

“This Wine Is Treacherous” (Hab 2:5a): Reading Condemnations against Violence in Habakkuk 2:5–20 from an Ecotheological Perspective

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Abstract

This study engages in an ecotheological reading of Habakkuk 2:5–20, a text riddled with text-critical, redaction-critical, and theological problems. I argue that the central theme permeating this text is the condemnation of human hubris and self-centredness, resulting in violent behaviour, whether it is perpetrated against nature, animals, or humanity in general (Hab 2:17). Utilising a hermeneutics of reminiscence as point of departure, the study argues that the book of Habakkuk is an ancient Near Eastern text bound to its own worldview(s) and societal issues. However, reading Hab 2:5–20 from the perspective of victims of violence against the background of exile and marginalisation opens avenues for ecotheological application. Such a reading recognises both the integrity of the ancient text and its relevance for modern readers struggling with urgent issues that did not exist in biblical times.

Keywords: book of Habakkuk; Habakkuk 2:5–20; ecology; ecotheology; hermeneutics of reminiscence; Minor Prophets; Babylonian Empire; Persian period

Introduction

Yes, indeed—this wine is treacherous:
 An arrogant man—he does not come to rest,
 (he) who opened like Sheol his throat,
 and he is like death—yes, he is not satisfied;
 so he gathered to him all the nations,
 and he collected to him all the peoples

Habakkuk 2:5

We are in danger of destroying ourselves by our greed and stupidity. We cannot remain looking inwards at ourselves on a small and increasingly polluted and overcrowded planet.

Stephen Hawking

I deliberately introduce this brief study of Hab 2:5–20 with these two quotes. The first comes from an ancient biblical text denouncing human arrogance (Hab 2:5) and—as a contextual reading will reveal—the resulting unrestrained violence perpetrated against nature and nations. I deliberately link this to a quote by the famous British theoretical physicist and cosmologist, Stephen Hawking, on human greed, which he equated to stupidity that can only result in the destruction of humanity’s only life-giving and life-sustaining planet. Nothing illustrates the stark reality of Stephen Hawking’s warning better than the current Covid-19 pandemic that is raging across the globe with devastating effects on virtually all spheres of human activity and existence. Our esteemed colleague and friend, Willie van Heerden, published extensively on the question of whether and how legitimate links can be made between an ancient text originating in a pre-modern, pre-industrial, pre-scientific world and the burning issue of an ever present, ever increasing, and ever more threatening ecological crisis.¹ I dedicate the present study to him in recognition of a lifetime of dedication to the study of the Hebrew Bible in general and applying an ecological lens when reading those texts in particular.

Habakkuk 2:5–20 is without doubt a problematic text. The suggestion that I regard these verses as a meaningful unit is already contentious. On a text-critical level, numerous verses in the unit are problematic and some are labelled virtually untranslatable. Habakkuk 2:5 is a case in point. Some commentators regard the reference to יין (the wine) as nonsensical and happily (and uncritically) follow the Peshet Habakkuk from Qumran’s reading הון (wealth) (Perlitt 2004, 67n47). The present author discussed both the demarcation of textual units and the text-critical problems of Hab 2:5 in detail elsewhere. I indicated that Hab 2:5 is a meaningful section (stanza) linking the divine reaction upon the prophet’s complaint (2:1–4) and the series of woe-exclamations laid in the mouth of all nations (2:6–20). I also discussed the text-critical problems of 2:5 in

1 For a review of South African scholarship’s contributions to “ecological readings” of the Bible, see Van Heerden (2009, 695–718).

detail (see Prinsloo 2016). On a redaction critical and composition critical level, it has become a *sine qua non* of modern critical scholarship that the five woe-oracles in 2:6–20 are not original literary units. They grew over a long period. Woe-exclamations originally directed against social wrongdoings perpetrated in Judah during the last years before the fall of the kingdom in 586 BCE were reinterpreted and reapplied to become oracles against the Neo-Babylonian Empire during exilic times (Dietrich 2016, 151–56). This essay’s limited scope will only allow me to address these complex issues in passing.

The current study adds another layer of complexity to the already complex textual and interpretational issues that confront any serious student of the little book of Habakkuk by engaging in an ecotheological reading of a specific section of the book, the section containing the contentious pronouncement referred to above (2:5), followed by a series of five woe-exclamations (2:6–20) denouncing violent behaviour and human arrogance. I argue that the central theme permeating Hab 2:5–20 is the condemnation of human hubris and self-centredness, resulting in violent behaviour, whether it is perpetrated against nature, animals, or humanity in general (Hab 2:17). My brief textual analysis of Hab 2:5 and 2:6–20 as meaningful and intertwined units (i.e., stanzas) with a particular focus will be accompanied by an ecotheological application of the text in the context of the legendary power and violence exerted by the Neo-Babylonian Empire, especially when they conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple,² as well as the appropriation of the text in the late Persian period. It is indicative of a process of the universalisation of evil which makes the book applicable to and relevant for new circumstances. I indicate that Hab 2:5–20 should be read from the perspective of victims of violence against the background of exile and marginalisation. Such a reading provides avenues for ecotheological application, while recognising both the integrity of the ancient text and its relevance for modern readers struggling with urgent issues that did not exist in biblical times.

