees, death, oppression, and misery. The only way to put an end to the latter is to put an end to the former.

Everyone meets the grim reaper sooner or later, traffickers in death like Hitler, Mao, and Idi Amin included. But not before they, no less than we, maim and kill fellow human beings. They do so with malice aforethought. We do so by acts of omission.

Again: the loss of innocent life at the hands of an individual while DUI cannot be avoided unless her choices are limited to ones that cannot result in harm. That is impossible without reducing her to a vegetable.

If the language of Paul is adopted, the gambler who destroys the livelihood of those who depend on him and the driver who runs over an innocent child are vessels of wrath (Rom 9:22). Jonathan Edwards put it sharply, in his discussion in 1796 of harm-causing behavior:

God decrees that they shall be sinful, for the sake of the good that he causes to arise from the sinfulness thereof; whereas man decrees them for the sake of the evil that is in them.

On this understanding, God's decrees are harsh. Our consensual norms, nonetheless, are just as harsh. We permit gamblers to gamble away the livelihood of their families; if they are CEOs, the livelihood of countless others. We allow drunks to run over

innocent children, for the sake of the good the freedom to do so accords.

We decree that criminal acts occur. Notwithstanding the occasional exception, we mean it for good, not evil. Moreover, we foreknow that the organization of society we choose produces perpetrators and victims. If we minimize their number, we minimize freedom. So we do not minimize their number.

Habakkuk knew, no less than the Talmud, that: "No one snaps a finger below unless they announce it above" (*b. Hul.* 7). But Habakkuk's faith in a righteous divinity did not permit him to accept the decrees of divinity lying down. Perhaps initially, he reacted to the onslaught of woe as Job first reacted: "The LORD gave, the LORD took away. Blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). If so, he did not deem it worthy of reporting. The book of Habakkuk is not in any case a diary of personal feelings. The prophet takes his God to task, not for himself but on

behalf of his people; therefore, the LORD replies to Habakkuk with second person plural address (1:5).

At some point, a believer will crack and accuse God of crimes. At some point, she will rub events in God's face. If the believer does not, he is not a believer. Because he believes, Habakkuk complains a second time (1:12-17):

¹² Are you not, O LORD, from everlasting?
My God, my Holy One, you cannot die.

O LORD, you made him for judgment,
O Rock, you appointed him to reprove.

¹³ Too pure of eyes to look on evil,
the sight of misery you cannot endure,
why do you countenance the treach-
erous,

why are you silent when a scoundrel
swallows

one more innocent than he?

¹⁴ You have made humanity like fish of
the sea,
like crawling things with no ruler over
them.

¹⁵ The lot of them he brought up with a
hook,

he drags them away with his net;
he collected them in his trawl,
now he is merry and exults.

- ¹⁶ Now he sacrifices to his net,
and burns incense to his trawl;
for through them his portion is rich,
his food, fat.
- ¹⁷ Shall he now without cease draw his
sword,
slaying nations without pity?

Assurance of Things Hoped For

Habakkuk 2:1-3 introduces a unit that occupies all of ch. 2. The purpose throughout is assurance. The prophet waits for an answer to his reproof. In reply, the LORD does not dispute Habakkuk's argument. At the same time, he promises a coming end to the cause of the reproof.

- ¹ On my lookout I stand,
I position myself on the wall.
I watch to see what he will say through
me,
what you will reply to my reproof.
- ² The LORD answered me:
Write down the vision,
promulgate it on tablets,
that a crier thereof may run!
- ³ For the vision is a witness for a set time,
a voucher of the end, it will not delude.

If it tarries, wait for it,
for it will surely come, it will not delay.

The LORD calls on Habakkuk to have faith that the giver of the vision will make the vision come to pass. Habakkuk 2:4-17 clarifies that the oppressor will be brought low.

The faith element is explicit in 2:4-5a:

- ⁴ Look how swollen,
unrestrained, is his thirst within him,
whereas the upright will live by faith;
^{5a} the wine nonetheless is treacherous,
an arrogant man, he will not abide.

