

PROBLEMS IN HAGGAI 2.15–19

Dr. David Clark is a UBS Translations Consultant resident in India

Translators cannot work at the Bible for long before they realise that problems often come in clusters. Some passages are relatively easy, while others contain more than their fair share of difficulties. The book of Haggai illustrates this well. Most of the book is fairly straightforward: all the major problems come in the short section 2.15–19. In this article I want to examine the passage in some detail and suggest ways of tackling the problems. Comments are based on the RSV text unless otherwise stated.

In 2.10–14 Haggai establishes the principle that ritual purity cannot be passed on by physical contact, whereas ritual defilement can. He applies this principle to the situation of his day: because the attitude of the returned exiles towards the Lord was wrong, their offerings had been unacceptable, and the Lord had not blessed them with good harvests. In 2.15–19 Haggai promises that the future would be better than the past. The people had now begun to rebuild the Temple in earnest⁷ (1.12–15, 2.18). They were thus showing a changed attitude towards the Lord, and so he would in future bless them with good harvests.

Verse 15

The first problem is found in the words translated “from this day onward” in RSV. In Hebrew they are literally “from this day and upward” (KJV, RV). The question arises as to what “upward” can mean in this context. There are four approaches to the problem: (1) In other contexts such as 1 Sam 16.13; 30.25; Hag 2.18, it clearly points to the future, and most modern versions take it to have the same meaning here. RSV translates “consider what will come to pass from this day onward.” The difficulty with this interpretation is that it does not fit the description of poor food supplies in the two verses that follow: the prophet is speaking of blessing for the future (2.19) not trouble. In order to overcome this problem, some scholars suppose a break in sense after the words “from this day onward” and treat verses 15b–17 as a parenthesis. Then the opening words of verse 18 repeat 15a and continue on with the prophecy of future blessing. This view is perhaps seen most clearly in the NIV, which places a dash after “from this day on.” This makes sense of the paragraph as a whole, but assumes an extremely awkward construction in the Hebrew.

(2) The Septuagint and older Jewish commentators understood the problem phrase to mean “from this day backward” (New Jewish Version, compare NEB). If taken in this way, it fits much better with verses 15b–17. However, this view involves giving the phrase a meaning not found elsewhere, and moreover exactly opposite to its meaning in verse 18.

(3) The difficulties with both of these views have led other scholars to think that the phrase does not belong to verse 15 at all, and has come to be inserted there from verse 18 by a copying error.

(4) Several versions take the words as having reference to the future, but do not supply the words “what will come to pass” as RSV. These words are not in the Hebrew, and RSV itself does not supply them in the parallel passage in 2.18. Without them, the phrase “from this day onward” goes only with the verb “consider”. This is probably the most satisfactory solution, and is shown

most simply in the JB rendering "Reflect carefully from today onwards" (compare NAB, NIV, TOB).

It is not always clear whether GNB accepts the second or third of these possible views. There are no words in the GNB text exactly equivalent to "from this day onward" of RSV, so it is possible that GNB has accepted the third view, and omitted the phrase. On the other hand, in the sentence "Can't you see what has happened to you?" the verb "has happened" is in the perfect tense, and thus clearly looks backward rather than forward. This could mean that GNB has accepted the second of the three views listed above. However, the words "what has happened" may be intended to translate a phrase which in the Hebrew occurs at the beginning of verse 16. See discussion below on verse 16.

Verse 16

Verse 16 opens with a word which as written in the traditional Hebrew text means "since they were" (RSV footnote) which makes no sense. The Septuagint translators apparently read a slightly different Hebrew text from the one we have, and translated as "How was it with you?" (Mitchell). Various attempts have been made by modern scholars either to understand the Hebrew as it is, or else to emend it. But most modern English versions follow the Septuagint at this point. Renderings include "how did you fare?" (RSV, NAB), "what state were you in?" (JB), and "what was your plight?" (NEB), which means "what sort of poor condition were you in?" It is not certain how GNB has handled these words, but it seems quite possible that they have been absorbed into verse 15 and are there represented by "what has happened". See the discussion above. If this is the case, it would have been better to join verses 15 and 16 and number them 15-16, as in the German Common Language version, *Die Gute Nachricht* (DGN).

