A NEW APPROACH TO HABAKKUK II 4-5A

by

JAMES M. SCOTT

Tübingen

4 hinneh 'upselâ lô'yašərə napšô bô
wëšaddiq beḵemûnatô yihyeh
5 wëap ki-hayyayin bôgêd geber yāhîr wëlô' yinweh ...

The Problem

Yahweh’s response to the prophet’s second complaint comes in Hab. ii 2-3, but how far it extends beyond that is uncertain. The reason for this uncertainty over the extent of the oracle is that an intertwine of exegetical problems (let alone the introductory problems of Habakkuk as a whole) has rendered verses 4-5 a veritable Gordian knot for interpreters, with the result that many diverse solutions have been proposed. The purpose of the present article is to suggest a new interpretation of Hab. ii 4-5a which seems to make sense of the Masoretic Text as an appropriate response from Yahweh.

A Tentative Solution

The relationship between verses 4 and 5

As a first step in solving the knotty problems of the passage, it will be provisionally assumed that verses 4 and 5 are bound...
together in a qal wahromer argument which proceeds from the minor premise, introduced by hinneh (v. 4a), to the major premise, introduced by wəʼap ki (v. 5a): "If indeed ..., then how much more ..." This argument form occurs with the same or similar particles some ten times in the Hebrew Bible (Ezek. xv 5; xxiii 39-40; Prov. xi 31; Job xv 15-16, xxv 16; 1 Kings viii 27 = 2 Chron. vi 18; Deut. xxxi 27; 1 Sam. xxiii 3; 2 Sam. xvi 11); therefore, the assumption that hinneh ... wəʼap ki also forms a qal wahromer argument in Habakkuk ii 4-5a seems plausible.

The minor premise (v. 4)

The minor premise of the qal wahromer argument is a tricolon, each colon of which will now be considered individually and then corporately.

First colon. After hinneh, which affirms the probability of the immediately following statement, there comes the crux interpretum of the passage: ʼuppelâ. Since historically this has been one of the most obscure words in the passage,3 it will be helpful in the following (1) to propose a new interpretation of the word, (2) to restore a missing part of the colon, and (3) to synthesize the content of the colon.

(1) A new explanation of ʼuppelâ. It is suggested that the Masoretic reading ʼuppelâ is formed from the masculine noun ʼopel with the termination -ā locale.4 Nouns of this segholate pattern sometimes reduce holem to qibbus and segol to shewa upon the addition of an accented suffix. For example, gōdel becomes gūdîlô (Ps. cl 2), gōsem becomes qūmśî (Ezek. xxii 24), qōmes becomes qūmsâ (Lev. ii 2, v 12, vi 8), and sōbel becomes subbôlô (Isa. x 27, ix 3, xiv 25). The problems with seeing ῦuppelâ as another example of this segholate phenomenon are that -ā locale is only rarely tonic (GKC § 90 c, i) and that the daghesh forte is unaccounted for.5

3 J. Gerald Janzen goes so far as to say, "This line [ii 4a] has occasioned a wide variety of interpretative and restorative solutions, none of which has gained wide support; and, pending possible manuscript discoveries, it may have to be bracketed as irrecoverably corrupt" ("Habakkuk 2:2-4 in the Light of Recent Philological Advances", HTR 73 [1980], p. 62).

4 Alternatively, ῦuppelâ may be a corruption of ʼopel. A possible textual-critical explanation of how this corruption arose might be that the text originally read ʼopel lūl, which by haplography became what is reproduced in the Masoretic Text, ῦuppelâ lûl. Whether this explanation is accepted or the one adopted in the present article, the resultant translation is probably the same, as will be discussed subsequently.

5 The daghesh forte in ῦuppelâ may be similar to that in subbōlô above (cf. GKC § 93 q).