Observations on Ecotheological Readings of the Bible, the Prophetic Corpus, and the Book of Habakkuk

The ecotheological reading of texts in the Hebrew Bible is a contentious issue, hence the remark above that the current study adds another layer of complexity to the interpretation of an already contentious book.³ It is an unavoidable fact that buzzwords of our time, like “ecology,” “ecosystems,” “climate change,” “biodiversity,” “conservation,” and many more do not occur in the Bible. The Bible is, and will always be, a product of a pre-modern mindset that grew from ancient Near Eastern

2 For a similar reading of Habakkuk 1–2 as a complaint against violence, see Dangl (1994).

3 For critical discussions of the ecotheological “trend” in biblical scholarship, see Van Dyk (2009) and Conradie (2010).

worldview(s). Those worldview(s) were decidedly anthropocentric.⁴ They regarded the self as the centre of the universe. If we are brutally honest, it remains true of humanity to this day. The American geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan (1977, 41) succinctly states: “Every person is at the center of his world, and circumambient space is differentiated in accordance with the schema of his body,” and adds, “Man is the measure. In a literal sense, the human body is the measure of direction, location, and distance” (Tuan 1977, 44). This “measure” dictates that “the earth is the human body writ large” (Tuan 1977, 89). Such “self-centredness may seem ‘selfish’ in the moral sense, but is the necessary irreducible basis for all experience. We have to start from our own self-awareness” (Wyatt 2001, 35).

For scholars reading the Bible through an ecotheological lens, this self-centredness becomes a theological and ethical problem. The Bible often expresses appreciation for the natural world. In the so-called “first” creation narrative in Genesis 1:1–2:3, for instance, the phrase *וירא אלהים ... כי טוב* (and God saw that ... (it) was good) occurs repeatedly as an indication of divine appreciation for the natural world. However, it is only after the creation of humankind and God having granted to them dominion over the natural world (Gen 1:26–30) that God sees *את כל אשר עשה והנה טוב מאד* (everything that he made, and it was very good). Read from an ecological point of view, the notion of human dominion over the natural world expressed in Gen 1:26–28, even if it is reinterpreted as responsible stewardship,⁵ is blamed for the ecological crisis facing the very existence of life on planet earth.⁶ Earth needs to be “rescued” from such an anthropocentric hermeneutical approach; she should be allowed to raise her own “voice,” and exegetes should develop geocentric hermeneutical tools to read the Bible.⁷ This naturally leads to a “human–nature” dichotomy in ecotheological readings of the Bible.

Stated in an over-simplified manner, two opposing approaches dominate ecotheological readings of the Bible, namely a theocentric or a geocentric approach (Van Heerden 2009, 698). Departing from Ricœur’s (1970, 32) distinction between opposing “schools” of hermeneutics, namely reminiscence and suspicion, Van Heerden classifies approaches to ecotheology as “retrieval” and “suspicion” (712). The first regards hermeneutics as an interpretive exercise that retrieves and restores meaning, the second as an exercise that deconstructs and assigns meaning. In the first approach, the hermeneutic key is retrieval (712). It is a covenantal or prophetic approach. Its focus is

4 The current study is not the appropriate platform to discuss the complex issue of ancient Near Eastern worldview(s) and spatial orientation(s). See Prinsloo (2013b, 9–11) for a brief discussion of the theme.

5 For a discussion of the debate on ecotheological readings of Gen 1:26–28, see Van Deventer (1996, 185–90).

6 White’s (1967) scathing criticism of the use of this passage to promote industrialisation and the alienation between humankind and nature is regarded as the catalyst for the rise of ecotheological readings of the Bible in their many guises (Horrell 2010, 2).

7 See Habel (2011) for an ecotheological “friendly” reading of Gen 1–11 in reaction to White’s criticism.

on the biblical text and “draws inspiration from the Bible and the covenantal tradition” (713). A number of key texts like Gen 1:26–28, Ps 8, and Ps 104 are read through an ecotheological lens to “rescue” the Bible from its human-centredness and indicate that the Bible—if the correct lens is applied—is, after all, “green.”⁸ In the geocentric approach, on the other hand, the hermeneutic key is suspicion. It is a sacramental or mystic approach (713). Here an ecotheological lens is applied to “rescue” the subdued voice of the natural world in biblical texts. Earth becomes an actor in her own right and her suppressed voice must be illuminated in order for modern readers to be absorbed “into the large body of earthly creatures and vice versa” (713).⁹

According to Horrell (2010, 1), “Environmental concerns are now widely recognised as among the most pressing issues facing the global community.” Given “the status of the Christian Bible as holy scripture for members of the Christian churches, it is an established and obvious strategy, as part of theological and ethical reflection, to consider what the Bible might have to ‘say’ on a given topic, whether that consideration is done with a certain naivety (as if answers could simply be found by reading out the right verses) or with a more hermeneutical and critical sophistication.” My contention is that both sides of the hermeneutical divide referred to above display “a certain naivety.” Adherents of the theocentric approach naively imply that a “right” reading strategy will reveal what the Bible actually has to say about environmental issues. Adherents of the geocentric approach naively deny the inherent ancient Near Eastern context from which the Bible grew and its concomitant and unavoidable anthropocentric focus. Stavrakopoulou (2010, 17) is correct when she asserts, “Sophisticated eco-criticism demands a multivalent and creative approach to these ancient texts in order to render them more palatable – and useful – to modernist, Western concerns about the environment and humanity’s role and place within it.”

Several routes were proposed to bridge the divide between the two approaches. I name but a few examples. Loader (1990) claims that ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature’s emphasis on the notion of order and the interrelated nature of everything in the divinely created order obviates the “human–nature” dichotomy and provides an adequate lens through which to read the Hebrew Bible from an ecological perspective. Van Heerden (2005) indicates that the creation narrative in Gen 1:1–2:3 cannot be dislodged from its

8 For examples of this approach relevant for Hebrew Bible studies, see especially the contributions by Rogerson (2010), Morgan (2010), Barton (2010), and Dell (2010).

