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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“NOTES ON HABAKKUK 2:1–5”

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XVII

NOTES ON HABAKKUK 2:1-5

Five Arabic cognates, coupled with a reordering of the verses in Hab 2:1-5, clarify the meaning of this difficult passage.¹ A logical transition of thought can be restored by transposing verses 2 and 3, along with moving three words from 2:5 to 2:15.² The Arabic cognates are

- (1) *قاص* (*qâṣ*) “a narrator, preacher,” a synonym of *خطيب* (*ḥaṭīb*) “one who recites, exhorts, preaches from a pulpit” and delivers an exhortation or sermon called a *خطبة* (*ḥuṭbat*) (Lane 1885: 2528).
- (2) *راض/روض* (*rûḍ / râḍa*) “to train, to discipline, or subdue oneself (through piety)” (Lane 1867: 1186).
- (3) *عبل* (*ʿabala*) “he cut it, or, cut it off, so as to extirpate it,” with *عبول عليه* (*ʿabalathu ʿabûlu*) “death separated him, cut him off, extirpated him” being said of a man when he has died; as well as *عابلتى عبول* (*ʿâbilatî ʿabûlu*) “my separator [from my companions] is death, or shall be death alone” (Lane 1874: 1941-1942).
- (4) *فحا/فحو* (*fahw / faḥâ*) “he meant or intended (by his saying)” and “the meaning or saying of a speech, its intended sense or import . . . I knew it, or I understood it.” (Lane 1877: 2347-2348).
- (5) *هارة/هور* (*hwr / hârah*) “he threw it down, demolished it,” and *هار القوم* (*hâra ʿalqawma*) “he slew the people” (Lane 1893: 2906).

The first of these five is the cognate of the קץ in Hab 2:3, which has traditionally been read as קץ “end” (the Septuagint has πέρας). The second is the cognate of the רויץ in 2:2, which has traditionally been read as רויץ “to run” (the Septuagint has διώκη). The third is the cognate of the עבל, which was in the *Vorlage* of the Septuagint (which has ὑποστείληται “should he draw back”), differing from the MT which has עפלה “was swollen (with a tumor or hemorrhoid).” The עפלה is generally paraphrased as “his soul which is *lifted up*” (KJV); “his soul is *puffed up*” (ASV); “he that is *unbelieving*” (DRA, following the Vulgates’ *qui incredulus est*); “a *presumptuous one*” (YLT); and even “he shall *fail*” (RSV).³

Moreover, the MT עפלה was translated by Aquila as νωχέλευομένου “slothful,” apparently from a text with עזלה “slothful” instead of the MT עפלה. The Targum and the Peshitta evidently read עפלה as עולה “iniquity”—indicating that the second letter in this word was so poorly written, or became so badly damaged, that it could read as a פ or a ב or a ז or a ו.⁴

In Hab 2:4 the Septuagint’s ὑποστείληται “should he draw back” has been dismissed by commentators who assumed that two letters in the *Vorlage* were transposed, with the MT עפל “swollen” having been read as עלף “to cover, to enwrap, to faint”—even though עלף fits the context no better than עפל.

Thanks, however, to the Septuagintal ὑποστείληται, the stem עבל and its Arabic cognate عبل (*abala*) “he went away, he died” comes into focus. This stem occurs in the name of Mount Ebal (הַר עֵיבָל), which was known as the

mountain of the curse (Deut 11:29; 27:4, 11), and its name could well have been understood as “the mountain of death” (= *عبول* [*‘abūlu*]) in light of the implicit and explicit curses of death which were pronounced (Deuteronomy 27–28) from Mount Ebal.⁵

The fourth Arabic word in the list above is the cognate of the פח in the verb וַיִּפַּח in 2:3, traditionally understood as פוח “to blow, to breathe.” The Septuagint has ἀνατελεῖ “it shall shoot forth,” as if the word were פרח “to bud, sprout,” rather than פח. But the expressions “a vision will sprout” or an “a vision will exhale” do not conform to normal Hebrew idiom. The fifth word is the cognate of the היר of the MT וַיִּהַר in 2:5, usually interpreted as “haughty” (= the Septuagint’s ἀλαζών).

With these five cognates in focus, Hab 2:2–4 can be translated as follows (with further comments in the notes).

