

# Opposition to Idolatry in the Book of Habakkuk

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## Abstract

Habakkuk is unique among books in the Twelve in its criticism of foreign cultic practices. Instead of condemning Israel and Judah for the worship of other gods, it criticizes the worship offered to a foreign deity by that deity's own people. This article examines Hab 2:18-19, arguing that the reduction of the *pesel* or *massêkâ* to a lifeless object is intelligible in moral rather than ontological terms. The integration of this cultic criticism into a more standard denunciation of a foreign nation's non-cultic transgressions yields a distinctive form of opposition to idolatry. What Habakkuk shows is that disbelief in the reality of idols may owe less to a mocking, debunking rationalism than to a cynicism regarding the uses of ritual.

## Keywords

Idolatry – Habakkuk – the Twelve – personification of death

## Introduction

Israelite monotheism was not a single, static belief system set in opposition to pagan polytheisms but rather a complex, historically differentiated set of relations between Israel and its neighbors. To acknowledge this is to confront a question about texts in the later stages of these developments: how did biblical authors come to view idol-worship as something essentially empty and worthy of ridicule? In this article, I examine one set of texts in the book of Habakkuk (Hab) in which we may observe an important transition: from the view that the worship of gods other than Yahweh through the use of physical objects is *wrong for Israel* to the view that this kind of worship is, in fact,

*wrong for the nations* as well.<sup>1</sup> When we set Habakkuk in its primary literary context, the book of the Twelve, we make a surprising observation. Despite the fact that the worship of foreign gods is repeatedly condemned in the Twelve, it is specifically *Israel's* participation in such worship that is usually the object of criticism. Only in Habakkuk, however, does a prophet denounce the worship offered to a foreign deity *by that deity's own people*. In what follows, I will compare Habakkuk's negative stance toward foreign worship to comparable passages in the Twelve. In order to shed light on Habakkuk's unusual stance, I will examine Hab 2:18-19 in connection with relevant passages in ch 1. In doing so, I will argue that the reduction of the *pesel/massêkâ* to a lifeless object is intelligible in moral terms, that is, by way of a link forged between the predations of the Babylonians and their forms of piety. The cultic practices of foreign nations are not criticized in other books of the Twelve, but in Habakkuk they become an important reason why Babylon is "appointed to punishment" (Hab 1:12). The integration of this cultic criticism into a more standard denunciation of a foreign nation's non-cultic transgressions yields a form of opposition to idolatry that stands between the condemnation of Israelite idolatry on the one hand and the mockery of foreign "cultic stupidity" on the other.<sup>2</sup> What Habakkuk shows is that disbelief in the reality of idols may owe less to a mocking, debunking rationalism than to a cynicism regarding the uses of ritual. Finally, I will venture a somewhat speculative explanation of how Habakkuk's unusual criticism of idolatry may be related to another unusual feature of the book: the personification of Death (2:5).

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1 On the distinction between opposition to idolatry that is focused on Israelite apostasy and opposition to idolatry that extends to the cultic practices of non-Israelites, see, for example, Stuart Weeks, "Man-made Gods? Idolatry in the Old Testament," in S. C. Barton (ed.), *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), pp. 7-21; John Barton, "The Work of Human Hands' (Ps 115:4): Idolatry in the Old Testament" *Ex Auditu* 15 (1999), pp. 63-72.

2 The expression is Barton's. Referring to opposition to idolatry in Isaiah, Barton writes: "Thus there is no talk of cultic *apostasy* in Isaiah in the sense of abandoning Yahweh for other gods who are real, but more of cultic *stupidity*, worshipping as a divine source of strength something that is no more powerful than the worshippers themselves. ("The Work of Human Hands," 66, original italics).