9 Multiple examples of this approach are available in various volumes of The Earth Bible Project initiated by Norman C. Habel. See especially Habel (2000b), Habel and Wurst (2000), Habel (2001), Habel and Wurst (2001), and Habel and Trudinger (2008) for examples relevant to Hebrew Bible studies. Habel (2008) indicates that scholars involved in The Earth Bible Project expressly keep in mind six so-called “ecojustice principles,” deliberately formulated in non-theological language, in their analyses of biblical texts (2). They are intrinsic worth, interconnectedness, voice, purpose, mutual custodianship, and resistance. See Habel (2000b) for a detailed discussion of these principles. According to Habel (2008), a “radical ecological approach” (3) demands “ecological hermeneutics” (2) involving suspicion, identification, and retrieval (4–5).

exilic context. Moreover, it should be read as a harmonious literary unit from the perspective of the exiles as victims to safeguard the exegete from ignoring prominent features of the text.¹⁰ Ademiluka (2009) declares the “human–nature” dichotomy unnecessary if ecology is understood “as the relationship between organisms and their environment.” He understands environment, in turn, “in terms of a number of concentric circles, starting in the centre with our own bodies as an integral part of the earth’s ecosystems, the environment in which we live (our homes), the environment in which we work, the environment as ‘nature out there’” (526). Stulac (2015) regards the hermeneutics of suspicion with suspicion and argues that a canonical-agrarian reading of an eschatological text like Isaiah 65 allows both the literary and historical context of the chapter and its interpretative potential for the modern ecologically-minded reader to receive equal weight.

Comparatively speaking, the prophetic corpus plays a minor role in the ecotheological debate and in ecotheological readings of the Hebrew Bible. A number of “obvious” prophetic texts, notably those with an eschatological and/or apocalyptic inclination, are (repeatedly) discussed in ecotheological circles.¹¹ Conradie (2010, 296) identifies “some prophetic texts such as Isa. 9–11, 40, 65, Ezek. 36, Joel, Amos” as “favourite texts.” He declares the selection of these texts as “quite understandable since they deal explicitly with nature or with a theology of creation.”

Barton’s (2010) study on the contribution of the prophets to the ecological debate is an example of a theocentric approach using the hermeneutics of reminiscence as point of orientation. He doubts whether what he perceives as “true” prophetic utterances have much to contribute to the ecotheological debate:

I think that the great prophets of the eighth to the sixth centuries BCE concerned themselves much more obviously with interpersonal ethics than with environmental ethics, and this is certainly how they have mainly been received, both in Judaism and in Christianity. It would be anachronistic to look to them for a concern to protect the environment in the terms in which this is understood nowadays ... they thought of environmental disasters, such as drought and famine, as natural or, rather, God-given disasters, not as the result of bad agricultural techniques or anything of that kind. (47)

The “true” prophetic utterances were not concerned with “sustainability or pollution,” but whether the actions of the powerful elite brought “justice or injustice for human beings” (48). It is only “in oracles and paragraphs in the prophetic books that most

10 Van Heerden’s study (2005, 371–93) represents a critical analysis of Habel’s (2000a, 35–45) reading of Genesis 1:1–2:4a, where Habel argues that the “first” creation narrative consists of an “Earth story” (Gen 1:1–13, 20–25, 14–19; 2:1–4a) that was “contaminated” by the later addition of a “human story” (Gen 1:26–30). The “Earth story” sketches a positive picture of creation as a harmonious whole, while the “human story” then “violates” Earth by subduing her.

11 Stulac (2015, 185–86), for instance, points to two studies on Isaiah 65 (Gardner 2001, 204–18; Olley 2001, 219–29) published in the same volume of *The Earth Bible* (Habel 2001).

scholars think later than the prophets whose names they bear that we do find a concern for nature in its own right, and about human responsibility for maintaining and nurturing it” (48). Prophetic texts concerned with the notion of a covenant “older and more all-embracing than any of the covenants Old Testament scholars have traditionally studied – the covenants with Abraham or David, or the covenant made through the mediation of Moses on Mount Sinai,” share with the ancient world in general “a belief in divinely ordained order in the universe” (49). Texts like Isa 11:1–9, 24:1–13; Jer 4:23–26; Hag 1:9–11, 2:15–19 propagate the notion of “a restoration of a primal harmony between human beings and the animal and physical worlds” (51). Even these passages are not concerned with a programme of environmental reform, rather “the moral teaching is given to explain the disaster that can no longer be avoided, rather than to provide a programme for future conduct – in other words, theodicy is more of a concern than reform” (52). Nevertheless, “the rediscovery of the ‘cosmic covenant’ does have some quite positive benefits” (52) for modern concerns regarding the environment. Ecotheological engagement with prophetic literature should be done with caution (54):

We do well in turning to the Old Testament to realize that it does come from a non-modern culture, and cannot be simply applied to our world without adjustment. There are indeed themes about ‘Peace, Justice, and the Integrity of Creation’, but they work with a very different mindset from ours.

Barton (54) remains sceptical about the use of prophetic literature in modern ecological debates. For him, the focus of the prophetic literature lies on the ethical and interpersonal rather than the cosmic plane:

Peace and harmony on earth, for the great classical prophets, are achieved through justice and righteousness, and though these terms (*mishpat* and *sedaqah*) have definite cosmic overtones, they are still to be encountered primarily in the way humans behave towards each other.

