THE PROPHETIC PROCESS RECONSIDERED

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Prophets have a reputation for being rather impolitic. Fervent spokespersons of their God they may have been. But who would want to put up with an Elijah, an Amos, or an Ezekiel as neighbor, house guest, or as church member? Though we might admire the forcefulness of a prophet's words, we have reason to doubt his or her diplomatic abilities, their ability to do something more than blast an audience with forceful rhetoric. As a consequence of such responses to Israel's prophets, it is rare indeed to hear the prophet held up as a role model for the religious professional or for the layperson. It is, perhaps, for this reason that both clergy and laity are encouraged to develop a prophetic perspective on certain matters, e.g., social justice, but rarely to be a prophet *per se.*

Scholars have worked diligently to explain what it took for a person to be a prophet, i.e., what it was that prophets had in common. Various theses have been promulgated to define this commonality. For example, Abraham Heschel argued that the prophet was someone in special contact with both human and divine realms. "The fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos, a communion with the divine consciousness which comes about through the prophet's reflection on, or participation in, the divine pathos."[1] The working out of the prophetic task, as we have that preserved in the Old Testament prophetic literature, is the giving of verbal expression to this divine pathos.

Another prominent twentieth century interpreter of the prophetic movement was Johannes Lindblom. He maintained that prophecy was the result of a special form of religious experience. A prophet is "a person who, because he is conscious of having been specially chosen and called, feels forced to perform actions and proclaim ideas which, in a mental state of intense inspiration or real ecstacy, have been indicated to him in the form of divine revelations."[2] For Lindblom, intensity of religious experience was the key to Israelite prophecy. Different though the definitions of Heschel and Lindblom might be, they serve to make prophets look as if they are a highly unusual class of people.[3]

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[1]A. Heschel, *The Prophets,* Vol. 1. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 62.

[2]J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel.* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962), p. 46.

[3]For a critique of such "essentialist" definitions of Israelite prophecy, see D. Petersen, *The Roles of Israel's Prophets.* (JSOTSS, 17) (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981).

Quite apart from what scholars have said about prophets, a few brief forays into the Biblical literature which preserves Israel's prophets' words and deeds, suggest as well that Israel's prophets were unusual people—difficult, idiosyncratic, and even unsuccessful characters. Elisha created havoc when he visited the home of a wealthy family and was instrumental in petitioning for the arrival of a child into that home, a birth we are not at all sure was welcome, so 2 King 4:8-17.[4] Hosea's family apparently functioned less as a primary supportive social unit and more as an instrument for his public, prophetic proclamation. His family served to demonstrate Yahweh's relationship with and message to Israel (Hosea 1). And Ezekiel, a specialist in bizarre symbolic acts, i.e., cutting off his hair and tossing it to the winds (Ezek 5:1-3), was proscribed from mourning over the death of his wife. As these isolated cases suggest, Israel's prophets appear to be unusual people, individuals with whom it would, in all likelihood, be difficult to relate.

Furthermore, as Israel itself recognized, these prophets, and I refer here especially to Israel's so-called classical prophets, were not "successful rhetoricians. Despite the crispness and elegance of their prophetic speech, people did not heed the injunctions of the prophets. Moreover, none of the prophets appear to have attracted a large following."[5] Whereas Amos admonished the people of Israel to seek Yahweh and live, the judgment of history spoken in the events surrounding the year 721 B.C.E. was that Israel had not sought Yahweh and had, therefore, perished. That society vanished from the ancient Near Eastern stage. Similarly, Micah and Jeremiah, among others, warned Judah of its imminent demise, and she too failed to respond. Judah experienced, as did Israel, defeat and exile. In sum, despite the best efforts of Yahweh's messengers, Israel's prophets, national existence for Yahweh's people became impossible. If Israel's prophets were unsuccessful in helping their people avoid forefeiting national existence, we should not be surprised if prophets are not regularly held up as role models.[6]

Furthermore, and perhaps most important, the picture we have of Israel's prophets has been markedly affected by the form and content of the literature in which the prophets' words come to us. We receive remarkably few glimpses of the prophets in action. Rare indeed are encounters such as that which Amos had with Amaziah (Amos 7:10-17). More frequent, unfortunately, is the situation found in Micah, a situation in which the words of the prophet and his traditionists have been preserved. Nothing, however, concerning these words' original social context has been preserved. We have little if any idea about the

[4]An excellent analysis of this form of literature is available in A. Rofé, "The Classification of the Prophetical Stories," *JBL* 89 (1970) pp. 427-440.

