Reading Habakkuk 3:4 and Deuteronomy 33:2 in Light of One Another*

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Abstract: Habakkuk 3:4 and Deuteronomy 33:2 have long resisted straightforward interpretation. However, both verses apparently belong to the same tradition of southern theophany and both share a similar syntax and imagery. This short paper argues that both verses can be used to shed light on each other, and that the unusual syntax of the MT preserves an ancient idiomatic expression.

Habakkuk 3:4 and Deuteronomy 33:2 are among the most difficult cruces in the Hebrew Bible. Both verses occur in poetic compositions belonging to the tradition of southern theophany, in which YHWH, in the role of the divine warrior, marches in power from the South. Moreover, in addition to comparable imagery and themes, both Hab 3:4 and Deut 33:2 also share a similar syntax: a prepositional phrase consisting of two nouns one of which has prefixed (ָת, followed by -ל + pronominal suffix. However, the use of the preposition ָת without a verbal complement is felt to be problematic, and both ancient and modern interpreters alike have struggled with the meaning of these cola.

Be that as it may, the striking similarity of the two verses has long been recognised, and as early as 1896 C. J. Ball described the cola as synonymous. However, whereas discussions

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2 While ָת is relatively uncommon in such verbless prepositional phrases, it is not entirely unattested: cf. הכה ימי, “for all things (are) from you” (1 Chr 29:14).

of these verses have been dominated by the lexical and semiotic issues involved with interpreting the problematic words קְרַנִים (Hab 3:4) and אֶשֶׁר (Deut 33:2), few have attempted to grapple with the difficult syntax (see below). Ultimately, however, the similarity of syntax in the MT suggests that we may be dealing with an idiomatic expression, according to which the directional prepositions מ and ל could be coordinated to convey the sense “to return,” or “to surround.” Consequently, in what follows I argue that in both verses the use of these mutually opposing prepositions was deliberate and meaningful, and calculated within their analogous poetic contexts to describe the nature of the radiance that surrounds the deity.

Habakkuk 3:4

This verse has typically been read as an ABC climactic tricolon. Thus, in the NRSV it is translated:

A. The brightness was like the sun; 
B. rays came forth from his hand, 
C. where his power lay hidden.

However, as will be argued below, it may also be possible to re-interpret the verse, in order to emphasise the tension inherent in the prepositions in the second colon, in which case, the verse may be read as follows:

A. (His) brightness is like light;  
B. Rays from his hand surround him, 
C. And there is his glorious veil

As such, the tricolon has an envelope structure whereby cola A and C describe the radiance which is introduced in colon B.

Colon A: נגה סאור תדה

The feminine form of the verb תדה has occasioned suspicion, owing to the fact that the noun נוגה appears to be masculine (note that in 2 Sam 22:13 the suffixed from is נָגְהָם, rather than the expected נְגָתָם). However, it has been countered that in no other context is the noun actually demonstrated to be masculine. Moreover, the related noun נְגֹהוֹת, “lustre, brightness,” in Isa 59:9 is apparently feminine. In any case, the basic meaning of the colon is essentially clear.

Colon B: קרני מורי ל

The interpretation of the second colon is a more complex task. Setting aside for the moment the difficult question of קרני, a literal translation of this verse results in the awkward expres-
sion: "from his hand to him." This difficulty is usually resolved by treating ברנים as a reflexive pronoun and supplying a verb: ברנים (are) from his very own hand." This is evidently how the Greek and Latin translators understood the verse: LXX: κέρατα ἐν χερσίν αὐτοῦ; Barbarini (Barb.): κέρατα ἐκ χειρὸς αὐτοῦ; Vulgate (Vg.): cornua in manibus eius; although, the LXX and Vg. apparently read מדרד rather than מדרד, and left the problematic ברר untranslated. Modern commentators have often resorted to (at times quite drastic) emendation.