Scholars with a geocentric approach using the hermeneutics of suspicion as point of orientation are more positive regarding the role of the prophets in the ecotheological debate. Four contributions in Habel and Trudinger (2008) illustrate the point. All depart in one way or another from The Earth Bible Project’s six ecojustice principles and their hermeneutics in some way reflect ecological hermeneutics’ principles of suspicion, identification, and retrieval. Loya (2008) attempts to retrieve the suppressed voice of “Earth” in Hos 4:1–3. Earth has been defiled by Israel’s sinful behaviour. Earth mourns, and therefore all creatures must suffer. Braaten (2008) highlights the role of “Earth” as a subject in Joel 1–2. God’s judgement does not only fall on the land’s human inhabitants, but also has consequences for the broader Earth community. Locusts act as Yahweh’s army (Joel 2:11, 25) and become the enemy of the rest of Earth’s community. Earth laments because she is dependent upon God and the human members of Earth community for her fortunes. Marlow (2008) argues that the voice of Earth functions like the voice of the prophet in the book of Amos, hence she should be recognised as the “other” prophet in the book. Person (2008) investigates the role of non-human

characters in the book of Jonah. They play important roles in the development of the book's plot and act as extensions of the human and divine characters. He deliberately reads "against" an anthropocentric interpretation of the book to retrieve the voice of non-human characters of Earth community in the narrative.

The book of Habakkuk plays a truly minor role in ecotheological debates. I am not aware of any "ecological" reading of the book from the perspective of the hermeneutics of reminiscence. The current study is an attempt to give voice to ecotheological concerns from this perspective. Heard (1997) made a passionate case that a book advocating divine violence against humankind and nature as an "antidote" against human violence is in dire need of a radical deconstructive reading from the perspective of the most vulnerable and exploited members of society. Heard (84–88) reads the book of Habakkuk via perceived intertextual links with Pss 109 and 137 to give "voice" to the plight of the "children," Judean and Babylonian, who were victims of human and divine violence.

I am aware of only one ecotheological reading of the book of Habakkuk (Mathews 2014) explicitly written with The Earth Bible Project's six ecojustice principles in mind. Mathews expressly states, "The question being addressed in this article is not 'what did Habakkuk say about ecology'? but 'how does the Earth raise its voice in this particular prophetic text'?" (30). To the ecojustice principle of voice she adds two principles from the field of performance criticism, namely embodiment and improvisation, to argue that the book of Habakkuk illustrates "the callousness, arrogance and destructiveness of both conquering enemy and conquering deity" (32). It is noticeable that the non-human world is given voice in the book. The principle of "embodiment in performance ... allows us to envisage the physical presence of other actors, both human and nonhuman" (33) in the book. Habakkuk 2:14 and 20 "present the Earth as capable of knowledge and devotion, allowing it to be a model of faithfulness and piety in the midst of a violent and destructive world ... Perhaps if the covenant community were to respond to Yhwh in the same fashion as the Earth, the harmony between creation and humanity would be restored and the need for violence and punishment removed" (35). The principle of improvisation allows the book of Habakkuk to be applied constantly to changing circumstances, prompting Mathews to conclude:

Perhaps it is time to challenge the prophetic vision found in the book of Habakkuk that asks, 'Is your face against the rivers? Is your fury against the sea?' (3:8). Rather than affirming, 'With streams you cleave the earth. Having seen you, mountains shake' (3:9–10), it may now be time to claim, 'I belong to these hills and plains.' Perhaps the command to 'hush before him all the earth' (2:20) should be reconfigured as 'I could not speak again, but was crowded with anguish and love.' Perhaps our Earth is telling us it is time to improvise our cherished traditions. (40)

Habakkuk 2:5–20: Exegetical Perspectives, Ecotheological Possibilities

Discerning readers would already have noticed my preferences when it comes to an ecotheological reading of the book of Habakkuk. I now explicate my preferences and presuppositions. My hermeneutical presuppositions are clear: First, my contention is that the Bible in general and the book of Habakkuk in particular should be read for what it is—an ancient Near Eastern document which reflects the worldview(s), spatial orientation(s), and historical and social concerns of its own world. Therefore, the book cannot be expected to say anything in particular about burning issues and pressing concerns of our post-modern society. Second, I am sceptical about attempts to artificially force the book of Habakkuk through dubious heuristic tools to say something about (post)modern issues that simply were of no concern to the ancient book. Third, I regard the current suspicion against the ability of a hermeneutics of reminiscence to make any significant contribution towards the burning issue of the ecological crisis facing planet earth as we approach the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century as false.

The following remarks are important when I apply my hermeneutics of reminiscence to the book of Habakkuk: It is notoriously difficult to date the prophetic figure and the book ascribed to him.¹² I regard the book's two superscripts (1:1; 3:1), both ascribed to חַבְבְּקוּק הַנְּבִיא (Habakkuk the prophet) as significant (Prinsloo 2013a, 139). Habakkuk 1:1–2:20 is characterised as הַמְּשָׁא (the message [of doom]). Habakkuk 3:1–19, on the other hand, is called תְּפִלָּה (a prayer). The “superscriptions appear to be reading instructions” (O'Brien 2004, 21). The מְשָׁא suggests a prophetic pronouncement of doom originating in the divine sphere (Floyd 2002), while תְּפִלָּה suggests an attitude of dependency on and faith in God (Prinsloo 2018, 664). In a מְשָׁא, “receivers of the message expect a specific people/group to be the ‘target’ for divine intervention” (664), while in a תְּפִלָּה, “receivers expect a supplicant to pray fervently for divine intervention and confess his/her complete dependence upon YHWH” (664). Habakkuk's מְשָׁא (1:1–2:20) is unique because it shows a strange “reluctance” to overtly identify the

