

1QpHab as a case study for the pesher hermeneutic and the

New Testament use of Habakkuk

Gerrit D.S. Smit¹

1. Introduction

Recently, I was teaching a PRTS course for ThM students on the history and preservation of the biblical text. In one of the lectures, I included a discussion about the importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls for the study of the preservation of Scripture. For that purpose I built a series of case studies from Qumran, in which I placed readings from the Old Testament beside readings from the Dead Sea Scrolls and students had to evaluate the differences and similarities for themselves.

The Codex Leningradensis was the natural starting point for the comparison. It was copied in AD 1008, and is the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible in the Masoretic tradition, and therefore it serves as the base text of both the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* and *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*. Behind it lay roughly a millennium for which we possessed no older Hebrew witnesses to the Old Testament. Some sceptics specifically question the fidelity of the transmission of the Hebrew Old Testament on the basis of these facts. It was therefore logical to compare texts from both traditions, to answer the scepticism about the preservation of the Old Testament text.

One of the case studies was 1QpHab, the Habakkuk Pesher. It is a leather scroll from Cave 1 at Qumran, dated to around 50-25 BC. It quotes Habakkuk 1-2 phrase by phrase and follows each quotation with an "interpretation" or "pesher" (פִּשְׁרֵי) applying the prophet's words to the Qumran community and its time. We compared the text from columns I-VII of 1QpHab with the same passages in the Codex Leningradensis. The discussion that followed, classified each difference as orthographic, minor, significant, or equal, and I indicated where the divine name appears in paleo-Hebrew script in the scroll.

The exercise was relevant for a number of reasons. First, it allowed students to evaluate the transmission of Habakkuk across more than a thousand years, and to see for themselves how much of the differences are spelling rather than substance. Second, it gave evidence on how a scribe was treating the name of God with reverence. Third, the same scroll that witnesses the text also indicates a way of reading it. So 1QpHab is at once a textual witness and a hermeneutical witness, and therefore it raises a question every Reformed student of the Bible must face: how does the hermeneutics of the Qumran pesher relate to the way the apostles read the Old Testament? What follows takes this question outside the classroom to ponder on further.

¹ Dr. Gerrit Smit is professor in the Faculty of Theology and rector of *Die Afrikaanse Protestantse Akademie*, South Africa & visiting professor at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary.

1QpHab offers a window into how a Second Temple Jewish community read prophetic Scripture as fulfilled in its own day, and for that reason it can be used as a control text for evaluating the apostolic use of the Old Testament. Some have argued that the apostles simply did what Qumran did, so that apostolic exegesis is sometimes interpreted as just one more instance of contemporising the text and therefore carries no more authority than its Jewish counterpart from the Dead Sea. Others have welcomed the parallel as proof that the apostles were not hermeneutically irresponsible, since they worked within a recognised interpretive practice of their time.

I want to focus on the following question: Where does the comparison between the pesher hermeneutic and the apostolic use of Scripture hold, and where does it break down? To follow the argument, it is necessary to first define the pesher form, then describe 1QpHab as textual witness, then examine its handling of Habakkuk with particular attention to Habakkuk 2:4, which is a key verse in Reformed theology, and finally offer an assessment.

2. What is a pesher?

A pesher is a commentary that cites a specific passage and then announces its fulfilment in the life of the present community. The Hebrew noun פֶּשֶׁר (plural פְּשָׁרִים) means "interpretation" or "exposition". Its Aramaic equal is פִּשְׁרָא, which is the word used in Daniel for the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams and of the writing on Belshazzar's wall (Dan. 2:4-7; 5:12-17). In both examples in Daniel, the prophetic meaning is a mystery that remains closed until God grants its meaning to a chosen interpreter.

The Qumran pesharim carry this pattern in explaining prophecy. A passage from the prophet is quoted, followed by an interpretation introduced by a repetitive formula, פֶּשֶׁרוֹ עַל ("its interpretation concerns..."), or a related expression such as פֶּשֶׁר הַדְּבָר ("the interpretation of the word"). The pesher hermeneutic rests on the following assumptions:

1. The prophetic text at hand is a mystery until an interpreter gives the meaning thereof. Its primary context is of less importance and its true meaning lies beyond the prophet's own words.
2. The focus of the text is the coming end-time. The community believed it was living in the last days, so the prophet's words were taken to describe its own history, its present enemies and its current leaders.
3. The solution to the mystery of the text is not discovered by grammatical or textual enquiry, but disclosed to the Teacher of Righteousness.

