Habakkuk the Faithful Dissident

A Performative Hermeneutic for Anglicans in Australia

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Introduction

“What, tho’ no more the fig her fruits diffuse,
No more the luscious vine her nectar yields,
No more the press with streaming oil o’erflow;
Tho’ fade the pastures and the flocks decay?
Still shall my bursting heart with rapture swell,
Still to my God, its grateful homage pour,”
And dwell, with hope, on joys that bloom in heaven,
The pilgrim’s goal — the sinner’s home of peace,
Where all is bright, and Love Eternal reigns!

Final stanza of Habakkuk 3, Charles Tompson, 1825

As far as I can ascertain, the earliest publication of Scripture in Australia occurred on 1 August 1825, when Australia’s first published native-born poet, Charles Tompson, published a poetic paraphrase of Habakkuk chapter 3 in Howe’s Weekly Commercial Express. New South Wales was in a widespread drought from 1824 to 1829, and one could imagine that Habakkuk’s expression of trust in the midst of socio-economic upheaval resonated with Tompson. In 2007, also a time of widespread drought, I want to return to the unfamiliar book of Habakkuk to see what (and how) it might speak to us.

But how are we, and in particular how are Anglicans, to read this book ‘in the clean pages’ of Scripture, as they say? Is there an approach to Scripture that on the one hand coheres well with the Anglican triad of Scripture, tradition, and reason, and on the other does justice to the dense textual repertoire present in Habakkuk?

I contend that both these criteria can be satisfied through a performative interpretation of Scripture. I concur with Stephen Barton: ‘I hope to show that the performance metaphor has significant potential for the revitalization of New Testament interpretation, as of biblical interpretation as a whole.’ Performative interpretation draws from the discipline of performance studies to offer an integrative conceptualisation of the task...
of scriptural (and indeed theological) hermeneutics. I also agree with William Countryman’s contention that it is only in the practice of interpretation that theories of such can be developed: ‘The point is not to get the abstract issues sorted out in advance and then start reading Scripture, but to reflect on them as we go forward so as to clarify and inform our practice of reading.’

Hence I will offer a performative reading of Habakkuk, albeit brief and partial, as a demonstration of its potential. Before I turn to this, however, some brief remarks on Scripture, reason, and tradition are apropos.

**Preliminaries**

First, Scripture. Although Anglicans disagree considerably over Scripture, there is considerable weight behind the assertion of Tom Frame that Anglicanism is ‘reflected primarily in ecclesiology and liturgy rather than in doctrine and canon law.’ Countryman similarly writes, ‘Anglican approaches have been shaped by the experience of reading vast quantities of Scripture in the context of prayer in the Daily Office. As a result, we have focused on Scripture not as a constitution or lawbook, but as a place of encounter with God… Scripture … finds its truest home and its richest exegesis … in the context of prayer, both common and private.’ We can call this the orthopraxis dimension to Anglicanism, attending to practice. This is a necessary ballast to the orthodoxis dimension, which attends to meaning.

Secondly, tradition. In this I position myself in the continental hermeneutical tradition, perhaps best summarised by Derrida: ‘In the beginning is hermeneutics.’ That is, with texts all we have is interpretation. There is no immediacy between interpreter and Scripture. As James K. A. Smith, one of America’s foremost interpreters of continental hermeneutic theory, puts it, interpretation goes all the way down. Smith argues that interpretation is not a result of the fall, but part of God’s good creation. He writes,

> It is this traditionedness that is denied in immediacy models, particularly in evangelical theology, which proposes to read Scripture apart from the ‘distortion’ of presuppositions or biases and which claims that ‘Scripture itself’ can stand over and correct our presuppositions.

Thus for Smith there is neither a single nor infinite number of interpretations, but a multiplicity, a set of well-read inter-related construals, each requiring an act of faith to move beyond undecideability to interpretation.
This is not to be decried but celebrated as the gift of intersubjectivity given by God to creation. The Trinity itself is the perfect interpretative community, sharing and receiving in pure love and hence perfect comprehension. Gianni Vattimo says it simply, “The Trinity is a hermeneutical structure \textit{par excellence}.”

There are limits to and rules of interpretation, which bank this river of interpretation somewhat severely: the text itself, cultures and languages, ethics, humility, and for Anglicans in particular the early creeds and the Thirty-Nine Articles. But the limit — or better, the authoritative text/drama — is God revealed fully in Jesus of Nazareth, ‘in whom the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’ (Col. 2:9). The incarnation means that a true, authoritative revelation of God is made in history, in our materiality and culture. That is, the limits to our interpretation are the same limits taken upon God in \textit{kenosis}. Neither matter nor subjectivity, two spectres haunting all philosophy, thwart God’s self-revelation.