What is “faith” in this context? Hebrews 11:1-2 nails it: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen, and by it the people of old won God’s approval.” “Faith” in the above translation equals “faithfulness” to the LORD, the waiting and watching to which 2:3-4a allude. As one good scholar puts it: “In its original context, [2:4b] is clearly interwoven with the first part of the v[erse]. [2:4a] focuses on a person whose life is swollen and crooked. Then the v[erse]

moves to the opposite pole, a pious person who keeps his or her *trust in the Lord* under the dire circumstances described in the book, i.e., when the righteous are asked to *wait* while those who do not deserve worldly power wield it over them [emphasis mine]" (E. Ben-Zvi). On this understanding, the upright person, in the face of calamity, counts on the vision vouchsafed to the prophet. An end to the unjust situation will come, without fail and without delay. Delayed gratification is the essence of his existence. Conversely, the oppressor's unrestrained thirst for conquest will be his undoing. The central prediction of the book of Habakkuk is simple: "an arrogant man, he will not abide."

Anticipated Closure

"The wine" (v. 5a) is the beverage by which the oppressor slakes his thirst, the nations he consumes. Wine imbibed to immoderation is treacherous; taunt

the conqueror it will, in anticipation of his demise (2:5b-17):

- ^{5b} Since he makes his maw wide like
Sheol,
he is like death and cannot be
satisfied;
he gathered all nations to himself,
collected all peoples,
⁶ they are all against him, are they not?
A song they take up, a taunt;
a barb at his expense, which says:
O he who amasses what is not his—how
long?
—who increases the debt he is owed!
⁷ Shall not those you bite with interest
suddenly arise?
Those you make tremble awake
and you be despoiled by them?
⁸ Because you plundered nations aplenty,
the peoples left will plunder you
for the shed blood of man and violence to
the land,
to towns and all who inhabit them.
⁹ O he who grabs what he can grab
—a disaster on his house—
so as to set his nest on high
and snatch himself from disaster!
¹⁰ You have plotted shame for your house
by cutting off many peoples,
your appetite straying;
¹¹ a stone in the wall will shout,

an arch in the wood will answer!
¹² O he who builds a city with shed blood,
 who founds a town on iniquity!
¹³ Is it not—just watch!—
 from the LORD of Armies?
 Let peoples toil with plenty of fire,
 nations grow weary with plenty of
 slaughter
¹⁴ that the earth may fill
 with knowledge of the glory of the
 LORD
 as waters cover the sea.
¹⁵ O he who makes his neighbor drink
 adding in your drug—
 making them drunk
 so as to take advantage of their
 nakedness!
¹⁶ You are stuffed with shame, not glory!
 Now you drink, and show your
 foreskin!
 To you shall return
 the cup of the LORD's right hand,
 and human waste be upon your glory.
¹⁷ For the violence against Lebanon will
 cover you,
 the destruction of beasts will shatter
 you
 for the shed blood of man and violence to
 the land,
 to towns and all who inhabit them.

The Bible, no less than the movies, presents life as a morality play. Ethical closure, a satisfactory ending, is universally anticipated. Deserved consequences will be meted out. History, no matter how unjust and catastrophic for a time, will be put on course.

The following concepts, in language borrowed from philosophy, form the background against which the ethical closure anticipated by the book of Habakkuk is intelligible.

1. A self is constituted by its history of moral agency.
2. A wrongdoer's wrong confers an unfair advantage on the wrongdoer. Deserved punishment is symmetrical; it inflicts a proportionate disadvantage on the wrongdoer.
3. The past extends its normative reach into the future.
4. A future event may rectify an event of the past.

The above points underpin the hope of ethical closure to which the book of Habakkuk bears witness. The book anticipates by faith desert for past wrongs:

plunder and murder, depredation of town and country.

Good and Bad Imperialism

Moral outrage in the face of imperialism soaks the pages of biblical prophecy. Isaiah and Jeremiah are replete with anti-Assyrian and anti-Babylonian theopolitical rhetoric (Isa 10:5-15; 13:1-14:27; 21:1-10; 47:1-15; Jer 25:11b-26; 50:1-51:64). Habakkuk critiques Babylonian imperialism repeatedly (1:10-11; 2:6b-8.9.12.15).

On the other hand, Persian imperialism in Isaiah 40-48 is glowingly described. The Persian conquest of Babylonia and the Levant under the leadership of Cyrus the Great was viewed positively because the Persian juggernaut brought an end to Babylonian imperialism, supported local religious institutions, and fixed as a goal the extension of its writ to the Aegean coastlands. An oracle communicated to

an Israelite prophet instantiates the assessment (Isa 42:1-4):

- ¹ Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one, in whom I take
pleasure.
I put my spirit upon him;
he brings order to the nations.
² He does not cry out, he does not
harangue,
or make his voice heard in the streets.
³ The bruised reed he does not break,
the dim wick he does not snuff out;
in truth he brings order to the nations.
⁴ None grows dim, no one is discouraged,
while he establishes order on earth;
the isles await his instruction.

