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BUILDING THE SECOND TEMPLE: QUESTIONS OF TIME, TEXT, AND HISTORY IN HAGGAI 1:1-15

INTRODUCTION

A long-standing approach to Hag 1:1-15 maintains that the people's opposition to the reconstruction of the temple was not due to laziness or indifference, as is affirmed in many commentaries on Haggai, but was rooted in ideological convictions. P. R. Bedford, for example, has argued at length for this approach in an article (Bedford 1995) and recent monograph (Bedford 2001). In an earlier study I offered an initial critique of this position and promised a detailed critique of Bedford's article (Kessler 1998, esp. p. 559, n. 20; as noted by Bedford 2001 177, n. 198). The publication of Bedford's monograph affords me the opportunity of responding to the fuller context of his arguments, and to state my own position vis-à-vis this general approach to the understanding of time (*t*) in Haggai 1:2-4 in greater detail.¹

The text of Haggai 2:2-4 reads as follows:

Thus says Yahweh Sebaoth: "This people says, 'It is not the time to come; the time for the house of Yahweh to be rebuilt.'"² Then the word of Yahweh came through Haggai the prophet saying: "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house [stands] desolate?"³

¹ The arguments of Kessler 1998 will thus be reformulated and expanded here.

² The text-critical decision which yields this translation, as opposed to the alternative "The time has not come" will be discussed *infra*.

³ *harev* here signifies abandoned, deserted cf. Amsler 1988, 22 and Kessler 2001, 149-50.

Scholars such as Wellhausen (1898, 173), Janssen (1956, 78), Hamerton-Kelly (1970), Steck (1971, 373-76), Hanson (1975, 225-69), de Robert (1996), and Tadmor (1999) view the people's words, as cited in Hag 1: 2, as reflecting the opinion that the time for temple reconstruction had not yet come, and, consequently, no such endeavour ought to be undertaken.⁴ Much weight is placed on understanding 't in v. 2 as referring to a "divinely appointed moment" (Tadmor 1999, 402-03; Bedford 2000, 173-78). Bedford's recent studies argue for this position in great detail. His assertions involve not only *exegetical* judgments regarding the sense of the text, but *historiographical* conclusions with reference to how such a prophetic text may be used to reconstruct an historical context (cf. Floyd 1995, 490). Similarly and consequently, this present assessment of the hypothesis of ideological opposition to the construction of the Second Temple consists of two parts. In the first section I will assess the notion of time in Hag 1: 1-15. In the second, I will discuss the relationship between Hag 1: 1-15 and historical reconstructions of the early Persian period in Yehud.

EXEGETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Several exegetical considerations present serious difficulties to understanding the people's opposition, *as it is redactionally portrayed in Haggai*, as stemming from pious theological concerns (thus Bedford 2001, 174, 177) rather than simple self interest.

Textual Criticism. In Hag 1: 2 text-critical and translational choices play a crucial role in determining the theme and logic of 1: 1-15. The two chief translational options propose differing subjects for the verb *bw'* (to come). The

⁴ For a summary of the opinions of these scholars regarding the various sectors of the population that held such views cf. Kessler 1998, 555-56.