## Worship of Foreign Gods in the Twelve

The books of the Twelve are rich in references to foreign nations. Only Hosea contains no proclamation against a foreign nation.<sup>3</sup> A survey of statements directed to various nations in the Twelve indicates that the prophets held them to account for a wide variety of things. Most common were complaints against violence, brutality, and invasion (Damascus in Amos 1:3; Ammon in Amos 1:13; Nineveh in Jonah 3:8; Assyria in Mic 5:5-6; and Assyria in Nah 3:1). Related to this are denunciations of boasting and taunting (Edom in Obad 1:12; Moab and Ammon in Zeph 2:8, 10; and Assyria in Zeph 2:15). Other culpable activities include the following: human trafficking (Philistia, Tyre, and Sidon in Joel 3:6; Gaza in Amos 1:6); appropriating Temple treasure (Philistia, Tyre, and Sidon in Joel 3:5); desecrating the bones of the Edomite king (Moab in Amos 2:1); exacerbating the plight of Judah (Judah's neighbors in Zech 1:15); and being the ancient enemy of Judah (Edom in Mal 1:2-5). In Amos, Tyre and Edom are denounced for failing to honor bonds of kinship with Israel and Judah (Tyre in 1:9; Edom in 1:11). Notably absent are denunciations of idolatry or complaints against the nations for engaging in cultic activities.

Foreign deities and religious practices are indeed referenced in the Twelve. With the exception of Habakkuk, however, such references, though negative in tone, do not actually reflect attempts to criticize the nations for worshipping their own deities. Instead, they serve to reinforce criticisms of illicit worship on the part of Israel and Judah. The Canaanite Baal cult forms the background for Hosea's invectives against Israel and is mentioned explicitly, for example, in Hos 2 and in Hos 9:10, 11:2, and 13:1.<sup>4</sup> While the characterization of cultic practices here is unquestionably negative, the point is to not to address the Canaanites but to dramatize Israel's apostasy from Yahweh as an adulterous affair with a god not its own.<sup>5</sup> Another notable mention of foreign deities in the Twelve is found in Amos 5:26: "You shall bear away Sikkuth your king and Kiyyun your star god, your images that you made for yourselves." The two

3 See Daniel C. Timmer, *The Non-Israelite Nations in the Book of the Twelve: Thematic Coherence and the Diachronic-Synchronic Relationship in the Minor Prophets* (Biblical Interpretation Series 135; Leiden: Brill, 2015), 21-29.

4 See John Day, "Hosea and the Baal Cult" in *Ibid.* (ed.), *Prophecy and Prophets in Ancient Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 531; London: T & T Clark, 2010), pp. 202-224. Day persuasively defends the view "that the Baal referred to is essentially the same as the god Baal known from the Ugaritic texts" (p. 205).

5 The reference to the Baal cult in Zeph 1:4 serves the same purpose.

names, indicating astral deities known from Assyrian sources, are revocalized here on the pattern of *šiqquš* (“abominable thing”) in order to denigrate them.<sup>6</sup> Yet the burden of the passage is the impending doom of Israel, brought on by despicable festivals and offerings (Amos 5:21-24) and their illicit adoption of foreign gods. The Twelve contains two references to the destruction of idols, Nahum 1:14 (*pesel, massēkâ*) and Zeph 2:11 (*ʾēlōhê hāʾāreš*). The context for both verses is the pronouncement of judgment upon Yahweh’s enemies, Assyria in Nahum 1:14 and the “gods of the earth” in Zeph 2:11.<sup>7</sup> Each functions to illustrate the totality of the coming catastrophe, an event in which Yahweh’s supremacy over the gods of the nations will be clearly evident. Assyria will not simply be chastened or corrected; rather, it will be wiped out as its “name” will fade from history and its gods, being cut off, will be unable to prevent the “worthless” Assyrians from descending to the grave. In Zeph 2:11 Yahweh will starve or famish (*rāzāh*) the “gods of the earth” by depriving them of worshippers to feed them, for the peoples of the earth will instead “bow down” to Yahweh. The notion that Yahweh is superior to other gods is clear enough in these verses and throughout the Twelve.

