

A Case Study for Study Bibles: The Book of Haggai

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Abstract

This article makes a case for properly defining “Bible translation” as nothing less than the preparation of a study Bible. Rendering the text of a biblical book into another language without providing the reader with adequate tools for understanding that text within its ancient culture is providing only half the material necessary for the work to be called a “translation.” The article seeks to illustrate the thesis by example from the book of Haggai and the several difficult issues it raises, issues that inevitably cause deep concern for serious readers of the Bible—the nature of God, the relationship between natural crises and human behaviour, the writer’s use of hyperbole while attributing everything written as coming from the gothead.

Keywords

study Bible, Haggai, translation standards

I wish here to recognize the dedicated and significant work of David Clark in the Bible Translation programme of the United Bible Societies (UBS) and his rigorous attention to the linguistic, cultural, and textual details that lie at the root of good translation. With his delightful British sense of humour, it was a joy as well as a privilege to serve alongside him.

Translating the Bible into the world’s many languages or revising older translations in light of changing linguistic factors, and of new textual and theological information, is one of the most significant elements in the church’s mission. It is crucial to the maturing of any and all local Christian communities. However, over the years of my involvement with the UBS

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translation programme, I came to accept that merely translating the ancient text and handing it to a reader was essentially pointless—never too strong a word. Not that the Holy Spirit could not use the translated text and hopefully enlighten the reader, but the vast gap between the modern reader and the ancient cultures represented in the Old Testament and New Testament basically prevents the modern reader, in so many cases, from appreciating what the text is really trying to say. Very odd ideas and theologies can result when a reader understands the text strictly from within his or her local cultural frame. Translation of a text obviously must render the sense of the source words as best as it is able, but of more importance is the cultural, religious, and historical setting from which it derives, along with a deeper appreciation of the literary forms it uses and their role in conveying meaning.

In this brief article I would like to focus on the fundamental need for a Bible with suitable notes as the minimum UBS goal for every translation project, and, even further, to recognize the need for a high-quality study Bible as the only criterion for a textual rendering to qualify as a translation. I will support this call with illustrations from the book of Haggai.¹

Haggai and its setting

It is 538 B.C.E. and Cyrus the Persian has just signed a document encouraging the exiles from Judah to return home from Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple. Many, including the prophet Haggai we presume, take up this offer and return to a devastated land to begin life again.

In 520 B.C.E. Cyrus's successor Darius is in power, with Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, a Persian satellite state. The book opens with a statement that Haggai received a message from YHWH to forward to Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, and his high priest Joshua concerning the people's failure to rebuild the temple (Hag 1.1-2). Haggai then turns to the people and begins to berate them for their priorities—their decision to give precedence to their own homes before beginning work on the temple (Hag 1.3-4). Haggai opens his address to the people in 1.5 calling attention to their current situation, asking them to reflect on the reality they face—poor

¹I continue to be involved in the new Chinese Study Bible project being undertaken by the Bible Society in Taiwan for the global Chinese church. It is a major Bible Society project, all carried out by Chinese scholars translating from the original languages and using the best of modern scholarship. It is being published as a series, not as a one-volume product, thus allowing for extended treatment of issues that arise for readers from a Chinese background, and is supported by countless illustrations and recent photos of all sites mentioned. A number of fascicles are already available and are more than worth consulting. See the website at www.bstwn.org.

harvests and little food, inadequate water supply, clothing that cannot keep out the cold, and poor return on investments or wages that cannot cover their expenses (1.6). Haggai paints a picture of a people living in the harshest of conditions, trying to re-establish their lives while environmental and other factors work against them.

Jerusalem and the towns of Judah had been destroyed by the invading Babylonians in 597/587 B.C.E., with large numbers of the population taken into exile. It was apparently the more educated and upper levels of society who were carried off, leaving behind those who were considered by the Babylonians as of little consequence, certainly not able to raise any further trouble for the victors. Little was left standing of the towns, or of Jerusalem and the temple itself. This was the scene that met the returning exiles some fifty and more years later in 538. Further decay and destruction over those years had even exacerbated the problem the returnees faced.

