

An Emendation of Hab 2:4a in the Light of Hab 1:5

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הנה עפלה לא ישרה נפשו בו

See, swollen, not straight is his throat in him!
See, presumptuous, not right is his desire in him!

הנ הפעל הלא ישרה נפשו בו¹

Consider the doer: Is not his desire in him right?

1. INTRODUCTION

If texts were landscapes, with the amount of commentary written on them marked as elevations, Hab 2:4 would be an Ophel, a hill rising above its neighbourhood,² and this in spite of the fact that the book of Habakkuk has plenty more to offer in the area of textual and exegetical difficulties.³ It may seem

¹ Note that distinct final forms of letters only developed in the Persian period and were used with consistency only much later, see E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (3rd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 197.

² Apart from the major commentaries and R. D. Haak, *Habakkuk* (VTSup, 44; Leiden: Brill, 1992), see J. A. Emerton, “The Textual and Linguistic Problems of Habakkuk II. 4–5,” *JTS* 28 (1977), 1–18, for a valuable overview of some earlier studies, and subsequently, e.g., J. G. Janzen, “Habakkuk 2.2–4 in the Light of Recent Philological Advances,” *HTR* 73 (1980), 53–78; J. M. Scott, “A New Approach to Habakkuk II 4–5A,” *VT* 35 (1985), 330–340; K. Seybold, “Habakkuk 2,4b und sein Kontext,” in S. Kreuzer and K. Küthi (eds.), *Zur Aktualität des Alten Testaments: Festschrift für Georg Sauer zum 65. Geburtstag* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992), 99–107, reprinted in K. Seybold, *Studien zur Psalmenauslegung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1998), 189–198; A. Pinker, “Habakkuk 2.4: An Ethical Paradigm or a Political Observation?” *JOT* 32 (2007), 91–112.

³ See O. Dangl, “Habakkuk in Recent Research,” *CurBS* 9 (2001), 131–168, for a general review which did not have the space to discuss this particular issue. An earlier, more detailed, review by P. Jöcken, *Das Buch Habakuk: Darstellung der Geschichte seiner kritischen Erforschung mit einer eigenen Beurteilung* (BBB, 48; Köln-Bonn: Hanstein Verlag, 1977) rarely concerns itself with textual and linguistic matters and

presumptuous therefore to elevate the hill further by offering yet another solution to the problems of the first half of the verse. But it is clear that we have not reached a consensus and maybe we have not thoroughly explored the full range of options. Few of the ingredients that make up my fresh proposal are entirely new but I have put them to a different use.

Above is the consonantal text underlying the MT,⁴ followed by two of the translations which have the most merit.⁵ The first rendering is close to one offered by Robert D. Haak.⁶ It echoes the swallowing motif in 1:13 and prepares for the theme of not getting sated in the following verse.⁷ Alternatively, נפש can be understood as “desire” in 2:4–5. This and the only other occurrence of a verb עפל, in Num 14:44, lends support to the concept of “swollen with pride” which gives us the second translation offered above.⁸ The idea behind the more concrete image of the first rendering might be that the throat gets blocked up with food guzzled up by the glutton until the blockage of a grotesquely extended throat leads to death. This fits with the promise of an end to the greedy grabbing of nations and peoples of which verse 5 speaks but this is arguably rather fanciful and it is not clear is whether ישרה (“straight/smooth”) is an appropriate word to form such a contrast; a smooth/straight throat is perhaps not readily understood as an image for moderation and good health. It is maybe easier to contrast presumptuousness with a right, i.e.,

maybe for this reason does not offer anything much to contribute to this discussion.

⁴ B. Ego, A. Lange, H. Lichtenberger, and K. De Troyer (eds.), *The Minor Prophets* (Biblica Qumranica, 3b; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 132, conveniently illustrates early textual diversity. The Targum probably does not represent a translation of a recoverable Hebrew text different from MT, see R. P. Gordon in *The Targum of the Minor Prophets* (The Aramaic Bible, 14; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 151.

In this article Hebrew is usually written without vowels when the discussion concerns ancient forms of the text, but with vowels when the MT is cited.