Baruch Margulis, for example, proposed the transposition of מדרד ומידיו and the insertion of הליכות עולם לeloiah umel ol from the end of v. 6 to supply the referent of اسم in the final colon:

"A glow issues from His hand
He is crowned (lit. "has") with rays like the sun
His procession is eternal
There his 'strength' is hidden"

Michael O'Connor proposed a revocalisation based on the deletion of the two matres lectionis in מדרד, מדרד, and the redivision of the remaining consonantal text of the MT to restore מדרל which he understood to be a Hebrew cognate of Ugaritic mdl "lightning-bolt":

"The radiance of His lightning is like the beams of the light
The name of the covering is His Strength"

And Nili Shupak, finding echoes of Egyptian solar imagery in the verse, preferred to see the ℓamed as a genitive and suggested the deletion of the mem in מדרד in מדרד, ירי (יירה) ויד, "his hand will be rays."³¹

By far the most extensive emendation, however, is that of Albright, who revised almost the entire verse:

"<Yahweh> attacked like a bull (?)
Provided with tossing horns
Rejoicing in the day of His triumph"

Yet, even after such extensive revision, most translators have continued to struggle with the meaning of this colon and have felt the need to paraphrase the verse.

At the heart of this difficulty, the dual noun ברנים has necessarily played an important role in determining the overall meaning of the colon. Interpretations have tended to follow one of three alternatives: (1) ברנים = "(animal) horns": This option is reflected in both the Greek

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7 Modern translations include: NRSV “come forth from”; JPS “gives off rays on every side”; NIV and ESV “flashed from”.
10 Note the emendation of נגה to נגהה; cf. נגוהו, "lustre, brightness" (Isa 59:9), and the inversion of the clauses in the English translation. Even so, this reconstruction is rendered highly unlikely by the presence of the preposition in the middle of a construct chain.
11 On the interpretation of Name as name, see below.
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Advocates of this reading generally assume a Canaanite background for the verse, citing literary and iconographic evidence from Ugarit and the ancient Near East. According to this reading, קֶרֶן in the next colon is understood to be thematically related to קֶרֶן as a reference to the deity’s power. (2) קֶרֶן = “lightning.” This reading likewise assumes a Canaanite and wider Near Eastern background to the verse, this time imagining the Storm-God holding a two (or three) pronged shaft of lightning. While this proposal allows a certain degree of harmonisation within the tricolon, the reader is left to wonder in what sense the deity’s power could be “hidden” if it is contained within the shaft of lightning in his hand. Moreover, it should be noted that nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible is קֶרֶן used with the sense of lightning. (3) קֶרֶן = “rays of light.” This interpretation requires closer consideration. First, it should be noted that while in the Hebrew Bible קֶרֶן is nowhere used with the sense of “rays” or “light,” in the immediate context of Hab 3:4 some sort of luminary imagery, paralleling נגָה and הָוד in the preceding cola, seems apposite. Consequently, קֶרֶן in Hab 3:4 has often been compared to the cognate verb קָרַן in Exod 34:29–30. The interpretation of this verb has also attracted much attention, with opinion divided between those who understand it to mean that the skin of Moses’ face spouted horns, and those who understand it to mean the skin of Moses’ face had a shining appearance.


15 Cf. Haak, Habakkuk: 87; David Tsumura, “Janus Parallelism in Hab. iii 4,” VT 54 (2004): 125; repr. VT 63 (2013): 113–16, notes that the word pair נא and קֶרֶן occurs two other times in the Hebrew Bible (1 Sam 2:10; Ps 89:18), and both times קֶרֶן clearly means “horn.”

16 Eaton’s reconstruction reads:

Even there is the covering of his power!


18 On the interpretation of קֶרֶן, see below.

19 קָרַן is the more common noun, especially in the context of theophany, cf. Exod 19:16; 2 Sam 22:15 = Ps 18:15; Ps 97:4; Zech 9:14.