Though this notion is related to the idea that the worship of other gods by non-Israelite peoples is blameworthy, there is no intrinsic, logically necessary connection between the two. One might accept an arrangement in which Israel’s exclusive allegiance to Yahweh is consistent with the allegiance of other nations to their gods. In the book of Jonah, for example, the sailors cry out to their gods (1:5) and urge Jonah to do the same (1:6). Though they are saved from the storm only by listening to Jonah and praying to Yahweh, the transition from the worship of foreign gods to the worship of Yahweh (1:16) is, for them, not a matter of expiating their own guilt but, ironically, of expiating the guilt of Jonah. Also noteworthy is the fact that the wickedness of Nineveh (*rāʾātām*; 1:2) is identified with “violence” (*ḥāmās*; 3:8). No mention is made of cultic offenses. The Ninevites’ religious deficiency is not identified with idolatry but, in gentler tones, with ignorance (4:11). The book of Micah contains one example of a motif found throughout the Twelve: the pilgrimage of the

6 Shalom M. Paul, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos (Hermeneia)* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), p. 196.

7 Zeph 2:11 follows pronouncements against Ammon and Moab (2:8-10), but the scope of judgment in this verse, which is likely a later interpolation, is global. See Timmer, *Non-Israelite Nations*, pp. 158-159; J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: A Commentary (Old Testament Library)* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 201-202.

nations to Zion (Mic 4:1-4).<sup>8</sup> After describing the journey of the nations to Zion in terms reminiscent of Is 2:2-4, the prophet describes Yahweh as the teacher and arbiter of the nations. In Mic 4:5, however, we find a somewhat puzzling coda: “for all the nations will walk, each in the name of its god, and (but?) we will walk in the name of Yahweh our God forever and ever.” Whether this verse is a reversion from the eschatological future to the prophet’s present moment (in which the nations do indeed walk after their own gods) or an authentic part of a vision for the future is debatable. Since the verse contains no clear syntactic markers of a temporal shift, Mic 4:5 is likely part of the vision.<sup>9</sup> If this is so, then the verse provides a remarkable example of the view that belief in the superiority of Yahweh and his supremacy over the nations does not entail a critique of non-Yahwistic pieties.

How, then, to explain this set of attitudes in the Twelve? As we have seen, the prophetic writings include strong denunciations of the nations for a variety of offenses, but not idolatry. Along with these are references to foreign deities and religious practices. Though negative in tone, these are not taken up into actual criticisms of worship directed to other gods by their non-Israelite followers. In fact, this kind of criticism would have jarred with the particularistic view, attested famously in Deut 32:8-9 and still influential in the Twelve, that the nations are allotted to various gods as Israel is to Yahweh. John Barton has proposed, then, that prophetic criticism of bad behavior by foreign nations cannot be based on moral laws that belong either to Yahweh’s covenant with Israel or to some natural, universal source. Drawing on the book of Amos, Barton argues that the pronouncements against the nations are based on what he calls “international customary law”:

Thus the principles at stake in these oracles are essentially part of a conventional morality, which God is assumed to back up with fiery sanctions, rather than actual laws supposed to be issued by God for all the nations of the world to observe. This helps, I would suggest, to make clear the essential rationality of Amos’s approach. Israel’s neighbours are not denounced for sins which they could not have been expected to recognize as such (e.g. idolatry) but for offences against common humanity;

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8 See Jakob Wöhrle, “The God(s) of the Nations” in Nathan MacDonald and Ken Brown (eds.), *Monotheism in Late Prophetic and Early Apocalyptic Literature: Studies of the Sofja Kovalevskaja Research Group on Early Jewish Monotheism Vol III*. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), pp. 177-199, esp. 187-190.

9 Wöhrle cites Mic 4:5 as an example of a “relapse into particularism” in the Hellenistic period (“The God(s) of the Nations,” pp. 193-194).

not for disobedience to God but for failing to follow the dictates of their own moral sense.<sup>10</sup>

I believe, based on the survey above, that Barton's explanation for prophetic indifference to non-Israelite idolatry holds true for other pronouncements against the nations in the Twelve—with one exception.