Thirdly, reason. Or, what faculty does interpretation require? If reason only means rationality, then this is insufficient. Again, I find Smith to be helpful, in his critique of ‘the hegemony of cognitive knowing that dominates the Western tradition.’ He argues, on the basis of creation, incarnation, and resurrection, for ‘a Christian epistemology \[that\] accords equal status, if not primacy, to the senses and imagination.’

In sum: Scripture is a \textit{given}, shaping orthopraxis and orthodoxis. Tradition is interpretation, the only game in town, from creation to eschaton and beyond. Reason is metonymy for the whole person — embodied, sensate, cognitive, spiritual — in a stance of self-aware, critical discernment.

I also take it for granted that the Spirit ceaselessly whispers with the wounded polyphony of Babel and Pentecost to the true Word of God, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

Let us now consider the turn to performance.

\textbf{The Turn to Performance}

Many scholars have suggested that drama can provide the conceptual richness and robustness necessary to do justice to the dimensions outlined above: the whole person in community as interpreter and actor. Drama also naturally incorporates ritual and liturgy, two quintessentially performative activities.

In theology and drama, the towering figure is the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, in his monumental five-volume \textit{Theo-Drama} (1973-1983). Recently, the evangelical theologian Kevin Vanhoozer has
also argued for a similar approach. He suggests it is ‘nothing less than the missing link between right belief (orthodoxy) and wise practice (orthopraxis).’

Both scholars go to great lengths to show that drama is intrinsic to Scripture and theology, and not an imposed analogy. This *apologia* is largely due to the neglect of performative approaches to Scripture and theology, thanks in no small part to Augustine’s and Tertullian’s unhelpful disparagement of theatre. Balthasar in fact spends 600 pages justifying such an approach, which Aiden Nichols succinctly condenses into nine keywords: incarnation, history, orthopraxis, dialogue, political theology, eschatology, structuralism, role, and freedom.

The ability of drama to combine praxis and meaning is also widely recognised by performance theorists, such as Jeffrey Alexander. Alexander provides helpful ways of determining the success or failure of performances, both secular or sacred, in terms of the authenticity of the actors and audience and the degree of fusion between script, actors, and audience. A successful performance conveys meaning and prompts appropriate action.

**Habakkuk**

If we take performativity of texts in the broadest sense of the enacted response the text invites into, *all* texts, Habakkuk included, can be read dramatically. As Carolyn Miller puts it, ‘Genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community.’ More particularly, Habakkuk’s well-established liturgical characteristics make it recognisably dramatic. Before we look at the details, we note that Habakkuk conveys condensed and intensified cultural meanings through its intricate conversation with other texts, drawing carefully and evocatively from Psalms, Job, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Exodus, Genesis, Amos, and Nahum. By quoting key texts from Israel’s traditions, central theological themes are concentrated, such as complaint, creation, theodicy, eschatology, judgement, and Torah.

I will now read the script of Habakkuk performatively, in a much more relaxed style than that of typical academic discourse.

*The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. (1:1)*

The audience is given three expectations: an oracle (*yippee*: judgement against foreigners), a prophecy (*warning*: mercy and judgement in unpredictable doses), and vision (*what will we see?*). And what comes next?
How long, O Yahweh, shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? (1:2)

A lament — totally unexpected, a twist in the plot from the outset, and a sign of things to come. Lament implies a gestation of mounting frustration culminating in this outburst. An answer is given:

Look at the nations, and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told. (1:5)

We note the affective direction given to the audience: ‘Be astonished! ... You won’t believe this.’ This draws them in.

For I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation. (1:6)

This is not what the audience wanted to hear, is it? Is this answer (vv. 5-11) even theologically viable? And who is this ‘I’? Is it Yahweh? The unidentified actor facilitates the transition to the rejection of this answer in vv. 13-14:

Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, you are not able to look on wrongdoing. Why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they? You have made people like ... crawling things that have no ruler. (1:13-14)

The accusation that Yahweh is ‘silent’ suggests that verses 5-11 are a non-answer. The dramatic tension is moreover escalated to extreme heights, as Habakkuk mounts a severe dismantling of Yahweh’s integrity and trustworthiness. Yahweh is accused of being good and yet utterly passive in the face of evil, of being a mal-createur. Humans, who were made to rule the rats and reptiles (Gen. 1), have been made as rats and reptiles! This script upends the audience’s expectations. Who would have imagined such an abrupt rejection of Yahweh’s ‘answer’ and a second volley of lament, such a critique of theological coherence?

