PETERSEN'S COMMENTARY ON HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH

TAMARA C. ESKENAZI

David L. Petersen: *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library). Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984.

At least two things qualify a book as a major contribution: first, the quality of the work itself; second, the significance of the subject.

When we consider the first of these, the quality of the work, then Petersen's commentary on Haggai and Zechariah clearly qualifies as a major contribution. It is scholarship at its best, a lively dialogue with other scholars but primarily focusing on the text and explicating it for students and scholars alike. The commentary clarifies many enigmatic passages in a fresh and cogent manner. Petersen's analysis of the visions of Zechariah is particularly impressive. He points out, for example, how the recurrent themes in the visions of "things on the move" and "inbetweenness" both indicate the content and meaning of the visions and locate the visions in the larger map of competing theologies. Although Zechariah's views of renewal are not as concrete as those of Haggai, they are at the same time not as bizarre as many interpreters imply. "Zechariah's visions stand somewhere between utopian social vision and concrete physical and social detail." (113) The commentary then goes on to demonstrate the realism and relevance contained in Zechariah's visions and resolutions for his time, a time of radical discontinuities and upheavals.

There are, of course, things one might wish to quibble about here and there, but this is largely because the commentary is provocative and invites dialogue. I have one question concerning the scope of the book. The opening statement of the Zechariah portion of the book states, "In this commentary I follow the critical judgment of scholars over the years who have discerned a fundamental division between Zechariah 1–8 and 9–14." (109) It seems to me that with the rise of canonical criticism and literary approaches to the Bible—methods which emphasize the value of interpreting texts not only on the basis of historical issue and sources, but in their transmitted wholeness—that more needs to be said to justify a decision to partition a book and treat only eight out of the fourteen chapters of Zechariah.

Further elucidation of the choice and of its implications is all the more appropriate in this commentary because Petersen throughout the book is attentive to the integrative movement within the text even while acknowledging later additions. He does not dismiss such later additions as irrelevant but looks for the meaning of the whole as well as at the meaning of the smaller units. In other

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TAMARA C. ESKENAZI is a doctoral candidate in the Joint Ph.D. program of the University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology in the area of biblical studies. On February 20, 1985 Dr. Petersen was honored at a convocation at which Ms. Eskenazi and Dr. Richards presented their responses from which this review and the following one by Dr. Richards have been adapted.

words, he demonstrates the significance and purposefulness of the final form of the text. Purposefulness is presumably implicit in the canonical shape which encompasses fourteen chapters. Separation of the final chapters, therefore, needs to be more fully discussed or defended.

Moreover, Petersen implies a literary relation between Haggai and Zechariah which goes beyond mere contemporaneity. Speaking of a particular date formula he suggests, for example, that its presence at the beginning of Haggai and in the last vision of Zechariah 1–8 "serves to unify this material in a subtle way." (282) Given Petersen's attention to such subtle unification it seems to me imperative that the very overt markings of unification, *i.e.*, the fact that someone combined Zechariah 1–8 with 9–14, also have to be addressed.

It is clear that the quality of the scholarship marks the commentary as a major contribution. We do not ordinarily think of Haggai and Zechariah as significant. They are *minor* prophets. Calling them "minor," however, is not a value judgment but a technical classification. Unfortunately Haggai and Zechariah have come to be thought of as minor in importance as well, in ways we do not consider Amos as minor, although he is also technically minor.

There are several reasons for this. First of all, Haggai and Zechariah are difficult, especially Zechariah, with enigmatic visions. Second, they are embarrassing prophets. We like to think of prophets as upholders of the spirit and opponents of the mere cultic; but Haggai and Zechariah embarrass us by stressing the physical as well as spiritual reconstruction. They do not denouce the cult. On the contrary they insist on it. Haggai is especially awkward. He blatantly announces that the crops fail because the temple had not been rebuilt. We don't like our prophets to speak this way. This is the mentality of the priests, we think. Prophets denigrate such materialism. At least we are much more at home with prophets when they denigrate the cult, and we call them "classical." Third, Haggai and Zechariah are *post-exilic* prophets. The post-exilic era is often labelled as the time of the birth of Judaism. It is granted importance only to the extent that Judaism appears to be important. For many people, scholars included, a sharp line of demarcation separates the post-exilic era from the pre-exilic era. Biblical faith, when it is applied to the Hebrew Bible, orients itself in the pre-exilic era, or in Ancient Israel as it is often called. The decisive moments are deemed to be classical prophecy, the freedom of the wilderness, the direct relationship with God of the patriarchal era, etc. The post-exilic era and writings are thereby relegated to an inferior and irrelevant position.

The point I wish to make in response to all these grounds for dismissal of Haggai and Zechariah is very simple: what is overlooked in any such dismissal is the fact that what we have of the classical prophets, of the wilderness era, of monarchy or patriarchal age is all sifted through the eyes of the post-exilic era. It is the post-exilic Jewish community which bequeathed to us the Isaiah we have, or Genesis or Exodus. It is communities such as the ones described and addressed in Haggai and Zechariah which shaped and transmitted our Bible to us. We cannot really claim to know or understand the earlier writers unless

we have come to grips with their transcribers, *i.e.*, the post-exilic communities and their views.

Petersen's commentary enables us to do precisely that. It takes us many steps closer toward understanding some important dynamics within the post-exilic era, as they appear in the teachings of Haggai and Zechariah and in their dialogue with their communities. It demonstrates the variety of options, concepts of present and future, blueprints for reconstruction which occupied these prophets and their contemporaries. In doing so it illuminates this pivotal period and equips us with knowledge which is prerequisite for our ability to evaluate what came before and after as well. The significance of such knowledge is difficult to overestimate.

One more reason why this book is important to me personally is that I have watched parts of the process of its completion. It was written and completed—was born—in the midst of a very full and busy life. The quality of the book and the quality of the life combine to make the publication of Petersen's commentary an inspiration and a challenge. His accomplishment sets up a standard but also demonstrates a possibility. One can only congratulate Petersen and thank him.