### Opposition to Idolatry in Habakkuk

Hab 2:6-20 contains a series of woe oracles that are introduced in 2:6a as part of a taunt song to be raised against an arrogant and avaricious man (2:5) who represents Babylon. After the first four woe oracles follow the verses concerning idolatry (2:18-20):

18 מה־הועיל פסל כי פסלו יצרו מסכה ומורה שקר  
 כי בטח יצר יצרו עליו לעשת אלילים אלמים  
 19 הוי אמר  
 לעץ הקיצה  
 עורי לאבן  
 דומם הוא יורה  
 הנה־הוא תפוש זהב וכסף וכל־רוח אין בקרבו  
 20 ויהוה בהיכל קדשו הס מפניו כל־הארץ

18 What profit is an idol once its maker has shaped it—a cast image, a false oracle?

For its maker trusts in what has been made, though the product is only an idol that cannot speak!

19 Alas for you who say:

to wood, “Wake up!”

to stone, “Rouse yourself!”

“Be silent! It gives an oracle!”

See, it is gold and silver plated, and there is no breath in it at all.

20 But Yahweh is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!<sup>11</sup>

10 John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003), p. 113.

11 This translation is adapted from the NRSV but departs from it in three places. (1) The opening question (*māh hō'îl*) is less broad than NRSV makes it out to be (“What use is

These verses pose interpretive difficulties. The use of the word *hōy* (“woe”) in v. 19 suggests that these verses be understood as the fifth and final woe oracle of chapter 2. The first four, however, begin with the pronouncement of woe (2:6, 9, 12, 15), describe the woeful activity, and specify an appropriate punishment. Hab 2:18-20, however, begins with a question and arrives at the pronouncement of woe (v. 19) only after a gloss on the nature of idol-making (v. 18).<sup>12</sup> Interpreters, therefore, often recommend that the order of 2:18 and 2:19 be reversed or that 2:18 be treated as a later gloss. In addition to formal irregularities, the content of these verses has also seemed incongruous, at odds with the rest of Habakkuk. Since the vocabulary in these verses has clear affinities to other prophetic texts, an obvious way to account for them is to suggest that these were a later addition.<sup>13</sup> The similarities between characterizations of idolatry in these verses and those found, for example, in Second Isaiah are undeniable; the possibility that these verses were added later cannot, therefore, be definitively ruled out. Some have argued, more specifically, that the compositional history of Habakkuk begins with criticisms of the Judahite elite and with hopes

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an idol?”). The verb *hō’il* occurs with some frequency in Is and Jer where it is almost always negated, indicating that efforts to consult idols or foreign powers are unprofitable and unrewarding (Is 30:5-6; 44:9-10; Jer 2:8, 11; 16:19; 23:32). (2) I have rendered the two instances of *y-r-h* (hiph. “to teach”; *mōreh* in v. 18 and *yōreh* in v. 19) as having to do with “giving an oracle.” Context suggests that the particular form of teaching or instruction in view in these verses is the imparting of knowledge in a cultic context; see Miller, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 126-127. I take the compact sentence *hū’yōreh* to be a continuation of the pronouncements of the oracle-giver; thus, “It gives an oracle!” (3) NRSV renders *dūmām* as an adjective (“silent”) modifying *’eben* (“stone”): thus, “to silent stone, ‘Rouse yourself!’” To characterize the stone as silent, however, makes little sense, because its inability to speak is already mentioned in the preceding verse and being silent has no connection to the command here to rouse oneself. If the stone is characterized as silent (rather than immobile), then the prophetic attempt at irony misses its mark. A formal consideration is that *’ēṣ* (“wood”) is not modified by an adjective; to attach one to “stone” is infelicitous. If *dūmām* is revocalized slightly (*dōmēm*) and understood as a polel imperative of the root *d-w-m* (“to stand still, wait”), then it makes sense as a prelude to the oracle-giver’s excited pronouncement (“It gives an oracle!”) and, at the same time, forms a nice contrast to the hushed silence of the peoples before Yahweh in 2:20. My thanks to Aaron Rubin for his help with this verse.