Compare Isaiah 44:28–45:3a; the Lord is the speaker:

- ²⁸ Who says of Cyrus, “My shepherd!
He shall fulfill my wishes!”
—saying of Jerusalem: “She shall be built,
the Temple refounded!”
^{45:1} Of Cyrus, his Anointed One
the LORD said:
“He whose right hand I have grasped
to tread down nations before him,
I who ungird the loins of kings,
opening doors before him,
letting no gate stay shut:

² ‘I will march before you,
the ring walls level,
the bronze doors shatter,
the iron bars cut down.

^{3a} I will give you
treasures concealed in darkness,
hidden hoards.”

The above remarks merely touch on a grave subject. The book of Daniel’s condemnation of Babylonian, Persian, and Hellenistic imperialism—the last pushed the claims of “universal truth” to the point of ruthless intolerance of Jewish particularism—deserves separate treatment. The approval given to an hegemony of Judah over neighbors is a related topic (2 Sam 7:8-16 + 8:1-14; Isa 8:23b-9:6; 11:1-9 + 13-14; 14:28-32; 16:1-5; Amos 9:11-12; Obad 21; Pss 2:8-9; 18:36-46; 60:8-11 = 108:8-11; 72:8-11; 108; 110).

What distinguishes good from bad imperialism? *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (2004), an essay by Niall Ferguson, makes the argument that a political and commercial empire is not good or bad *per se*. It

is always both; it can be either. An empire can cause more evil than good, or more good than evil.

Ferguson argues that in military and economic terms America is nothing less than the most powerful empire the world has ever seen. Like the British Empire a century ago, the United States aspires to globalize free markets and establish the rule of law and representative government—in theory, perhaps, a good project. To be sure, those with empires of their own, with dreams of having one, or nostalgia for an empire that no longer exists, will see things differently.

An American believer's sense of what qualifies as a "good" imperial project might be based on the good and bad imperialisms that come to expression in Habakkuk 2; Isaiah 10:5-15; Isaiah 40-48; and the books of Daniel and Revelation. It might also be based on Romans 13 and on a commitment to American "scripture," including Lincoln's 1855 *Letter to Joshua Speed*

and Emma Lazarus's 1883 *The New Colossus*. Thus, it might not coincide with Ferguson's Hamiltonian ideal. Furthermore, it is not clear why an American or non-American, believer or otherwise, needs to support an imperial project of any kind.

Nonetheless, it pays to have a grasp of the criteria by which imperialisms are evaluated in biblical tradition, and to relate that tradition to American exceptionalism, real or imagined. On that basis, it is possible to make more cogent sense of the metanarratives (comprehensive explanations) that inform the realities of current international politics. Realpolitik, neo-conservatism, isolationism, not to mention the antiimperialism of a Noam Chomsky, are current approaches to international affairs based on metanarratives whose content overlaps with, and sometimes contradicts, those inscribed in biblical literature. None of the just-named approaches has features that make it self-evidently better than the others. None should be

thought immune to revision in light of biblical metanarratives. The Bible is a storehouse of critical theory—more so than Plato’s Republic or the Babylonian Talmud—on the state and on limits on the prerogatives of the state. Cogent arguments for removing the Bible from the Western canon have not yet been offered. In the meantime, it continues to extend its writ as canon in the non-Western majority world.

Critical theory serves as grounds for political dissent. It is no accident that a prophet like Jeremiah ran afoul of the authorities. In the ancient world, prophets were often hated by the powers-that-be. As Agamemnon famously said to the soothsayer Calchas: “Prophet of evil, when have you ever said good things to me? You love to foretell the worst, always the worst! You never bear good news” (*The Iliad*, 1:106–108). Ahab expected no better from Micaiah ben Imlah. He was right not to. “Didn’t I tell you that he would not prophesy

good fortune for me? Only misfortune!”
(1 Kgs 22:18).

By definition, the world is going to hell in a hand basket. That being so, whoever makes accurate predictions about the future foretells doom.

The tightrope act Habakkuk performed as a prophet is a function of a double-barreled assertion: the slaughter he foresees was ordained by God even if the slaughter defied justice and fell under God’s judgment.