12 From the book of Habakkuk, nothing can be gleaned regarding the prophetic figure. Apart from the name חַבְבְּקוּק and the designation הַנְּבִיא (the prophet, 1:1; 3:1), the prophetic figure remains an enigma. Legendary stories about Habakkuk in Jewish tradition provide no reliable historical data (Nogalski 2011, 646). The only historically identifiable group in the book is הַכַּשְׂדִּים (the Chaldeans) mentioned in Hab 1:6. The term occurs 82 times in the Hebrew Bible. In 2 Kings (8x), 2 Chronicles (2x), Nehemiah (1x), Isaiah (7x), Ezekiel (9x), Nehemiah (1x), and especially in Jeremiah (46x) the term refers to the Neo-Babylonian Empire founded by Nabopolassar (626–605BCE) and steered to the zenith of its power by his son, Nebuchadnezzar (605–562BCE; see O'Brien 2004, 61–62; Fabry 2018, 75–82). The apparent familiarity with the expanding military power of the empire mentioned in Hab 1:5–11 leads many to place the prophetic figure either shortly before (e.g., Robertson 1990, 34–38; Roberts 1991, 82–84) or after (e.g., Rudolph 1975, 194; Deissler 1984, 217–18; Haak 1992, 111–49; Dietrich 2016, 102; Fabry 2018, 73–75) the battle of Carchemish in 605 BCE. The prophetic book probably grew in stages from shortly before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE to late into the Persian or even into the Greek period (see the discussions in Dangel 1994, 25n1; Nogalski 2011, 649–52; Dietrich 2016, 98–103; Fabry 2018, 112–26).

perpetrators of violence condemned in the booklet. Intertextual links with *משארת* overtly directed against the Neo-Babylonian Empire in Isa 13–14 and 21:1–10 suggest that Hab 1:1–2:20 “can be located in the scribal traditions associated with the composition and redaction of the book of Isaiah” (687). The links suggest that the Babylonians are the perpetrators of violence condemned in Hab 1:1–2:20. The “vague” references to the Babylonians might suggest that Habakkuk’s *משא* “represents an earlier stage in the development of the eschatological expectation that YHWH is about to conclusively and comprehensively intervene in the cosmos. The Babylonians were still in power and their very presence complicated overt identification of the perpetrators of violence. It suggests that Habakkuk’s *משא* (1:1–2:20) by and large reflects the concerns of the exilic community” (687). As I will argue below, this generic style becomes an important interpretational tool that “allows Habakkuk to communicate powerfully at different times and places” (O’Brien 2004, 62).

Habakkuk’s *תפלה* (3:1–19) differs in character from the first part. Its shape is reminiscent of “corporate worship” in the Psalter (O’Brien 2004, 62). It has a superscript (3:1) reminiscent of superscripts in the Psalter (see Pss 17, 86, 90, 102, 142), a postscript (3:19d) that would not have been out of place in Psalms’ superscripts (see Pss 4, 6, 54, 55), and the notation *סלה* (3:3b, 9b, 13d), elsewhere only present in the book of Psalms. The *תפלה* “shows unmistakable signs of cultic transmission, in all likelihood during the Persian period” (Nogalski 2011, 645). There are many intertextual links between the *תפלה* and other hymnic passages in the Hebrew Bible (see Exod 15:1–18; Deut 33:1–3; Judg 5:4–5; Pss 18:8–16; 68:8–9; 77:17–20; 144:5–6). In the *תפלה*, hymnic passages are framed by first person singular passages expressing prayer, awe, and trust (see 3:2, 7, 14, 16–19). Thus, theophanies “hinting at the Sinai and exodus experiences of Israel’s distant, mythical past are applied to the poet’s present circumstances” (Prinsloo 2013c, 7). Mathys (1994, 318) argues that the insertion of “ancient” passages in other contexts is indicative of the interpretation of surrounding material by later exegetes. The reference to *עני* (the poor, 3:14) and *יגודנו* (who are attacking us, 3:16) suggests that the poet of Habakkuk’s *תפלה* was

a member of a specific social group in the late Persian and/or early Hellenistic period who regarded themselves as the true Israel and as the actual recipients of YHWH’s salvific intervention in and promises to his people. The poet appropriates YHWH’s promise to the prophet Habakkuk at the time of the Chaldean onslaught on and devastation of Jerusalem to his own predicament as a marginalised ‘poor’ in a wicked and hostile environment. (Prinsloo 2013c, 7)¹³

As point of departure for my ecotheological reading of the book of Habakkuk, I ask a fundamental question: What is/are the main concern/s of the book of Habakkuk? The answer to this question has, of course, many facets and nuances. However, two

13 For the identification and location of the “poor” as a social group in post-exilic Israel, see Ro (2002, 189–99).

perspectives catch an observant reader's attention. First, the book of Habakkuk is concerned with the issue of theodicy. Brueggemann (1999, 253) calls theodicy "the ultimate, inescapable problem of the Old Testament (even though the term is never used)." Ancient Israelite religion "insisted that God's world is morally coherent and assured by God's rule," hence "human conduct matters decisively for the future of the world" (253). This "foundational assumption ... endlessly produces a crisis of theodicy" (253), because the sheer magnitude of historic events that "defy rationality" append "a huge question mark to fixed belief, transforming a society accustomed to affirmation into one plagued with interrogatives" (Crenshaw 2003, 175). This "question mark" to "fixed belief" is reflected in Habakkuk's scathing questions about divine absence in the face of complete societal disintegration (1:2–4), the astounding observation that Yahweh is the root cause of unleashing the violence of הכשדים (the Chaldeans) against God's people and the world (1:5–11), and the fact that the dehumanising violence perpetrated by "the Chaldeans" shatters the very foundations of belief in Yahweh as the God who controls world events (1:12–17). These issues are extremely relevant when we grapple with ecotheological questions and crises, because "the relationship between creator and sentient creature, once thought crystal clear, has become clouded with mystery" (Crenshaw 2003, 176).

