Five Arabic cognates, coupled with a reordering of the verses in Hab 2:1–5, clarify the meaning of this difficult passage. 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. The Arabic cognates are

1. **(qās)** “a narrator, preacher,” a synonym of **(ḥātib)** “one who recites, exhorts, preaches from a pulpit” and delivers an exhortation or sermon called a **(ḥūbat)** (Lane 1885: 2528).

2. **(rūd)** “to train, to disciplined, or subdued oneself (through piety)” (Lane 1867: 1186).

3. **(‘abala)** “he cut it, or, cut it off, so as to extirpate it,” with **(‘abalahu ʿabūlu)** “death separated him, cut him off, extirpated him” being said of a man when he has died; as well as **(‘abilati ʿabūlu)** “my separator [from my companions] is death, or shall be death alone” (Lane 1874: 1941–1942).

4. **(fāh)** “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) האר / חארה (hwr / hâra) “he threw it down, demolished it,”
and חארת אלים (hâraʾ alqawma) “he slew the people” (Lane 1893: 2906).

The first of these five is the cognate of the יִכְפָּר in Hab 2:3,
which has traditionally been read as יִכְפָּר “end” (the Septuagint
has πέρας). The second is the cognate of the יֵרַד in 2:2,
which has traditionally been read as יֵרַד “to run” (the Septuagint
has διώκειν).

The third is the cognate of the נמליה, which was in the Vor-
lage of the Septuagint (which has ὑποστείληταί “should he
draw back”), differing from the MT which has נמליה “was
swollen (with a tumor or hemorrhoid).” The נמליה is generally
paraphrased as “his soul which is lifted up” (KJV); “his
soul is puffed up” (ASV); “he that is unbelieving” (DRA,
following the Vulgate’s qui incredulus est); “a presumptuous
one” (YLT); and even “he shall fail” (RSV). 3

Moreover, the MT נמליה was translated by Aquila as νωσελευομένον “slothful,” apparently from a text with נמליה “slothful” instead of the MT נמליה. The Targum and the Peshîtta evidently read נמליה as נמליה “iniquity”—indicating
that the second letter in this word was so poorly written, or
became so badly damaged, that it could read as ב or ב or
א or א. 4

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

Thanks, however, to the Septuagintal ὑποστειληζαλ, the stem עָבַל and its Arabic cognate ‘abal (‘abala) “he went away, he died” comes into focus. This stem occurs in the name of Mount Ebal (אבול), 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” (= עובל [‘abûlu]) in light of the implicit and explicit curses of death which were pronounced (Deuteronomy 27–28) from Mount Ebal.5

The fourth Arabic word is the cognate of the מ in the verb מֵאָמַר in 2:3, traditionally understood as מָר “to blow, to breathe.” The Septuagint has ἀνατέλει “it shall shoot forth,” as if the word were מָלַר “to bud, sprout,” rather than מָר. 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 ד in the MT דָּרִי in 2:5, usually interpreted as “haughty” (= the Septuagint’s ἀλαζων).

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

2:1

עַלְמָמָר עַלְמָר
וְהָאֲתִמְעָר עַלְמָר
וְאָבָדַה לְאָמָר הָעַדִּיר
וֹמָה אֲשֶׁר עַלְּהָלְכָּהּ.
HABAKKUK 2:1–5

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

For a vision was promised7 to the protestor, its intent would be understood8 by the preacher,9 and it would not disappoint.10 If it seem slow, wait for it. It will surely come; it will not be postponed.12

2:2

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

Then Yahweh answered me, saying: “Write the vision! Make it plain upon tablets, so that the one reading it may be disciplined!”13
“Behold!
The unrighteous soul has been cut off, but the righteous lives by his faithfulness.”