It seems inevitable that one of the priorities for those returning would be to have a shelter, a home, and something more substantial than a tent. Food and clothing and the basic daily needs would be at the front of their minds. Haggai's message in 1.5-6 indicates that there were climatic and economic factors that made those early days of their return even more difficult. Clearly life was a struggle and their priorities were aimed at their survival.

Haggai, as prophet and divine messenger (1.13), seeks to explain present conditions as the result of YHWH's intervention. The high expectations the people had with regard to providing themselves with food and other basic staples were dashed, according to Haggai, because they gave priority to their own domestic needs rather than YHWH's needs. Even the little that they were able to produce, YHWH "blew away" because his "house" was still lying in ruins (1.9). YHWH's priority, according to Haggai, was to see the temple built so that YHWH could there "take pleasure and be honoured" (1.8). Verses 10-11 explain that YHWH has "withheld" the moisture necessary for the crops to yield adequate fruit, caused hardship to animals, and frustrated people's efforts to support themselves. All is withheld because YHWH demands to be pleased and honoured in his temple; he disapproves of the people's priorities. It's not that the people were evil, unjust, or worshipping idols—none of that traditional prophetic complaint was expressed; they simply hadn't rebuilt the temple. The returnees' unacceptable priority choice really upset YHWH, according to Haggai, and so he took his anger and disappointment out on the people.

Haggai's message that the climate crisis in Jerusalem was a divine punishment was his attempt to account for a natural phenomenon. Typical of the time and its worldview, attributing crises of various kinds to a divine source, and, in this case, as a punishment, Haggai lays the blame for the

crisis squarely at the feet of the people who had delayed the temple rebuilding by prioritizing their own homes and livelihoods; but what else were they expected to do?

As a result of Haggai's proclamation, Zerubbabel and Joshua took seriously the need to "obey the voice of the Lord," and so the biblical record shows that some three weeks later, together with the people, they set about repairing or rebuilding the temple (1.12-15). A month or so later (2.1) Haggai inspects the work. In a series of rhetorical questions he asks the workers how they feel about this work-in-progress. How does it rate in comparison with the old temple, and so on. The first question (2.3) is unusual since it was almost impossible that there was present at the time anyone who had seen the temple prior to its destruction some sixty years past. The point of the questions is to encourage the workers despite the obvious ruined state it was in and the practical difficulty of ever matching the splendour of Solomon's temple. Haggai, in order to encourage them further, then adds an amazing promise that "YHWH is with them" and will ensure that the gold and silver for the temple vessels and decorations, the wealth of all the nations, flows in to enable their work eventually to surpass the glory of Solomon's temple. It is grand hyperbole promising great prosperity in contrast to their current drought, and the promise is bracketed with the usual formal markers "Thus says the Lord of hosts . . . says the Lord of hosts" (2.6-9) to claim divine authority for the prediction. According to Haggai's inspired information, YHWH requires not only a completed temple; he demands a most beautiful one, while the people are to be content with temporary housing. This explanation for the crisis and the priorities demanded are surely problematic and very confusing to the average reader.

Issues arising

A naïve reader of a standard translation may understand Haggai's account quite literally, and if one regards the account as coming directly from God then it will inevitably lead to any number of questions—serious questions about the nature of a God whose primary concern is for a splendid and glorious temple in which to be honoured, about the climate crisis understood as a divine punishment for building one's own home, about a promise of great wealth flowing in from the nations, about the impending defeat of enemy nations, and so on. Of course, in terms of strict translation, these questions cannot be dealt with directly.

However, if the point of any translation is to provide readers with what the church regards as "inspired" and life-changing words, then leaving readers with questions that can be deeply troubling or confusing is unacceptable.

Passing quickly over and ignoring so many parts of Scripture that seem embarrassing makes a mockery of Bible reading and the kind of theology derived from it. Notes that provide some background information regarding certain theological or social views represented by the prophet and his contemporaries at the time are a minimal requirement to give some understanding of any text, and a well-prepared and researched study Bible is an absolute necessity in order to provide this. These notes cannot be prescriptive or biased in any manner, but must reflect the best of current scholarship that meets with general consensus, and if there is a debate, then the various views possible must be included. And the form in which it is offered needs to be carefully considered—questions for discussion and reflection based on the information provided in notes, essays, maps, illustrations, and such, not doctrinal or sectarian confessional statements.