more frequently adopted translation construes 't as the subject of *bw'* and translates, "The time has not come, . . ." (thus Reventlow 1993, 8; Wolff 1988, 27; Meyers and Meyers 1987, 3). The alternative translation, which I have followed above, views the people as the implied subject of *bw'*, (as is the case in v. 14) and translates, "It is not the time to come" (thus Barthélemy 1992, 923-24; Amsler 1988, 19). Leaving aside those solutions which delete one or the other occurrences of 't as well as those which repoint *bo'* to *ba*,⁵ there are two principal options for understanding the MT: (1) *bo'* may be read as an infinitive absolute and subject of 't; as in the first translation; or (2) *bo'* may be read as an infinite construct used genitively (GKC § 114b; Tadmor 1999, 402, n. 6) describing the *kind* of time in question (i.e. a time for/of coming), as in the second translation, above. Four considerations make the latter solution the most likely. (1) The people are the subject of *bw'* in v. 14. There they come to Jerusalem to build the temple. In the thematic structure of 1: 1-15, vv. 2 and 14 stand opposite each other. Because of Haggai's words in 1:-11, the people do in v. 14 that which they have refused to do in v. 2. (Barthélemy 1992, 923-24; Beuken 1967, 30-49). It is thus likely that the people constitute the subject of *bw'* in both verses. (2) Vv. 2b and 4 both use 't followed by a genitival infinitive construct. It is therefore entirely apposite to see the same construction in 1: 2a. (3) Jerusalem appears to have been quite sparsely inhabited at the time (Lipschits, 1998, 184-85; Carter, 1999, 200-205; Kessler 2001, 46-51 and 2002, 90-96) and it would be necessary for some workers to come to Jerusalem from their own dwellings, located elsewhere (Barthélemy 1992, 924). (4) The noun 't followed by a genitival infinitive construct (usually preceded by *lamedh*, but occasionally without, cf. Gen 29:7) is frequently used in sapiential contexts and denotes the kind of time suitable for a

⁵ For a detailed discussion of these options, cf. Barthélemy 1992, 923-24 and Kessler 1988, 558, n. 7.

given activity (see *infra*). Thus the translation “It is not the time to come (i.e. now isn’t a good time to come) is more contextually appropriate than “The time has not come.” The latter reading leaves greater room for the possibility that the people’s motive is theological (although it by no means *requires* it). The former underlines the speakers’ volitional choices at a given moment.

Form Criticism. The form of Hag 1:2-11 has been variously categorized. Floyd (2000, 273) views it as a prophetic disputation. A similar designation is maintained by Wolff (1988, 33-34). Beuken (1968, 185-89) sees the section as containing the following forms: v. 4, *Scheltwort*; vv. 5-6 *Mahnwort*; vv. 7-8 *Auftrag* and *Heilswort*; v. 9 *Disputationswort*; v. 10 *Spruch/Entfaltung*; v. 11 *Eingreifen Gottes*. Steck (1971, 367) considers 1:2-8 to be a *Diskussionswort* followed by a promise. Critical to the argument of the section is the presence of the “futility curse” form in vv. 6-11 (Beuken 1968, 189-97; Hillers 1965, 28-29; cf. Tollington 1993, 189-94). Such form critical considerations all imply that the prophetic address here is one of reproach (cf. May 1968 on the use of *ha’am hazzeh* [this people] in 1:2). Such forms of reproach, especially in prophetic and Deuteronomistic literature,⁶ imply that the people are in some way guilty before Yahweh. The fault may be, at the very least, dereliction of duty, or worse, willful rejection of a *known* moral obligation (thus Chary 1969, 19; Wolff 1988, 33 speaks of the futility curses as “proofs of guilt”).⁷

⁶ See *infra* on the use of Deuteronomistic motifs in Haggai.

⁷ Bedford (1995, 74 and 2001, 72) sees the people’s fault as essentially “cultic”. I fail, however, to see how “neglect of the temple” and “willful disobedience to the prophetic call to rebuild” (Bedford’s words, p. 287) could be seen by Haggai (or his editor) as merely cultic violations, and not evidence of a lack of covenant faithfulness, especially given the clear links between Haggai and the Deuteronomistic tradition (Mason, 1977). On the hermeneutical strategy of linking temple reconstruction and covenant cf. Petersen, 1985, 50, and Kessler, 2002, 153-57.

Bedford (2001, 170-77) maintains that the community had rejected a call to rebuild issued sometime around the emergence of Darius I and the return of Zerubbabel. He affirms that their motivation for doing so was not “moral turpitude” (p. 173) but stemmed from “excellent ideological reasons” (p. 174). He concludes (p. 177),

Since the rebuilding of a shrine which an angry deity had consigned to destruction could not be undertaken without clear evidence that such work had divine sanction, Hag 1: 2 can be interpreted as reflecting the Judeans’ perception that the dissipation of Yahweh’s anger was not yet evident nor was his return hitherto known to be imminent.

