

Violence, Chaos and Theophany in *Habakkuk 3*

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Abstract – Divine violence often causes scandal, since the current image of divinity is one-dimensional, focused on features such as mercy, justice, forgiveness, etc. In reality, the Bible – First and New Testaments – is not afraid to present many faces of God, even those that are scandalous to us. The aim of this paper is to show the role of divine violence in restoring order in the cosmos through the analysis of one of the most complex texts of the First Testament: *Abakkuk 3*. The restoration of the cosmic order is also the restoration of good and earthly justice. It is evident, however, that the world of the contemporary reader is different from that of the author and his readers: textual analysis shows the distance that separates them and, at the same time, opens up a space of issues that solicits numerous questions about our way of place ourselves in front of religion and the divine, on our presuppositions and our expectations.

Keywords: divine violence – psalm of lament – theophany – chaos

1. Introduction

The ancient cosmogonies tell of a primordial chaos until the intervention of a divinity brings order to the existing. This also happens in the Bible, where Elohîm makes order by distinguishing the time (day, night)¹ and space (earth, water, sky)²: everything is put in its place. Looking at what was done, the narrator says that «God saw that it was good», where the adjective *tov* (good) expresses not a moral judgment but the fact that what was done complies with his plans. The ordering of the cosmos corresponds to what He wanted. In the ancient world, religious cults and political systems contributed to the maintenance of this order, that is, to stability and harmony. However, this does not mean that everyday life was peaceful: wars and conflicts were frequent and reflected what was happening in the divine world. Thus, for example, even in the Bible, victory in war is not due to men, but to the divinity who guides and protects them. Divine world and the human world were interdependent.

¹ Gn 1, 4.

² Gn 1, 7.9.

As always happens when dealing with ancient texts, over the centuries, the lexicon and literary images used by biblical authors and editors have gradually lost the immediacy of their meaning, because the world of the reader is profoundly different from that of the authors and their narratives. Theophanies, often narrated with images of divine violence, are among the most significant in this area, also because the biblical authors prefer the 'staging' of their own testimony of God to the argument aimed at convincing the listener. For them, inner faith, liturgical practices and the mystery in which God is enveloped were all one.

Through the analysis of *Habakkuk 3*, I reflect on the images of divine violence that describe the restoration of order and the overcoming of chaos. However, a single text cannot provide an overview of the biblical tradition, composed over a very large period of time.

Returning to the text means confronting the complexity of its world and the difference that remains with the world of the reader. However, this gap should not be interpreted as a loss, but as a space for questioning, in which we have the opportunity to reflect on the complexity of the religion and on the way in which we can place ourselves in front of it.

The essay takes into account the editorial position which is not aimed at biblical scholars and theologians, therefore, after a general overview of the text, I will focus on some of its literary characteristics. Finally, the reflection will be focused on the theophanic images. It will not be possible or necessary to clarify everything, rather it will be possible to suggest the complexity of the text and the experience of faith that it bears witness to and in which religious images and imaginaries are rooted. The latter give rise to systems of practices and beliefs. Over time, however, such practices and beliefs lose their direct link with their source and become incomprehensible. When one reaches this point, the time has come to rethink one's knowledge of God and its forms of expression.

2. Habakkuk 3, 1-19

The prayer of the prophet Habakkuk is in the third and last chapter of the prophetic book of the same name in the collection of the Twelve Minor Prophets. Despite the fact that they have been handed down in a single scroll, this does not mean that these books constitute a literary unit³. In fact, scholars are divided between those who try to reconstruct

³ E. Ben Zvi, *Twelve Prophetic Books or «The Twelve»: A Few Preliminary Considerations*, in J.W.

the redaction of the individual books within the context of the collection and those who prefer to study them individually. Here, the choice is to analyze the composition independently, referring to other places in the OT to the extent in which they are important for contextualizing or going deeper into some textual elements which contribute to understanding the violent images of the divinity. However, the subject of the composition is a great deal broader, and the violence exercised by God is only one of the ways in which He is revealed. The attention of the one who is praying is wholly focused on the divine providence, on which the effective realization of the plan of God solely depends⁴. He, in fact, is *nābî*⁵ literally «called», that is, the one who speaks in the name of the divinity. That does not mean that he foresees the future but that, in his observing of current affairs, he knows how to grasp the principal aspects and to interpret them along the lines revealed to him by God.

The prayer is framed by the autobiographical events concerning the prophet who operated between the VII and the VI century B.C. but, as always happens in the OT, the redaction of the composition does not coincide with the historical activity of the one praying since, in fact, the former occupies a broader period, probably as far as the post-Exilic period⁶. For reasons which we cannot consider here, the attribution of the composition to the prophet relates to the theological imagery which is in the background and which generates a play of allusions and references that has specific intentions with respect to the reader: it consists in offering him the key to read events and future scenarios. The prophetic vision takes shape as a cognitive capacity of reality and not simply as imagination: the prophet's observing is oriented to understand events and insert them into a horizon of meaning able to provide the direction of those events. This ability to give form to reality is expressed in images and language which are not always immediately clear to the modern reader

Watts - P.R. House (eds.), *Forming Prophetic Literature: Essays on Isaiah and the Twelve in Honor of John D.W. Watts*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, pp. 126-156.