[5]Elisha is an unusual case. See R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel.* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), and more generally, I. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion.* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971).

[6]Cf. for a provocative assessment of the dire consequences of Israel's prophets' proclamation, M. Silver, *Prophets and Markets. The Political Economy of Ancient Israel.* (Social Dimensions of Economics) (The Hague: Kluwer-Nijhof, 1983).

physical setting in which these words were spoken and little information about the audience to which they were addressed.

I think many people who read a book such as Micah are inclined to infer that a collection of such words means that Micah was essentially an orator, someone declaiming Yahweh's words, and this simply because we have only his words. The presumption is that the prophets were involved fundamentally in one-way communication. They passed on Yahweh's words to someone else. They spoke and others listened, or did not listen. To be sure, there is some warrant for this view—that the prophets could proclaim Yahweh's words with little apparent concern for social interchange. Nevertheless, there is also considerable evidence for thinking that the social interaction of the prophets was more complex than straightforward declamation.[7] Put another way, despite initial appearances to the contrary, there is warrant within the prophetic canon for thinking about the prophetic process as well as the prophetic word.

In one often overlooked prophetic book, that memorializing the words and actions of Haggai, we are presented with a case in which the social context for the prophet's oracles is attested and in which the results of such oracles are articulated forcefully.[8] It is my hope that an overview of the book of Haggai might help refine our notion of the prophetic process, to help us discover the existence of a process in which the social dynamics are integral not only to the proclamation but to the very formulations of the deity's words to a particular moment in history.

The book commences with an oracle in which Haggai is commanded to deliver an oracle to the two leaders or officials of the Judahite community c. 520 B.C.E.: Zerubbabel, the Davidic heir and "governor," and Joshua, the high priest. However, a close reading of the oracle itself suggests that it was as much directed to the people of Judahite society as it was to the leaders of that society. Whomever the addressee, it is clear that Haggai is challenging individuals to proceed with the work of temple reconstruction. Haggai pointed to the miserable status quo which his hearers were experiencing and, as well, to a glorious future which would result from compliance with Yahweh's admonitions.

As a consequence of this speech, the community's leaders as well as "the remnant of the people" heeded Yahweh's words and began, again, to work on the temple. This verse could well have marked the end of the book. Many have taken Haggai's primary goal to have been the physical reconstruction of the temple.[9] Had this been the case, the book of Haggai should have been only

[7]See, for example, the interaction between Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jeremiah 28) or of Micaiah ben Imlah in the Israelite court (1 Kings 22).

[8]On the composition of the book of Haggai, especially concerning redaction critical issues, see W. Beuken, *Haggai-Sacharja 1-8.* (Studia Semitica Neerlandica, 10) (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1967) and R. Mason, "The Purpose of the 'editorial framework' of the Book of Haggai," *VT* 27 (1977), pp. 312-421.

[9]So the standard commentaries, e.g., W. Rudolph, *Haggai—Sacharja 1-8/9-14—Maleachi.* (KAT 13,4) (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1976).

twelve verses long, markedly shorter than the short book it already is. But no, Haggai was involved in a process which was more complex than simply advocating the case for temple rebuilding. In that initial goal, and it was one of his goals, he had succeeded early on.

In fact, his very success created problems. The leaders and the people had begun work on the temple as a result of the, literally, inspiring words of Haggai. And work had progressed so much so that some could tell this reconstructed holy site would be only a pale replica of the Solomonic temple. Responding to the people's perceptions of the second temple was a task which lay outside the purview of Haggai's initial remarks. Haggai's first oracle did not promise a glorious temple. Rather, in it, he promised that if the temple were rebuilt, whether a replica of the splendiforous Solomonic temple or not, the Judahites would prosper. Nevertheless, concern in Haggai 2:1-9 shifted to the people's perception of the temple's appearance. And Haggai's response to this concern is interesting. He does not say, 'Look, God doesn't care what the temple looks like, just build it and you will succeed.' Instead, Haggai addressed directly the concerns of the people. "Take courage... for I am with you." And he provides them with an oracle of promise—Haggai 2:6-9—that Israel will once again be the recipient of resplendent bounty.