I indicated in the class discussion that the pesharim are not expository commentaries in the modern sense, but rather eschatological in nature and uses typological readings, in which the meaning of the text is not always following the literary context of the original. It includes the interpreter's conviction about where history now stands in terms of the coming age. Even though I'm not arguing that we can read the Pesher Habakkuk on par with the New Testament, for one is

secular and the other canonical, it still gives an interesting case for the study of hermeneutics. This last point will prove decisive when we place 1QpHab beside the New Testament's citations of Habakkuk.

3. The manuscript: 1QpHab

1QpHab is a commentary on Habakkuk 1:1-2:20. It was written on a leather scroll of about 1.4 metres and can be dated to roughly 50-25 BC. We have thirteen columns available in good condition. The scroll belonged to the sectarian literature of the Dead Sea community, most likely situated at Qumran. Other sectarian literature include the Community Rule (1QS), the War Scroll (1QM) and the Damascus Document (CD) and others. The content of these manuscripts reflects the convictions of the community that collected and treasured the biblical manuscripts found in the caves.

Because 1QpHab quotes Habakkuk passage by passage before interpreting it, the scroll is also valuable as an indirect witness to the Hebrew text of the Old Testament as it was read around the first century BC. The text the church received in the Masoretic tradition was already the majority text in the pre-70 AD Jewish community. For the doctrine of providential preservation, 1QpHab is thus an important piece of evidence to prove that a Jewish sectarian group that read Habakkuk in a highly contextual way nonetheless transmitted a text so similar to the one we have today.

Throughout 1QpHab, the surrounding text is written in the standard Jewish Hebrew handwriting of the time, but the divine name יהוה is written in the paleo-Hebrew script (𐤅𐤄𐤏𐤍) used before the time of the Exile². The scribe thereby marked the divine name visually in order for a reader to take due note of it. This is an example of a Second Temple equivalent of later Masoretic conventions of writing the divine name as יהוה and reading it as Adonai, or the Christian equivalent of using *nomina sacra*, where ΙΣ was used for Ιησοῦς or ΘΣ was used for Θεός. The use of the *nomina sacra* in early Greek manuscripts could have served the purpose to save space, but it was also an expression of reverence or honour for the divine name.

4. Reading 1QpHab

1QpHab reads Habakkuk's dialogue with God as a transcript of the community's own conflict with Rome and with the Jerusalem priesthood. Habakkuk's original setting, most likely the Babylonian threat to Judah in the late seventh century BC, falls almost entirely out of view.

When we compare a few verses from 1QpHab to the readings in the Masoretic Text, we find the following:

² For example in Habakkuk 2:16-20 (1 QpHab, col. 10)

Habakkuk	1QpHab	Probable historical reference
The Chaldeans (Hab. 1:6)	The Kittim	The Romans
The wicked (Hab. 1:4, 13; 2:5-17)	The wicked priest	A Hasmonean high priest
The righteous person (Hab. 1:4, 13; 2:4)	The Teacher of Righteousness and his followers	The founder or leader of the community

A few notes on the table above:

The middle column consists of anonymous names, almost like a codename. The pesher never names a contemporary figure, so every identification in the right-hand column is reconstructed from internal clues and external history, which is why it is labelled "probable".

a) The Kittim

The name is probably related to the inhabitants of Kition in Cyprus (Gen 10:4) and came to mean the people of the western coastlands. Daniel 11:30 refers to the “ships of Kittim”, traditionally identified with Rome, during the Roman intervention that forced Antiochus IV to withdraw from Egypt in 168 BC. The Greek LXX renders the phrase with Ῥωμαῖοι (Romans). The pesher adds some detail: the Kittim “sacrifice to their standards and worship their weapons of war” (1QpHab VI, 3–5). This description fits Roman military religion particularly well, since the legionary standards (signa) held religious significance and received cultic honours.

b) The wicked priest

The title הַכֹּהֵן הָרָשָׁע is most likely a play on הַכֹּהֵן הָרֹאשׁ ("the chief priest"). The pesher says he was called by the name of truth when he first arose, but became proud once he ruled in Israel (1QpHab 8:8-13).

c) The teacher of Righteousness

The title מוֹרֵה הַצִּדִּיק can be translated "the teacher of righteousness" or "the right teacher". 1QpHab 2:7-9 describes him as the priest into whose heart God put understanding to interpret the prophets. In another instance, the Damascus Document, also from Qumran, places his rise twenty years after the community's beginnings (CD 1, 9-11). Unfortunately, he is never named, so

whoever that was, we can only speculate on.

