REFLECTIONS ON A NEW HAGGAI COMMENTARY

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David L. Petersen has written the first, major, comprehensive English language commentary on the books of Haggai and Zechariah 1-8 since 1912.[1] The uninitiated may find it odd that the commentators do not interpret all fourteen chapters of Zechariah together. Others will find it strange that anyone would devote such time and energy to one and 57.1428% of another obscure book. If he only would have commented on the remaining ninety verses of Zechariah one would have been able to say this is a commentary on two books!

This light-heartedness is not relieved much when one turns to some of the authors of commentaries on Haggai and Zechariah. Comments ranging from "Haggai has no claim to be ranked with his great predecessors in the prophetic office" to speaking about a commentary on Zechariah in the following manner, "The Exegesis presents the interpretation which appears to be the most probable." It is extremely difficult to feel compelled to read a book when the commentator reminds you that Zechariah was one who had "the absence of all ambition to be original..." and of Haggai that he is indeed "a minor prophet." Thank goodness none of this appears in the Petersen work.

Even those who have found some value in the books of Haggai and Zechariah tend to begin with the sense that the authors were "...born in the wrong year and in the wrong place." Others focus the beyond timeliness in a way that notes that we the readers were born in the wrong year.

Things have changed from the 6th century BCE. We are clearly in a different time and place. The ancient words are difficult to understand. However, it will do little good for the text, its interpretation or us to reminisce like the modern poet

> I could have been
> in Paris at the foot of Gertrude Stein,
> I could have been drifting among
> the reeds of a clear stream
> like the little Moses, to be found
> by a princess and named after a conglomerate
> or a Jewish hero....[2]

Petersen's commentary provides reference to the most important bibliography; gives clear, concise introductions to the books; presents a new translation which has regard for the important textual variants and problems; and provides the reader with connected, insightful interpretations. My reflections are limited to

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[1]This review was given orally on 20 February 1985 at The Iliff School of Theology celebrating the publication of David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1-8: A Commentary*. The Old Testament Library, 1984.

[2]Philip Levine, "One for the Rose" from *One for the Rose* (1981), pp. 43-44.

examples from the portions dealing with Haggai. (Now you will see my motivation for counting verses since it means I have to deal with only 38 verses of the total 159 and 106 pages of the 320 total pages in the Petersen monograph!) While the material in Zechariah 1–8 presents quite different exegetical problems, I think my observations on Petersen's treatment of Haggai would also apply to Zechariah.

The Introduction

The introduction consists of two basic parts, an excellent summary discussion of the historical context and a highlighting of the significant literary issues. Since the historiographical concerns become crucial for Petersen's literary reflections it is appropriate that he outline the issues of the early Persian period. He does this with economy while bringing the reader along in the consideration of political, socio-economic, archaeological and chronological issues. All of this is done with careful attention to establishing the "importance of rebuilding the temple" in a period which unfolds a rather "inglorious economic" picture.

Petersen's careful narrative does not sensationalize the historical period, but makes clear why some have said the date in Haggai 2:18 marks the birth of Judaism. The text says (Petersen's translation)

> Consider this day and its future significance!
> The twenty-fourth day of the ninth month,
> the day on which the foundation of Yahweh's temple was laid.
> Consider!

It is generally argued that with the founding of the temple on 18 December 520 BCE, a series of developments set in motion what with good reason may be called the birthday of a new form of religious expression.

The literary discussion includes the necessary points such as the textual tradition, the prose-poetry debate, the redactional issues and the identification of the individual Haggai speeches. The discussion of the "form of the book" provides an innovative suggestion in designating the genre of the entire book as a "brief apologetic historical narrative." This proposal arises from Rudolph's suggestion, although undeveloped, that there are apologetic dimensions within this material. Petersen couples this with Lohfink's identification of a genre (in such texts as Jeremiah 26 and 36) of so-called historical condensed narratives. The characteristics of the genre may be observed in Haggai and they support Petersen's understanding of the functions of the book. This is an important suggestion given the rather idiosyncratic nature of the Haggai prophetic corpus.

The slightly over 20 page introduction to Haggai (and the 15 page intro. to Zechariah) provides the necessary information to the reader. More important, the material genuinely serves as an introduction to Petersen's commentary. It is not a summary of all the research undertaken in the last millenium! Comprehensive commentaries in recent times have tended to take exhaustive direction, not only within the body of the commentary but also in the introductions.

The Old Testament Library volumes have provided the more reasonable tradition which Petersen exemplifies. However, he sets some new standards even for those volumes in the measure of clarity and dedication toward providing a real introduction to his own commentary.

The Commentary—Haggai

Out of no disrespect for Petersen but what must be stated at the beginning is that commentaries are not meant to be read from cover to cover. I said on another occasion that I have always hoped that one might receive more of a sense of being connected to 220 current when reading commentaries than one normally is but I never meant to imply that the increase in intensity would generate cover to cover readings. This commentary within various sections comes close to 220 current, but to sustain this for page after page can only be hoped for in different genres.

I wish to make four observations about the commentary itself. The first three are entirely laudatory and the final one is intended to generate more continuing dialogue, a byproduct of a colleague's giving up work for publication and thereby debate.