Here, too, the textual witness is mixed: the Vg. (apparently following Aquila)\textsuperscript{23} translated the verb כָּרַן with the adjective cornutus, rendering the line cornuta erat facies sua, “his face was horned,” while the LXX supplied the verb δεδόξασται, “it shone” (which is typically used in the LXX for רוח; \textsuperscript{24}Nevertheless, there is evidence that later Jewish tradition also understood כָּרַן in Exod 34:29–30 to mean that Moses’ face “shone.” Thus, 2 Cor 3:12–18, which is almost certainly influenced by the LXX (cf. δόξαν; esp. v. 18), refers to the veiling of Moses’ glory. Similarly, the Targums refer to the זיו, “splendour” of Moses’ face: Tg. Onq. זיו סגי דאפוהי יקרא, “the resplendent glory of his face increased”; Tg. Ps.-J. דאנפוי איקונין זיו אשרבה, “the resplendent visage of his face shone”; Tg. Neof. דאפוי איקרהון זיו הנהר, “the resplendent glory of his face shone.” Further still, explicit references are found in Philo of Alexandria, who supplies an extended description of Moses’ radiant appearance in his Life of Moses 2.70, in which Moses’ face is described as “shining like the sun” (ἡλιοειδοῦς φέγγους ἀπαστράπτοντος), and in Sifre Zutta, which, in a midrash on Num 27:20, explicitly identifies the כָּרַן of Exod 34:29–30 with the זיו of Hab 3:4, describing them as חמה מגלגל שיוצאין כקרנים “, like the ‘rays’ (קרנים) that come from the wheel of the sun.”\textsuperscript{25} As observed by J. J. M. Roberts, the weight of this exegetical tradition cannot be easily dismissed.\textsuperscript{26}

However, the basis for seeing כָּרַן as an allusion to “rays of light” is not limited to late interpretations only. Seth Sanders and David Tsumura have collated considerable evidence for the existence of an association between horns and light in ancient Mesopotamia and Ugarit. The most compelling evidence comes in the form of a pair of Mesopotamian astronomical texts, which include a lexicographical treatment of the Sumerian word SI, in which it is explicitly stated that SI can mean both “horn” (qarnu) and “radiance, shining, light” (šarūru).\textsuperscript{27} However, this evidence is not entirely without problems. From the data amassed by both Sanders and Tsumura it is evident that the equation between horns and light is predominantly conceived in relation to the moon (or in the case of Enūma Anu Enlil, cited by Sanders, a solar eclipse). Consequently, the most obvious inference is that כָּרַן/qarnu represents a metaphorical expression referring to the “horns” of the crescent moon.\textsuperscript{28} Be that as it may, Sanders has observed that in


\textsuperscript{25} Cf. Jacob Neusner, Sifré Zutta to Numbers (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), 231. The Sifre Zutta passage is particularly interesting insofar as it is an elaboration on the הוד, “glory,” of Moses, and therefore has a clear resonance with Hab 3:3. Note that the interpretation כָּרַן = “shine,” was not universally accepted in the midrashic tradition with some sources understanding Exod 34:29–30 to mean that Moses’ face was horned—cf. Rimon Kasher, “The Mythological Figure of Moses in light of Some Unpublished Midrashic Fragments,” JQR 88 (1997): 19–42; Sanders, “Old Light on Moses’ Shining Face,” 405, and n. 14.

\textsuperscript{26} Roberts, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, 134.


\textsuperscript{28} This is seen particularly clearly in the Eblaite incantation text cited by Tsumura, “Janus Parallellism in Hab. iii 4,” 126.
CT 26 43 viii 5–10 the semantic range of $SI$ is expanded to include both the affective: šuḥarru, “to daze,” and the physical: arāmu, “to mask,” suggesting that the metaphorical conception extended beyond the physical appearance of the moon to encompass abstract qualities associated with its radiance.

In light of this comparative evidence, Tsumura has suggested that Hab 3:4 could be interpreted as a Janus parallelism, in which קרנים should be understood to refer to both “horns,” and “light” (and indeed such multivalence lies close to the heart of metaphor). However, Sanders put the case even more strongly:

The early first-millennium Mesopotamian astronomical and lexical sources attest to an ancient understanding of light as material which explains the crux of Moses’ shining face. Moses’ face could, quite literally, radiate horns, and the need to translate the term as either divine radiance or physical protuberance is merely a side-effect of our conceptual categories, irrelevant to ancient Israelite ideas.

Consequently—however one opts to construe the imagery of Exod 34:29–30 and Hab 3:4—there can be little doubt that such figurative language was at home in the ancient Near East.