⁴ E. Achtermeier, *Naum-Malachi*, John Knox, Atlanta GA, 1986, p. 54.

⁵ The English «prophet» comes from the Greek πρόφημι «proclaimer». Hebrew has several terms for designating the prophet: in addition to *nābî'*, we find *rō'eh* «seer»; *hōzeh* «seer» and the expression «man of God». In general, the prophet is one who, inspired by God and without the aid of divinatory techniques, reveals the divine message. M. Weippert, *Aspekte israelitischer Prophetie im Lichte verwandter Erscheinungen des Alten Orients*, in G. Mauer - U. Magen (eds.), «Ad bene et fideliter seminandum». *Festgabe für Karlheinz Deller zum 21. Februar 1987*, Kevelaer - Neukirchen - Vluyn, Butzon & Bercker, 1988, pp. 287-319, here pp. 289-290.

⁶ L. Peritt, *Die Propheten Nahum, Habakuk, Zephanja*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004, p. 43.

because inserted in a distant literary context which can be reconstructed only by means of those texts which one is trying to decipher. Some literary difficulties remain insoluble; some verses are untranslatable; and others have a meaning which is not immediately evident as is clear also from the ancient translations. However, our aim is not to reconstruct a hypothetical text, but to understand how it is that the prophet claimed to grasp the divine revelation in violent events despite giving value to the peace that followed them. In other words: if peace was also something valuable for the authors of this composition, why do they attribute violent actions to God and even praise them?

What does it mean «to pray»? Which is the theological role of the literary images of divine violence?

3. Dating and Author

The dating of this composition is uncertain and depends above all on the language and images employed. In a general way, we can affirm that scholars agree in attributing a long redactional process to the book of *Habakkuk* and, in particular, to chapter 3⁷, that was transmitted and re-elaborated in order to respond to questions that arose in successive periods. That contributed to rendering the composition very complex⁸ or even enigmatic⁹.

The prophetic figure who gives his name to the book has a historical origin but he is not recognized as being the source of the book which seems, instead, to satisfy a demand much later than the period in which he operated. The prophetic activity of Habakkuk was recovered whether because it had retained a certain authority or whether it was consistent with the testimony which the authors of the composition intended to transmit, that is, the superiority of Yhwh over the forces of nature and the enemies of Israel. This operation of recovery of the past projected into the future attributes to the text the double function of middle term between the author and the reader, and, at the same time, it is the object of intentions (on the part of the author) and interpretations (on the part of the reader) which cannot be defined once for all.

⁷ R.D. Haak, *Habakkuk*, Leiden, Brill, 1992, pp. 78-104; T. Hiebert (ed.), *God of My Victory. The Ancient Hymn in Habakkuk 3*, Atlanta GA, Scholars Press, 1986, pp. 81-128; D.A. Robertson, *Linguistic Evidence in Dating Early Hebrew Poetry*, Missoula MT, Society of Biblical Literature, 1972.

⁸ P. Jöcken, *Das Buch Habakuk. Darstellung der Geschichte seiner kritischen Erforschung mit einer eigenen Beurteilung*, Köln - Bonn, Peter Hanstein Verlag, 1977.

⁹ U. Cassuto, *Chapter III of Habakkuk and the Ras Shamra Text*, reprinted in *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, Jerusalem, Magnes, 1975, vol. 2, pp. 3-15.

4. Some Literary Features

In the title of the composition (*Hab 3, 1*)¹⁰, it is said that it is a *ṭ^epillāh*, that is, a prayer, of the *nābî'* Habakkuk. The characteristics of this prayer are the object of discussion among scholars. For example, according to Perlitt¹¹, the principal theme of the book is the prophet's question about the plans of God, that is about the future of the promise made to Abraham about the prosperity of his people (1, 2) and then also of all the human race and about the «why» of the waiting (1, 3. 13). These questions are transformed into hope (2, 3) and then into thanksgiving and praise (3, 18).

With regard to the purpose of the composition, Achtemeier¹² claims that *Hab 3, 3-15* is a hymn that recounts a vision in which the prophet Habakkuk sees the punishment inflicted by God on the Babylonians and the other nations of the earth (v. 12). For Hiebert¹³, instead, it is an ancient song of triumph which was sung during the liturgy from what can be deduced from the musical directions (vv. 3a. 9a. 13. 19). This composition is independent of the first two chapters of the Book and had a long redactional history, influenced by Ugaritic and Akkadian¹⁴.

Haak puts forward a different argument, considering the book of Habakkuk in its unity. Starting out from the fact that the third chapter is recorded in the scroll of Murabba'ât and in the Greek scroll of Nahal Hever, he maintains that *Habakkuk 3* was included in a corpus of contemporary traditions¹⁵. However, there is still no answer to the question concerning the existence of an oral tradition preceding the written one. Despite the fact that most studies attribute an oral origin to the prophetic tradition, in the case of *Habakkuk 3*, Haak claims that the complexity of the text derives – on the contrary – from the fact that the work originated in written form¹⁶.

From this brief survey, we can draw some considerations: *Habakkuk 3* is a literarily complex composition with a long redactional history attested in

¹⁰ Hereafter, for the quotation of the verses of *Habakkuk* I'll use the official abbreviation of the book *Hab*.

¹¹ L. Perlitt, *Die Propheten Nahum*, pp. 42-44.

