The Book of Haggai and the Rebuilding of the Temple in the Early Persian Period

by John Robert Barker, O.F.M.

In biblical studies the “postexilic” or Persian, era has in recent decades emerged from a long period of relative neglect to now constitute an important and vibrant area of research. Persian Period studies of all kinds are flourishing and contributing greatly to our appreciation of the contentious yet theologically productive period of the 6th–4th centuries. One particular example of this is the work that has been done on the book of Haggai. Once regarded by many as a wholly uninteresting text, Haggai has of late been subjected to serious and sustained scrutiny by scholars such as Elie Assis and John Kessler, along with others, whose excellent work has shown this short book to be much more interesting and complex than previously thought. My own doctoral work on Haggai, which engages the text through rhetorical analysis, joins this effort by seeking to reexamine the persuasive intention and strategies of the text. I understand this text to be a carefully composed response to arguments and counterarguments against the rebuilding of the temple, as well as an interpretation of both acceptance and refusal of the prophetic call to rebuild. Such an approach can, I believe, contribute to our understanding of both the text and the nature of the debates surrounding the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem in the early years after the exile.

The only biblical account of the reconstruction of the temple is found in Ezra 1–6, which states that immediately after Cyrus gave permission for exiles to return to rebuild the temple, a large number of them did so. Work was halted soon afterwards, however, because of outside interference. For many years the project languished until Haggai and Zechariah “began to prophesy…in the name of the God of Israel” and then supported the Judahite leaders in rebuilding the temple (Ezra 5:1, 2). The temple was then completed in the sixth year of Darius, about 516 BCE. There are a number of well-known historical problems with Ezra, one of which is the claim that cessation of the work on the temple was due to outside interference. This assertion is almost universally regarded as an anachronistic projection of later problems between the communities of Judah and Samaria. Rather, any work that was begun on the temple was almost certainly halted because of problems within the community.¹ These are never directly stated anywhere, but we can surmise what at least some of these may have been on the basis of what we know of the economic, social, political, and religious role of temples in the ancient Near East, as well as what little we find in the book of Haggai.

¹ This supposition is supported, albeit via an argument from silence, by the books of Haggai and Zechariah. The prophetic preaching in both of these books, particularly Haggai, assumes that it is the people of Judah who are to blame for not rebuilding the temple, not outsiders. Neither book betrays any idea, in fact, that work was ever begun on the temple, much less halted because of outside interference.

John Robert Barker, O.F.M., is assistant professor of Old Testament at Catholic Theological Union. He is currently completing his doctorate in Biblical Studies from Boston College
Haggai begins by addressing “this people,” who are said by God to claim that “now is not the time to rebuild the house of Yhwh” (1:2). What exactly this means is not obvious, and the prophetic response offers only a little help. Rather than directly argue that “this people” has the wrong understanding, the prophet accuses them of being more concerned with their own problems than with rebuilding the temple. He then informs them that the reason they are experiencing economic and agricultural problems is because they have not rebuilt the temple.

There are a number of possible reasons why “this people” may not have wished to rebuild the temple at that time, some of which are stated or alluded to and some of which are not but should nevertheless be taken into consideration when reading this book. Some of the more materialistic reasons would include the need to leave farms and other forms of life-sustaining labor to work on the temple, something many people would not have felt able or willing to do, particularly in hard times. As the temple in Jerusalem would require personnel and sacrifices, it may have been perceived as a heavy and unnecessary economic burden. Religious observance did not require a large central temple and many people, especially those whose families had remained in the land, would very likely have been content with or even preferred local worship sites, where many of them were undoubtedly accustomed to worship. In addition, a central temple could also serve as a source of imperial control by facilitating the collection of taxes, among other things. For these and other reasons the local populace—who after all would have to actually contribute labor and resources to the temple during and after reconstruction—may not have been enthusiastic about the project.

Among the elites there would also be theological reasons to be hesitant to rebuild. For example, temples understood to have been destroyed as part of the punishment of an offended god could only be rebuilt with the permission of that god, often signaled by evidence such as agricultural prosperity that the period of punishment had come to an end. One possible interpretation of the claim that it was not the time to rebuild to the temple is that “this people” understood the poor economic and agricultural circumstances to be an indication that Israel remained under divine punishment, in which case attempting to rebuild the temple against the Deity’s wish would only invite further disaster. Haggai appears to be turning this argument on its head by claiming that the poor conditions are not the continuation of the punishment that included the destruction of the first temple but a new punishment for failing to build the second temple. While there is some cause to think this argument would work, there is just as much cause to think that not everyone would have been persuaded by it. Traditional ancient Near Eastern and Israelite theology offered more than one way to read “the signs of the times.”

These are just some of the possible reasons for opposing the reconstruction of the temple; others could be listed as well. Because the objections could be grounded in various traditional as well as material concerns and be voiced by different social groups within Judah, it is historically unlikely that a single argument intended to shame the people into starting work on the temple would have been enough to persuade the entire populace to build the temple. Yet this is how Haggai is typically read. At the conclusion of the first oracle (1:2–11), there is a brief notice about the community’s response. This is almost universally taken to mean that all the people responded positively to the prophet and got to work. I suggest that this is not only historically improbable but also not supported by the language of the text, the analysis of which I will keep brief and non-technical.