Linked to this issue is a second perspective. The book of Habakkuk grapples with the phenomenon of unrestrained violence and its effect upon individuals, peoples, and the non-human world at large. Dangl (1994, 26) describes Habakkuk as a prophet for victims of violence and identifies violence as the main target of his prophetic activity. The book asks a very basic and timeless question: How can anyone striving to be a צדיק (righteous person) survive in a world governed by unrestrained violent behaviour, where רשע (wickedness) abounds, and where there is an apparent absence of divine intervention to rectify what is obviously wrong in this world? This topic "is a timeless one: how can God be understood as just and caring if the wicked prosper?" (O'Brien 2004, 58). It is this timeless struggle to make sense of a world gone wrong that opens avenues for ecotheological reflections on the book. Below I will indicate that Habakkuk links unrestrained violence to unrestrained greed, an uncontrollable lust for more. This is, indeed, a relevant theme that should play an important role in any ecotheological deliberation. For the moment, though, I briefly focus on the theme of violence in the book, especially expressed by means of the term חמס (violence) and related terms. The centrality of the theme is suggested by the book's opening complaint (see אזעק אליך "I cry to you, 'violence,' but you do not save" in 1:2b). חמס occurs again in 1:3, 1:9, 2:8 and twice in 2:17. חמס is paired with שד (plundering) in 1:3 and 2:17 and is used together with synonyms expressing violent behaviour like און (trouble) and עמל (suffering) in 1:3, the root שלל (to plunder) (twice) in 2:8, דמים (bloodshed) in 2:8, 12, 17, and עולה (injustice) in 2:12. It occurs in association with words from the broad field of jurisprudence indicating unlawful behaviour like ריב (strife) and מרון (contention) in 1:3. It is noteworthy that words from this broad semantic field of "violence" occur exclusively in Habakkuk's משא (1:1–2:20). In Habakkuk's תפלה (3:1–19) Yahweh is depicted as divine warrior campaigning against the violence perpetrated by the רשע

(3:13). However, the חַמְס -complex of words is used exclusively for the unlawful behaviour of humans against each other and the non-human world, and Yahweh's divine intervention, qualified as $\text{הַלִּיכּוֹת עוֹלָם לוֹ}$ (his age-old ways, 3:6), is intended to rectify what is wrong in this world. From an ecotheological perspective, this is a relevant observation. Recently, Kim (2020) argued that reading Habakkuk through a lens of cultural trauma allows modern readers to understand how an ancient text has been and can be appropriated, (re)contextualised and reinterpreted through successive generations to become a relevant and meaningful document applicable to changing circumstances and novel challenges. Kim (2020, 219) states:

To explore the possibilities of Habakkuk's enduring impact on subsequent generations, cultural trauma studies offer a helpful framework for understanding how public representations of stories and characters construct past collective traumas. In this trauma discourse, public representations produce archetypal images of victims and perpetrators for a wider audience to learn moral lessons from reconstructions of past trauma.

Kim indicates that three issues are involved in the "processes by which past traumas can be reconstructed and experienced collectively through public representations that aim to raise moral awareness and generate solidarity with the victims" (221). First, a "carrier group" makes past experiences of trauma accessible to later generations by retelling and reclaiming the stories of the past. In the case of Habakkuk, this group is "the author(s) or editor(s) who construct a master narrative of theodicy concerning traumatic events from the Assyro-Babylonian period for later generations who lack access to the original event" (222). O'Brien argues that ultimately the carrier-group is to be located as the late Persian period redactors of the so-called Book of the Twelve. They grouped Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah together

to provide particular support to Zechariah's message regarding YHWH's sovereignty over the nations. Nahum and Habakkuk explain that a righteous deity may use an unrighteous nation to punish Israel and Judah but that unrighteous nation will itself be punished. Zephaniah reiterates those themes and offers hope to Judah and a glimmer of hope to the nations. (O'Brien 2007, 180)

In the late Persian period appropriation of earlier prophetic messages, O'Brien sees opportunities to reflect on "the pressing needs of the present" and the possibilities to "retell our past in ways that speak to those needs" (182).

Second, personalisation of trauma allows the carrier group to "invite readers to identify with trauma victims and learn moral lessons" (222). In Habakkuk, the experience of trauma is internalised and narrated by the fictional prophetic figure as a first-person speaker, an eye-witness of astounding Babylonian atrocities committed against nations (1:5–6; 1:14–17), humanity (2:8, 17), the earth (2:8, 17), and the non-human world (2:17). The prophetic persona portrays himself as a champion for victims of violence (Dangl 1994, 26). The book's "autobiographical style" is "one of the most striking features of the book of Habakkuk" (O'Brien 2004, 59). The "autobiographical style" is

apparent in no less than 35 first person singular forms, six in 1:1–17,¹⁴ eight in 2:1–20,¹⁵ and twenty-one in 3:1–19.¹⁶ The increase in the prophetic figure’s first person involvement is noteworthy and becomes an overwhelming presence in Hab 3:1–19, which—as I argued above—can in particular be interpreted as an appropriation of Hab 1:1–2:20 during the (late) Persian period. The prophetic persona thus becomes a timeless champion for everyone who suffers under the burden (Habakkuk is not qualified as *המשא*, literally “the burden,” in the superscript in 1:1 for nothing!) of an “empire” and its concomitant exploitation, repression, and tyranny.

