

Matthew Plummer
Department of Bible Religion and Philosophy
Goshen College

Interpreting Habakkuk through a American Indian Hermeneutic

Contrary to traditional ideas of kenosis, I shall undertake in this paper to re-interpret the concept of kenosis using an ecological/ American Indian hermeneutic. Using such a hermeneutic, I believe, will be helpful in articulating God's inherent concern for his Creation, a concept that has long been ignored in orthodox theology. Using an American Indian hermeneutic will invite us to re-think our ideas about our relationship to God and to Creation, and the relationship between God and humanity as revealed in Scripture. I suggest that using such a hermeneutic in analyzing Habakkuk might suggest how closely this book reveals a God who is interested not only in the wholeness and redemption of humanity, but also the redemption of all his Creation.

An analysis of any Biblical text in terms of kenosis must first begin with a clearly articulated and workable definition. Kenosis, as it is understood by such theologians as Philip Hefner and Manuel G. Doncel, is a metaphysical concept concerning the relationship between God (Creator) and his Creation. Kenosis, in Doncel's view, is a love which expresses itself not as an assimilation of the loved to the lover, but as a dynamic force which respects the integrity and difference of the two parties and allows the parties to become more themselves (Doncel, 792). Kenosis is encountered in its true form in the Triune God, as each Person expresses its love for the other Persons in such a way that completes and enhances the others existence (a.k.a. perichoresis) (Doncel 792). Perichoresis is helpful in understanding kenosis because it links the creative power of kenosis to the intercommunication that is expressed in Creation. God, in the act of Creation, limited himself out of kenotic love for the created, a necessary act to allow the existential freedom and ontological separateness of the universe (Doncel 792). Kenosis, therefore, because of this existential freedom of the created, is expressed in Creation. And some of the created, especially humans, have the

responsibility to extend their kenosis to each other and to the world and be co-creators with God (Doncel 797).

These expressions find form within the very framework of the universe. Modern science has long realized the unavoidable interrelatedness and interdependence of Creation (McFague, 150). Not only are the very atoms of which our bodies are made of the dross of an ancient super-nova; the “higher” forms of life (humans, animals) are dependent on the lower forms (plants, microorganisms), even lifeless forms (water, air). The relationship does not work the other way around (McFague 151). Trees would do just fine, probably even better, if humans did not exist. Even the nature of atoms and the flow of energy in a subatomic reality deny us the comfort of separating the Universe into “living” and “non-living” (McFague 151). This all underscores a perichoretic reality in which humanity is not the crowning achievement, the defining purpose of creation but is just one little species that has the special gift of self-consciousness. God respects and loves the integrity of all creation, not just humans. We must understand, then, that God cares for the wholeness and completeness of not just humans, but also the earth, the animals, rocks, trees, flowers, waters, stars, and planets. Sin and evil, therefore, can be understood as a rejection of God’s kenosis and a splintering of God’s perichoretic relationship with the world. Redemption, consequently, can be understood as a re-asserting of this kenotic love with God and with creation. “Justice and peace,” says American Indian theologian George E. Tinker, “emerge almost naturally out of a self-imagining that sees the self as only a part of the whole, as part of an ever-expanding community that begins with family and tribe but finally includes all human beings and all of creation (Tinker 114).” Re-establishing our relationship with the earth and all of Creation becomes as important as re-establishing our relationship with God. Consequentially, any concept of kenosis must include such a notion of the integral and perichoretic nature of Creation with its Creator.

The book of Habakkuk can be understood through a spatial, creational apprehension of kenosis. Indeed most of the book is an indictment of an imperialistic, power-centering ideology operating under the myth of scarcity, one such ideology introduced in the works of Walter Brueggeman. God says of the Babylonians: “he is as greedy as the grave, and like death is never

satisfied, he gathers to himself all nations, and takes captive all the peoples (2:5).” The text is here highlighting the consumerist nature of Babylon: like all Empires, Babylon seeks to centralize all resources, all people, and all power and put them all under imperial control. This is a direct subversion of the created order, of the interconnectedness of creation. It is centering humanity (or more precisely, certain members of humanity) in a predominant, exclusive position in relation to Creation. Humanity, and only certain humans at that, is the only thing that matters in the universe. This manifest itself in verse 1:5: “the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails (1:5).” Humanity is not willing to except the limitations that a perichoretic relationship with Creation would entail.