- 12 Marvin Sweeney (“Structure, Genre, and Intent in the Book of Habakkuk” *VT* 41 (1991), pp. 63-82) argues that these verses do not constitute a proper woe oracle and that the last three verses (Hab 2:18-20) are a “commentary” on the taunt song as a whole.
- 13 See, for example, Lothar Perlitt, *Die Propheten Nahum, Habakuk, Zephania: Übersetzt und erklärt von Lothar Perlitt* (*Das Alte Testament Deutsch* 25/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), pp. 78-81; Horst Dietrich Preuß, *Verspottung fremder Religionen im Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1971), pp. 237-241.

that Yahweh might discipline them (1:2-4; 12-14; 2:6-19). After the catastrophic events of the Babylonian invasion and exile unfolded, however, anti-Babylonian material was added (1:5-11, 15-17), and the woe oracles (2:6-19) were redirected from Judah to Babylon.<sup>14</sup> Reconstructions of this sort are plausible and illuminating, and they open important questions about the possibility of an underlying tradition. Yet in their most atomistic versions, they also run the risk of neglecting Habakkuk's final literary form, of substituting a history of textual development for an explication of the internal, thematic connections that make Habakkuk a coherent composition in its own right. The question, then, is how these verses comport with the rest of the book; and if they were indeed added later: why might tradents have found them appropriate to Habakkuk's vision?

Hab 2:18 begins with a question concerning the purpose and profitability a *pesel* or *massékâ*: what might one hope to gain or accomplish in consulting one? The possibility of gaining real knowledge is foreclosed by the immediate identification of the object as a "false oracle" (*môreh šāqer*) of human making. Nevertheless, the idol-maker "has put his trust in it" (*bāṭaḥ 'ālāyw*). The verb of the initial question (*hō'îl*; "to be of use, get profit, get advantage") belongs in the "same theological context" as the act of trusting in (*bāṭaḥ 'al*) something,<sup>15</sup> such that Hab 2:18 may be understood as a question concerning the benefit one expects to receive by placing such faith in an object. Instead of being a rhetorical question that demands a negative answer ("What use is an idol?" NRSV), it is better understood as a genuine invitation to consider how idols profit their makers. In this verse, then, the question is not a theoretical one concerning the metaphysical status of a human-made idol, but a practical one concerning motives and outcomes. This brief interrogation of what it means to trust in idols, then, glosses the woe oracle in the next verse by bringing its purpose into view. Far from being a simple intellectual error, the sin of idolatry is transferred to the moral sphere. The other four woe oracles in the taunt song condemn Babylon for its abuse of authority. In each case, the

14 Walter Dietrich ("Three Minor Prophets and the Major Empires: Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives on Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah" in Rainer Albertz, James D. Nogalski, and Jakob Wöhrle [eds.], *Perspectives on the Formation of the Book of the Twelve: Methodological Foundations, Redactional Processes, Historical Insights*; BZAW 433; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012, pp. 147-156) describes a two-stage process in which the prophet turns his attention from injustice in Judah to the wickedness of the Babylonians after it became clear that Nebuchadnezzar's goal was not "to put a stop to the exploiters within Judah" but to become an "exploiter himself." (pp. 152-153) See also James D. Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Micah-Malachi*; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011, pp. 649-652.

15 Peritt, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephania*, p. 79.

prophet's characterization depends upon a contrast between some feature of Babylonian power and the illegitimate way it has been used to mistreat the nations. The wealth of the empire, instead of providing needed capital to subjected peoples, becomes the basis for economic enslavement (2:6-7). Efforts to build Babylon (the "nest on high"; 2:9) do not benefit those who labor to build it (2:10). Other imperial building programs do nothing to improve the lives of the nations who "weary themselves for nothing" (2:13). And instead of honoring the dignity of conquered peoples, the powerful Babylonians humiliate (2:15) and exploit (2:17) them. Hab 2:18 continues the series of contrasts. It implicates idol-worship in the larger imperial program by suggesting that oracles gleaned from wood and stone objects—like other features of Babylonian rule—in fact mask Babylonian self-interest.