Third, universalisation of evil allows the carrier group to “represent perpetrators as an ‘archetypal evil’ for all humanity” (O’Brien 2020, 223). As indicated above, the exact identity of the perpetrators of violence in Habakkuk remains somewhat “mysterious,” although there are hints that the atrocities perpetrated against Judah and the nations as the Neo-Babylonian Empire reached the zenith of its power are the focus of attention, at least (initially) in Habakkuk’s *משא* (1:1–3:20). The appropriation of this anti-empire attitude in Habakkuk’s *תפלה* (3:1–19) opens avenues for a universal and timeless application of Habakkuk’s denouncement of violent behaviour. The Habakkuk carrier group deliberately universalised evil to make the book applicable to diverse situations in changing and developing circumstances. The universalisation of evil becomes particularly apparent in Hab 2:5–20. The content of the section can be schematised as follows:¹⁷

14 See *אזעק* and *שועתי* in 1:2; *תראני* and *לנגדי* in 1:3; *אלהי* and *קדשי* in 1:12.

15 See *משמרת* and *שמעתי* in 3:2; *יראתי* in 3:7; *להפיצני* in 3:14; *שמעתי*, *בטני*, *שפתי*, *בעצמי*, *ותחתי*, *ארגז*, and *אנוח* in 3:16; *ואני* in 3:19.

16 See *שמעתי* and *יראתי* in 3:2; *ראיתי* in 3:7; *להפיצני* in 3:14; *שמעתי*, *בטני*, *שפתי*, *בעצמי*, *ותחתי*, *ארגז*, and *אנוח* in 3:16; *ואני* in 3:19.

17 For a discussion of the demarcation of 2:1–4 as a unit (stanza), 2:5 as a second unit (stanza) and 2:6–20 as a third unit (stanza) with an introduction and five woe-exclamations, see Prinsloo (2016, 2–3). Habakkuk 2:1–4 focuses on the nature of the divine revelation to the prophet. It is to be written down as a reliable testimony of Yahweh’s salvific involvement in the unfolding of the future (2:2–3). Its reliability guarantees life for the *צדיק*, while the self-reliant and presumptuous archetypal evil one (*הנה*) is typified as “not right” to the core of his being (*לא־יִשְׂרָה נִפְשׁוֹ בּוֹ*, 2:4b).

2:5	Deceived by an insatiable appetite for violence	
2:6–20	Taunt songs of the nations ¹⁸	
2:6ab	The nations will sing funeral dirges	
2:6c-8	Woe to the greedy!	
2:9–11	Woe to one who gains wicked profit	
2:12–14	Woe to the one building a city with blood	
2:15–17	Woe to the pervert...	
2:18–20	...and the one relying on idols – woe to him!	

Habakkuk 2:5 confronts exegetes with numerous text-critical and interpretational challenges.¹⁹ The following table contains the Masoretic text:

Table 1. Masoretic text of Hab 2:5–20

וְאַף כִּי־הֵינִן בּוֹגֵד	5a	Yes, indeed – this wine is treacherous: ²⁰
גָּבַר יְהִיר וְלֹא יִנָּחֵה	b	an arrogant man – he does not come to rest,
אֲשֶׁר־הִרְחִיב כַּשְׂאוֹל נִפְשׁוֹ	5c	(he) who opened like Sheol his throat,
וְהוּא כַּמּוֹת וְלֹא יִשְׂבָּע	d	and he is like death – yes, he is not satisfied;
וַיִּקְטָף אֵלָיו כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם	5e	so he gathered to him all the nations,
וַיִּקְבֹּץ אֵלָיו כָּל־הָעַמִּים:	f	and he collected to him all the peoples.

Habakkuk 2:5 paints a grotesque picture of the archetypal evil one (גבר יהיר) an arrogant man, cf. also עפלה [she] is audacious in 2:4) by means of two images. First, his lust for power is metaphorically described as היין (this wine). Proverbs 20:1 and 23:29–35 contain warnings against the delusionary influence of “wine.” In Ps 75:9 and especially in prophetic literature “wine” is associated with the “cup” of judgement in Yahweh’s “right hand.” The judgement is directed against wickedness (Jer 25:19–26), and in Jer 51:7–8 and Isa 51–23 in particular against Babylonian violence. Thus, Hab 2:5 qualifies “this wine” as בוגד (a treacherous thing), something that cannot sustain a גבר יהיר. Second, this intoxicating lust for power is compared to typical Hebrew Bible and ancient

18 The close connection between 2:5 and 2:6ab is obvious. אלה (these) in 2:6a refers back to the גוים in 2:5e and the עמים in 2:5f. However, the interrogative particle introducing 2:6a, marking a rhetorical question and thus the certainty that the downtrodden nations will indeed sing the violator of 2:5 to death, so to speak, merits my demarcation of 2:5 as a stanza and 2:6–20 as a long stanza that can be subdivided into sub-stanzas.

19 See Prinsloo (2016) for a detailed discussion of these issues and a contextual and intertextual interpretation of Hab 2:5.

20 See Joüon and Muraoka (2006, 475): “A thing is perfectly determinate **when it has already been mentioned** – the so-called anaphoric use: the article is then equivalent to a weak demonstrative, e.g. *that man...*” (emphasis original). The anaphoric use of the article is applicable because the theme at stake is known. It has already been mentioned in 2:4’s עפלה (conceited) and will again be mentioned in 2:5b’s גבר יהיר (an arrogant person). I agree with Joüon and Muraoka (2006, 475) that it is a “weak demonstrative” and that my translation of the article by “this” in the current context is a choice of translation rather than a grammatical necessity.

Near Eastern depictions of death as a monster with an insatiable appetite (see Exod 15:12; Num 16:30–33; Hos 8:7; Jonah 2:6; Pss 42:8; 55:15; 69:2, 15; 104:25–26; 106:17; 130:1; Prov 1:12; *KTU* 1.5.II.2–3). The arrogant man’s intoxicating and insatiable lust for more finds concrete expression in his unwavering efforts to gather to him כל־הגוים (all the nations) and collect to him כל־העמים (all the peoples) (2:5ef). This universalisation of evil is undoubtedly relevant to current ecological concerns. The warning that the intoxicating lust for more is “treacherous” contains a timeous and relevant warning against (post)modern consumerism and the unbridled exploitation of the earth and her natural resources.