2:1

עַל־מִשְׁמַרְתִּי אֶעֱמֹדָה
 וְאֶתִּיצֵבָה עַל־מִצּוֹר
 וְאֶצְפֵּה לְרֵאוֹת מִהַיַּדְבָּר־בִּי
 וּמִה אֲשִׁיב עַל־תּוֹכַחְתִּי:

Let me stand upon my watch,
 and station myself on the rampart;
 then let me keep watch to see what He will say to me,
 and what I might requite about my complaint.⁶

2:3

כִּי יַעֲוֹד חֲזוֹן לְמוֹעֵד
 [MT = כִּי עוֹד חֲזוֹן לְמוֹעֵד =
 וְיִפְתַּח לְקִיץ וְלֹא יִכְזֹב
 אִם־יִתְמַהֲמַה חֶפְזָה־לוֹ
 כִּי־בֹא יָבֹא לֹא יֵאָחֵר:]

For a vision was promised⁷ to the protestor;⁸
 its intent would be understood⁹ by the preacher,¹⁰
 and it would not disappoint.¹¹
 If it seem slow, wait for it.
 It will surely come; it will not be postponed.¹²

2:2

וַיַּעֲנֵנִי יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר
 כָּתוּב חֲזוֹן וּבְאֵר עַל־הַלְּחֹת
 לְמַעַן יִרְוֶץ קוֹרֵא בוֹ:

Then Yahweh answered me, saying:
 “Write the vision! Make it plain upon tablets,
 so that the one reading it may be disciplined!”¹³

2:4

הִנֵּה עֲפָלָה לֹא־יִשְׁרָה נַפְשׁוֹ בּוֹ
 וְצַדִּיק בְּאַמּוֹנָתוֹ יַחִיָּה:

“Behold!

The unrighteous soul has been cut off,¹⁴
 but the righteous lives by his faithfulness.”

2:5

וְאִף גְּבוּר יְהִיר וְלֹא יִרְוֶה
 [MT = וְאִף גְּבוּר יְהִיר וְלֹא יִנּוּה =]
 אֲשֶׁר הִרְחִיב כְּשֹׂאֵל נַפְשׁוֹ
 וְהוּא כְּמוֹת וְלֹא יִשְׂבַּע
 וַיֵּאֱסֹף אֵלָיו כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם
 וַיִּקְבֹּץ אֵלָיו כָּל־הָעַמִּים:

Indeed,¹⁵ the strongman¹⁶
 demolishes¹⁷ and cannot be sated,¹⁸
 He enlarges his appetite like Sheol;
 and like death, he is never satisfied.
 He gathers to himself all the nations;
 and collects for himself all the peoples.

When Hab 2:5 is read in this manner, it would be better to transpose it to the end of 1:13 (or even after 1:17), making it a part of Habakkuk's complaints, rather than its being a part of Yahweh's response to Habakkuk's questions. If the MT **יִשְׂאוּ** were read as **נִשְׂאוּ**¹⁹ and the **וַיֵּאֱמַר** repointed as **וַיֵּאֱמַרְ**, then the **הֲלוֹא** of 2:6 meant "Did not?" rather than "Shall not?" The woes which follow in 2:6–19 could have been uttered over time in the past, for, according to the vision in 2:4 the maledictions *had* come true: **עֵפֶל לֹא־יִשְׂרָה נַפְשׁוֹ בּוֹ** "the unrighteous soul *has been cut off*" (a *Pu^c*al perfect, whether the verb is a masculine, as proposed here, or a feminine with the MT), whereas the righteous *lives* (**יִחִיָּה** a *Qal* imperfect).

The intent of the vision was to affirm what was expressed elsewhere in the language of sowing and reaping, as in Pro 22:8, "he who sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of his fury will fail"; Job 4:9, "those who plow iniquity and

sow trouble reap the same; by the breath of God they perish”; Hos 8:7, “for they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind”; and Hos 10:12, “sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of steadfast love.”

The theological assertion made via the vision was: those who perished at the hands of the Chaldeans, and the Chaldeans themselves who perished later were unrighteous and got what they deserved—death! The survivors, like Habakkuk himself, were the righteous who received what they deserved—life! Whereas Habakkuk (1:13) had posited two categories—the “wicked” (who oppressed) and the “man more righteous than the wicked” (who was oppressed)—there were really three categories: (1) the wicked, (2) those less wicked, and (3) the righteous. Survivors of the Chaldean oppression and the oppression by their fellow Judeans were all in the third group, thanks to their faithfulness. The wicked and those less-wicked were cut off, regardless of the degree of the wickedness. This affirmation became the basis for Paul’s assertion, “for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom 1:18).