The dual ending (קרנים) in the MT of Hab 3:4 need not be considered particularly problematic: the imagery might be of radiance flowing from both above and below a closed hand, or else it may be that the suffix was supplied reflexively owing to the fact that horns (not to mention the subsequent ם, “hand”) are typically found in pairs. Alternatively, and this is perhaps a preferable solution, it might be that קרנים was originally vocalised as a substantive masculine plural participle קֹרְנִים, i.e. “the radiations” (cf. the hip’il participle מַקְרִן, Ps 69:32), which was later misunderstood and repointed as a dual noun in subsequent editions. In any case, it should be noted that in the Sifre Zuta passage cited above, the dual form is used of rays issuing from the surface of the sun, a context in which the dual suffix can hardly be limited to a literal pair.

Returning to the question of syntax, the next difficulty relates to the meaning of 므דוי. Following the interpretation קרנים = “rays,” it is tempting to read this as “rays (emanated) from his hand.” However, if that is in fact what the verse describes, the omission of the verb (e.g._Send, ירד, יצא, or even in the context ארוץ, cf. Deut. 33:2a) is surprising. As noted above, the LXX and Vg. apparently read דבכ in accordance with the expected conventions of a descriptive nominal clause. But, as attractive as it may be, this solution is not satisfactory: the witness of Barb. and the virtually identical syntax in Deut 33:2 attest to the plausibility of the MT’s reading. Furthermore, given that the construction לו… (ן) is the more difficult reading, it is not easy to see how it could have entered the text.

It is possible, however, that this perceived difficulty may have arisen due to the manner in which subsequent translators have tended to punctuate the text. That is, it is generally assumed that קרנים is the subject of the clause and 므דוי is the predicate, while לו functions as a reflexive pronoun. Consequently, there is a tendency to separate לו and treat it as though it were periph-
eral or ancillary to the clause. However, an alternative possibility is that קרנים could be treated together as a noun phrase forming the subject of the clause, and that לול could be understood as the predicate. This is distinct from the genitival relationship that would ordinarily be expressed through the construct state; rather, the preposition מן designates the source of the קרנים (i.e. “rays from his hand”).

It is possible to interpret this latter alternative in either of two ways. The first option is to translate the preposition ל as a genitive: “the rays from his hand (are) his own.” This option has found some support in modern translations. The second option is to emphasise the push-and-pull dynamic implied by the directional connotations inherent in the two prepositions. In which case, the literal expression: “the rays from his hand (are) to him,” might be paraphrased “the rays from his hand (return) to him.” The imagery is of rays flowing continually—both away from and back to—the divine presence. It should also be noted that there is no implicit direction for the flow of radiance. Consequently, this colon may reflect an idiomatic expression, effectively meaning: “the rays from his hand surround him.”

This expression has a more active sense than the analogous phrase והנה ונחלה, “and brightness was around it” (Ezek 1:27), and emphasises the deity as the source of radiance.

Colon C: השם מביא עוה

The appeal of the latter interpretation of Colon B is that it also lessens the difficulty of the final colon. This colon is usually interpreted: “And there his strength was hidden.” However, there is also considerable disagreement in the versions regarding this colon, and it too has been subjected to extensive emendation. Some, following the LXX (ἔθετο) and Syriac (зем), restore the verb √שִׂים “put, place,” while others have preferred to read the noun שֵׁם “name.”

Andersen, following the MT in reading the locative particle שם “there,” was inclined to see “heaven” in the preceding verse as the most suitable referent for שם. However, if Colon B is understood to describe the radiance surrounding the deity, then קרנים may itself be a suitable referent. Accordingly, שם should be understood to function as a deictic particle relating directly to the preceding colon.

36 A few have grappled with the meaning of ל; cf. Haak, Habakkuk, 83. However, Haak’s method was to separate it from the colon, treating it instead as the introduction to the next Colon:
“The earth is full, indeed, of brightness, true light!
Horns come from his hands.
To him, indeed, there is crawler, his strength.”