"When one came to a heap of twenty measures, there were but ten; when one came to the winevat to draw fifty measures, there were but twenty". The Hebrew does not state what the "heap" was composed of, but the context makes it clear that food is in mind, and GNB puts this in (compare NAB, NEB, TOB, NJV footnote). However there are some interesting differences between the American and British editions of GNB. First of all there is the difference between "pile of grain" (American) and "heap of corn" (British). This is purely a dialect variation and no difference in meaning is intended.

Second, in keeping with their general policy, the British editions give the quantities in metric measurements "two hundred kilograms, a hundred litres", while the American editions keep the traditional Anglo-Saxon units "twenty bushels, fifty gallons". In the case of the "grain/corn", the Hebrew text does not in fact contain a word for the unit of measurement. The important point is not the exact quantity involved, but the fact that the person concerned found only half as much as he expected. Because it is the proportion which is in focus rather than the exact amount, it really does not matter much whether a translator uses a metric unit, an Anglo-Saxon unit, or a traditional unit from the language and culture of his readers. Most modern English translations use the vague term "measures" for both the "grain/corn" and the "wine" (RSV, JB, NAB, NIV, NJV).

If a translator is using a well known unit of measurement, the proportions will be shown by the figures he chooses. These should be round figures, and should be appropriate in size to a heap of grain and to a winevat. If for any reason there is no convenient unit of measurement, the translator should concentrate on the proportions involved.

In the case of the grain/corn the person found fifty per cent of what he expected, or exactly a half. In the case of the wine, he found only forty per cent, or two fifths. The first proportion should be easy to express in most languages, but the second one may be more difficult. If so, the translator could say something like this: "You would go to a pile of grain, but would find only half as much as you expected. You would go to draw wine from a vat, but would find even less than a half of what you expected."

A winevat was a container in which wine could be stored. It was usually hollowed out of rock. When the grapes were ripe they would be taken to the wine press and trodden underfoot to squeeze out the juice. The press was also usually hollowed out of the rock, and was a little higher up than the vat. The two were connected by a channel or pipe, so that the juice could flow from the press down into the vat where it would ferment. If the person wishing to draw wine from the vat found less than half as much as he expected, that meant that the grapes had been of poor quality, and had yielded less juice than normal. In the same manner, the grain had been of poor quality, and when threshed, had yielded less than the farmer would have expected when he saw the crop growing. The reasons for this are given in the following verse.

Verse 17

The opening words of this verse are identical with the opening words of Amos 4.9, and may even be a quotation of it: "I smote you and all the products of your toil". The Hebrew words translated here "all the products of your toil" are, except for the pronoun, the same as those translated "every work of their hands" in 2.14. The "toil" is agricultural labour, as in 2.14, and GNB translates as "everything you tried to grow."

Haggai mentions three of the immediate causes of the recent crop failures. The first two are translated "blight and mildew" in many modern English translations (RSV, JB, NIV, NJV, Mft), but this is a case where the older translations may be more accurate with "blasting and . . . mildew" (KJV, RV). The first of these terms actually refers to the scorching effects of the hot east wind that sometimes blows across Palestine from the desert, and causes the growing grain to shrivel up. The second term refers to a disease of the grain caused by a fungus which prevents it from ripening properly. This would be associated with damper winds, perhaps from the Mediterranean. These two terms occur together elsewhere (Deut 28.22; 1 Kg 8.37; 2 Chr 6.28), and perhaps represent extremes of dryness on the one hand and damp on the other. GNB translates both by the single term "scorching winds". This is perhaps adequate if the damp winds as well as the dry winds were very hot, but if the real point of linking the two terms is to emphasise opposite extremes of humidity, then the GNB rendering misses it. Translators may be able to make the point clear without using technical language by saying "I sent hot dry winds to wither your grain, and damp winds to make it rot."