It suffices to note at this point that the invocation of Deuteronomistic futility curses and the use of prophetic forms of reproach and judgment seems to be an odd way to respond to a timorous people, motivated by a desire to avoid offending their deity. One would rather expect some form of an oracle of comfort or reassurance, similar to Isa 40: 1-2; Joel 2: 21-27, or Zech 1: 12-17 and 8: 12-13, for example. Thus form critical issues favour viewing Hag 1: 1-15 as a response to some volitional direction on the people’s part which is at variance from the will of Yahweh and inimical to covenant faithfulness.

Lexical, Syntactical and Contextual Considerations. If, as Bedford suggests, the people’s objection is to be viewed as theological in nature, ‘*t*’ in 1: 2a must be understood as denoting the “divinely appointed time” for temple reconstruction (so Bedford 2001, 173-78; Tadmor 1999). It is perfectly true that ‘*t*’ may at times refer to an epoch or a moment designated by Yahweh for a particular purpose (Ps 102:14 [Eng. 13]; Isa 60:22; Jer 27:7; 46:21; 50:27, 31 cf. BDB, ‘*t*’, 1 and 2c). However such a nuance seems ill-suited to the context here. A far more likely option is the well-attested use of ‘*t*’ as denoting “an appropriate or suitable time”

for a given activity (Job 22:16; Prov 15:23; Eccl 3:2-11; 7:2, 17; 8:5-6; Jenni, *THAT*, s.v. “‘t”, 377; Amsler 1988, 22). Taken in this sense, the people are declaring that the time appears *to them* to be inappropriate for the task of temple reconstruction.

A variety of contextual factors favour this latter nuance. First, as noted above, the forms used in the prophetic invective correspond well to the rejection of a clear obligation for reasons of personal comfort. Second, Haggai’s response to the people’s convictions does not consist of any theological or chronological arguments (as Bedford notes, 2001, 286, cf. Wolff 1988, 41) as would be expected if the basis of the opposition was a lack of knowledge of Yahweh’s will. Third, v. 4 uses ‘t in a way which is identical to that which I am proposing in v. 2a. In v. 4 Haggai ironically reformulates the people’s perspective and uses ‘t followed by an infinitive construct (as occurs in v. 2a). Thus in v. 4 the term ‘t carries the notion of a judgment relative to the appropriateness of a given activity. Using a good dose of irony, Haggai asks the people, “Is it an appropriate time for you to live in paneled houses while this house is desolate?” Consequently, both vv. 2a and 4 both use ‘t in the sense of an appropriate time for a given activity.⁸ The idea of an “appropriate” or “suitable” time is well rooted in sapiential literature (von Rad 1972, 138-43). When ‘t is used in this sense, it is frequently followed by an infinitive construct indicating the activity which is appropriate or inappropriate in the time under consideration (Joüon § 124d; GKC § 114b; IBHS § 36.2.1.c.). This sapiential orientation is evident in several passages which contain the same construction as Hag 1:2. In Eccl 3:2-8, for example, ‘t is followed by several infinitive constructs describing activities appropriate to certain periods of life. Thus there is a time to be born (‘t *lltd*), to die (‘t *lmwt*), to plant (‘t *lt’t*), and

⁸ I do not see why Bedford (2001, 177) affirms that seeing a prophetic reproach in v. 2-11 means attributing a different nuance to ‘t in vv. 2 and 4. In both cases the meaning is simply “time suitable for.” In v. 2 it is an affirmation, in v. 4 an ironic restatement.

to pluck up (*'t l'qwr*). Genesis 29:7 provides an excellent parallel to Hag 1: 2 and 4. There it is stated, "It is still day, it is not the time to gather in (*l' 't h'sp*) the flocks." The intent is clearly to state that, given the external circumstances, gathering in the flocks constitutes an inappropriate activity. In each of the above instances the construction refers not to a *divine judgment* regarding whether or not an activity should be undertaken, but rather to a *human evaluation* in response to the question, "would the activity being considered be wise, prudent, appropriate or reasonable in the existing circumstances?" Furthermore, such a human evaluation can be called into question by the prefixing of an interrogative *he* to *'t* (as in Hag 1:4). Thus 2 Kgs 5:26 contains a virtually identical interrogative structure. There Elisha asks Gehezai, "Is it the time to receive (*h't lqht*) silver, to receive (*lqht*) garments, olive trees, vineyards, sheep and cattle, manservants and maidservants?" (cf. the discussion of this text in O'Brien 1996). Haggai, like Elisha, calls into question a course of action chosen on the basis of the appropriateness of the circumstances—presumably the adversities mentioned in 1:4-6; 9-11. In essence, the people are portrayed as having said, "It is clear, given the external circumstances, that wisdom dictates that the rebuilding of the temple be put off until a more appropriate time."