37 Cf. Shupak, “God from Teman and Egyptian Sun God,” 105.

38 That is if the preposition ל is understood to have the sense “to, towards,” e.g. הוא לקצר, “he came to the city” (1 Sam 9:12); והיה לו קרנים האלים, “and he returned his wife Sarah to him” (Gen 20:14; note that in this example מ designates the object of the verb ושא “to return”), and מ is understood to refer to the source of origin, e.g. יהוה בא מ Sinai, “YHWH comes from Sinai” (Deut 33:2); אלהים בא טמא, “God comes from Teman” (Hab 3:3).

39 Indeed Margulis may have been hinting at this interpretation when he noted that the Peshitta has חלמוה, “which may have preserved a variant (and superior?) reading כפשו” (Margulis, “The Psalm of Habakkuk,” 414, note b).

40 Cf. Ezek 1:4; note the care taken by Ezekiel to avoid anthropomorphisms esp. Ezek 1:26–28.

41 Patterson, “The Psalm of Habakkuk,” 169 argues for extensive emendation, deleting membr and treating šîn as a relative particle preceded by a pleonastic wāw.

42 Cf. Roberts, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, 135.


44 An analogous use of is found in Exod 20:21:"And Moses
The hapax legomenon חביון has also occasioned some difficulty. The LXX reads ἀγάπησιν, presumably derived from √حب, “love”; however, this makes little sense in the context and may reasonably be disregarded. An alternative, proposed by Cyrus Gordon, is that חביון, together with חבי (which the MT has pointed as a qal imperative) in Isa 26:20, should be identified with the horned deity ḫby, who is apparently named in an Ugaritic narrative concerning the inebriation of El (KTU 1.114, r. 18–20). However, Scott Noegel has recently challenged this interpretation of KTU 1.114, r. 18–20 (and, by extension, Hab 3:4 and Isa 26:20), arguing that the conventional interpretation of the Ugaritic passage directly contravenes what we understand of ancient Near Eastern demonology and social perceptions of the effects of alcohol. Consequently, Noegel has argued that rather than a DN, ḫby should be identified instead with the Akkadian root ḫbb “to murmur, babble,” and understood as an epithet of El. In light of this difficulty it is helpful to consider other explanations for חביון.

The most common solution is to identify both חביון and חבי with the Heb. root √חבה “to withdraw, hide,” which occasionally appears in the form of a לו verb √חבה. Significantly, this same root (חאה/חוב/חובה) is attested in both Talmudic and Targumic literature, and the noun חביון, “hiding place,” is attested in Tg. Cant. 2:14, and Tg. Qoh. 10:20. The nature of the relationship between Heb. √חבה/חביון and its later Aramaic cognates is not entirely clear, but in light of the Aramaic evidence and the witness of Tg. Jon.: מכסה, √עזה “to hide,” and Vg. abscondita, “was hidden,” it seems satisfactory to interpret חביון as a noun meaning “hiding place,” and to translate the clause along the lines: “where his power lay hidden.” Note, however, that HALOT, interpreting חביון as “covering, veil,” proposed the reading “his strong covering,” i.e. “there (was) his strong covering,” which makes good sense as a description of the radiance emanating from and surrounding the divinity.

Finally, Nahum Waldman has demonstrated that עז often occurs together with other terms for “majesty, glory” and may carry similar connotations. Accordingly, it is possible to translate the colon: “And there (i.e. contained within the rays) was his glorious veil.”

Deuteronomy 33:2

In the syntactically parallel clause in Deut 33:2, it is Ashdāth that is/are said to emanate from God’s “right (hand)” (דימני). The crux, Ashdath, has attracted numerous attempts at clarification and emendation, the most plausible of which have been conveniently summarised by Gary Rendsburg and there is no need to review the secondary literature again here.

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47 Cf. GKC, §75 oo–qq.
48 For both the verb and the noun cf. Jastrow.
50 Cf. JPS, which translates עז as “His glory.”
In light of the above reconstruction of Hab 3:4, it is interesting to return to C. J. Ball’s lexical proposal, identifying אָשָׁד with the Syriac √אָשד “to pour, to stream.” Ball noted that אָשָׁד is frequently used to denote the pouring out of light and, as such, he saw this colon as synonymous with Hab 3:4, translating the colon: “at His right He had streaming rays.” This interpretation seems to be supported by Rendsburg’s identification of a possible Ugaritic cognate išdym in UT8 (= KTU 1.45), a mythological text apparently dealing with the sun goddess Špš. As Rendsburg notes, the apparently similar imagery of both Deut 33:2 and KTU 1.45 “is too close to be accidental.”