Then, unexpectedly, the ‘I’ reappears in 2:1:

I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and whether I shall return to my reproof. (2:1)
This shift to a new scene is powerful. The audience is drawn to identify with Habakkuk — for they too are profoundly dissatisfied with Yahweh’s supposed sending of ruthless violent oppressors and wait with Habakkuk to see if a third round of complaint is warranted. The pace slows considerably, building a new anticipation. Yahweh, it seems, is obliged to answer; Yahweh is drawn in as an actor and must reveal his intentions.

Attending to the setting of the drama, we note that the watchtower is deeply significant because it implies a setting in which Jerusalem still stands and thus one in which the Babylonians are at the zenith of their power. The political and public dimensions are unavoidable: the audience includes the Babylonians, who are about to get a pasting!

Yahweh answered me and said: Write the vision; inscribe it clearly on tablets, so that one who reads it may run! For the vision is yet for the appointed time; and it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it tarries, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. (2:2-3)

Yahweh ‘acts’ faithfully and enters the stage, forewarning the worshiping community that the one who reads it will run! This is a vision, in other words, that provokes decisive action, orthopraxis no less. But it also demands patience.

Look at the presumptuous one! His life is not upright within him. (2:4a)

Attention is directed toward the Babylonian King: ‘Look at him!’ the crowd is urged. And then, the first of three interjections. Someone — perhaps even Yahweh — calls out...

But the righteous one lives in faithfulnesss. (2:4b)

The first interjection is an ethical vision. Then follows yet further performance instructions to the audience, who are brought onstage as it were:

Shall not everyone taunt such people and, with mocking riddles, say about them,

‘Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own!... Will not your debtors suddenly arise? Then you will become their victim.’ (2:6-7)
The chorus starts a rhythmic taunting, consisting of five woes. The basic pattern is ‘Woe to him who does... You do...’ This shifting between the third-person addressee, the foreign king, whose corrupt political power is slowly unmasked, and the second person, the audience, draws the listener in.

_Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain...! You have plotted the ruin of many peoples, shaming your own house and forfeiting your life._ (2:9-10)

_Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbours, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies. You will be filled with shame instead of glory._ (2:15-16)

In the midst of these five woes, however, the interjector irrupts again, adapting Isaiah 11:9:

_But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh, as the waters cover the sea._ (2:14)

He now throws in an _eschatological vision_. And then after the fifth woe, he alludes to Amos 8:3:

_But Yahweh is in his holy temple; Silence! All the earth before him!_ (2:20)

This is the liturgical vision. The word ‘Silence!’ anticipates judgement; the tension is palpable. This public flaying of the Babylonian king, who is literally poised to conquer Jerusalem at any moment, needs a resolution. But the audience does not expect what comes next:

_A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk according to Shigionoth._

_(3:1)_

No judgment, but instead a new scene altogether, a community at prayer. Even the tune is given: _Shigionoth_!

_O Yahweh, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O Yahweh, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy._ (3:2)
The two themes of the prophetic Day of Yahweh, wrath and mercy, are given over to Yahweh for resolution: God can be trusted after all. And so the crowd of jeerers becomes a choir of worshippers, letting go of revenge.

What follows is an astonishing theophany, cosmic in scope, drawing primarily from Exodus and Job, in which Yahweh fills the stage with lightning and thunder.

*The brightness was like the sun; rays came forth from his hand, where his power lay hidden... He stopped and shook the earth; he looked and made the nations tremble. The eternal mountains were shattered; along his ancient pathways the everlasting hills sank low... Was your wrath against the rivers, O Yahweh? Or your anger against the rivers, or your rage against the sea, when you drove your horses, your chariots to victory? The mountains saw you, and writhed; a torrent of water swept by; the deep gave forth its voice. (3:4-10)*

Such words reposition everyone in relation to the ineffable One. This is the theological vision, which in the broader scriptural witness is understood to undergird the ethical, eschatological, and liturgical visions. The choir sings this tumultuous song and then again unexpectedly, the lone voice, the ‘I’ speaks for the final time:

*I hear; and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound.... I wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us. Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; ...yet I will rejoice in Yahweh; I will exult in the God of my salvation. (3:16-18)*

This is the performance the script is beckoning — trust, despite imminent devastation. Israel’s unsurpassable vision of Yahweh’s goodness makes lament necessary; one is barely spiritually alive if such questions are not asked. Israel’s uncompromising critique of just such a vision makes it worthy of authentic, believing embodiment.

And then the final verse adds a startling coda:

*For the leader: with stringed instruments. (3:19b)*

Any doubts over the performativity of this text should be dispelled with these words. The text literally presents itself as a *gift*: ‘For the leader
— grab the guitars. This is a script to be enacted thoughtfully, not mined for propositions. It provides direction for faithful re-enactments, without micromanaging the outcome.