⁵ These two are offered to suggest a range of possibilities on a spectrum. If I had to opt for one translation, I would pick one which contrasts a “swollen” with a “judicious” desire or “appetite”.

⁶ “Behold, swollen, not smooth, will be his gullet within him” (Haak, *Habakkuk*, 57–59).

⁷ Cf. 2:16. F. I. Andersen, *Habakkuk: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 25; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 208, interprets “throat” as an organ of (wicked) speech rather than (greedy) swallowing.

⁸ DCH offers three entries for a verb עפל. The first (“swell”) and second (“be heedless”) try to account both for Hab 2:4 (as pual perfect or, emended, as qal participle) and for the hiphil in Num 14:44; cf. G. R. Driver, “Linguistic and Textual Problems: Minor Prophets. III,” *JTS* 39 (1938), 393–405, 395. The third (“become weak”) only accounts for the pual perfect in Hab 2:4 and goes back to a proposal taken up in *HAL-AT*, based initially on an emendation to the root עלף. It is not clear to me on what basis the possibility of III עלף = עפל is contemplated.

appropriate desire. The reference back to the hiphil verb in Num 14:44 in this context has a long history.⁹ The existence of a related noun עִפְלָה to refer to a thickening or swelling of tissue and the designation “Ophel” for an (elevated?) area in the city of Jerusalem and one in Samaria seem equally relevant. They all point in the direction of the root, which has an equivalent in Arabic, being used for a swollen appetite or pride although both the use of a pual and the reference to something non-material is unique.

Our brief discussion so far has hinted at the problems with the MT. The two most commonly noted problems in addition to the difficulties with עִפְלָה are the lack of an antecedent in the verse to בו and the unsatisfactory relationship between this colon and the following (וְצַדִּיק בְּאֵמוּנָתוֹ יֵחִיָּהּ, “and a righteous one will live by his faithfulness”). Many readers look for a noun in the first colon to contrast with צַדִּיק and a verb indicating an outcome which contrasts with יֵחִיָּהּ. In other words, they expect the first colon to say in one way or another that the wicked will perish.¹⁰

The ancient versions offer a good deal of variety, some attesting a proto-Masoretic text, others suggesting confusion over its meaning. 1QpHab offers a text similar to the MT for the first four words, הנה עופלה לוא ישרה. The rest of the verse is missing because the manuscript is damaged at this point.¹¹ The LXX translator, beginning the verse with ἐὰν, apparently divided after הן but the Naḥal Hever scroll and Aquila attest הנה (ἰδοὺ). Glossing ὑποστειλγεται, the LXX may reflect עלפה for עִפְלָה,¹² a reading which has been adopted by several scholars and is also found in two medieval manuscripts cited by Kennicott, once in plene עולפה.¹³ It is possible, however, that the LXX only reflects uncertainty about the meaning of עִפְלָה. The same may be true for the substitution of σ for ע. The earliest witness to this reading is the use of σκαστία in the Naḥal

⁹ See conveniently D. Barthélemy (ed.), *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament, vol 3: Ezéchiel, Daniel et les 12 Prophètes, Rapport final du Comité pour l'analyse textuelle de l'Ancien Testament hébreu* (OBO 50/3; Fribourg: Éditions universitaires; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 842–843.

¹⁰ Somewhat differently the Targum: “Behold, the wicked think that all these things are not so, but the righteous shall live by the truth of them.” (Translation by R. P. Gordon, see above.)

¹¹ Similarly, 4Q82^s only confirms the sequence ישרה נפש which is not relevant for our discussion. The Wadi Murabba‘at scroll is too fragmentary to help us with this verse.

¹² Laurenz Reinke, *Der Prophet Habakuk: Einleitung, Grundtext und Uebersetzung, nebst einem vollständigen philologisch-kritischen und historischen Commentar* (Brixen: Al. Weger’s Buchhandlung, 1870), 27, claims that Jerome used “retraxerit te,” which would correspond to LXX. This reading is not reflected in (later editions of) the Vulgate.