Finally, in Deut 33:2 the pronoun used is the (archaic) 3mp pronominal suffix לוֹ, “to them.” The Targums apparently understood this as לָנ, “to us.” In the context, either reading is plausible; but not within the idiomatic reflexive sense described above. It is, therefore, interesting to note that the LXX has the m.s. genitive pronoun μετ’ αὐτοῦ, “with him,” and this reading may in fact be superior, as לָנ could easily be the result of dittography from the preceding line (וּלָנ) and the emendation לו results in an even closer parallel with Hab 3:4.

According to this reconstruction, the colon may be translated along the lines:

streams (of light?) from his right (hand) surround him.

A Word on the Imagery

The imagery of divine radiance is at home amongst biblical descriptions of the deity; e.g. Ezek 1:27–28; Psalm 104:2. But figurative and descriptive language associating the deity with luminosity also abounds throughout the ancient Near East. The motif is well known from the solar cults of Egypt, but it is in the Mesopotamian concept of melammu and its cognates that the closest parallels for the imagery of Hab 3:4 and Deut 33:2 are to be found. Melammu has three principal characteristics: 1) it is frequently conceived as an aura surrounding a deity, individual, or object; 2) it is frequently associated (if not identified) with radiance; 3) it is a representation of that deity’s, individual’s, or object’s power. In the words of Irene Winter:

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52 C. J. Ball, “The Blessing of Moses (Deut xxxiii)”: 119.
53 Ibid, 118. In his discussion of the syntax Ball suggested emending the 3.m.s. pronominal suffix to a 1.c.p. pronominal suffix (at least for Deut 33:2); cf. C. J. Ball, “The Blessing of Moses (Deut xxxiii)”: 119–20.
55 Ibid., 83.
56 Cf. Tg. Onq.; this seems to be influenced by the targum’s understanding that the subject of Deut 33:2 is the giving of the Law, which apparently derives from the same tradition as the MT’s “fire of the law,” and is therefore of questionable authority.
60 Shawn Aster has recently demonstrated that the equation of melammu with radiance is especially commonplace from the Sargonid period (beginning in 720 BCE) onward, Shawn Z. Aster, The Phenomenon of Divine and Human Radiance in the Hebrew Bible and in Northwest Semitic and Mesopotamian Literature: A Philological and Comparative Study, (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2006), 74–79.
Insofar as *melammu* is visible, radiant and has the power to overwhelm one's enemies, it conveys not just a passive physical aura, but a sort of vital force-field or energy contained within and emanating from the entity it surrounds.\(^{61}\)

If it is understood that Hab 3:4 and Deut 33:2 preserve a reflex of a similar conception, then the pairing of קָרָנִים and עָז in Hab 3:4 may have been deliberately calculated to evoke connotations of strength and power.\(^{62}\)

**Concluding Remarks**

The remarkable similarity in the unusual syntax of both verses suggests that, in this instance, the MT may have preserved an idiomatic expression, according to which the directional prepositions (ל and מ could be coordinated to convey the sense “to return,” or “to surround.” However, the difficulty attested in the versions in knowing how to translate these verses suggests that the essence of this expression had been lost by the time of translation (although echoes of it might be perceived). This impression is reinforced by the efforts of the versions to make the verses conform to more familiar grammatical conventions. Ultimately, the mutual intelligibility of Hab 3:4 and Deut 33:2 attests the centrality of luminary imagery in the theophany tradition and, from a text critical point of view, makes extreme emendations of either verse *a fortiori* unlikely.

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\(^{62}\) Cf. Tsumura, “Janus Parallelism in Hab. iii 4,” 124–28. Dr. Llewelyn has observed (personal communication) that יד “hand,” may belong to the same conceptual domain as “horn” and “strength.” As such the imagery that unites the last two cola is associated with strength and power, and it is therefore quite likely that the “radiance, brightness” described in this tricolon belongs to the same conceptual matrix.