First and probably primarily, Petersen's commentary develops an interpretation of the individual texts. For those unfamiliar with commentaries it may be surprising to know that many commentaries do not accomplish an interpretation of the text. Too frequently they demonstrate erudition and familiarity with the secondary literature without drawing any point. Too frequently they become preoccupied with weighing the issues and forgetting to read the scale. Too frequently they enjoy the discovery of some new point and neglect determining its importance for interpretation. One example of how Petersen might have run amuck will suffice. The seemingly unimportant designation in Haggai 1:1 of Zerubbabel as the governor of Judah is at least a minor preoccupation within scholarly circles. I will spare you the details (in part to keep hidden as long as possible the perversity of some of our scholarly interests). Petersen is able to reflect the debate as well as make a significant point about the designation. One need not know everything about the problems of when there really were governors of Judah nor about the etymological story of the word governor. The commentator does need to be observant of diverse issues, but the work starts with the recognition that the two figures addressed in 1:1 do have titles and genealogical trappings (the other person is Joshua the high priest). The way the figures are introduced signals an awareness of the audience being addressed and the conceptual basis on which they are addressed. All of this enables Petersen to comment that Haggai is "making a claim for continuity with the past social structure and value system" in addressing a particular segment of the religious community, namely the returned exiles. This is important as he develops the roles of the dominant figures in the book and their significance for a restored Judahite community which both looked to the past "continuation of monarchic Israel" while evolving into a "fundamentally different phenomenon."

Second, Petersen's style of questioning and then answering provides an excel-

lent posture for the genre commentary. My guess is that many readers go to commentaries for the ANSWERS. You will get them when you read this commentary, but they emerge from a dialogical wrestling with questions and answers. It would be very difficult to illustrate this short of a lengthy reading. My point is that a commentary is best written in the style which leads the reader in and out of the text. For want of a better term I would call this a reflective style. Let me suggest to those interested that you read Haggai 2:10–14 then go to the commentary discussion on meanings of holy and profane, clean and unclean.

Third, both the specialist and non-specialist will recognize Petersen's familiarity with the history and literature of the Persian period. What may not be as noticeable to the non-specialist is the careful use of the literature and theories surrounding it. I contend that his precision is due in part to the focus on developing an interpretation of the text under investigation and not using a radar detector to find everything in sight.

This point may be illustrated simply. Petersen acknowledges and makes use of the important monograph by Beuken. Were there an author index the name would appear frequently. However, among the numerous differences between the two the most important is Petersen's reasoned refusal to accept the primary thesis of Beuken regarding a Chronicler schooled redactor for Haggai. While Petersen isn't the only one to question Beuken's work, his knowledge about the history and literature provide the mentor not some novel theory. He can through a kind of inner textual exegesis point the way toward Haggai's own point.

Finally, an observation which is both methodological and at bottom hermeneutical. I have already stated my interest and agreement with the suggestion that Haggai is a "brief apologetic historical narrative." As I turned to the development of this proposal within the commentary I looked for a detailed structural analysis of the individual units and the entire book. It would be unfair to say that I was disappointed not to find these outlines. They can be deadly and, worst of all, outlines in commentaries are rarely used to advance the commentator's interpretation.

It would be appropriate to say that as this commentary focuses on the present form of the book one can ascertain a studied, detailed unfolding of the "flow" of the text. For example, the discussions of the numerous chronological notations are clear and connected. The reader is fully informed of their appearance and significance. Or in other places the careful observation that a threat which normally carries a present, directive force is written in the past tense and now "functions as historiography." These are indications of the awareness of structural guideposts.

Therefore, at one level it should be clear that I am not suggesting that Petersen is giving us an imprecise, negligent, lazy reading. The reader hears an interpretation which is just short of actual structural analyses. What one does not hear frequently enough is the detailed literary argumentation of grammatical, metrical, syntactical, generic and rhetorical devices. One catches Petersen's knowledge of these factors, but I would like more. The nonspecialist is saying, "thank god

he didn't follow Richards' suggestion or I would be completely lost!"

No, I do not think the reader would be lost. In fact Petersen's argumentation might be able to be shortened in some cases. Let me risk a veiled example. The figure Zerubbabel appears seven times in the book. In each case there are significant observations and careful notes about the way the figure is named. Problems related to the addressees (the people and/or the leaders) are discussed. The occurrence of Zerubbabel's name in 1:1 and 2:23, the last verse of the book, is observed and comes close to being called an *inclusio.* The significance of this Davidic heir is duly discussed. However, a stronger case might have been secured regarding Zerubbabel's centrality over against Haggai. One might sharpen the issue through several questions. Is this the book of Haggai or Zerubbabel? Is this a prophetic book or a Davidic heir book? Might it have been one or the other of these at different points in its life? Some further structural considerations might be revealing and lead us to several substantial results.

Is all of this important? Am I only asking for a 400 page commentary which would have little to contribute to the average reader? No, my concern is twofold. First, I would like to see the argument more securely fastened for Petersen's proposal that Haggai is a "brief apologetic historical narrative." Not everyone is going to agree and I think the case can be secured. Second, there is a hermeneutical issue at the base of this. The most succinct and sharply focussed way that I can state this for now is to call attention to the designation of the book which employs both the words historical and narrative. I believe it would be fair to say that the discussions of narrative discourse today tend to divide sharply historiography and narrative fiction. If the designation of Haggai implies a relationship of the two, what is that relationship? Surely it is not the negation of any connection, namely proposing that historical time may be constructed without any reference to narrative time. Nor can one establish a direct relationship between the two, such as between genus and species.

As Ricoeur says "To reconstruct the indirect connections of history to narrative is finally to bring to light the intentionality of the historian's thought."[3] I believe that Petersen has directed us to the narrator/historian's purview. He has with critical acumen broadened our perspectives, forced us to read the text and demanded that we take it seriously. This should be celebrated as a significant achievement.

[3]Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Volume 1 1984), p. 92.