The register of scorn dominates the description of judgment to be meted out to the Babylonian oppressor in 2:4-17. It was not unusual for prophets to describe exploitative relations in highly charged sexual terms (examples: Hos 2:4-25; Ezek 16). What sets Habakkuk 2:15-16 apart, assuming the offered translation is on the right track (see above, p. 35), is the reference to same-sex rape under the influence of drugged drink. The anality of the act may be alluded to in the phrase that speaks of

waste on the glory of the defiled person; it is also possible that the result of uncontrollable bowel movements after heavy drinking from the cup is referred to.

Prophecy is proleptic. By definition, it jumps ahead and envisions the future. It serves as a standard against which to judge the present. It prepares those in the present for worst-case scenarios. Should the worst-case scenario come to pass, the proleptic vision stands a chance of entering a culture's memory. Its etiology of the past stands a chance of receiving a hearing.

The consistent strength of the prophecy of Habakkuk is its anticipatory reach. It was not particularly clairvoyant to predict that the Chaldean juggernaut would overrun the earth, slaughter and kill at will, and stuff its net with nations as anglers do with fish.

It was prescient to claim, before the predicted crime occurred, that punishment would follow. The anticipated

result, once the punishment came to pass, was that knowledge and praise of the LORD's glory would fill the earth (2:14)—even if few were in a position to ascribe power and glory to the LORD in particular.

The inability of other gods to predict the slaughter of their own peoples, and the slaughter of the slaughterer, is taken as proof that said gods are no-gods (2:18-20):

¹⁸ Of what avail is an image,
that its craftsman sculpted it?
A metal casting—a lying instructor—
that its craftsman depends on it,
making mute and powerless nothings?

¹⁹ O the one who says to a tree, “Wake
up!”

“Get up!” to a stone!

“Silence! He instructs!”

Observe: he is motionless in gold and
silver,

there is no breath in him.

²⁰ But the LORD is in his holy temple;
be silent in his presence, all the earth!

See No Evil, Hear No Evil

The gods of the Gentiles are dead in Habakkuk. The contrast between the LORD's ominous knowledge of the future and the muteness of other gods is the occasion for the demotion of said gods to non-entity status. Their inability to foresee decimation and exile by the Chaldean juggernaut, their inability to foresee a reversal in which the oppressor would be undone, is fatal. The LORD's reasoned foreknowledge sets him apart from the other gods. The LORD, and the LORD alone, is immortal, invisible, the only wise God.

Habakkuk's monotheism—not peculiar to himself but typical of the strand of the religion of Israel to which he adhered—might be called meta-catholic. It “out-catholics” the catholicity of polytheism by means of comprehensive unification. Certain Gentile gods upheld justice; so does the LORD. Many gods possessed violent power; so does the LORD. Consummate knowl-

edge and acts of creation were attributed to a high god like Marduk; they are attributed by the biblical prophets to the LORD alone. Anything they can do the LORD can do better. Habakkuk's critique of "idolatry"—the making of images inhabited by deity through ritual procedure—is an "etic" critique. It construes from the outside a set of givens that hang together within the system that generated the givens.

When and how did the reduction of polytheism to monotheism take place in the history of the religion of Israel? Mark S. Smith has argued that it occurred in the context of Israel's confrontation with the imperialist power of Assyria and Babylonia. In response to Assyria's and Babylonia's arrogation of power to themselves and to their empire gods, Aššur and Marduk respectively, Israel arrogated power to its God, the LORD.

Said response is already in evidence in Isaiah 10:5-15, assignable in whole or in part to the late 8th century B.C.E.

The response flowed consequentially from the fact that the LORD himself was an empire God in the eyes of the people who worshipped him, quite possibly from the time of David and Solomon. In the realm of the cult, that meant there were no other gods before the LORD in rank. Exodus 20:2's diction is telling: "You shall have no other gods before me." Aššur and Marduk included.

But Habakkuk's critique is more radical and takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum* (an argument in which one derives a ridiculous outcome from a premise and concludes that the premise is wrong because it leads to an absurd result). He reduces gods other than the LORD to their presence and witness in objects made of wood and stone. Divine inhabitation of images is precisely what Habakkuk denies. His polemic is of a piece with the push in the direction of imageless worship of the LORD alone promulgated by reformers who operated in the name of King Josiah in whose wake Habakkuk served as a prophet.

Said reformers actualized a religious perspective with deep roots in the preceding centuries.