In Hab 2:19 woe is pronounced on the one who addresses the *pesel* or *massêkâ* in order to receive an oracle. It quotes the oracle-giver as he initiates the process, first by calling the idols to action ("Wake up!"; "Rouse yourself!") and then by addressing his oracle-seeking audience ("Be silent! It gives an oracle!"). The brevity of the description is matched by its vividness, as the prophet makes the reader or hearer a direct observer. Little is said about the cultic figure responsible for the oracle or the identity of the person(s) seeking the oracle. Context provided by the four preceding woe oracles, however, suggests that the one seeking the oracle is someone in a position of power. If this verse is taken as a vignette of cultic practice, it is a highly compact one. It contains no description of the idols themselves, only a bare identification of the materials out of which they were made. The focus on materials was an important part of idol parodies in the prophetic literature. The reference here to several materials—wood, stone, silver, and gold—marks Hab 2:18-19 as an unusually comprehensive parody.<sup>16</sup> It also locates the prophet's audience close to the oracle scene while, at the same time, distancing them from it. Just as the climactic moment has arrived and the oracle-seeker is silenced in anticipation of the oracle, the prophet breaks away from the scene and addresses his own audience: "See, it is gold and silver plated, and there is no breath in it at all." The text abruptly shifts attention from the prospect of the idol's speech to its metallic appearance. How is it possible for an object covered in metal to have breath (*rûah*)? And if it has no breath, how will it speak? Whatever words follow from the exchange of the oracle-seeker and the oracle-giver are understood, then, merely to flow from human to human, to lack real divine origin and sanction.

16 Wolfgang Roth, " 'For Life He Appeals to Death (Wis 13:18)': A Study of Old Testament Idol Parodies" *CBQ* 37 (1975), pp. 21-47, esp. pp. 33-34.

Criticism here is directed not so much at the oracle itself as at injustice that it masks. The nature of this injustice is clear from other allusions to Babylonian worship in ch. 1.<sup>17</sup> In Yahweh's first response to the prophet (1:5-11), he characterizes the Babylonians as fierce, war-like, and contemptuous. The description culminates in the pronouncement that their bellicosity is without any proper moral constraint: "Then (*āz*) they sweep by like the wind; they transgress and become guilty; their own might is their god!" (1:11 NRSV) The particle *āz* at the beginning of 1:11 marks a shift: what is at first recognizable as the might of a foreign nation sent to discipline Judah becomes something sinister: a transgressive and unrestrained exercise of power.<sup>18</sup> It is precisely this aspect of the invading army that stirs the prophet to further protest in the next section of the book (1:12-17). After insisting that Yahweh should not tolerate such wickedness, the prophet employs a metaphor otherwise unknown in the Hebrew Bible, the parable of the fisherman who sacrifices to his equipment (1:15-17).<sup>19</sup> He compares the invader to a man who gathers in the nations as a fisherman hauls in fish and feasts on them. The enemy then "sacrifices to his net" and "makes offerings to his seine." (1:16) The irony in this description is thick. His net can hardly be held responsible for the exorbitant haul, whether to praise it or to blame it. The harvest of fish is the fisherman's doing. Instead of congratulating himself, though, he worships his equipment. In doing so, the fisherman makes it clear, as 1:11 adumbrates, that he has made his own power his god—yet he has done so while maintaining a pretense of piety. Once again, the prophet's criticism of this cultic aberration is moral rather than ontological.

17 Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 127: "Finally, contrary to many scholars, the saying's [i.e. Hab 2:19] treatment of idolatry is not at all isolated or unprepared for in the book." Roberts then cites 1:11 and 2:16 (sic; he must mean 1:16 since the reference is to "one who sacrificed and burned incense to his tools of conquest.") as supporting evidence. He continues: "The new characterization of the conqueror as one who depends on divine images [in Hab 2:19], which are no more than the work of the craftsman's hands, paid for by the crown, does not differ radically from these earlier characterizations. In each characterization the Babylonian has deified what is not divine, and in the long run, trust in any such false god will prove deceitful." (p. 127) I agree with Roberts that 2:19 fits with material in ch. 1 and need not be isolated from the rest of the book, though I differ in my understanding of how to articulate this connection.