¹² E. Achtemeier, *Naum-Malachi*, pp. 53-54.

¹³ T. Hiebert (ed.), *God of My Victory*, pp. 1-59.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

¹⁵ See also P. Humbert, *Problèmes du livre d'Habacuc*, Mémoires de l'Université de Neuchâtel, T. XVIII, 1944, pp. 247-248.

¹⁶ R.D. Haak, *Habakkuk*, pp. 151-152.

different traditions and preceded by an oral tradition. The archaisms, the use of complex stylistic forms such as inclusion, parallelisms, the alternation of verbal conjugations, the presence of conjugations which do not always have a grammatical function and the choice of keywords render this poem literarily different from the first two chapters of the book and certainly the fruit of a deliberate literary redaction.

We have no reason to deny the historical existence of the prophet Habakkuk, but I share the hypothesis of those who hold that he was not the real author of the composition. Rather, we ought to understand the attribution of the composition to the prophet as part of a stylistic strategy on the part of its real authors: the figure of this prophet must certainly have been known in different traditions and enjoyed authority. The recovery of his message in the post-Exilic period was meant to be a way of making a powerful affirmation of hope in a God who was able to rule/overturn the cosmos and to defeat the historical enemies of Israel.

Other literary characteristics, such as the preservation of ancient linguistic forms, the salvage of images which come from ancient traditions, the attribution of the composition to a prophet who lived well before the Exile, allow us to glimpse the action of several hands in the redaction of the final text. The archaic vocabulary and the authority of the prophet were tools for attributing value to the composition and guaranteeing its circulation. The poetic form and the fact that it was sung served, on the other hand, to engage the readers/listeners in the prophecy of Habakkuk: the song and the prayer testify to the triumph of Yhwh over the gods, the cosmos and his historical enemies. The prophet's visions thus become the prayer of the faithful: the text becomes the bridge between an imagined past and a possible future.

5. The Text

The chapter 3 of the book of *Habakkuk* is written in a poetic form and was set to music. In this case too, it is impossible to reconstruct the melody, something, moreover, which would help with understanding the tone of some statements, above all where the vocabulary and the images are not comprehensible and we have, once more, to trust in conjectures. In putting forward the translation of the composition, the intention is, as far as possible, to understand its form and content without seeking to smooth out the textual difficulties in the name of a simplifying – and false – literary coherence. In fact, the basic idea consists in holding that the vi-

olent images of God cannot be understood outside the literary context in which they are found and that, therefore, the question about the divine violence can be answered only by the analysis of a specific context. It can emerge also thanks to those textual critical issues which prevent facile accommodations.

*Title*¹⁷

- 1 Prayer¹⁸ of the prophet¹⁹ Habakkuk on tones of lamentation.

Introduction

- 2 Yhwh, I have heard²⁰ your proclamation.
I have feared, Yhwh, your work.
Over time you have made it known,
over time make it known
in anger²¹ you have remembered²² mercy²³.

¹⁷ Translation by the author.

¹⁸ The title of the composition (v. 1) contains abundant information on its self-definition: *ṯ*pillāh* is «prayer». In *Habakkuk 3*, *ṯ*pillāh* is both prayer and prophetic vision, offering of self and profession of faith.

¹⁹ Beside the figure of the *nābī'*, with lesser emphasis, the OT names other figures: *rō'eh* «seer», *'iš (hā)'ēlōhīm* «man of God». In 1 Kgs 18, 22, Elijah describes himself as the *nābī' l' jhwh*, in opposition to the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 19, 10). A little further on (1 Kgs 19, 36), Elijah is called *hanābī'*, «the prophet», and the article performs the function of emphasizing his role, «Elijah is *the true* prophet». In *Hab 3*, 1, the addition of the article to the substantive *nābī'* is consistent with the books of Haggai and Zechariah in which the prophetic title is added to the proper name (Hag 1, 3. 12; 2, 1. 10; Zech 1, 7). Cf. J. Blenkinsopp, *Sage, Priest, Prophet. Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel*, Louisville KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

²⁰ In the Semitic languages, the root *šm'* signifies «listen», also in the sense of «obey». Her in v. 2 and v. 16.

²¹ *Hab 3*, 2.7.16b.

²² In this case, *zkr* expresses a spiritual task: «remember mercy». God's remembering ensures that his anger does not get the upper hand.

²³ In *Hab 3*, 2, the term retains its base meaning of «maternal womb» and refers to that set of feelings which derives from it: «mercy», «compassion». Referring to Yhwh, *ṛḥm* can be translated with «mercy» (Ps 116, 5).

Theophany and victory of Yhwh

- 3 elôhā comes from Teman,
 and the Holy One from Mount Paran, *selah*²⁴.
 His splendour covers the heavens,
 and his praise fills the earth.
- 4 and his splendour becomes like light²⁵,
 two horns²⁶ from his hand for Him,
 and there (is the) hiding place of his power.
- 5 Before his face goes (the) plague,
 and the flame follows in his footsteps.
- 6 He stood, he measured the earth.
 He looked and shook (the) nations.
 The mountains of eternity were shattered.
 the perpetual hills bowed low,
 the paths as ever for Him.
- 7 I saw affliction,
 under the tents of Cushan.
 The tents of the land of Midian quiver with fear.
- 8 Perhaps you blazed in the rivers, O Yhwh?
 Perhaps your anger in the rivers?
 Perhaps your wrath in the sea?
 When you rode on your horses

²⁴ The significance of *selāh* is not clear, and, outside *Hab* 3, 3. 9. 13, it appears only in the Psalms. It is not an indication of a caesura or of a liturgical use of the text. In the Greek translation, it is rendered with the word διάψαλμα.