¹³ See Barthélemy, *Critique textuelle*, 3:841–42. Cf. HALOT entry עלף. Andersen, *Habakkuk*, 208, wonders whether in fact the root עלף is behind Aquila’s rendering *νωχελουμένου* (“being sluggish”), cf. Isa 51:20.

Hever scroll (cf. Aquila).¹⁴ Like the פ/ל metathesis, it has found some support among medieval exegetes.¹⁵ Using the עול root (“iniquity”), the Peshitta reads ו for פ and thus either reflects a Hebrew text which had עולה,¹⁶ or creatively interprets a difficult text. This, too, has found a following among modern scholars, beginning with Julius Wellhausen.¹⁷ It is not obvious how one might get from עפלה to the Vulgate’s rendering “incredulus” (which in Isa 21:2 is used to render one of the two occurrences of בגד). What is clear is that readers have struggled with the first half of this verse for a long time. With reference to the textual diversity in the versions, Andersen suggests, “In the face of such chaos, all one can do is resign to the likelihood that the original text is irretrievably lost or else struggle to make the best of the MT as it is.”¹⁸ Others, of course, more boldly have sought to retrieve the original text by way of various proposed emendations.¹⁹ Today this is usually done in the spirit expressed by J. J. M. Roberts, “Any interpretation...will be clouded by a certain amount of hypothetical guesswork.”²⁰ It is in this spirit that I offer the following proposal. While I am convinced that it is possible to make sense of the MT, the difficulties invite exploration of other options.

2. RE-READING HAB 2:4A

The opening word of Hab 2:4 signals the citation of the vision of which vv. 2–3 spoke. In a recent full discussion of הנה, Cynthia L. Miller-Naudé and Christo H. J. van der Merwe classified Hab 2:4 with verses in which a speaker draws attention to something newsworthy. This is an avenue I wish to pursue in spite of the fact that the classification does not actually fit the version of the text reflected in the MT.²¹ The representative example for this category is Josh 24:27 which they render “Consider this stone, it will be a witness against

¹⁴ The MT only attests the form אפל but 1QIsa^a has the feminine form אפלה (אפלה) in Isa 29:16.

¹⁵ Cf. Barthélemy, *Critique textuelle*, 3:843. For a more recent juxtaposition of “puffed up” and being “in darkness” see the Me’am Lo’ez anthology: Shmuel Yerushalmi, *The Book of Trei-Asar, vol. 2: Micab – Malachi* (trans. and adapted by Zvi Faier; New York: Moznaim, 1997), 170–171.

¹⁶ So already Reinke, *Der Prophet Habakuk*, 30.

¹⁷ Julius Wellhausen, *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten – Fünftes Heft: Die kleinen Propheten übersetzt, mit Noten* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1892), 163.

¹⁸ Andersen, *Habakuk*, 209.

¹⁹ See above n. 2 for literature reviewing earlier proposals, cf. Barthélemy, *Critique textuelle*, 3:841.

²⁰ J. J. M. Roberts, *Nabum, Habakuk, Zephaniab* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 111.

²¹ This was conceded by C. H. J. van der Merwe, who is responsible for this part of the essay, in personal conversation. He now calls his classification erroneous, while observing that there is no ready alternative classification for the text as it stands.

us.”²² An analysis along those lines would strengthen our expectation that a noun should follow הנה, assuming that הנה not only signals the beginning of the vision but within the vision presents a specific object to the attention of the addressees.²³

There are a few possibilities for emendation which would offer the required noun. The best known may be Wellhausen’s הָעוֹל (“the evildoer”) with possible support from the Peshitta and maybe the Targum (see above). This could be linked to the use of the root עול in v. 12. While the addition of the direct article ה can be explained easily, either by different word division (cf. LXX) or by assuming haplography, the deletion of ה at the end of the word is harder to explain. The פ/ו interchange could not have happened orally, as the reconstructed word sounds very different from the Masoretic word, nor is it known as a frequently made copying error although ו and פ are similar in some scripts. But while העול fits the context well, it is maybe not likely that עפלה could have arisen from it by accident.