The vision ends at 2:20 with the admonition for all the earth—including Habakkuk—to hush. Enough complaints! “Yahweh in his holy temple.” Justice is being done. The *wicked* had perished; the *righteous* live. As the text now stands, the silence before Yahweh was broken by Habakkuk’s prayer which was filled with praise and affirmation, without petitions nor complaints—suggesting that Habakkuk understood the content and intent of the vision: the righteous live by faithfulness.

Centuries later, the Apostle Paul gleaned a different meaning from the vision, stating in Romans 1:17 “For in it [the gospel of Christ] the righteousness of God is revealed through

faith for faith; as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’”²⁰ *Doing* what was right (= *faithfulness*) became then a matter of *believing* what was right (= *faith*). An attempt to reconcile the tension between these two interpretations of Habakkuk’s vision appears in James 2:18–26, which concluded that “faith apart from works is dead.”

NOTES

1. See William Hayes Ward, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Habakkuk*, in *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah and Joel* by J. M. Powis Smith, W. H. Ward, and J. A. Bewer; New York: Charles Scribners, 1911, pp. 13–14 of the section on Habakkuk. Concerning verse 2:4, Ward despaired, “The first member of this couplet is corrupt past safe reconstruction,” and paraphrased it as, “The upright [shall rest] his soul in me; And the righteous shall live in my faithfulness.” For summaries of subsequent studies see John Marshall Holt, “So He May Run Who Reads,” *JBL* (1964) 83: 298–302; J. A. Emerton, “The Textual and Linguistic Problem of Habakkuk II, 4–5,” *JTS* (1977: 27:1–18; Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, The New American Commentary, Volume 20, Nashville: Broadman and Holman (1999) 318–326. Emerton translated 2:2 as “Behold, he whose personality within him is not upright will fly away (i.e. pass away, perish), but the righteous man will live because of his faithfulness.”
2. Wellhausen (1898) and Stade (1906), cited by Ward (1911: 19) proposed a similar transposition of 2: 18 and 19.
3. The only possible Arabic cognates of Hebrew עָפַל would be *غفل* (*ḡafala*) “he was unmindful, forgetful, neglectful” and *غفل* (*ḡufl*) “one whose beneficence is not hoped for, nor his evilness feared; he being like the shackled that is neglected . . . one having no grounds of pretension to respect or honour; of whom

one knows not what he possesses” (Lane 6: 2276; Tregelle 1875: 565). But these definitions, though very negative, do not fit the context of Hab 2:2–4, where an antonym of “life, to live” is anticipated.

4. The confusion and/or the interchange of the כ and פ is well attested, and numerous examples have been cited by Delitzsch (1920: 115 §118^{a,b}).

5. Lexicographers of Biblical Hebrew have cited only the Arabic *عبل* (*ʿabala*) “to be bulky, chubby, stout” (BDB 716; KBS 2: 816), with no mention of the noun *عبول* (*ʿabûlu*) “death” or the verb *عبل* (*ʿabala*) “to hold back, to take away,” the latter of which the Septuagint translators obviously knew. The *עַבַּל* / *עַפַּל* by-forms meaning “separation, death” need to be recognized along with *פְּרֹזַל* / *בְּרֹזַל* “iron” and *פְּזַר* / *בְּזַר* “to disperse.”

6. Habakkuk’s first complaint (1:2–4) was followed with an immediate answer (1:5–11). The response to his second complaint (1:12–17) was delayed, requiring Habakkuk to be watchful since the time set for God’s response was unknown to him. This delay gave Habakkuk time to think through what would be his response in his next dialogue with God.

7. Reading the MT *כִּי עוֹד* as *כִּי יְעוֹד*, restoring a י lost by haplography, and vocalizing the *עוֹד* as a passive participle. Hebrew *יְעַר* “to appoint” may have had nuances of “threat” and/or “promise,” like its Arabic cognate *وعد* (*waʿada*) “he promised” or “he threatened” (Lane 8: 2952; BDB 416).

8. Reading here instead of the MT *מוֹעֵד* “appointed time or place,” the *Hiphʿil* participle *מוֹעֵד* / *מוֹעִיד* or *מוֹעִיר*, from *עוֹד* II

“to exhort, to protest, to warn, to testify” (BDB 730) or its by-form יַעֲד (with the עוֹדֵר / יַעֲדֵר being like טוֹבֵב / יַטְבֵּב “to be good”).