²⁵ The description of the theophany by means of light recalls other biblical passages such as Ps 18, 8-16; Amos 5, 20; Is 30, 26; 60, 19.

²⁶ *Garnajim* is a feminine dual noun which means «two horns». In the Ancient Near East, at Ugarit in particular, the symbol of the horn was frequently associated with divinities and kings, T. Hiebert (ed.), *God of My Victory*, pp. 17-18.

- with your chariots of salvation.
- 9 You bared your bow completely,
(the) oaths (are) with the arrows of the discourse, *selah*.
You divided the earth (with the) rivers²⁷.
- 10 They saw you, the mountains trembled.
A rainstorm passed by.
Your voice established (the) abyss,
its hand was raised on high.
- 11 Sun²⁸ (and) moon²⁹ stood their height,
through the light of your arrows they go,
through the brightness of the gleam of your sword.
- 12 In wrath you marched (on the) earth,
in anger you smote the nations.
- 13 You went out³⁰ to free your people,
to free your anointed one³¹.
You shattered peaks³² in the house of the ungodly.

²⁷ To understand the meaning of the colon, it is necessary to understand a preposition which attributes an instrumental value to the noun *nʿhārôṭ*, «you divided the earth with the rivers». The subject understood is always Yhwh who was named in v. 8. This verse is formed out of two distinct images: the first bicolon describes the preparation for war, but the reference to the oaths is not clear. The final colon, on the other hand, describes the subdivision of the earth with the rivers.

²⁸ In the most ancient witnesses, *šmš*, «sun» was the name of a divinity in the Ebla, Ugarit and South Arabian pantheons, see E. Lipinski, «šemeš», in G. Johannes Botterweck et al. (eds.), *Grande Lessico dell'Antico Testamento*, Brescia, Paideia, 2009, vol. IX, pp. 677-687. The OT shows awareness of the ancient Canaanite cult of the sun both through toponyms (Josh 15, 10; 18, 17; 19, 41; 21, 16) and the image of the chariot of the sun (2 Kgs 23, 11), which can be seen as analogous to the «chariot of Yhwh» of Ezekiel 1, but condemns it (Deut 17, 3; 2 Kgs 23, 5. 11; Ezek 8, 16-17; Job 31, 26). It is beyond doubt that the sun was worshipped in the Ancient Near East, but it cannot be maintained with equal certainty that Yhwh was worshipped as a solar divinity.

²⁹ In *Hab* 3, 11, together with the sun, it becomes an instrument for the manifestation of the power of God.

³⁰ This verb is often used to describe Yhwh who goes out to battle: Jdg 4, 4; 5, 4; Pss 68, 8; 108, 12; 2 Sam 5, 24; Is 42, 13.

³¹ Pss 89, 39. 52; 132, 10.

³² The scenario comes from ancient Egypt, Ugarit and Akkadia, see 1 Sam 12, 3. 5.

- To (laying?) bare, standing on their neck, *selah*.
- 14 You pierced the back and the neck³³,
his villages they ravage³⁴
to overwhelm me their exultation,
like eating the poor in a secret place.
- 15 You marched in the sea (with) your horses,
(in the) clay mud of many waters.

Psalm of lament

- 16 I heard and my innards trembled,
my lips quivered at the voice,
rottenness entered my bones
and under me I tremble.
That (However) I remain firm in the day of trouble,
while I go up against the oppressing people.

Trust in God

- 17 Since the fig does not blossom
and there is no fruit on the vines,
there has been an increased failure in the crop of the olive
and the fields are not yielding food.
You have destroyed the livestock from the pen and there is no
herd in the stalls.
- 18 And I will exult in Yhwh³⁵

³³ Verse 14 is incomprehensible, and textual criticism can help to understand it only in part, see T. Hiebert (ed.), *God of My Victory*, pp. 36-38.

³⁴ This part of the verse is incomprehensible, and Albright did not translate it: W.F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths*, London, Garden City, 1968, p. 49.

³⁵ Pss 149, 5;68, 5.

I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.
 19 Yhwh my Lord, my strength³⁶ makes my feet
 like deer³⁷ and makes me walk on my high places.

Coda

To the choirmaster, with the stringed instruments.

The text is syntactically complex, and it is not always possible to clarify its grammar. The translation presents numerous difficulties and forces us to make choices which remain uncertain. It is possible, however, to follow the thread of the prayer. The subdivision of the text can easily be recognized: the central body is constituted by a theophany, subdivided into two stanzas (vv. 3-7; 8-15), enclosed between v. 2 and vv. 16-19. Despite that, scholars explain the structure of the composition and its purpose in various ways, but they agree in the subdivision of the scenes: v. 1 title; vv. 2. 16-19 frame; vv. 3-15 theophany, subdivided into vv. 3-7 and 8-15. In fact, in my view, although having an inclusive function, v. 16 can be considered an independent scene, a psalm of lament in which the worshipper focuses on his own state of mind in a way that is something more than a literary inclusion. The theophany, which constitutes the central body of the poem, is the most ancient nucleus around which, in later periods, the figure of the prophet was developed (vv. 2. 16. 18-19). The theophany thus became a vision.