Wilhelm Rudolph suggested a metathesis of the first two letters, a proposal which was taken up in modified form by Klaus Seybold.²⁴ He took the resulting noun פְּעֵלָה to mean “punishment” with debatable support from Isa 65:7; Pss 17:4; 28:4; and 109:20. Aaron Pinker objects that “‘punishment’ would hardly balance צדיק in the following hemistich”²⁵ but Rudolph and Seybold would be able to deflect this criticism by pointing out that on their proposal the opening words are the heading and צדיק is in parallelism either with ישרה or יחיה. Pinker is right, however, to observe that the support for the translation “punishment” is very tenuous and this must be one reason for the low take-up of Rudolph’s emendation by other scholars. This weakness likely led Seybold to the proposal of emending further to פְּלִילָה (only attested in Isa 16:3).²⁶ This

²² C. L. Miller-Naudé and C. H. J. van der Merwe, “Hinneh and Mirativity in Biblical Hebrew,” *HS* 52 (2011), 53–81. A good example with a living object is Ps 52:9 [ET, 7], where one might translate “Consider this man who has not made God his stronghold...”

²³ Cf. F. I. Andersen, “Lo and Behold! Taxonomy and Translation of Biblical Hebrew הנה,” in M. F. J. Baasten and W. Th. van Peursen (eds.), *Hamlet on a Hill: Semitic and Greek Studies Presented to Professor T. Muraoka on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (OLA, 118; Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 25–56, on the observation that הנה “is best classified as a presentative” (p. 52).

²⁴ Rudolph, *Micah-Nahum-Habakuk-Zechariah* (KAT, 13/3; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1975), 212–213; Seybold, “Habakuk 2,4b,” 206. Seybold leans towards an emendation to פְּלִילָה (attested in Isa 16:3) which gives “Urteil” (judgement) for Rudolph’s “Strafe” (punishment). This emendation incorporates the third word (לֵא) which would thus disappear, cf. *Nahum, Habakuk, Zephanja* (ZBK:AT 24/2; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1991), 66. Rudolph suggested instead that לאיש had been lost through haplography.

²⁵ Cf. Pinker, “Habakkuk 2.4,” 98.

²⁶ This gives him “Urteil” (judgement) for Rudolph’s “Strafe”

further emendation incorporates לא which would thus disappear. Rudolph retained לא but assumed that לאיש had been lost through haplography. In both cases, the emendation is as extensive as Wellhausen's was. I believe that a less drastic emendation with a more straightforward understanding of the root פעל is possible.

While rejecting Rudolph's emendation, with good reason, Pinker notes that four words in 1:5–6 are echoed in Hab 2:3–4 and accepts that this lends “support for understanding עפלה as פעלה through homophonic correspondence.”²⁷ He reckons, however, that “the nebulous nature of the referent for פעלה *vis-à-vis* the very specific צדיק in the parallel hemistich” is a “major problem.”²⁸ But if the root פעל, like צדיק, is traced back to ch. 1, it is not nebulous at all. Interestingly, פעל is used in an initially mysterious way, namely without an obvious subject, in Hab 1:5 and only subsequently clarified (YHWH is doing an incredible deed by way of Babylonian expansion). A reference to the divine agent is suitable here in 2:4, if one follows the word-divisions which Pinker suggests.²⁹ Seeing an allusion back to 1:5 means of course that the root פעל retains its common meaning. This removes the need to propose elaborate emendations to find a reference to judgement or punishment in this first colon.

If the second word of the verse was indeed originally a participle or a noun, it seems likely that it had the direct article attached. As indicated above, the direct article might have been lost either through haplography or through different spacing.³⁰ A case can be made either way but the latter is assumed in the textual version presented at top of this essay, cf. LXX but interpreting הן as functionally equivalent to הנה. More importantly, I propose another re-spacing of characters at the end of the emended word to produce הפעל הלא. If, with הפעל, the vision originally referred to the doer of the deed in Hab 1:15, the statement לא ישרה נפשו בו is entirely

(punishment), cf. his *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephania* (ZBK:AT 24/2; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1991), 66.