Fourth, the broader context of 1: 1-15 sets the people's activity in a framework of alienation and renewal vis-à-vis the covenant (Beuken 1968, 32-34; Mason 1977, 418-19). This is especially apparent in the use of the typically Deuteronomistic vocabulary in 1: 1-14, notably *sm' bqwl yhw*, (Weinfeld 1972, 336) and *yr'*, (Derousseaux 1970, 209ff, esp. pp. 221, 255-56) in 1: 12 and *yhw 'elohehem* (Driver, 1895, lxxix-lxxx) in 1: 12 and 14. Thus, as noted above, the people's initial refusal and subsequent change of heart is redactionally set within a broader framework of covenant violation, repentance, and renewal (cf. Deut 4:

28-32). The fundamental motif in covenant rejection and renewal is that of loyalty to the God of the covenant (Derousseaux 1970, 221; Lohfink 1968; Driver 1895, lxxxii). The text in Haggai 1 describes a movement toward such an attitude on the part of the people.

Redactional Purpose of the Book of Haggai. I have argued elsewhere (Kessler, 2002, ch. 9, esp. 255-57) that one of the primary redactional themes in the book of Haggai is that of the prophet's success. This success has been widely noted in scholarly literature (Beuken 1968, 332; Wolff 1988, 16; Meyers and Meyers 1987, xliii; Peckham 1993, 741). In the context of this theme, Haggai is cast in the role of a "typical" prophet, but a successful one, whose powerful word breaks through the community's resistance to the will of Yahweh, and through whom Yahweh is able to effect change (Kessler, 2002, 254-55). The upshot of this is that, from a redactional point of view, it would be entirely alien to the purpose of the book to cast the people as piously seeking the will of Yahweh and to portray Haggai as a scribe or interpreter of omens able to correct their miscalculations.⁹ Rather, he is portrayed as a classical prophet whose words cut to the heart of a disobedient people (Floyd 1995, and 2000, 272-74).

Summary and Conclusions. In the light of the foregoing evidence, I maintain that the words of the people *as presented by the redactor of the book of Haggai* are meant to portray the community as using sapiential reasoning to justify the conclusion that their circumstances constituted sufficient grounds for putting off the reconstruction of the temple. Indeed, so compelling is such a reading of Haggai, that Bedford himself is drawn towards it, despite his desire to attribute

⁹ Bedford (2001, 308) acknowledges the fact that Haggai has its own redactional slant but does not explore the book's redactional history or distinctive perspectives in detail. His comments in this regard are found on p. 55, esp. n. 35. This stands in significant contrast to his excellent, detailed discussion of Ezra 1-6, including the "edict of Cyrus" on pp. 87-157.

nobler motives to the people. On one hand he states (2001, 198) that “the tension between the prophet and the people does not lie in the area of moral rectitude but in a difference of opinion as to whether the “propitious time” has in fact arrived.” He similarly affirms (p. 177) that “the people’s lack of interest in temple rebuilding in Hag 1:2 arises not out of self-interest or any other supposed moral deficiency, rather it reflects a perspective similar to that exhibited in Zech 1: 12, namely that they were unsure of the correct time to rebuild.” Yet despite these affirmations he views the people as guilty of neglect of the temple and willful rejection of the prophetic word (2001, 287). He states that v. 4 “satirizes” the people for deeming it appropriate for themselves to live in houses, while Yahweh lacked one (2001, 177-78). It becomes quite difficult to see how, even for Bedford, the people’s attitude reflects “excellent theological reasons” and not, at some level, a motive of self interest. His conclusion (2001, 178) that “it is not self interest, but rather a lack of concern for this temple based on a misunderstanding of the deity’s will, that has incurred Yahweh’s ire” does not adequately take into account the people’s rejection and neglect which he himself has posited. Indeed the position that Hag 1:1-11 is a prophetic invective directed against a people who have willfully neglected Yahweh’s house is the virtually unanimous conclusion of commentators on the book (Wolff, Petersen, Meyers and Meyers, Verhoef, Amsler, Chary, Rudolph, Reventlow).¹⁰