6. *The mise en scène*

Bearing in mind the complexity, only hinted at here, of the poem, I can now reflect on its content and to understand the context in which we are present at the drama of the violent action of God.

The song of the prophet Habakkuk, as the title calls it (v. 1), is a prayer on tones of lament: this title explains and, at the same time, gives direction to the hearing of the composition. It is not a liturgical song or a song of

³⁶ Ps 18; 2 Sam 22, 33-34, or else «army», see T. Hiebert (ed.), *God of My Victory*, p. 56.

³⁷ According to Haak, we could have here an image that expresses a sense of security since in the OT the deer is fertile, see Gen 49, 21; Jer 14, 5. Moreover, if one accepts a military significance for *hjl* and *'jlwt*, then *rglj* could be translated with «infantry».

joy, but a prayer, that is, a request in the tone of a lament. Those who hear it can prepare the soul to share it. Naming the prophet as the author of the prayer makes it clear that is not just any lament, not the expression of any suffering but an authoritative interpretation of reality. In a way similar to the previous compositions, here too, the first scene (v. 2) contains already the whole event which will then be recounted in the following verses. Right from the beginning, it is understood that the autobiographical events of the prophet have to do with the work of Yhwh which has been revealed over time. The action of God is characterized by two contrasting sentiments, namely wrath, which is later dampened, so to speak, by compassion. In the biblical tradition, the term used to express the latter, *ṣḥm*, stands for the «maternal womb» and the sentiments that are connected with it: God's wrath is extinguished like that of a mother in whom prevail compassion, mercy and tenderness.

In the second scene (vv. 3-7), we are present at a theophany and the reactions of the enemy peoples. In the vision of Habakkuk, God is not immobile, but walks and acts (v. 5-6), and his action immediately has two effects: the first is directly provoked by Him and consists in shaking the nations (v. 6b); the second is a consequence of his action and consists in the prostration of nature before Him as a sign of recognition of his superiority (v. 6cde). Both of these effects are the source of the terror which fills the historical enemies of his people (v. 7). We can, therefore, observe a correspondence between the action of God (v. 6b) and the worry which immobilizes the enemies of Cushan and Madian (v. 7).

The second part of the theophany (vv. 8-15)³⁸ is characterized by the alternation between the divine action and the reaction of nature (vv. 8-11. 15) and, within that, by the divine action against the earthly enemies (vv. 12-14). God's wrath is counterposed with the salvation of which he is the author. The image of the divinity on a chariot of war (vv. 8-9) who bares his bow can be explained in two ways: the first makes it go back to the oath made to the tribes of Israel, but the difficulty of the verse does not allow us to pick up further elements in this direction; the second consists in tracing it back to the military practice of the Bronze Age and the early Iron Age in which the bow had become the principal weapon of the chariot of war, and the chariots were equipped with containers of bows and quivers to carry the weapons which were not in use³⁹. The authors of this

³⁸ The text presents numerous difficulties, see A. Passoni Dall'Acqua, «YHWH si adira contro Neharaim». Il mitema della lotta cosmica in *Abacuc 3,8-15*, in «Materia giudaica», 10, 2005, 1, pp. 33-56.

³⁹ Y. Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in the Light of Archaeological Discovery*, New York,

scene had terrestrial conflicts in mind, but also the Akkadian and Ugaritic literature, and they attribute to their divinity the most powerful weapons of the period. The theophany involves – and subverts – all the elements of nature (vv. 10-11).

7. From Theophany to Vision

The use of the first person (vv. 2. 16. 18-19), instead of the impersonal form of the third, transforms the ancient theophanic traditions into a prophetic vision, that is, into experience and confession of faith, while the southern origin of 'elôhā/Yhwh (v. 3ab) locates the divinity in an earthly scenario in order to go on to exalt his heavenly splendour (v. 3cd-4). The distinction of the location into earthly and heavenly is, however, only scenographic. As Assmann explains, for the ancients:

«The theme of myth was not the essence of the deities, but rather ... the essence of reality ... Myths establish and enclose the area in which human actions and experience can be oriented. The stories they tell about deities are supposed to bring to light the meaningful structure of reality. Myths are always set in the past, and they always refer to the present. What they relate about the past is supposed to shed light on the present»⁴⁰.

That also goes for the representation of the God of Israel in a twofold way: firstly, because the conception of the divinity and the narration of the myth are again those of the Near Eastern tradition; secondly, because the use which is made of the contents of the ancient traditions is intended to throw a new light on the way of conceiving the divinity in the present and on the meaning of events. The intention is to transform and form the way of looking at reality. Thus, the march in the sea spoken of in v. 15 not only describes the vision but refers to the affirmation of the superiority of Yhwh over the waters which – as in Exodus 15 – were at one time the dwelling place of other divinities⁴¹. Therefore, the alternation and interweaving between mythic event and historical reality in the second part of the theophany are intended to show their reciprocal interpenetration: reality is what is being signified by the myth.

McGraw Hill, 1963.

⁴⁰ J. Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 112.