²⁷ Pinker, “Habakkuk 2.4,” 99. The relevant words in 1:5–6 are והתמהו תמהו (in 2:3 יתמהמה פעל) (in 2:4 עפלה), תאמינו (in 2:4 באמונתו), and הנני (in 2:4 הנה).

²⁸ Pinker, “Habakkuk 2.4,” 99. He considers a reference to “Babylon's treatment of Judah.”

²⁹ Pinker proposes reading הנה עפלה לא הן העפל הלא for עפלה לא. Following Scott's earlier proposal, he argues that העפל refers to Jerusalem's fortified acropolis, the Ophel (“Habakkuk 2.4,” 100). This emendation is less invasive than mine, only requiring a re-spacing of characters, but it relies on attributing an unusual meaning to both Ophel (finding a reference to the city's rulers) and the verbal phrase (interpreting it as “being satisfied with something”). In addition, he proposes a further emendation in 2:4b to make for a better parallelism with his new understanding of 2:4a.

³⁰ Whether or not ancient Hebrew texts were written in *scriptio continua*, it is clear that the spacing was often minimal and sometimes ambiguous, cf. Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 208–209, 252.

implausible and must have been understood as a rhetorical question, most likely marked by ה.³¹ In other words, the earlier text would have read הן הפעל הלא,³² unless the later text is the result of haplography in which case the earlier would have read הן הפעלה הלא. “The one who does it” (הפעלה) would be perfectly possible here but הפעל (“the doer”) works equally well, as the context of the book makes it clear what deed is in view, and assuming a different word division in two places has the advantage of keeping the same number of letters as the received text.

If my overall conjecture is right, the tiny shift of ה on the page, marking a different word division, may have prompted the other changes. The misreading of the grapheme ה as belonging to פעל rather than לא makes little difference to הפעל, merely making the object explicit albeit in a general way, but crucially loses the interrogative, turning the rhetorical question into its opposite. Once the text was understood as making a negative statement about someone, a different referent had to be found than the one doing an amazing deed in 1:5. פעלה no longer made sense and Num 14:44 may have come to the rescue in suggesting עפלה.

These deliberations point towards understanding נפש as “desire” and ישרה as judging this desire to be “right” whether in the sense of morally “upright” or in the sense of “straightforward” as opposed to twisted. While this has been a common way of reading the phrase, it needs to be defended in the face of Janzen’s strong objection to any translation which renders the verb ישרה (יִשְׂרָה) similarly to how one might render the adjective ישרה (יִשְׂרָה).³³ He claims that “verbal forms in every other instance have to do, literally or figuratively, with locomotion along a path, or making straight such a path.”³⁴ In fact, only fifteen other occurrences of the qal are attested, three of which are outside the Hebrew Bible.³⁵ Of the biblical occurrences outside Habakkuk all but one are with the phrase “in the eyes of” which refers to a positive value

³¹ An interrogative sentence follows a הנה clause also, e.g., in 2 Kgs 10:4; Ezek. 13:12; 17:10. Good parallels for the use of הנה to present something about which a negative statement is made can be found in Ps. 40:10 [ET, 9]; 52:9 [ET, 7] and Ezek. 4:14.

³² It would be possible to adopt my reading of the text without any re-spacing of characters, “Behold a doer: is not his desire in him right?”, but I do not consider it likely that this rhetorical question could have remained unmarked and “doer” would most likely have had a direct article.

³³ Janzen’s objection is to readings of the Masoretic text and therefore applies only indirectly to our discussion. The underlying consonantal text could of course be read as either verb or adjective. But it will be useful to show that the Masoretic reading of the consonantal text can be retained without harm to the interpretation offered here.

³⁴ Janzen, “Habakkuk 2:2–4,” 63; cf. Pinker, “Habakkuk 2.4,” 101 (n. 39).