The third of the three adverse weather conditions is hail, which is perhaps to be associated with north winds (compare Prov 25.23). If it is heavy, hail can damage crops, and even injure people and animals (compare Ex 9.25–35; Josh 10.11)

The last part of the message in Hebrew is literally “yet you were not towards me”. This is a rather unusual expression, and the Septuagint here translates with the same Greek wording as that used at the end of Amos 4.9. Accordingly, many scholars have thought that the Hebrew here should be emended to make it the same as in Amos 4.9, especially as the beginnings of the two verses are the same. However, Driver notes a number of places where the Hebrew contains expressions somewhat similar to the one here (2 Kg 6.11; Hos 3.3; Ezek 36.9) and so it does not seem entirely necessary to emend the text. From the translator’s point of view, it does not matter greatly whether the text is emended or not, as the meaning is much the same either way. The NIV “yet you did not turn to me” (compare DGN) probably translates the Hebrew as it stands. RSV “yet you did not return to me” (compare JB, NAB, NEB, NJV) translates the text as emended to conform to Amos 4.9. The difference is slight, and the meaning of either possibility is clearly expressed in plain language by GNB with “but still you did not repent”.

In Hebrew, the verse ends with the words “says the LORD”. GNB has transferred these words to the beginning of the paragraph (2.15) and does not repeat them here.

Verse 18

The opening words of the verse, “Consider from this day onward”, are the same in Hebrew as the opening words of 2.15, except that the first word of 2.15 (“now” in RSV) is not repeated here. There are two points to be noted: (1) Even RSV does not repeat the obsolete word “pray” in verse 18! (2) The Hebrew word translated “upward” in KJV and RV definitely has a reference to the future, and is rightly rendered “onward” in RSV (compare BJ, JB, NAB, NEB, TOB, NIV, NJV).

The equivalent in GNB is “from now on”, but GNB has placed these words at the end of the verse rather than at the beginning. This is because GNB has run together the two occurrences of “consider” (RSV) and translated them only once. By placing its equivalent expression “see what is going to happen from now on” at the end of verse 18, GNB thus gives an effective introduction to verse 19.

The words “from this day onward” refer to the same day as that mentioned in 2.10, “the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month”, that is December 18th, 520 BC.

Haggai states that “the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month” was “the day that the foundation of the LORD’s temple was laid”. This appears to clash with Ezra 3.10–13, which records a foundation laying ceremony in about 537 BC. Some scholars think that the narrative in Ezra 3 is mistaken and that no such ceremony took place in 537. Other explanations are possible, however. Some scholars such as Driver and Cashdan believe that there was indeed a foundation laying ceremony in about 537, but that because the work lapsed after that, the ceremony was repeated in 520. Since the effective rebuilding

began only in 520 this latter ceremony came to be regarded as marking the true foundation date. Wiseman points out that “more than one foundation ritual was commonly employed for building temples”. In the case of the Jerusalem temple “It is likely that the first marked the subterranean foundation-laying and the second the first building at ground level as in ancient Mesopotamian practice” (*New Bible Commentary*, page 784).

This view is hard to reconcile with the view that the foundations of Solomon’s Temple were still intact. Baldwin holds that the word translated “lay the foundation” in Ezra 3.10–12 and Hag 2.18 would be more accurately rendered “begin the restoration”. She believes that such a rendering would remove the apparent contradiction.

None of these views is without difficulties, but fortunately the translator does not have to resolve them. The Hebrew text as we have it is easy enough to understand and translate, and the translator should not try to alter it.

Verse 19

There are a number of problems in this verse, but before considering them, it will be helpful to emphasize two points. The first is that the closing words of the verse, which are perfectly clear in meaning, “From this day on I will bless you” form the climax to the whole paragraph 2.15–19. Accordingly, they should be translated in such a way that this is clear to the reader. The second is that the earlier part of the verse, which contains the difficulties, must be interpreted in such a way as to fit with the plain sense of the second part. In studying this verse, it is important for translators to understand something of the climate and agricultural patterns of Palestine. This is especially true if the translators live in the southern hemisphere or in areas where the weather and vegetation are totally different from those in Palestine.