Habakkuk complains that the wicked surround the righteous and that justice goes forth without punishment. The Qumran community experienced a similar situation in its estrangement from the temple establishment. The Babylonians, God's instrument of judgement in Habakkuk, became the Romans, whose military power the community saw advancing in its own time.

5. Habakkuk 2:4 in different manuscripts

Habakkuk 2:1-4 is the Lord's answer to the prophet's second complaint. The prophet takes his stand on the watchtower to see what God will say, and the Lord commands him to write the vision down, because it awaits its appointed time and will surely come, though it is delayed (Hab. 2:2-3). Verse 4 then sets two kinds of people side by side: the one whose soul is puffed up and not upright within him (ESV), and the righteous, who shall live by his faith.

The noun מִצְדִּיק belongs to the root צדק, which denotes firmness, reliability and steadfastness. In the context of Habakkuk 2 it describes the settled trust of the righteous person who holds fast to the promises of the vision while its fulfilment is delayed. The same root appears in Genesis 15:6, where Abram believed (אָמַן) the Lord, and it was counted to him for righteousness. The Masoretic Text reads "his" faith(fulness), the Septuagint reads "my", that is, God's faithfulness, and the New Testament citations either omit the pronoun or follow a Greek form of the text. The interpretation in 1QpHab 8:1-3, which speaks of the fidelity of the doers of the Law, presupposes the Hebrew reading with the third-person pronoun.

The table below sets out the canonical witnesses first, with the Qumran reading added for comparison.

Witness	Text of Habakkuk 2:4b	Whose faith(fulness)?	Emphasis of the reading
Masoretic Text	וְצִדִּיק בְּאִמּוּנָתוֹ יִתְּיָר	The righteous person's ("his")	Steadfast trust in God's word sustains the righteous through the coming judgement
Septuagint	ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως μου ζήσεται	God's ("my")	The righteous lives from God's own faithfulness
Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11	ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται	Pronoun omitted: faith in God's righteousness revealed in Christ	Justification by faith, set against justification by the works of the law

Hebrews 10:38	ὁ δὲ δίκαιός μου ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται	The believer's persevering faith; "my righteous one" is God's	Endurance in faith until the Coming One arrives
1QpHab 8:1-3 (non-canonical, for comparison)	Interpretation presupposes the Hebrew reading	The "doers of the Law", in their toil and their fidelity to the Teacher of Righteousness	Deliverance of the righteous from judgement on account of labour and loyalty

6. The New Testament reading of Habakkuk 2:4

Habakkuk 2:4 is cited three times in the New Testament, more frequently than any other verse in the prophet's book. In each instance, the apostles interpret the prophet's words in the light of their fulfillment in Christ, recognising in him the realisation of the promise already expressed in Habakkuk. Their use of the text thus reflects a continuity between the prophetic message and its fulfilment in the redemptive work of Christ, through whom the significance of the prophet's words comes to its full expression.

6.1 Romans 1:17

In Romans 1:16–17, Paul introduces the central theme of his letter: in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν (from faith to faith) as the prophet Habakkuk declares. Paul's quotation differs slightly from both the Hebrew text and the Septuagint, since he omits the pronoun "his" in the Masoretic Text and "my" in the Greek translation. This omission has prompted different interpretations of the phrase. Richard Hays, for example, draws on the Septuagint's wording to suggest that the emphasis may fall on God's faithfulness, or on the faithfulness of Christ. Many Reformed interpreters have generally understood πίστις here as the believer's trust in God, a trust that rests entirely on God's own faithfulness and the reliability of his promises. These interpretations differ in emphasis, yet both direct attention to the relationship between faith and the life God grants. Paul reads Habakkuk's words in the light of the gospel, in which God's promised salvation has been accomplished in Christ. The life of the righteous therefore rests on the sure promise of God, received through faith and grounded in his saving work.

6.2 Galatians 3:11

In Galatians 3, Paul places Habakkuk 2:4 within a wider argument drawn from the Old Testament. He has already appealed to Genesis 15:6, where Abraham's faith is reckoned to him as righteousness (Gal. 3:6), and he now brings Habakkuk 2:4 in connection with Leviticus 18:5

(Gal. 3:11–12). Through these texts, Paul contrasts the principle of faith with reliance on the works of the law as the basis for justification. The connection between Genesis 15:6 and Habakkuk 2:4 is particularly significant, since both passages draw on the Hebrew root *אמ*, which conveys the idea of firmness, reliability, and faithfulness. Paul reads Habakkuk in the light of Abraham's example, while Abraham's experience also helps illuminate the prophetic declaration. Scripture therefore provides the interpretive framework for understanding Scripture, as the promises given to Abraham and the words spoken through Habakkuk converge in Paul's argument. His conclusion is that one is justified before God through the law, for the righteous shall live by faith. In the light of Christ, Paul recognises the fulfilment of this scriptural testimony in God's promise of righteousness and life, received through faith.