At Qumran, the earliest ‘re-scripting’ of Habakkuk we have, the Babylonians (1:6) are interpreted as Romans (1QpHab 2:12), an exemplary performative reading if ever there was one.

Theological Reflection
When reading Scripture, one should always apply the ‘proof of the pudding’ test: Has the reading methodology yielded hefty theological gains? I think so in this case, for (at the least) a performative reading leads us to ask a particular question: What image of a leader/director does Habakkuk paint? As Habakkuk is performing in public, ‘on his watchtower,’ what sort of public theologian is he?

Habakkuk is a dissident. He challenges without compromise God, God’s law, God’s people, the moral and theological coherence of the cosmos, the prevailing political powers. Habakkuk is also faithful. In spite of economic, ethical, theological, personal, moral, and political crises, he rejoices in the God of his salvation. Habakkuk is thus a faithful dissident.

The church has truckloads of faithful people who think ‘Shine Jesus Shine’ is pastoral care, and truckloads of dissidents who won’t lift a finger for ecclesial or liturgical reform. But much rarer are the faithful dissidents.

Only a faithful dissident
- names the pastoral crisis for what it is — to confront ‘the Chaldeans’ together before God, no matter how long it takes (‘if it lingers wait for it!’), and no matter what questions it raises about God’s goodness and integrity (‘You have made us like rats!’);
- offers a devastating critique of worldly power, unmasking its horror, hypocrisy, and hubris; and instead stakes a claim for Yahweh, fully revealed now as Jesus, our true and only Prime Minister;34
- shatters china-doll theology untested in the cauldron of de-structuring crises that threaten wholesale narrative fragmentation;
- conveys an ethical, eschatological, and liturgical vision of renewal (‘the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh’), drawn up into a breathtaking theological vision;
leads the worshipping community thoughtfully from complaint to praise, turning a taunting crowd into a thronging choir.

Conclusion

If love is the rule, then the ‘how’ of reading Scripture together is as important as the ‘what’.

In September 2007, I asked John Bell at a public lecture about his view on the future of Shakespeare in Australian schools and universities. He said that if students sat and read Shakespeare, the future was bleak. But if they stage performances, write music, design sets, and so forth, it will thrive.

I suggest that the same is true for Scripture in Australian churches. If its performative, liturgical, enacted, evocative dynamism is experienced and embodied, interpreted and believed, it will thrive. But if it is treated as a moral cookbook or as *Doctrine For Dummies* or ignored altogether, its future is bleak.

The challenge for Anglicans in Australia, I therefore suggest, is to train faithful dissidents who direct their congregations in the ‘public service’ of liturgy, for and before the world, under the guidance of the Trinitarian God, together studying the Script(ures) in order to stage faithful, innovative, local performances of God’s drama of reconciliation. As Shannon Craigo-Snell says, Christian interpretation

[is] an embodied, communal event, taking place in and through Christian life and worship. The lens of the theatrical metaphor allows us to observe that Christian communities comprehend the speech of God through and in their embodied lives. The Bible has a surplus of significance for Christians. It contains the command to perform.

As Charles Tompson discerned, perhaps an innovative and yet ancient approach to an innovative and yet ancient text such as Habakkuk will indeed yield a timely word to us today, a word radiating those ‘joys that bloom in heaven’.
Notes


2 This Sydney newspaper was published from 2 May to 26 September 1825. (http://www.nla.gov.au/anplan/heritage/1802-1850.html).


12 Smith, *The fall of interpretation*, p. 155.

14 Vattimo, *After Christianity*, p. 60.
16 One’s humility/kenosis towards the text is a theme of Vattimo, Smith, and in particular Wesley A. Kort, ‘*Take, read*: Scripture, textuality, and cultural practice’, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 1996, who writes, ‘the act of reading Scripture involves and requires above all divestment [of the self, MPA] and dislocation’ (p. 28).
19 Smith, ‘Staging the Incarnation,’ p. 130.
23 Smith, ‘Staging the Incarnation’.

27 See Walker, ‘Why performance?’.


33 André LaCocque (pers. comm.) suggests an alternative reading, in which Yahweh ‘used to be trusted by the ancestors, but now there is a hiatus at the very moment when a divine intervention is so necessary. The prophet finds himself (and his people) in a deep religious crisis between the glorious past (according to tradition) and the dire present conditions. So, as the just lives by his faith (2:4), Habakkuk says, “yet, I will rejoice in Yhwh” (3:18).’


the life, activity and organization of the Christian community, construed as performance of the Biblical text.’

Tompson, *Wild notes*, p. 58 [Habakkuk 3]. Thanks to David Neville and André LaCocque for commenting on a draft version.