It must be said that Haggai's response here was not entirely disinterested, not simply a capitulation to the concerns of the community. To be sure, he spoke directly to the people and their perceptions of the situation, but he also, in so doing, ensured that the people would continue to work on the temple, activity which comprised one of Haggai's fundamental goals.

Again, Haggai 2:9 could have provided the end of the matter. The temple was being rebuilt and the people's discouragement about the lack of glory for this temple had been assuaged. This moment could have provided a quite appropriate termination to the book, had the book of Haggai been concerned solely about the reconstruction of the temple.

Haggai's words and work continue. In Hag 2:10-19 we are treated to a dialogue which Haggai has with the priests. In vss. 10-14, a rather arcane interchange concerning the so-called contagion of holiness occurs. Since the topic is so foreign to our own ways of thinking, this text has been frequently misunderstood. The primary point being made by Haggai appears to be that holiness is not passed from one object to another whereas radical impurity can contaminate other materials. This is, in itself, nothing new for the historian of religions. Haggai's special twist on this matter is his conviction that the priests, and more precisely, "the work of their hands," are unclean. This is a surprising judgment since the priests are routinely perceived as guardians of the holy and not subject to radical defilement. Nonetheless, it is they whom Haggai perceives as unclean.

It might be possible to argue that this judgment of Haggai's represents anti-cultic or anti-priestly sentiment. However, such an anti-ritual charge would not fit easily in the mouth of a prophet who has just called for the

rebuilding of the temple. What Haggai does seem to be suggesting is revealed in the verses which follow hard on the heels of his dialogue with the priests. In vss. 15-19, we discover Haggai focusing on the significance of a particular day. Is it possible that "this day"—vss. 15, 18—is in some way related to Haggai's concern about impurity expressed in vss. 10-14? As verse 18, and other early post-exilic texts, e.g., Zech 4:6b-10a, make clear, this day is none other than the day on which the temple was ritually rededicated.[10] On that day, the impurity engendered by an impious cult, so Ezekiel 8, and by foreign desecration is removed. The continuity with the holiness of inherently holy space is reestablished by the ritual manipulation of a foundation deposit.[11] Moreover, on this day, the cleansing of the holy space would also have had the effect of making possible the reinstitution of a legitimate sacrificial system, and this in contrast to the tainted system already in effect, so Hag 2:10-14.

Seen from this perspective, Haggai 2:10-19 represents Haggai's continuing concerns and oversight for the people as well as for the temple rebuilding project. Once construction on the temple was well underway and once the people's concerns about the munificence of the temple had been addressed, Haggai was able to zero in on a problem which use of this newly emerging facility constituted, its radical, ritual impurity. The book witnesses that Haggai adroitly engaged in conversation the one group of people, the priests, who could purify the temple. To point out to them the innate impurity of the temple cultus was also to point out to them the need for an act of purification, an act which could provide not only for purification but also for blessings, especially fertility in and throughout the land.[12]

Again, Haggai's style is instructive. He is not pictured as berating the priests or the populace. Rather, he engages them in dialogue, dialogue in which a rather obvious point is made about the contagion of radical impurity. Then, once the necessity for purification has been argued, he uses discourse designed for dialogue. Instead of simply pronouncing the virtues of a feast of temple rededication, he asks three rhetorical questions, thereby using a literary device designed specifically to engage the hearers in a process of communication.

Once the priests and the populace have been stimulated to act so as to guarantee the purity of a restored cultus, Haggai is able to focus even more specifically on one sector of the population, on one individual, the Davidide Zerubbabel. Interestingly, here Haggai's rhetorical style changes. No longer do we find discourse that invites dialogue. Rather Haggai turns to highly allusive language, that which one expects to hear when Davidic kingship is discussed: the world dominion of Yahweh's rule, the notion of Davidic kin as

[10]For an assessment of the impact of temple rededication, see B. Halpern, "The Ritual Background of Zechariah's Temple Song," *CBQ* 40 (1978), pp. 167-190.

[11]So D. Petersen, "Zerubbabel and Temple Reconstruction," *CBQ* 36 (1974), pp. 366-372.

[12]In the ancient Near East, temple building and reconstruction were routinely understood to engender blessings of high crop yield, fertility among the human populace, lack of warfare, *et al.*

royal servant, the image of the ring as symbolic of Davidic rule, the specific language of election as signified by the verb *bāḥar,* "choose," in Haggai 2:23. These elements conjoin to create a mosaic of powerful language such as to affect the hearer, in this case the Davidic prince, to play a distinctive role in the evolving post-exilic Judahite polity.