6.3 Hebrews 10:37-38

In Hebrews 10:37-38, the author cites Habakkuk 2:3-4 in a Greek form that incorporates the expression “yet a little while,” recalling Isaiah 26:20. The citation brings the original emphasis of Habakkuk's prophecy into focus: the righteous must trust God's word and wait patiently for the fulfilment of his promise.

The author applies this message to believers who have already endured suffering and persecution (Heb. 10:32–36) and who now need encouragement to persevere in faith. The expression *ὁ ἐρχόμενος* (the coming One) identifies the promised coming with the return of Christ, giving Habakkuk's vision its place within the hope of the Christian church. The passage thus leads naturally into Hebrews 11, where the author illustrates how faith sustains God's people as they await the fulfilment of his promises.

If we read this alongside Paul's citations in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11, Hebrews highlights a complementary dimension of Habakkuk's message. Paul draws on the text to explain justification by faith, while Hebrews emphasises the perseverance that characterises the life of faith. Both understandings arise from Habakkuk's own prophetic message, in which the righteous live by trusting God's word and waiting for him to fulfil what he has promised. In the light of Christ, this waiting finds its focus in the certainty of his coming and the completion of God's redemptive purpose.

7. 1QpHab 8:1-3 as a point of contrast

The interpretation of Habakkuk 2:4 in 1QpHab provides a useful point of comparison with the New Testament's use of the same passage. The comparison is especially interesting when we consider how differently the text is applied within two Jewish interpretive contexts of the Second Temple period. According to García Martínez's translation, 1QpHab 8:1-3 identifies those who observe the Law in the house of Judah as the righteous who will be delivered from the house of judgement. Their deliverance is associated with their toil and their fidelity to the Teacher of Righteousness. In this interpretation, *אֱמֻנָה* (*ʿēmûnâ*) carries the sense of faithfulness or fidelity, which are expressed through adherence to the Teacher and his interpretation of the Torah.

Habakkuk's declaration is thus applied to the community whose identity and hope are bound to its observance of the Law and its loyalty to the Teacher of Righteousness. The emphasis falls on the community's covenantal fidelity as it awaits God's promised deliverance.

The method underlying this reading becomes clearer in 1QpHab 7:1-5. Here the author explains that God commanded Habakkuk to record what would happen to the final generation, although the prophet was not shown when the appointed period would reach its completion. The Qumran community argue that God disclosed the meaning of the prophetic words to the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom he revealed the mysteries contained in the words of his servants, the prophets. Within the pesher tradition, therefore, the prophetic text proposes a significance that extends beyond the prophet's own historical horizon. The Teacher occupies a decisive position because he has received the revelation necessary to explain how Habakkuk's words apply to the community's circumstances and its expectation of the end.

The contrast with Paul's use of Habakkuk 2:4 in Galatians 3:11 is obvious. The Pesher Habakkuk applies the text to those who observe the Law and remain faithful to the Teacher of Righteousness, associating their labour and fidelity with their anticipated deliverance. Paul, by contrast, cites the same declaration in support of his argument that no one is justified before God through the works of the Law. His argument rests on the scriptural distinction between righteousness received through faith and the attempt to establish righteousness through the Law. The difference concerns the place of the Law and the character of the faith by which the righteous live. At Qumran, the verse is interpreted within a framework of communal fidelity to the Law and the Teacher and in contrast, Paul reads it within his argument concerning justification and the fulfilment of God's promise in Christ.

This comparison doesn't need to assume that Paul knew the Pesher Habakkuk or was directly responding to the Qumran community. The value lies in showing how the same text was interpreted and applied in different ways within Second Temple Judaism. Read against this background, Paul's use of the verse becomes clearer. He understands Habakkuk's declaration within the wider testimony of Scripture, in which God's promise is received through faith and finds its fulfilment in Christ. The comparison therefore highlights both the diversity of Jewish interpretation in the period and the specific place Habakkuk 2:4 occupies in the apostolic hermeneutic of the gospel.