9. The meaning of MT וַיִּפֹּחַ לְקֵץ, “(the vision) breathes / exhales to the end,” is, to say the least, ambiguous if not senseless. Interpretations which make פוּחַ “to breathe, to exhale” a synonym of מְהֵרָה “to hasten” or חוּשׁ “to make haste” are misleading, for four words later in the line it states clearly, “though it tarry, wait for it.” The vision could not have *sped* and *tarried* at the same time. The Septuagint’s ἀνατελεῖ “it will rise” is of no help because it simply reflects a *Vorlage* with פָּרַח “to bud, sprout, shoot” for the MT פוּחַ. (Delitzsch [1920: 111 §109^{a-b}] cited many other examples of the confusion of a ו and a ר.)

The MT וַיִּפֹּחַ needs to be repointed as וַיִּפְחַ and recognized as the פֹּחַ verb פָּחַח ע"ע, a by-form of the פָּחַח ל"ה verb פָּחַח (see GKC 77^c for other examples of ע"ע and ל"ה verbs having the same meaning). This פָּחַח is the cognate of the Arabic فحًا (*fâha*), cited above which is a synonym of لحن (*lahana*) meaning “an indication whereby the person addressed is made to understand one’s intent” (Lane 8: 3008). The vision would be clearly understood by Habakkuk, without ambiguity and without deception. It is ironic that the language used to tell about Habakkuk’s vision—which was to have been understood perfectly—has been misunderstood ever since it was written without a distinction between the *h* and the *h*.

10. The MT לְקֵץ “to the end” needs to be repointed to קֵץ “to the narrator/preacher,” with קֵץ being the cognate of قاص (*qâs*), noted above, with the verb meaning “he related” or “he explained.” The object of the verb could be an admonition, an exhortation, a sermon, a speech, an oration, a dream, or a harangue. In Habakkuk’s case, as a narrator/preacher/prophet (= קֵץ), he would grasp the meaning and intent of the vision—whenever it

came —and would proclaim it and explain it accurately and honestly. (In modern literary Arabic a **MeKq** (*qaṣāṣ*) means a novelist or storyteller.)

11. Following the translation in BDB 469.

12. Repointing the MT **ΓΧΘ** as a *Pu^cal* or *Hoph^cal* (Jastrow 40).

13. The MT **#Wr^y** is a homograph for two verbs, one meaning “he may run,” and the other meaning “he may train/discipline himself.” Many commentators (who, in the language of Habakkuk, could be called **xyxkPo ~ yCqo** “story tellers intending to get it right”) have created a word picture of (1) Judean joggers reading highway billboards (“so that a runner may read it”) or (2) a track coach’s notes for a pep rally (“so that one who reads it may run”). The wrong **#Wr** is to be blamed for these mistranslations—even though it is the only **#Wr** currently in the Hebrew lexicons. The right **#Wr** has yet to make it into the lexicons, which is the **#Wr** that is the cognate of **QŪ@/Q!@** (*rûḏ / rāda*) “to train, discipline oneself,” introduced above. The phrase **ENh(d# mCdmQŪ@** (*rawiḏ nafsaka bi’lattaqway*) “discipline thyself well by piety” provides the clue to the meaning of **#Wr** in this verse.

14. The final **h** of **h l P.[** needs to be shifted to the **qyDCh**, thereby making the verb masculine (**l P.[**) and the noun definite (**qyDCh**).

15. Moving **dgAB !yvh; yKi** from 2:2 to the last line in 2:15, permits the rest of 2:5 to be read as a description of the unrighteous person mentioned to in 2:4a.

16. Reading the MT **rbš** “man, servant” as *scriptio defectiva* for **rABG!** “mighty man” which, given the political overtones of the passage, is best rendered “strongman.”

17. Recognizing that the הִיר of the MT יְהִיר is the cognate of Arabic هير (*hayyir*) “he threw down, he demolished.”

18. Following Wellhausen (cited by Ward, 1911: 14) who thought the MT לֹא יִנְוֶה “he will not abide” should be read as לֹא יִרְוֶה “he will not be sated,” which balances the לֹא יִשְׂבֵּעַ “he will not be satisfied” that follows in the next line.

19. See Delitzsch 1920: 111–112 § 110^{a-c} for other examples of the confusion of the ם and ן.

20. See also Gal 3:11 and Heb 10:38–39.