PROPHETIC TEXTS AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

If, as argued in the previous section, the editor of Haggai is concerned to present the people’s reticence to reconstruct the temple as culpable neglect, what

¹⁰ My disagreement with Professor Bedford on this point ought in no way to be taken as reflecting my appreciation of his monograph as a whole, which is an excellent work of scholarship and makes many significant points.

can be said of the broader suggestion that there was, in the early Persian period, a current of opinion which stood in opposition to such a project on ideological grounds? I think that it is fair to say that if no other historical data existed which would render such an hypothesis plausible, one would hardly propose it on the basis of Haggai 1 alone. However, as Bedford has convincingly demonstrated, the question of the appropriate time to rebuild a damaged cult site was a highly important one in the ancient world. He carefully documents this motif in a series of Assyrian and Babylonian royal inscriptions (Bedford 2001, 174-76). He furthermore shows that the abatement of the divine anger which brought about the devastation of the land is a central concern in various biblical texts (Bedford 1995, 82-84). Thus it is altogether apposite to affirm, on the basis of the Assyrian, Babylonian and biblical evidence, that it is quite *likely*¹¹ that ideological objections to temple reconstruction, or at least significant questions with reference to the timing of such a project, did exist in the early Persian period (cf. the cautious affirmations in de Robert, 1996). It is on the basis of such concerns that Bedford imputes similar motives to Haggai's audience.

Two observations of a methodological nature are appropriate here. First, it should be noted that Bedford and others move from extra-biblical and biblical parallels to a suggested reading of the people's intent in the words attributed to them in Haggai 1:2. Second, the assumption that theological motives—and pious and legitimate ones at that—lay behind the people's opposition must be inferred *in abstraction from* the redactional portrait of the situation. Thus, to reach the

¹¹ The degree of certainty with which it may be affirmed that such concerns were present in Yehud depends upon the degree to which the Assyrian and Babylonian evidence is relevant to the Jerusalem temple. Bedford is indeed aware of the problems posed by the use of comparative evidence, cf. his excellent discussion of the applicability of the *Bürger-Tempel-Gemeinde* hypothesis to Jerusalem in Bedford, 1991, esp. pp. 155, 162.

conclusion drawn by Tadmor and Bedford, one has to attribute to Haggai's community a motive *different from the one which the book's redactor presents*. Let it immediately be said that such a manoeuvre may be altogether justified and yield excellent results. Sometimes biblical texts unwittingly reveal information about themselves (cf. for example, the phrase "as it is said this day" in Gen 22:14). At other times the theological preoccupations of the text lead to hyperbolic or schematic presentations which are attenuated or counterbalanced by other details within the text itself. An example of this phenomenon is the repeated "emptyings" of the land in 2 Kgs 24-25 (Barstad 1996, 30-31; cf., for further examples of this, Ackroyd 1968, 29-30, and Lipschits 1999, 162-65). In the light of these observations, I would affirm that if Hag 1 is to be used in relationship to the question of being for or against temple reconstruction in 520 BCE, such use must be made with *significant qualification*. Thus, arguments in favour of viewing the people's statement in Hag 1: 2 as reflecting an "anti-reconstructionist" position need to include the qualification that opposition to rebuilding the temple *may* lie behind the objection of the people in Hag 1:2, however such motives are obscured in the redactional presentation of the book which views such opposition as stemming from the people's misplaced priorities. Indeed, Bedford is highly sensitive to the problems involved in use of biblical texts in historical reconstructions. His 1991 article and his discussion of the 'Edict of Cyrus' (2001, 87-157) display great attentiveness to these matters.