⁴¹ It is the war of God against chaos, see: M. Dietrich - O. Loretz, (eds.), *Mesopotamica-Ugaritica-Biblica. Festschrift Kurt Bergerhof zur Vollendung seines 70. Lebensjahres am 7. Mai 1992* (AOAT, 232), Kevelaer - Neukirchen - Vluyn, Butzon & Bercker, 1993.

8. The Psalm of Lament

With an abrupt change of scene, v. 16 shifts attention on to the worshipper once more: the words are those of the ancient prophet, but, in singing and reciting them in the first person, they become one's 'own'. The vision of the prophet becomes the hope of the individual: sentiments of fear, terror, distress and exultation reveal a very profound interior religious experience appropriated by the individual in the choral celebration. Those who redacted and transmitted this composition, were aware of the importance of this identification between text and reader. If, on the one hand, the authority of the prophet is employed to reinforce that of the hymn, on the other hand, every faithful person who recites it *is* a prophet. The vocabulary (*šama'tij*; *watirgaz*) partly repeats that of v. 2, forming with it an inclusion which encloses the theophany within the lament of the prophet. Not only that, within this inclusion each worshipper becomes a spectator of the theophany. The worshipper is simultaneously the one who sings and the one who is present at the scene described in the hymn; he is both within the vision and outside it. The ugliness and precarious nature of his body is echoed by the dissonance of the sentiments expressed: on the one hand, fear and distress at what he has seen and heard, on the other hand, a sensation of stability and security which comes from the same things which have caused his terror.

9. The Destruction of Nature and the Trust of the Worshipper

The worshipper is present at the theophany and, like nature, remains shocked (v. 16), but, for him, the end has not been decreed. On the contrary, «I remain/I shall stay firm in the day of distress» (v. 16e). This «firmness» (*'anûah*) leads us to read the devastation of v. 17 with different eyes: no longer with the passion and zeal of destructive anger, but as a condemnation that has already happened. The final scene (vv. 17-19) retraces in an insistent way the action and reaction of the characters in the poem: it begins with a description of the destruction which follows the theophany and ends with the worshipper's profession of faith. Everything has been accomplished, and, when v. 17 returns to the devastation of nature (Pss 105, 32- 33; 78, 47), it does not describe the theophany, but its consequences, and, so, on the one hand, nature has lost its own fertility, on the other hand (vv. 18-19), it is precisely this scenario that shows the prophet the greatness of Yhwh and gives him hope in the future.

At this point, the analogy between the sentiments of the prophet and those of nature is ended precisely because, in being present at the submission of the latter, the former rejoices and hopes in salvation (vv. 18-19). This scene of devastation is counterposed by the joy of the worshipper who unites himself to the victory of Yhwh. The prophet's joy is not bound up with an everyday episode: he has not been present at a secular war but at the action of God who has led him to salvation. The use of the future tells us that this will again be achieved completely, and, at the same time, in his enthusiastic expression of his opinion, the prophet affirms that he is certain that this will happen: the prophetic vision is not a prediction but a careful examination of events which is able to grasp their deep sense and ultimate direction because he puts aside all human fear and turns with trust to God.

The concluding image refers to that of the king who is walking on the peaks of the mountains⁴². In fact, the image comes from the iconographic tradition of the storm-god and could be utilized also for the king inasmuch as he alone is worthy to occupy the places dwelt in by the divinity (Ps 41, 13). By means of this representation, the king corresponds to Yhwh who dwells on the heights, and the earthly kingship corresponds to the cosmic one.

From the description of the scene, one understands how the narrative unfolds on several levels at the same time: the theophany, the historical enemies, the polemic against chaos, and the prophet's confession of faith which – in fact – are part of a single dimension. These different levels flow together with the intention of exalting the victory of Yhwh, who gives hope to the worshipper and, at the same time, declares the nothingness of the foreign divinities. It is in this context that the prophet exalts the violence with which God triumphs over his enemies, instilling fear in them and infusing hope and strength in those who are faithful to him. The perspective of the composition is one-sided and aims, on the one hand, at exalting the divine power, and, on the other hand, of infusing strength in those who hope in God. Once again, the only weapons available to the faithful are their faith and the song with which they confess it.

⁴² W.B. Barrik, «The Word Bmh in the Old Testament», PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1977.

10. The War against Chaos

The text of *Habakkuk 3* is very complex but it is in this form that it has become canonical despite the fact that it was already problematic in ancient times, as appears from the other translations. The interpretation of an ancient text always requires an intercultural translation, primarily a linguistic one, due, firstly, to the heterogeneity of the semic system in which the text is composed in relation to the language of the interpreter; secondly, due to the need to decode such signs⁴³. In the process of decoding, the modern reader is gradually persuaded to ask if he still possesses the requirements of the reader imagined by the author. This question, which seems to reach to the heart of things, is in reality also the presupposition of the author-text-reader interaction since the reader can understand the message of the text only if he already possesses, at least in part, the minimum requisites for such an interpretation.