God, however, rejects this philosophy: “Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain, to set his nest on high, to escape the clutches of ruin! [...] The stones of the wall will cry out, and the beams of the woodwork will echo with it (2:9.11).” The earth itself is crying out against the evils done to it by a people who reject the interrelatedness of nature to elevate themselves above it. This verse might in fact support the suggestion that certain Israelites rejected the common convention of assigning only humans consciousness and reason. This, however, cannot be born out with a subsequent verse, verse nineteen, which refers to stone as “lifeless.” Still, verse nine and eleven are still a far cry from the divorced centralization of humanity over Creation. In fact God further denounces the Babylonians of deforesting Lebanon and over-hunting animals (2:17). He says that “the people’s labor is only fuel for the fire, the nations exhaust themselves for nothing (2:13).” Thus all the endeavors of humans are meaningless; all attempts at creations (such as empire) are really acts of destruction, unless human creativity is rooted in a respect for Creation and a kenotic relationship with both the Creator and his Creation.

It is apparent in the text that human relationships between themselves, God, and Creation are out of order because of their inability to escape cycles of violence, all perpetuated by an ideology of scarcity. It is precisely the centralization of resources and people by empires that perpetuates more violence: “Will not your debtors suddenly arise (similarities to America and Britain?), will not they wake up and make you tremble (2:7)?” God’s judgment is articulated in this circle of violence: “With his own spear you [God] pierced his head when his warriors stormed out to scatter us,

gloating as though about to devour the wretched who were in hiding (3:14).” Violence is its own reward for rejecting a kenotic, perichoretic relationship with God and Creation.

In the last chapter of Habakkuk, chapter three, the whole created order seems to be lamenting the backwardness of humanity. God comes in splendor to inflict vengeance upon humanity, to “thresh the nations (3:12)” and to deliver “your anointed one, to save your anointed people (3:13).” Scholars have traditionally interpreted “your anointed people” here as the people of Israel. Yet in the context of a hermeneutic interested in Creation, “your anointed people” may also be seen as the land, the animals, and the earth that the Babylonians had overwhelmed and destroyed like a plague. Yet God himself is identified with a plague in verse five. Furthermore he destroys mountains, brings pestilence and tramples the seas with his horses. He seems, in fact, to be embodying the sort of violence against the earth that he accused the Babylonians of doing. However, if it is remembered that through kenosis God identifies with Creation to such an extent that he is able to increase its self-likeness at every moment, the imagery of the mountains trembling and crumbling (3:6) and the deep roaring and lifting high its waves (3:10) can be seen as the anger of the Lord expressed in Creation. Thus, just as God used the plagues in Egypt to punish the Egyptians, so he uses nature to war against that backward two-legged race, humanity. But the final eschatological event will not be realized in war, it will be closer to Habakkuk’s idea of wholeness: “The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights (3:19).” Thus, being in the right kenotic and perichoretic relationship with God and Creation entails creaturely perfection. At that time, when humanity fully realizes its kenosis, God will become unrestricted and fully himself again. Time and space will cease, and humanity will exist in an interpersonal loving of the created and Trinitarian People (Doncel 794).

Interpreting Habakkuk through an American Indian hermeneutic has thus led us to suppose that the book does indeed express a deep concern for the well-being of creation. Furthermore, God’s indictment of empire, power-centering, and the myth of scarcity invites us to re-think our relationship with the earth and the current economic, political, and social structure we live in. By emphasizing Creation in an interpretation of Habakkuk, we have allowed ourselves to recognize the

vast meaning of Creation that, though it includes us, does not center exclusively upon us. And lastly, the emphasis upon kenosis and perichoresis allows us to theorize on how we may incorporate these elements in our lives, and how we may be faithful co-creators with God.

Works Cited

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