8. Similar but not the same

Since the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, scholars have pointed out many similarities between the pesharim and the New Testament use of the Old Testament. Some have concluded that the apostles may have adopted a Qumran method of hermeneutics. We can acknowledge the similarities, but we need to also understand them correctly. The following points may be noted:

1. Qumran believed it was living in the last generation; the apostles proclaimed that the last days had arrived in Christ (Acts 2:16-17; 1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 1:1-2).

2. The pesher formula על פִּשְׁרוֹ has a functional counterpart in the new Testament, for example: "this is that which was spoken" (τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ εἰρημένον, Acts 2:16) and "that it might be fulfilled" (Matt. 1:22).
3. Qumran spoke of רְיָיִם disclosed to the Teacher; Paul speaks of the μυστήριον kept secret since the world began but now made manifest through the prophetic Scriptures (Rom. 16:25-26).

These similarities show that the apostles spoke in categories that their Jewish hearers would recognise. On the other hand, they do not show that apostolic hermeneutics was derived from Qumran. The New Testament grounds its reading of the Old Testament in the teaching of the risen Christ, who opened the Scriptures to his disciples (Luke 24:25-27, 44-47), and in the forward-looking structure of the Old Testament promises themselves. Therefore, the background illuminates the text, but it does not determine its meaning.

The Westminster Confession states that the true and full sense of any Scripture "is not manifold, but one" (WCF 1.9). The pesher method assumes the opposite: beneath the surface sense of the prophet lies a hidden meaning, accessible only to the "inspired interpreter". The New Testament does not work in this way. Peter does say that the prophets searched what time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating (1 Pet. 1:10-12), but he also says that they knew they were speaking of the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow, and that they served not themselves but us. Qumran makes the prophet ignorant of his own message; the apostles treat him as a true witness to Christ.

The Teacher of Righteousness claimed that God had revealed to him the mysteries of the prophets, but nothing outside the community's own testimony confirms that claim, and the prolonged delay of the end, which the scroll itself must explain, hardly supports it. The apostles wrote as witnesses of the resurrection, taught by the risen Lord to understand the Scriptures and moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21). Their interpretation of the Old Testament is therefore not one opinion among many Second Temple readings, but canonical Scripture, which is God's own interpretation of his earlier word. Therefore, 1QpHab may be read with profit, in much the same way as article 6 of the Belgic Confession allows the apocryphal books to be read, but it has no authority to establish any point of faith or doctrine and neither serves as a hermeneutic for New Testament interpretation.

9. A short assessment

The Westminster Confession states that the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is Scripture itself (WCF 1.9), and that nothing is at any time to be added to it, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or by human traditions (WCF 1.6). The Qumran case shows what happens when that rule is absent. The pesher was controlled by the Teacher's disclosure and by the community's experience, and they probably believed that no higher text can correct it. The apostles, by contrast, interpret Scripture by Scripture: in Galatians 3 Habakkuk 2:4 is read beside Genesis 15:6 and Leviticus 18:5, within the whole testimony of the Law and the Prophets.

Two conclusions follow for the preacher and the student. First of all, the church must read the Old Testament in relation to Christ. Second, we follow the apostles' redemptive-historical reading, but our interpretations remain answerable to the grammatical and historical sense of the text and to the apostolic interpretation already given in Scripture. Where a modern reader treats the prophets as merely a code for current events, he has not followed the New Testament hermeneutic, but returned to a similar hermeneutic used by Qumran.

10. Conclusion

1QpHab serves as a textual witness for the history and preservation of the Biblical text. It confirms that the Hebrew text of Habakkuk was transmitted with care, and that the Qumran community preserved a text recognisably the same as the one the church received.

The comparison helps us see more clearly why the apostles' reading carries an authority that no other ancient reading can claim.

Bibliography and further reading

Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*. Vol. 4, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai. Translated by John Owen. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1848.

Gaffin, Richard B., Jr. *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology*. 2nd ed. Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1987.

García Martínez, Florentino. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English*. 2nd ed. Leiden: Brill, 1996. Introduction, pp. xxxii-lxv; Pesher Habakkuk, pp. 197-202.

García Martínez, Florentino, and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997-1998.

Golb, Norman. *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls? The Search for the Secret of Qumran*. New York: Scribner, 1995.

Hays, Richard B. *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

Price, Randall. *Zondervan Handbook of Biblical Archaeology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018. Chapter 10, pp. 303-321.

Tov, Emanuel. *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*. 3rd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012.

Vos, Geerhardus. *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948. *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert*. 40 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1955.