In this final oracle, Haggai's rhetoric evinces an openness toward the future. And it is an optimistic openness. Yahweh will be victorious and the Davidide will, again, be important in Yahweh's imperium. Interestingly, Haggai's openness to the future is general. Haggai does not recommend that the Davidide openly assume the mantle of monarchy. Instead, the concrete form which this person's political activity should take is left unspecified, open to the creative interplay of forces at work in Judahite society during this period.

With this oracle directed to Zerubbabel, the brief booklet of Haggai comes to an end. Apart from references to him in Nehemiah 5:1; 6:14, we hear the name of Haggai no more in the Biblical record.[13] And why should we? Most of Haggai's glorious expectations for the future never came to fruition. Treasure did not pour into the temple and the Davidide Zerubbabel does not appear to have played a prominent role in the late sixth century B.C.E.

Nonetheless, this brief book provides us information which is rare indeed elsewhere in the prophetic canon, viz., how it is that the prophet interacted with those to whom he communicated God's message, and how it was that the deity's message was formulated to address the concerns of the people. It has been a commonplace to assume that the deity's words were somehow mysteriously communicated to a prophet, who in turn passed them on to the populace. Such a model might be termed the megaphone view of prophecy. However, several things both inside and out of the book of Haggai raise serious questions about the validity of this model. First, what we know of prophetic behavior outside Israel, and we know increasingly more as a result of epigraphic discoveries from the Middle East, indicates that prophets were very much in dialogue with their audience. The Mari prophets are recorded as responding to requests for information.[14] And Balaam, both the Biblical and extra-Biblical character, was in dialogue with his interlocuters as a part of his prophetic role.[15] Second, the formula used to describe the way in which Haggai received the divine word is highly unusual. The usual formula for a prophet's reception of a word from the deity is *hāyāh dĕbar yahweh 'el,* "the word of Yahweh came to...," so Jer 2:1. Not so in Haggai. There the Hebrew

[13]Sirach's "In Praise of Famous Men" does not include Haggai though it does mention his contemporaries Joshua and Zerubbabel (Sirach 49:11-12).

[14]On Mari prophecy, see conveniently H. Huffmon, "Prophecy in the Mari Letters," *BA* 31 (1968), pp. 101-124 and W. Moran, "New Evidence from Mari on the History of Prophecy," *Bib* 50 (1969), pp. 15-56.

[15]For the *editio princeps,* see J. Hoftizer & G. van der Kooij, eds. *Aramaic Tests from Deir 'Alla.* (Documenta et Monumenta Orientis Antiquii, 29) (Leiden: Brill, 1976) and for an overall assessment, J. Hoftizer, "The Prophet Balaam in a Sixth Century Aramaic Inscription," *BA* 39 (1976), pp. 11-17.

reads, *hāyāh dĕbar yahweh beyad,* "the word of Yahweh was conveyed by..." Admittedly the difference in one preposition might appear slight. However, a precise translation of the Hebrew grammar suggests that the composer or author of this booklet perceived Haggai to have an active role in the process by means of which the divine word was communicated, more so than with some other prophets.

Third, and most telling, is the sequence of the oracles inside the book of Haggai. After the first challenge to the populace in Haggai 1:1-11, Haggai's words are very much formulated in dialogue with his audience. He is involved in a process rather than in pure declamation on behalf of restoration. He addresses the concerns of the community as the community's members engage in the rebuilding of the second temple.

It would, of course, be illegitimate to infer that all of Israel's prophets performed in a way similar to Haggai. However, since much of the prophetic literature provides us with no information about how the oracles were communicated, and since certain data from the ancient Near East squares with what we have found in the book of Haggai, it is difficult to gainsay the possibility that much in the prophetic corpus developed in a process not unlike that revealed by the book of Haggai.

If such is the case, then it may be possible to rethink admonitions for individuals now to adopt a prophetic perspective. It may be that the prophets did less pure declamation than we had earlier thought and that they were engaged in more interactive discourse than we had earlier surmised. The book of Haggai suggests that a so-called prophetic-pastoral stance is not impossible to contemplate, one which takes seriously speaking forth on important issues, but as well includes concern for the creation and maintenance of community while the issues are being addressed. At least, such a pastoral-prophetic perspective seems to be exemplified in the process which lies behind one short prophetic booklet, Haggai.