³⁵ Sir 39:24; 4QJub^d 21:15; 11QShirShabb 3:6 are listed in *DCH*.

judgement. I am not at all convinced that in any of these cases locomotion is implied.³⁶ This leaves the single non-metaphorical instance, 1 Sam 6:12, which speaks of young bulls going straight on the road to Beth-Shemesh. This is hardly sufficient evidence to demand a distancing of the verb in the *qal* from the related nominal and adjectival forms, and especially so in the light of the fact that only one of the extra-biblical occurrences suggests locomotion, namely 11QShirShabb which in col. vii refers to the celestial chariotry not turning but going straight.³⁷ Sir 39:24 claims that to the faithful God's ways are straight. While it is of course implied that the faithful will walk in God's ways, the reference itself is not to locomotion or to a path being made straight but to the contrast between smooth ways and ways which are full of pitfalls. 4QJub^d speaks of Abraham asking Isaac to carry out God's commandment so that he will be "upright" in all his deeds.³⁸ In sum, while the verb in the *qal* can refer to locomotion, the standard dictionaries are correct in glossing "be straight, be upright, be level, be right" alongside "go straight ahead," as frequently no locomotion is implied. As with the adjective, the reference to something being even, level, straight, or right need not imply a moral judgement although it can do so.

Some have objected to such a reading on the grounds that, unlike the "heart" (לב/לבב),³⁹ "desire" (נפש) is nowhere else said to be, or not to be, ישרה.⁴⁰ But the phrase "upright heart" (ישר לבב) usually characterises in effect the whole life of a person,⁴¹ while the reference here may be more specific. The question at hand is not whether YHWH is, generally speaking, "upright" but whether the deed for which he claims responsibility (cf. 1:5) and which had such a disastrous impact

³⁶ Janzen claims an implicit reference to a "way" or "path" that is straight but the noun most commonly used is דֶּבַר. There is not a single instance of a (metaphorical) path or way being straight in someone's eyes.

³⁷ I am not entirely sure that this is the reference given in *DCH*, as I cannot correlate "11QShirShabb 3:6," which apparently uses the reference system in Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, to which I do not have access, to *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*. The Song is based on Ezekiel 1 which does not use the verb ישר in this context.

³⁸ See F. García Martínez and E. J. C. Tigchelaar (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition, vol. 1: 1Q1 – 4Q273* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 466–467. The reference seems to be Jub 21:12 rather than 21:15 (which is not extant in this manuscript), as given in *DCH*.

³⁹ לב: Job 33:3; Ps 7:11 [ET, 10]; 11:2; 32:11; 36:11 [ET, 10]; 64:11 [ET, 10]; 94:15; 97:11; 125:4. לבב: Deut 9:5; 2 Kgs 10:15; 1 Chr 29:17; 2 Chr 29:34; Ps 119:7.

⁴⁰ E.g., Haak, *Habakkuk*, 58.

⁴¹ Some of the uses with לבב in particular (2 Kgs 10:15 and 1 Chr 29:17; 2 Chr 29:34) can be read as referring more specifically to particular decisions or deeds rather than a whole life commitment but the latter seems implied in the great majority of cases.

on Judah was done with a crooked desire.⁴² In other words, the question is whether, in using the Babylonians, YHWH's passion is straightforward, presumably in the sense of truly desiring justice to be done, or whether his desire is in fact twisted, anger gone out of control. The question was voiced in 1:12 where the prophet expresses his anguished hope that the Babylonians will not make a complete end of the people of God (לֹא נִמּוּת)⁴³ but were ordained for מִשְׁפָּט. The "why?" (e.g., 1:3 and 1:12) is at least as important in Habakkuk's complaint as the "how long?" (1:2). On the proposed emendation the revelation in 2:4 would begin to give reassurance on the "why" question, just as 2:5 begins to address the "how long" question. Neither gives a full answer but 2:4 would indicate that there is an upright desire behind the raising of the Babylonians, as 2:5 indicates that the Babylonian evil cannot last for ever.

It is also worth considering whether the use of יִשְׂרָאֵל with נֶפֶשׁ is implicitly in contrast to a נֶפֶשׁ that is dislocated, i.e., alienated, as in Jer 6:8; Ezek 23:17, 18 (twice), 22, 28 (with נִקְעָה/יִקְעָה). This would further strengthen the link with 1:12 which appeals to the relationship between YHWH and his people, as the prophet implores that there has to be a positive purpose to the calamity. While YHWH's reply in 2:4 does not in fact claim such a positive purpose, an affirmation of right intentions could specifically be a claim that YHWH's self is still directed towards Israel, not turned away in alienation from his people. But this must remain tentative, as to my knowledge יִשְׂרָאֵל and יִקְעָה are nowhere explicit antonyms.