18 Cf. Is 10, where Assyria is sent to punish Israel (10:6) but then misconstrues this as license to "destroy" and "cut off nations" (10:7). In this way, Assyria comes under Yahweh's judgment.

19 On the possible Babylonian background of this metaphor see David Stephen Vanderhooft, *The Neo-Babylonian Empire and Babylon in the Latter Prophets* (*Harvard Semitic Monographs* 59; Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1999), pp. 154-157.

The problem with the ritual is that it sanctions and perpetuates the predatory behavior. Thus the prophet concludes with a question that appeals to Yahweh's sense of justice: "Is he then to keep on emptying his net, and destroying the nations without mercy?" (1:17)

The theme of unrestrained power masked by piety, then, connects 1:11 and 1:16. The prophet comes to understand that the wicked, unlike the righteous, will not endure (2:4). This is communicated to the prophet by Yahweh. To the extent that the Babylonians are unrighteous, they will not endure. I believe, however, that the text may make an additional connection between the moral critique of Babylonian power and the prophet's unusual denunciations of their idol-worship. Following Yahweh's response to the prophet's second complaint (2:2-4), the prophet compares Babylon to Death personified:

How much more shall wealth deceive the arrogant man,  
And he shall not succeed who has made his maw as wide as Sheol,  
Who is like Death, which is insatiable,  
Who has gathered in for himself all the nations,  
And has collected for himself all the peoples.<sup>20</sup>

By identifying Babylon ("the arrogant man") with Death, the prophet allies Babylon with a figure who stands in opposition to Yahweh and those faithful to him. A similar move is evident elsewhere in the Twelve. In Hosea, Sheol and Death are said to claim Israel and impose on it the parched conditions associated with Death's ascendancy (Hos 13:14-15). Yahweh, by contrast, restores fertility and vegetation, bringing Israel back to life with dew and moisture (Hos 14:4-8; cf. Hos 6:3).<sup>21</sup> It is possible (though far from certain) that the Babylonians here are integrated into a particular prophetic framework, one in which Death is the chief enemy of Yahweh and Yahweh is understood as the God who perennially overcomes Death on Israel's behalf.<sup>22</sup> After Hab 2, the Babylonians disappear from the book, and the "prayer" of Habakkuk in ch. 3 describes a theophany of cosmic proportions. Its imagery has proven difficult to unravel, though it may owe something to storm imagery associated with Baal.<sup>23</sup> If so, then Hab 3:16-17 may offer a counterpoint to the appearance

20 The translation of 2:5 belongs to Roberts (*Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, p. 112).

21 Day, "Hosea and the Baal Cult," p. 219.

22 See Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), esp. pp. 201-216.

23 John Day, "Echoes of Baal's Seven Thunders and Lightnings in Psalm XXIX and Habbakuk III 9 and the Identity of the Seraphim in Isaiah VI" *VT* 29 (1979), pp. 143-151.

of Yahweh in the storm by placing the prophet in the domain of Death, as one awaiting deliverance. The prophet is distressed, subject to “rotteness” (*rāqāb*; cf. Job 13:28) and the debilitating fear of one in the grip of Death (3:16). Outwardly, the land has succumbed to the arid and lifeless conditions commonly associated with Death: fig trees, vines, olive trees, and livestock have all failed (3:17). Nevertheless, the prophet is hopeful that salvation will come (3:18-19), in other words, that Yahweh will overcome Death. Connections here to theme of Death are, admittedly, speculative. What is clear, though, is that the prophet understands the cultic activities of the Babylonians within the context of their characterization as insatiable, death-dealing overlords. Cultic activities are not an object of criticism in their own right but become so when the deathly character of Judah's enemy makes it clear that Babylonian piety is false. They are merely a screen, a means by which the Babylonians conceal a deeper allegiance to their actual god: Death. The deathly quality of Judah's enemy belies its self-image as a benevolent and blessed empire, evoking a prophetic cynicism that extends, finally, to Babylonian piety.

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