2:5

Indeed, the strongman demolishes and cannot be sated. 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 being a part of Yahweh’s response to Habakkuk’s questions. If the MT נָפַל was read as נָפַל, and the נָפַל repointed as נָפַל, then the נָפַל 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: וַיִּהְיֶה לָעַר יְשָׁרָה נָפַל בָּא “the unrighteous soul has been cut off” (a Pu’al perfect, whether the verb is a masculine, as proposed here, or a feminine with the MT), whereas the righteous lives (וַיִּהְיֶה, 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: (1) the “wicked” (who oppressed) and (2) the “man more righteous 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—or oppression by fellow Judean kinsmen—were from 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 under-
stood 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.’” 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*

2. Wellhausen (1898) and Stade (1906), cited by Ward (1911: 19) proposed as similar transposition of 2: 18 and 19.

3. The only possible Arabic cognates of Hebrew נָשָׁל (gafala) “he was unmindful, forgetful, neglectful” and מֶגֶל (gyfl) “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 ב and ו is well attested, and numerous examples have been the cited by Delitzsch (1920: 115 §118).

5. Lexicographers of Biblical Hebrew have cited only the Arabic עִיבָל (‘abala) “to be bulky, chubby, stout” (BDB 716; KBS 2: 816), with no mention of the noun עִיבּוּל (‘abûlu)“death” or the verb עִיבָל (‘abala) “to hold back, to take away,” the latter of which the Septuagint translators obviously knew. The Hebrew הבּל/בל by-forms meaning “separation, death” need to be recognized along with הבּל/בל “iron” and הבּל/בל “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 כֵּן כִּי יָצָא הִוא כְּעֵצָה כָלָה כָּלִים וּכְּפָרָה “to appoint” may have had nuances of “threat” and/
8. Reading here instead of the MT מָשֶׁר, “appointed time or place,” the Hipḫʾīl participle מְשָׁרָה, from הִשָּׁר “to exhort, to protest, to warn, to testify” (BDB 730) or its by-form מְשֹׁר (with the noun מָשָׁר/מסך “to be good”).

9. The meaning of MT קֵלָל, “(the vision) breathes/exhales to the end,” is, to say the least, ambiguous if not senseless. Interpretations which make הֵשָׁה “to breathe, to exhale” a synonym of פָּרָה “to hasten” or הָוָה “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 ἁμη “to bud, sprout, shoot” for the MT קֵלָל. (Delitzsch [1920: 111 §109a] cited many other examples of the confusion of a מ and a ר.)

The MT קֵלָל needs to be repointed as קֵלָל, and recognized as the פֹּע verb כִּלָּל, a by-form of the כָּל verb כִּלָּל (see GKC 77c for other examples of פֹּע verbs having the same meaning). This כִּלָּל is the cognate of the Arabic فَاحَا (fāha), cited above which is a synonym of لَاحَا (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.

10. The MT בֵּן “to the end” needs to be repointed to בֵּן “to the narrator/preacher,” with בֵּן being the cognate of גָּאָש (qāṣ), noted above, with the verb meaning “he related, 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 (= חָפַד), 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 قاصص (qasas) means a novelist or storyteller.)

11. Following the translation in BDB 469.

12. Repointing the MT רָעָה as a Pu’al or Hoph’al (Jastrow 40).

13. The MT רָעָה 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 חָפַד תֵואר (“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 רָעָה is to be blamed for these mistranslations—even though it is the only רָעָה currently in the Hebrew lexicons. The right רָעָה has yet to make it into the lexicons, which is the רָעָה that is the cognate of רָעָה רָעָה (rû’d/râ’da) “to train, discipline oneself,” introduced above. The phrase רָעָה רָעָה בְּתַקּוּ (rawwīd nafsaka bittaqwî) “discipline thyself well by piety” provides the clue to the meaning of רָעָה in this verse.

14. The final ש of נַפְסָךְ needs to be shifted to the נָפְסָךְ, thereby making the verb masculine (נָפְסָךְ) and the noun definite (נָפְסָךְ). (The final ל needs to be shifted to the ל, therefore making the verb masculine (לָמֲךָר) and the noun definite (לָמֲךָר).

15. Removing רָעָה רָעָה 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 נבון “man, servant” as scriptio defective for נבון “mighty man” which, given the political overtones of the passage, is best rendered “strongman.”

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

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

19. See Delitzsch 1920: 111–112 § 110 for other examples of the confusion of the נ and ל.


* For bibliography go to http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/cbbp-bibliography.html.