The simulacra (images) the deities inhabited had nothing to say. A telling observation, since a simulacrum *est* (is), not *significat* (signifies) divinity. The transubstantiation of deity in statuary was a commonplace of ancient Near Eastern religions, as attested rituals make clear. The silence of simulacra is eloquent according to Habakkuk. Insofar as they were reported to speak, they prove to be “lying instructors,” promising weal rather than warning of impending doom.

Habakkuk was not the only prophet of Judah to ridicule gods insofar as their devotees identified them with the forms they assumed in the cult. His contemporary Jeremiah satirized with equal vigor: “Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field are they; they cannot speak! They must be carried, because they cannot walk! Do not fear them, for they can do no harm, nor can they do any good” (Jer

10:5; see also Isa 40:18-20; 44:9-20; 46:1-2, 5-7).

The LORD's predictions are not earth-shaking. The deity reveals the future in full accommodation to human limitations. It would not have been hard to predict that the Chaldeans, once they got their act together, would do what the Assyrians had done before them. It would not have been hard to predict that the Chaldeans would one day bite the dust as the Assyrians did before them. But easy predictions are not always made.

The role of the "media," then and now, is to let the good times roll. The media are wont to ignore obvious facts and trends. At the same time, the media make "the sky is falling" predictions so often that no one takes any prediction of doom seriously.

The most that media do is channel the nervous energy of all there is. Appeals to transcendentals resemble wish projections rather than attempts to

ground discussion in objective realities. In the book of Habakkuk, on the contrary, God is other with respect to Habakkuk and his wishes. The I-Thou relationship brings truth to the surface.

Habakkuk satirizes the pretensions of the polytheistic system of myth and ritual. The gods are unable to move and unable to speak. Insofar as they are made to move and made to speak, they are sock puppets, a propaganda tool of those who fabricate them.

The faith of Habakkuk depends on myth in the sense of a narrative with metaphysical presuppositions, and on ritual in the sense of a place and tradition of worship. Moreover, the LORD is described by Habakkuk in the familiar terms of the storm god tradition. A narrative theology finds expression in the prayer found in Habakkuk 3.

Prayer, Praise, and Narrative Theology

Habakkuk's God does not inhabit images. Nor does the prophet discover the divine will by examining the organs of sacrificed animals. Dialogue occupies center stage. Ultimately, as a traditional misunderstanding of Psalm 22:3 has it (a "fruitful error" of the history of interpretation), the God of Habakkuk inhabits the praise of his people. Beyond complaint and the LORD's predictions, the book of Habakkuk concludes with prayer and praise.

^{3:2} O LORD, I have heard your renown,
I am awed, O LORD, by your work.
In battle revive it a second time,
in battle manifest it a second time;
in the frenzy remember mercy.

Habakkuk is praying for a renewal of hostilities against the forces of chaos, the archetypal work of the LORD. In the agitation to follow, he asks God to show compassion. The prayer prepares the way for a present tense description of divinity going out to battle.

3:3 The LORD comes from Teman,
 the Holy One from Mount Paran.
 His majesty covered the sky,
 his praise filled the earth.
 4 A brilliance like light appears,
 a two-pronged spear at its side,
 there, a hiding place for his power.
 5 Pestilence marches before him,
 Plague sets out at his heels.
 6 He stood and took the earth's measure,
 he glanced and startled nations.
 Age-old mountains shattered,
 primeval hills sank low,
 primeval routes twisted.
 7 Horror of pain I saw;
 the tents of Cushan shake,
 the curtains of the land of Midian.
 8 Against Neharim ["River"], did it burn,
 O LORD;
 against Neharim, your anger;
 against Yam ["Sea"], your rage,
 that you drive your horses,
 your chariots to victory,
 9 strip bare your bow,
 the seven bitter maces?
 With riverbeds, the earth you scar,
 10 the mountains saw you, they writhe;
 an effusion of water swept over.
 Deep gave forth his voice,
 he raised his hands on high.
 11 Sun <withheld his light,>
 Moon remained in his redoubt.

By the light of your arrows they advance,
by the gleam of the flash of your
spear.

¹² You tread the earth in rage,
you thresh the nations in anger.

¹³ You marched out to deliver your
people,
to deliver your anointed.

You smashed the roof of the scoundrel's
house,
you stripped it from foundation to
column.

¹⁴ You pierced [his] head with maces,
his warriors the storm drives away;
to scatter the lowly was their delight,
to devour the lowly on the sly.