In *Habakkuk 3*, the prophet is alone. His isolation is still more evident as the prayer unfolds since he is the sole narrator and the sole spectator of the facts. The musical indications (vv. 3. 9. 19) allow us to understand its liturgical and musical use: what is narrated is a theophany and the emotional reaction of the worshipper. This prayer recounts a theophany which seems to have happened already, but only in the vision of the prophet, and, at the end, there is a look to the future with the sign of hope. The prayer of Habakkuk does not recount things that have happened, but what the prophet hopes will happen by generating temporal overlaps between the time of the prayer, the time of the facts recounted, their projection into the future and the time of the worshipper who is reciting the prayer, renewing at the same time the vision and the hope of its realization. Thus, we have a complex temporal dimension, inasmuch as what has been recounted as past has to be realized again and becomes a future hope which is renewed each time the prayer is sung in the liturgy.

This complex temporal dimension is activated not only through the alternation of the verbal conjugations but also by the use of the first person in vv. 2ab. 16. 18 19: within a prayer that was recited during liturgical functions, the use of this form had the ability to involve the individual in an intimate way. The words are those of the ancient prophet, but, when one sings and recites them in the first person, they become one's 'own'. The vision of the prophet becomes the hope of the individual: the senti-

⁴³ G. Del Olmo Lete, *Interpretación de la mitología cananea. Estudios de semántica Ugarítica*, Valencia, Institución San Jerónimo, 1984, p. 11.

ments of fear, terror, distress and exultation reveal a very profound interior religious experience which the individual makes his own in the choral celebration. Those who redacted and handed on this composition were aware of this identification between text and reader. If, on the one hand, the authority of the prophet is employed to reinforce that of the hymn, on the other hand, every faithful person who recites it *is* a prophet.

The inclusion of the hymn within verses which speak in the first person places each worshipper within the most ancient – partially desacralized – tradition transmitted by the images of the theophany. The use of different names to refer to the God of Israel (vv. 22b. 3. 8a. 19a), his origin from the South (v. 3ab), the images which are scattered in the theophany (vv. 3c- 15), in which the ancient gods are un-divinized⁴⁴ and nature is subjected to his passing, everything which refers to more ancient traditions is recovered to press the worshipper beyond those traditions. We can say, therefore, that, the defeat of the earthly enemies is a consequence of a quite other battle: that of God against Chaos, which – inevitably – rebounds on those who worship those chaotic divinities. So too, the ancient god of the plague worshipped at Ugarit as *rašapu/rašap*⁴⁵ is replaced with the image of the plague (*rešeph*, al v. 5). According to Perlitt, the union of plague and epidemic [pestilence] indicates that these evils have to be placed on the same plane and that must be interpreted as a symptom of their demythologization: they are no longer autonomous divinities, but earthly consequences of the presence of God⁴⁶.

The worshipper, the faithful one who sings during the liturgy, is present at the passage of God and, in this vision, overcomes any hesitation which holds him bound to the ancient gods. The song is intended to celebrate the victory of Yhwh over the ancient forces of chaos and, at the same time, stands out as a confession of faith of the one who is singing. To this end, Yhwh's splendor covers the heavens and the plague is no longer a divinity but a «sickness» (vv. 3c-5) which becomes a tool in the hands of Yhwh. The eternal mountains, ancient dwellings of the gods, are shattered at his passage (v. 6). With the end of the ancient gods decreed, the consequence is the end of their worshippers: the earthly enemies who dwell in Cushan and Midian are filled with terror (v. 7). The rivers, the sea

⁴⁴ M. Weippert, *Die Bildsprache der neuassyrischen Prophetie*, in H. Weippert - K. Seybold - M. Weippert (eds.), *Beiträge zur Prophetischen Bildsprache in Israel und Assyrien*, Freiburg, Universitätsverlag Freiburg, 1985, pp. 55-87.

⁴⁵ L. Perlitt, *Die Propheten Nahum*, p. 87.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*; N. Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic, 1998.

and also the stars dwelling of the ancient divinities, are fragile elements of the creation with which Yhwh divided the earth: the mythical elements of the battle against chaos are employed to demonstrate the manifestation of Yhwh in all his dread⁴⁷.

After having presented the elements of nature one by one in their total submission to Yhwh, the vision turns to the historical enemies of Israel (vv. 12-14). The manifestation of God is, at the same time, a judgement against the peoples who are hammered (*Hab 3*, 12. 13) and a promise of salvation for his own people (*Hab 3*, 13a). The images employed always come from the tradition: v. 13 refers to the royal theology of the pre-Exilic period in which the actions of the king were strongly bound up with those of the gods, especially in cosmic conflicts⁴⁸. Heavenly world and earthly world enter into contact by means of the figure of the king or, in this case, the prophet.

The ancient war between the divinities, at the end of which the victor destroyed and disposed of the corpse of the vanquished is now reproduced as a war between God and the enemies of his people, but the meaning of this conflict is not earthly: «The cosmos which originates after this victory is then understood as a reality which is based permanently on an unstable equilibrium which threatens to be shattered at every moment and which therefore needs an effort to maintain it»⁴⁹.

In the destruction of nature, the prophet acclaims the superiority of Yhwh and, at the same time, describes his act of punishment: the ancient forces of chaos are no longer divine and become an instrument in the hands of the one God, the Creator. The images of upheaval and destruction are matched initially by the fear of the prophet who is petrified by the greatness of God (vv. 2. 16). At a second stage, however, this apocalyptic scenario is the source of his trust (vv. 17-19). This change of sentiment would not be comprehensible unless it presupposed that, initially, he was present at the advance of Yhwh, with the fear of his being involved or with the fear unleashed by a battle between God and nature. While the prophet is present at the un-divinization of nature, he sees also the defeat of the earthly enemies (v. 7): Yhwh's dominion over chaos is also salvation for his people (v. 6b. 8de. 13) which thus turns out to be inserted in a cosmogonic dimension.