In Hab 2:6–20 the arrogant man’s insatiable appetite becomes the reason why roles will be reversed. The conquered nations will lift up a “proverb” (משל in 2:6a), qualified specifically as a “derisive riddle” (ומליצה הידות in 2:6b) against the conqueror’s insatiable lust for more.²¹ This “derisive riddle” becomes a fivefold funeral dirge in the mouths of the conquered nations (2:6c–20).²² The focus of the first four woe-exclamations is the judgement of archetypal violent behaviour, whether it is perpetrated against nations, human beings, animals or the natural world. The refrain-like repetition of the phrases מדמי אדם והמס־ארץ (because of the bloodshed of humanity, and violence done to the earth) (2:8c, 17c) and קריה וכל־ישיבי־בה (a city and all its inhabitants) (2:8d, 17d) in the first and fourth woe-exclamations is particularly telling. The final repetition of this refrain is preceded by a specific reference to the exploitation of the natural world (כי המס לבנון יכסך for the violence done to the Lebanon will overwhelm you, 17a) and its non-human inhabitants (ושד בהמות יהיטן and the devastation of the beasts will terrify you, 17b). The annihilation of the “Lebanon” and the “beasts” affects all creation and its ripples are felt by humanity, the earth, and all her inhabitants (Nogalski 2011, 674)! Significantly, this neatly framed condemnation of violent behaviour is followed by a final woe-exclamation (2:18–20), deviating from the first four in both form and content. Particular focus is placed on the folly of serving idols. Idolatry, in the context of Hab 1:1–2:20 (cf. 1:11, 16), includes the deification of the archetypal evil one’s power and lust for violence. Whoever lives under the illusion that הוא יורה (that is a teacher) (2:19) is bound to experience ultimate disappointment. There might be gold and silver (2:19), but no breath of life is to be found in it (2:19).

In the context of Hab 1:1–2:20, the denouncing of violence is primarily directed against the extreme violence suffered by the citizens of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem at the hand of their Babylonian conquerors. However, through the eyes of the “carrier group” (Kim 2020, 221), this trauma becomes a social construction denouncing

21 See Prinsloo (2013a, 145): “They are ‘derisive’ because they constitute an elaborate funeral song about the demise of the presumptuous person who has just been likened to death itself.”

22 See Prinsloo (2013a, 145–47) for a brief exposition of each of the woe-exclamations. I interpret ויאמר in 2:6c as “and it will say.” The 3ms form refers back to משל in 2:6a. I reject the suggestion in the text-critical note of *BHS* that 1QpHab and the LXX should be followed and that ויאמר should be amended to ויאמרו (and they will say) (cf. Dietrich 2016, 143).

archetypal evil, applicable to successive experiences of trauma, as is suggested by the appropriation of Habakkuk's מִשָּׁא (1:1–2:20) in his תְּפִלָּה (3:1–19) and by Habakkuk's placement in the Book of the Twelve. Nahum denounces evil perpetrated by the Assyrians against the kingdom of Israel. Habakkuk denounces violence perpetrated by the Babylonians against the kingdom of Judah. Zephaniah denounces violence perpetrated by the people of Yahweh. In all three cases, violence inevitably leads to the destruction of the perpetrators of violence. Hope for an alternative future and changed behaviour lies in adhering to the precepts of Yahweh, the universal king. Twice in Hab 2:6–20, the presence of Yahweh amidst the reality of violence and exploitation becomes a source of hope against the violence perpetrated by the archetypal evil one (2:14, 20). Read from this perspective, the third and last woe-exclamations each end in a climax, with Yahweh's universal presence (2:14) and his presence in his heavenly abode (2:20) as the guarantee that human violence will, ultimately, end in failure. With regard to Hab 2:14, Nogalski (2011, 672) succinctly states:

In 2:14, such presence is presumed to be part of the fabric of creation itself. As a result, the *knowledge* [emphasis original] of God's glory that fills the earth becomes that which fulfils the purpose of creation.

Ultimately, Yahweh's presence "negates space to wicked behaviour" (Prinsloo 2013a, 146). With regard to 2:20, Nogalski (2011, 674) adds:

The demand for silence marks a significant juncture in the book, recounting YHWH's temple presence that deserves obeisance from all the world and admonishing anyone who would challenge him... that the time for questioning has ended.

Habakkuk 2:20 "emphasizes YHWH's kingship and dominion over the created universe" and calls the entire earth to "hushed reverence" (Prinsloo 2013a, 147). The universalisation of evil and the universal presence of the creator-king in Hab 2:5–20 provide ample opportunity for ecotheological deliberation about human exploitation of Yahweh's creation.

Conclusion

In this study, I applied an ecotheological lens to Hab 2:5–20, utilising a hermeneutics of reminiscence as my point of departure. I argued that the central theme of Hab 2:5–20 is the condemnation of violent behaviour, whether it is perpetrated against nature, animals, or humanity in general (Hab 2:17). My brief textual analysis of Hab 2:5–20 as meaningful and intertwined units (i.e., stanzas) with a particular focus on the condemnation of unrestrained violence revealed the applicability of my point of departure to the (post)modern ecotheological debate. The book of Habakkuk is an ancient Near Eastern text bound to its own worldview(s) and societal issues. However, reading the book from the perspective of victims of violence against the background of exile and marginalisation, opens avenues for ecotheological application. The notion of

the universalisation of evil makes the book relevant to the current ecotheological debate. Such a reading recognises both the integrity of the ancient text and its relevance for modern readers struggling with urgent issues that did not exist in biblical times.

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