¹⁵ You trod on Yam with your horses,
the foam of mighty waters.

It is a challenge to read the description of divine manifestation in ch. 3 with what Paul Ricoeur called second naïveté. The prayer moves effortlessly from mythopoeic to historical description and back again. The transitions are seamless across 3:12-13 and 3:14-15. The text posed no difficulties for its first readers. Natural and political realities were understood as components of one and the same God-haunted world. Di-

vine pressure on both natural and political realities subjects them to a will beyond their own.

From a mountain on the edge of the horizon the LORD advances. A starlit night accompanies his demarche: "his majesty covered the sky / his praise filled the earth" (cf. Ps 19). He appears like a gleam, a pronged bolt of lightning at his flank. The hiding place of his power is there, behind the curtain of darkness. Fever marches before him. Plague is at his heels. He surveys the earth and spies the nations. One look and the landscape is transformed, the nations aghast. Cushan and Midian are not the expedition's destination. Nonetheless, the tents in which they dwell, to the south of his point of departure, shake at the shock of his demarche (cf. Exod 15:14-16).

In view of the report he hears and the sight he sees, the prophet asks if the LORD marches out of anger at the forces of chaos, named as Neharim (River, a plural of majesty) and Yam (Sea). To be

sure, it is always thus when the LORD goes to war (cf. Pss 74:12-14; 89:8-14; Isa 51:9-10). Restoration is built on destruction. Sun and Moon are put to fright by the Destroyer in action. The historical object of divine fury is spelled out: a scoundrel whose army takes pleasure in scattering the lowly and swallowing them on the sly. To oppose them the LORD strides Land in rage and treads on Yam with his horses. The scoundrel's house, from foundation to column, the LORD smashes. His people, his anointed, the LORD delivers.

How would it have gone in the days of King Nabonidus, scion of empire, when "the roof" of his "house" was "smashed," the house "laid bare from foundation to column" (Hab 3:13)? With apologies to Deep Purple and their famous song, "Smoke on the Water":

We all came out to Babylon—
Did our scholar-king resign?
Opis looted, its population pulped
We didn't have much time...

In the words of a modern historian:

[T]he relevant Babylonian chronicle... says that the Babylonian and Persian armies fought a fierce battle at Opis east of the Tigris. After the Babylonian defeat, Cyrus followed up his victory by looting Opis and massacring its inhabitants. He then moved to Sippar on the Euphrates, and waited for Nabonidus to be taken prisoner and the city of Babylon to surrender to his general, Gobryas. Only then, when Babylon was invested with Persian troops to ensure that all went well and the Babylonian king a captive, did Cyrus stage a triumphant entry and promise the city peace.

Said events are prefigured in the language of divine manifestation of Habakkuk 3, in the appropriation of the "March to Battle" (3:3-7; cf. Deut 33:2; Judg 5:4) and "Fight against Chaos" motifs (3:8-15; cf. Pss 29:3-10; 97:1-6; 99:1; 104:31-32).

The LORD's renown as a Destroyer is familiar to Habakkuk. The God he

reveres is the same God evoked in a hymn by Jaroslav Vajda, the second verse of which goes like this:

God of the earthquake God of the storm
God of the trumpet blast
How does the creature cry Woe
How does the creature cry Save?

The God of earthquake and storm comes from Teman; the Holy One, from Mt. Paran, locations, to judge from parallel passages, in Edom/Seir (Deut 33:2; Judg 5:4-5). The evidence in favor of locating “the mountain of God” (Paran/Sinai/Horeb) in S Transjordan or NW Arabia—not in what is now known as the Sinai peninsula—has often been rehearsed. Its association with Edom/Seir (Deut 32:2; Judg 5:4) and the outback within herding distance of Midian (Exod 3:1; cf. Hab 3:7) points to the mountains of southernmost Edom as a probable location. Paran would be the name of one of the most impressive ranges of the Levant, on a par with Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon (Nah 1:4).

To be clear, it is possible to go beyond the “still small voice” text of 1 Kings 19:11-12, a passage intent on dispelling any possibility of confusing the one who moves on the wind with the wind itself, and deny an association between God and the natural and political worlds—the natural world is, in Habakkuk 3, a reality in its own right and a metaphor of the political world.

Acts of God

Disenchantment, however, the opposite tack of the direction Habakkuk 3 takes, has unintended consequences. “Acts of God” of the ecological and political varieties occur unabated. The possibility of creative destruction can be denied. It does not follow that destruction thereby abates. It only follows that acts of God can no longer be harnessed for a purpose beyond themselves.