The question still remains as to whether or not, quite apart from the redactional presentation in Haggai, it is historically plausible that the Judaeen population was significantly motivated by personal and pragmatic considerations in its reluctance to begin construction of the temple. Three factors would appear to support such a hypothesis. The first concerns the biblical texts

cited by Bedford which relate to Yahweh's anger as manifested in the Babylonian destructions. It should be noted that none of these texts specifically evokes the question of knowing when the right time might be to rebuild the temple. All of them can be read as yearning for a time when Yahweh would make such an project a possibility. Under Babylonian rule some sort of authorization would likely have been required for any major rehabilitation of the temple itself, and Jerusalem as a whole. This is especially so if, as Lipschits has suggested (1998, 473, 475, 483-84) Babylonian imperial policy specifically aimed at the centralization of provincial rule at Mizpah. If this is the case, one could argue that the advent of Persian rule, the much debated "decree of Cyrus" (on which see recently, Briand 1996, and Bedford 2001, 111-53, both with bibliography) permitting the return and reconstruction of the temple constituted sufficient grounds for the community in Yehud, especially the returnees, to assume it was time to rebuild. Such a perspective would have been all the more persuasive with the arrival of the Davidide Zerubbabel (as Bedford notes, 2001, 179).¹² Thus it is unlikely that the community *as a whole* would find no convincing reasons to begin rehabilitating the temple.¹³ By contrast, it is quite probable that reconstruction of the temple, now a real possibility, would have been seen as a self-evident duty. Second, meticulous concern regarding the timing for temple reconstruction would appear to be more appropriate to religious specialists such as scribes and priests than the general populace (Grabbe 1995, 64-65). In this regard it is significant to note that, in Haggai, "the people" in 1: 2 constitute a *dramatis persona* separate and distinct from the High Priest, Governor, and the

¹² On "dynastic principle" in Persian imperial policy whereby members of former ruling elites were restored to power, cf. Lemaire 1996, 53-54; Bianchi 1994, 156-57; Briant 1982, 199-225)

¹³ Theological opposition to rebuilding would have to be rooted in something more concrete than ignorance of the appointed time (cf. Hanson 1975, 90-95 and Hamerton-Kelly 1970 who situate the opposition in more specific ideological and theological convictions).

prophet (1:1) as well as “the priests” (2:11). Given that the majority of the population of early Persian Yehud was likely involved in agricultural and economic pursuits (cf. Ben Zvi 1997, 194-96) the kind of reasoning described in the redactional portrait in Haggai seems more appropriate to them than more rarefied concerns regarding the details of the timing of the reconstruction. Ackroyd (1968, 30) comments, “[In] almost any community, . . . the proportion of those who make a serious effort to understand and to face the problems of life is small compared with those who—no doubt partly for reasons of necessity and the pressure of conditions—live from hand to mouth with little time to concern themselves with the broader issues.” Third, it is altogether likely that conditions in Yehud in 520 BCE were not well suited to the reconstruction of the temple. Yehud had a limited territory (Lemaire 1994, 20-21), and reduced population base (Carter 1999, 201-05; Lipschits 1998, 474; 1999, 182-84), and bore a taxation burden within the Persian Empire (Schaper 1995; Briant 1982; 1996, 405-29). Thus the image of a struggling, largely agricultural community choosing to wait for a more suitable moment to rebuild the temple is far from historically improbable. In sum, despite the fact that the attitude of the people in Hag 1: 2 is filtered through the redactional stance and purpose of the book, the text may indeed reflect one attitude among several—and a widespread one at that—regarding the reconstruction of the Jerusalem temple.

CONCLUSION

Haggai 1 is best considered as one piece of the broader patchwork of opinions in early Persian Yehud regarding the rehabilitation of the Jerusalem temple. There the people are depicted as using sapiential reasoning to justify their decision that the reconstruction of the temple best be left for a more

appropriate time. The text's portrayal of the community has historical credibility. Such an attitude may have constituted the pragmatic counterpart to other, more ideologically and theologically driven objections current at the time. Furthermore, Haggai 1 provides an excellent example of the various issues and problems involved in the use of prophetic texts for purposes of historical reconstruction.

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