There the summers extend from May to September, and are hot and almost completely dry. During this time, the main crops are harvested—wheat in May and June, and grapes in August and September. In October and November, the early rains were expected. These softened the ground and allowed it to be ploughed and planted with grain seed for the following year’s crop. During the winter months of December, January and February, the weather grew colder, with rain at intervals, or even snow. The farmers hoped for more rain in March or April to help the growing grain crops to mature well. Since the total rainfall over the whole year was not very great, even small decreases could have a severe effect on the crops, and cause real hardship to the people.

The first part of the verse takes the form of two rhetorical questions which we will label (A) and (B). Scholars generally agree that the answers expected to these questions are both negative. The first question (A) is “Is the seed yet in the barn?” If the answer is no, we must still ask what the seed is, and why it is not in the barn before we can understand the point of the question. At least three different answers are possible:

1. The seed is that gathered in the relatively poor harvest of the summer of 520, and it is not in the barn because there was so little of it that it has already been eaten. This, according to Driver, is the understanding behind the RV, and is also found in GNB, and DGN. It fits the thought of verses 16–17, but does not seem fully convincing, as it does not lead on well to the promise of blessing

in the second half of the verse. If even the seed grain had been eaten, how could there be any harvest the following year?

2. The seed is that yet to be gathered from the harvest expected in the following summer, 519. It is not yet in the barn because there has not yet been time for it to grow since the work on the Temple was restarted. This is the view of Mitchell. He says that Haggai's argument is as follows: "You have not yet had a harvest since you began to work seriously on the Temple. Do not be discouraged, for now that you have begun, you can be confident that the Lord will give you better harvests." This fits with the promise of blessing in the second half of the verse, but it is still not convincing because it does not follow well after verses 16 and 17, and it makes the prophet ask the people what appears to be a silly question. Obviously in December the harvest of the following summer could not have been gathered in!

3. The seed is the seed grain remaining from the harvest of 520, and it is not in the barn because it has already been sown in the ground. This view is held by Cashdan and by Baldwin. In this case, Haggai's argument would be: "You know what bad harvests you have had in the past (verses 16-17). But now consider the present. Since you started to rebuild the Temple, the Lord has given enough rain to soften the earth and allow you to plant the seed for next year's harvest. Take this as a sign of encouragement, for the Lord will certainly bless you with better harvests in the future." This fits both with the preceding verses, and with the promise of blessing at the end of verse 19, and seems to be the most probable interpretation.

These then are different ways of interpreting a negative answer. But it is also possible to take the answer to this question as positive—yes, the seed still is in the barn. This is the view of KJV, which translates "take note while the seed is still in the granary." In this case the seed must be the seed grain, as in answer (3) above, and if it is still "in the granary" then it has not yet been planted. While this is a grammatically possible interpretation, it does not fit well with the date of the prophecy in mid-December, as the sowing of seed for the next year's harvest was normally done well before then. If it had not been done by then, there could be little hope of a good harvest the following year.

In connection with this first question, it remains to note that NEB emends the Hebrew text by adding a word similar to the Hebrew word for barn. It then translates "will the seed still be diminished in the barn?" (compare JB). Presumably this is intended to mean "Will you go on having bad harvests in the future?" This rendering would not appear to improve the flow of the paragraph as a whole, and is not recommended to translators.

We may now move on to the second of the two rhetorical questions (B) "Do the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree still yield nothing?" We must begin by noting three textual points. The first is that the interrogative particle which occurs with the first question is not repeated with the second one. Most translations assume that the influence of the particle applies here also, although it is grammatically possible to treat this second question as a negative statement (RV, TOB, NIV). This option would seem to imply that the first question "Is the seed yet in the barn?" should be given answer (1) above. This fits with verses 16-17, but makes for a very abrupt change to the promise of blessing at the end of the verse 19. NIV senses this, and makes 19b a

separate paragraph. On the whole it seems better to regard 19a as containing two questions rather than one question and one statement.