Is the Bible’s ontology of evil primitive? By all means, and in more

than one way. Are modern ontologies of evil more realistic? Not at all.

Modern ontologies of evil are based on displacement and denial of death, phenomena psychologists analyze but do not cure (except in the sense of replacing, as it were, heroin with methadone).

The polarities of the Bible's ontology of good and evil describe the good as bringing the demonic on its foes: realistic, but disturbing. God and evil are difficult to think of in synergy if one has been the victim of unspeakable evil. For those whose coping mechanisms are impaired, God is God, evil is evil; never the twain must meet. The Devil, like Voldemort, is That-Which-Must-Not-Be-Named. God is reduced to a teddy bear. And if "God" is no longer deemed a useful name for that which we desire but do not have, "acceptance" will do.

Frederick Gaiser cites an instructive fill-in-the-blanks exercise:

[Blank] accepts us. No matter how great our faults, [blank] will embrace us. [Blank] tells us we're all right. [Blank] does not tell us to feel guilty.

"When I have conducted this experiment," says Gaiser, "the most frequent answers have been 'God,' 'Jesus,' 'the gospel,' or 'mother.' But, according to Gregory Curtis, the author of these sentences, the answer is 'evil.'"

Evil is described as demonic in the Bible. Demons appear as instruments of God on a leash, as in Habakkuk 3:5, or are marked for destruction, as in Psalm 91. An identical polarity, I would argue, is contained in the doctrine of the devil developed later, but that topic is beyond the scope of these reflections.

The unaccepting God tramples the grapes of wrath in Habakkuk 3. In v. 5, God has two sidekicks, *Deber* (Plague-man) and *Resheph* (Fever-man). Theodore Hiebert's remarks are worth quoting:

When *ʿElôah* goes out from *har pā'rān*, the ancient sanctuary of Yahweh in the southeast, he does not march out alone. He is accompanied by two attendants, Deber and Resheph... One of these attendants, Resheph, originally pronounced *rašp(u)*, was a deity known throughout the ancient Near East... Resheph was a warrior, an appropriate kind of deity to be included in Yahweh's military retinue in Hab 3:5. Resheph was pictured in his iconography with mace-axe, spear, quiver, and shield: described as fierce in battle: and adopted as a military patron by Syrian and Egyptian kings. He appears to have been a god of the underworld, identified explicitly with Babylonian Nergal at Ugarit, and associated with such deadly forces as plagues and disease. In some biblical references to Resheph he still seems to retain his personalized character of a divinity or demon (Deut 32:24; Ps 78:48; Job 5:7). Even when the term appears to be used more as a common noun depicting the forces associated with the deity Resheph,

the mythological roots of the expression are not far from the surface (Ps 76:4; Cant 8:6).

Resheph resembles the Mesopotamian god Erra. Erra, “warrior of the gods,” is identified with Nergal, equated, as already noted, with Resheph at Ugarit. The Poem of Erra, a composition by a Babylonian priest, merits mention: “The one who composed the poem about him [Erra] was Kabti-ilani-Marduk, a Dabibi. He revealed it to him in the middle of the night, and when he recited it upon waking, he omitted nothing at all, nor added a single word” (V: 42-44). Benjamin Foster has this to say in his introduction to *The Poem of Erra*:

[The Poem of Erra] is one of most original and challenging compositions in Akkadian. The text is a portrayal of violence: its onset, course, and the consequences—how it needs to be recognized and feared... Violence can eliminate even the order ordained by the gods and sweep away in its frenzy all the hopes and accom-

plishments of civilization. The author, Kabti-ilani-Marduk, who may have lived in the eighth century B.C., must have seen and suffered the consequences of violence and strife.

The book of Habakkuk likewise grapples with a world gone awry. The concluding prayer faces down hostile realities of a political and ecological nature. It is bad enough that a people “attack us”—Habakkuk speaks, not on his own behalf, but as a citizen of his country. Ecological realities likewise conspire to produce death and misery (3:17). Despite everything, precisely for that reason, the LORD alone is the prophet’s strength. Habakkuk is possessed of incorrigible faith.

^{3:18} I rejoice in the LORD,
I exult in my saving God.

¹⁹ GOD, the Lord, is my strength!
He made my feet like a doe’s,
he makes me tread on heights.

For Further Reading

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