A final question needs to be considered. Does YHWH have a נֶפֶשׁ? The construct נֶפֶשׁ יְהוָה is not attested and the use of נֶפֶשׁ with reference to God is rare and sporadic, but it is not unknown, especially in the prophetic literature where most such occurrences are found. Nearly always the context is the one just mentioned above, namely of intense, passionate aversion, although a positive use is found, e.g., in Isa 42:1.⁴⁴ The more common use of נֶפֶשׁ in connection with God's passionate rejection of his people may well provide a background to its use here in Hab 2:4, even without the more specific claim that יִשְׂרָאֵל is the antonym of יִקְעָה.

⁴² While נֶפֶשׁ is used in various contexts to refer to the whole person, the point here is that in characterising a person as righteous לִבְבִּי/לֵב is used but not נֶפֶשׁ, so that its more specific reference to desire is more likely.

⁴³ The first person plural in MT is also found in LXX and probably not the result of a scribal emendation, cf. C. McCarthy, *The Tiqqune Sopherim and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament* (OBO, 36; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 105–111.

⁴⁴ Cf. the entries by C. Westermann's in *THAT* 2:71–96 (cols. 91–92) and H. Seebass in *TDOT* 9:497–519 (p. 516).

3. CONCLUSION

Habakkuk experienced the devastating consequences of Babylonian hegemony for the rule of law and order within Judah as elsewhere (1:2–4). The Torah, meant to safeguard God’s justice, was compromised under an onslaught that had been identified in an earlier prophecy (1:5–11, probably cited in the complaint *ad sensum* in a new and more scathing form) as God’s work: “Look at the nations and observe, and astonish yourselves, be astonished! For one is about to do a deed in your days (which) you would not believe, if it were told” (1:5).⁴⁵

The prophet argues that surely the use of Babylonian violence must ultimately be “for justice” (1:12) but there was no sign of this. YHWH’s toleration of evil raises the question whether the divine desire is truly for justice or aims for the destruction of YHWH’s people. Habakkuk’s complaint is that YHWH’s work seems to be destructive and not at all conducive to the victory of justice.

On the reading suggested here the answer, the vision on the tablet, comes by way of a description of all three parties, YHWH in 2:4a (“Consider the doer: Is not his desire in him right?”), the righteous in 2:4b who is promised life in continuing faithfulness, and the proud Babylonians in 2:5 who are compared to someone who in his greed had too much to drink and as a result will stumble and be overcome, as elaborated in 2:6ff. If the **הַנִּיחַ** of the earlier prophecy pointed to YHWH as the cause of the rise of the Babylonians (1:6), the second revelation, introduced by **וְהִנֵּה**, suggests that YHWH’s desire in doing this was right and offers this as the ground for the hope and promise that things will turn out all right in the end.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ For reasons why ch. 1 should be read as a unified complaint which cites an earlier oracle rather than a dialogue, see, e.g., M. H. Floyd, “Prophetic Complaints About the Fulfillment of Oracles in Habakkuk 1:12–17 and Jeremiah 15:10–18,” *JBL* 110 (1991), 397–418, and idem, *Minor Prophets: Part 2*, (FOOTL, 22; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 85–86; G. T. M. Prinsloo, “Reading Habakkuk as a Literary Unit: Exploring the Possibilities,” *OTE* 12 (1999), 515–535; D. Cleaver-Bartholomew, “An Alternative Approach to Hab 1,2–2,20,” *SJOT* 17 (2003), 206–225. There were already 19th century interpreters who considered vv. 5–11 an earlier oracle (e.g., Giesebrecht, Wellhausen) although they did not offer an integrated reading of the chapter.

⁴⁶ I want to thank my friends Karl Möller, Chris Thomson, Steffen Jenkins and Matthew Mason for casting their critical eyes over this essay, helping me to present the argument more clearly.