⁴⁷ L. Perlitt, *Die Propheten Nahum*, p. 89; R. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible*, Washington DC, The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1994, pp. 49-51.

⁴⁸ R.D. Haak, *Habakkuk*, pp. 98-99.

⁴⁹ G.L. Prato, *Gli inizi e la storia. Le origini della civiltà nei testi biblici*, Roma, Carocci, 2013, p. 102.

11. Conclusion: Beyond Staging

The vocabulary used to describe the divine violence is that of the wrath of God against his enemies. The regulatory activity of the cosmos is a way of liberating and saving his people, thus re-establishing justice and order. With his prayer, Habakkuk wishes to communicate to the reader that the enemy will not remain unpunished because the greatness of God is such as to overturn the cosmos:

«The wrath of God which approaches is not concerned with the rivers but with the people. This is the purpose of the violent theophany: the judgement of the people. The solemn 'Einherschreiten' [stride] of Yhwh is once again an element of the description of the theophany (Jdg 5, 4; Ps 68, 8). As judge, he comes with 'bitterness' and 'wrath'»⁵⁰.

The answer to the rhetorical question in v. 8 comes in v. 12: God's violence is provoked by his indignation against his enemies and he wishes to restore justice. In the face of Yhwh's wrath, the prophet expresses different states of mind, dissonant among themselves and with respect to nature (vv. 2. 16. 17-19): the terror which they experience is various: nature is destroyed and subjected; the worshipper, on the other hand, is seized by a religious terror. The ambivalence of these states of mind reflects the ambivalence of the divine violence: destructive for the one, saving for the other. The recitation of the song requires a participation in this sacred terror. The only positive image of nature that is offered in the prayer is precisely that of the deer, to which the prophet compares himself, giving life to an image that is light and bucolic.

The last scene of the hymn throws a different light on the verses which precede it: after the destruction, we are present at an unexpected pacification. The desolation of nature is in parallel with the serenity of the worshipper, who understands that this is a sign of the victory of Yhwh. The language and images of violence and terror are now counterposed with images and words of peace, of joy even. The victory of Yhwh is not temporary but signals the beginning of a new age, that of salvation in which the prophet is able to exult in God and involve in his exultation all those who recite his prayer.

Yhwh is the principal person of the narration while the worshipper is the protagonist of his drama together with those who repeat it during the liturgy. So prayer and prophetic vision will be present each time the song is recited and hope renewed. It is characterized by three levels: one is

⁵⁰ L. Peritt, *Die Propheten Nahum*, p. 91. See Is 10, 5. 25; Zeph 3, 8.

precisely that of prayer, formed by the vision of the theophany and the future hope. The prayer has by its nature a trans-temporal dimension: although it is ancient, it returns to being present each time it is recited. Therefore, it does not belong to the period in which it was composed but to that of the worshipper. A second level concerns the meaning which the theophany has for the contemporaries of the prophet: the images of which it is composed belong to the religious tradition of the Ancient Near East but are being employed to affirm a new theological vision, resulting from a conscious reflection. A third level, directly linked to the preceding, is of a historical type: in putting forward the image of a God who is superior to the other gods, we have a polemic against the religious tradition of the enemy peoples, they too defeated by the intervention of God.

As prayer, *Habakkuk 3* is addressed to the worshipper of every period, offering him the image of his own God and the words for his confession of faith. To the extent in which it is a theological reflection, the composition exalts the vision of the warlike and victorious God who is able to free and save his people and against whom no enemy will be able to prevail. Finally, in its historical state, it is addressed to its contemporaries who were able to decode the images which animate it and to grasp the different use which is being made of it. But the historical nature of the song is also the continual renewal of the hope which is fulfilled in history. The message common to these three dimensions is the celebration of the victory of Yhwh over his enemies and the possibility of hope which derives from that.

As I clarified at the beginning, a single text cannot explain the divine violence narrated in the biblical texts, both because they tell different forms of violence and because these texts express different conceptions of it, without confronting each other. In fact, in the biblical *corpus* a historiography of divine violence doesn't exist. However, *Habakkuk 3* provides some tools to understand more generally some aspects of divine violence and I would like to name a few. The first one is that divine violence against the enemies of Israel is always a form of justice: it serves to defend Israel and restore earthly order. Divine action and earthly order are interdependent.

A second characteristic is that Yhwh is the first deity to act directly on the earth. This expresses a new theological vision: divine violence argues against the theology of enemy peoples and goes on the stage a different role of nature.

Finally, I would like to underline the perspective of the biblical authors: violence carried out by God is always legitimate. It is therefore not sub-

jected to judgment nor arouses scandal: divine violence defends Israel, restores justice and the earthly order, unmaskes the falsehood of the enemy gods. All of this obviously does not eliminate our moral questions, but pushes us to remember that the biblical authors write with assumptions and purposes different from ours. Textual analysis is undoubtedly one of the fundamental tools for understanding differences and continuing to question ourselves, for the benefit of our moral progress.