The second textual point is that most modern translations follow the Septuagint in reading "still" (RSV, BJ, JB, NEB, compare NAB, GNB, NJV) as the first word of the second question: this does not involve changing the consonants of the traditional Hebrew text, but simply supplying a different vowel.

The third textual point is that several modern translations also follow the Septuagint in reading the word translated "yield" in RSV as a present participle rather than as a perfect tense. Again, no change in the Hebrew consonants is involved. The effect of this is to give it a future rather than a past reference (RSV, JB, NEB, Mft). These small emendations help to keep the two questions parallel with each other, and translators are recommended to accept them.

The second question is then to be understood as "Do the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree still yield nothing?" If the implied answer is no, then Haggai is saying in effect "The vines and fruit trees are looking in better condition now than they have looked for years at this time of year, December. You should therefore take hope for better yields in the future." This agrees with answer (3) to the first question, and helps to form an adequate link between verses 16–17 and the promise of blessing in verse 19b.

However, it is possible to take the implied answer to the question as yes, the fruit trees still yield nothing. This would also seem to imply either negative answers (1) or (2) or else a positive answer to the first question. If the negative answers (1) or (2) are implied, then the resulting interpretation as a whole is open to the same objections as those answers. It also seems unlikely that the two questions would imply opposite answers. If a positive answer is to be given to both questions (as in NJV), then Haggai's argument would run "take note now, even before the seed for the harvest of 519 has been sown, and before the fruit trees have started their spring growth, that the Lord has already promised to give you better harvests in the future." This interpretation forms an adequate link between verses 16–17 and the promise of future blessing, but as pointed out before, it does not fit with the stage of the agricultural cycle that would be expected in December.

We have examined the various possible ways of interpreting the first part of this verse. However, even if it is accepted that both of the opening clauses are in fact questions, they may still not be translated as questions, or at least not as direct questions. JB for instance, links them closely with the command to think carefully in verse 18, and translates as indirect questions: "Reflect carefully, if grain is still short (compare NEB) in the barn, and if vine and fig tree . . . still bear no fruit." The implication is that in the future there will be no lack of grain or fruit because the Lord intends to give better harvests. NAB and GNB translate the two rhetorical questions as negative statements and GNB runs them into one sentence with the final promise of blessing: "Although there is no grain left and the grapevines, fig trees, pomegranates, and olive trees have not yet produced, yet from now on I will bless you." This translation implies negative answer (1) to the first question, but GNB has avoided the abrupt transition from present hardship to future blessing by its restructuring, both here and in the previous verse.

In view of the bewildering variety of possible interpretations and com-

binations of interpretations, how is the translator to approach this verse? For the reasons given in the preceding discussion, the best recommendation is (a) to interpret both clauses as questions; (b) to supply negative answer (3) to the first question; (c) to supply a negative answer to the second question; (d) to translate the questions as statements and thus make clear what the implied answers are. A possible translation base would be: "The seed grain is no longer in the barn but has already been sown. The grapevines, fig trees, pomegranates and olive trees will not continue to give poor crops. From now on I will certainly bless you with good harvests."

With regard to translation matters, we may first note that the vine and the olive tree are central features of Palestinian culture. They and their fruit are frequently mentioned in scripture (for instance 1.11; 2.12) and so even in areas where these trees and their fruit are not known, translators must find some way of speaking about them even if loan words have to be used. However, the fig tree and the pomegranate are much less important, and in this verse could be translated with a general term such as "fruit trees" or "other fruit trees".

Secondly, since the word "bless" in this verse refers primarily to agricultural success, it would be good in many languages to make this clear as in the translation base suggested above. Compare the similar treatment in GNB of other phrases with agricultural implications in 1.11; 2.14, 17.

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