---

2 I explore these in detail in my doctoral thesis. One very significant concern, among others, would have been the lack of a divinely-appointed royal figure to rebuild the temple, a basic necessity in the ancient Near East. The heavy emphasis throughout the text on the Davidide governor Zerubbabel, as well as the oracle concerning him at the end of the book, are intended to counter this argument.

3 I know of only two scholars who have suggested that the text indicates acceptance by only some of the community: Samuel Amsler, Aggée-Zacharie 1–8, Zacharie 9–14, Malachi (CAT 11c; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1988), 26; and Michael H. Floyd, Minor Prophets, Part 2 (FOTL 22; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 270. Neither scholar develops this insight or applies it to his understanding of the text as a whole.
Haggai 1:12 states that the leaders “and all the remnant of the people” responded to the call. The language here is specific: “remnant of the people.” There are discernible rhetorical reasons for choosing this phrase, which not only indicates that not everyone responded but also characterizes those who did respond as what amounts to the “real Israel.” The term “remnant” very often refers to those survivors of the divine punishment who emerge as a purified and true Israel. The composer of this book has carefully chosen this language to reflect the theological perspective that those who believed the prophet, and only those, constitute this remnant. The others are simply referred to as “this people” or, later in v. 12, as “the people.” Most translators assume that “the remnant of the people” and “the people” in 1:12 are the same and translate this verse accordingly. The Hebrew, however, is open to another interpretation which allows for the distinction.

This is important because it indicates that the prophet has not been successful in persuading the entire community to rebuild the temple, only those who are “the true Israel.”

This reading is supported by an analysis of the third oracle in the book, the “priestly torah” oracle of 2:10–14. There has been much debate about what to make of the prophetic declaration in v. 14 that “this people” and their offerings are unclean. What appears to be confusing about this oracle is that the prophet never directly states the reason for calling “this people” unclean. Because most commentators assume that the entire community responded to the prophetic call, and therefore that in this oracle “this people” refers to that same community, they naturally wonder why the prophet is now condemning them and their offerings as unclean. Various suggestions have been offered, but none has carried the day among a majority of scholars. I believe the answer lies in the fact that the text has earlier distinguished through its language between those who responded to the call (“the remnant of the people”) and those who did not (“the/this people”). In this oracle we have a reference to “this people,” which suggests to me that it is addressed not to the whole community, or to those who responded to the prophetic summons, but to those who have not joined the building effort. By recognizing that the text does not envision a single unified community but in various ways addresses both those who did and those who did not respond, confusing aspects of the book can perhaps be more clearly understood.

Much more could be said here, but this gives an indication of how one scholar of the Old Testament is drawing on the insights of both contemporary rhetorical criticism and Persian Period studies to probe more deeply into a text that, for all its brevity, is still susceptible to new analysis. In the past, this short book devoted to the reconstruction of the temple was often dismissed as theologically uninspiring, most often by those whose confessional commitments led them to undervalue the religious role of cultic worship. The temple was a thing of the past and so a text focused entirely on it could hardly have much value for modern readers. It is true that the historical particularity of the book means that its most immediate message—build the temple!—is no longer relevant for most readers. But the book retains its value for modern readers, not necessarily in its more obvious message but in what it reveals about the nature of a resilient and theologically fruitful tradition. This book is part of the biblical record of a difficult time, in which ancient institutions, traditions, and ways of conceiving of God’s relationship with Israel had to be examined in light of changed circumstances. Some, such as Haggai, retained a more traditional perspective on such things as the national temple while others saw a diminished or non-existent role for it in the new era. The book of Haggai can give insight into both perspectives through an examination of how it answers objections as well as how it states its own position. This is not just of historical value because it reminds us that the vibrancy and

---

4 The Hebrew word translated here as “remnant” could also, abstractly considered, mean simply “rest,” as in “all the rest of the people.” For contextual reasons I am not able to elaborate here, this reading of the word is unlikely.

5 See, for example, Ezra 9:8, 15; Neh 1:2; Isa 10:20–22; 46:3; Jer 50:20, and many more.

6 The Hebrew indicates not that “the people” “feared Yhwh” in the sense of having a healthy religious response, but that they “were afraid of Yhwh.” Because of the assumption that the narrator is referring to all the same people, scholars have made various attempts to discern what this means. If we assume that the different language indicates different groups, then the text is indicating that the group that did not respond, “the people,” did not respond, because they were afraid of Yhwh. That is, they did not believe it was God’s will to rebuild the temple and they were therefore afraid to offend the Deity by participating in the project.
strength of a religious tradition is often, perhaps only, purchased at the price of contention and strife, along with the willingness to engage in *argument* for the sake of moving forward into uncertain times. Many of the challenges we face in our religious communities today also have to do with our ancient institutions, traditions, and ways of conceiving of how God relates to the world. Strife and contention arise, just as they did for our religious forebears. They disagreed greatly about some of the most cherished aspects of the tradition, and more than one perspective survives in the canon. Yet out of that serious contention Judaism was born. Great upheavals can be existentially frightening and exhausting, but Haggai and many other texts remind us not only that such moments are part of our religious heritage but also that when approached in the right spirit, even the most difficult periods can give rise to great things in the name of God.