One of the important issues that arises in Haggai, as in most of the prophetic books, is the use of hyperbole. In 2.6-9, 21-22, Haggai uses hyperbole to describe the future that he foresees for the people both in terms of God's provision of international wealth flowing in for the temple reconstruction, and then for the complete overthrow of the power of Judah's enemies. Given that Judah at the time was a Persian vassal state attempting to recover from the devastation brought by the Babylonians, and given the impoverished condition of the land, its towns, and villages, these words from Haggai possibly sounded comforting. The problem was that, like similar promises made by earlier prophets over the past centuries (e.g., Isa 14.1-2; 18.7; 60.1-22; Amos 9.11-15), Haggai continued the theme of a glorious future, free from enemy power, never again to be invaded or humiliated. Haggai used grossly exaggerated language that for many must have sounded either very comforting—or very hollow.

Hyperbole or exaggerated promises are a significant feature of prophetic literature. While there is little doubt that Haggai and the prophetic cohort were inspired observers of and commentators on the state of their societies, their criticisms of social and moral failures did not quite match the heightened language of their grandiose promises. Failure to appreciate the hyperbolic dimension of the biblical text leads to a series of questions about the nature of prophetic speech. Were Haggai's promises misleading? Did the failure of similar earlier promises make Haggai a false prophet, since that was an important criterion separating true from false prophets? Did God deceive Haggai, if God was actually the source of these promises, as claimed? If Haggai promised that Judah's enemies were going to be annihilated, how is it that they were still under Persian domination, to be followed by the Greeks and later the Romans? Hyperbole, as found in the prophets generally, raises the more fundamental question, Was Haggai simply

expressing his personal hopes for a better future and using inflated or exaggerated speech to represent them? Did his promises have nothing to do with God's word, but express purely Haggai's own hopes and longings for his people? The formula "Thus says the Lord . . . says the Lord" that brackets such prophetic oracles is essentially a "professional" device to give greater authority to the prophets' own musings and cannot be regarded as fact.

It is more than likely that notes in support of a translation of the book of Haggai will need to confront issues such as God's use of climatic factors as a means of punishing a people who were simply trying to re-establish themselves in a devastated Judah. An essay dealing with the worldview and theological perspective of people of that era, and with Haggai's dependence on Deuteronomy's insistence on obedience to the Law as a prerequisite for blessing, will assist or provide context for any outside discussion of Haggai's interpretation of the situation the people were currently experiencing. The fact that Haggai "channels" the priestly concerns of Joshua and Jerusalem's leadership at the time is also a crucial factor in his demand that the people get back to rebuilding the temple. However, the more immediate issue of the literary form of hyperbole is not so simply dealt with since Haggai's promises using that level of language are bracketed by the formula that identifies the words as given by God to Haggai—and note the number of times the phrase "says the Lord of hosts" is used in this context (four times in 2.6-9; three times in 2.21-23). We are being irresponsible if we fail to draw readers' attention to this literary feature and suggest how it might be better understood.

Since formulaic phrases seem to be universally applied by Israel's prophets, we are entitled to assume that "rules" for their use by the prophets and their editors, as well as their reception by audiences, were well understood. Formulations we regard as hyperbole were clearly not interpreted by the audience as if the prophet intended them literally; had they thought the prophet was making literal statements they would have laughed him to scorn or ignored him. The audience, we assume, knew how to interpret the prophetic word contextually and knew instinctively that the promise should not be taken literally—never before had such promises been so realized, so why now? Prophets like Haggai simply made what sound like outrageous promises; that was how they all spoke. Modern readers need to be helped to see that there are, for example, two ways (at least) of reading Haggai's hyperbole: (1) as the prophet's personal hope or longing expressed in the most forceful way available, and not as deriving from a divine source, not from God because it was never to be realized; (2) as a fixed literary device for speaking of a future that speaker and audience alike knew was not "real." In either case, the addition of the bracketing formula, "Thus says

the Lord . . . says the Lord” is the way in which the prophet claimed special authority for the promise (or threat) made. It is essentially a literary device used by all the prophets to give greater authority to their own musings, and, I would argue, cannot be regarded as a literal claim.

Prophets were at a disadvantage when it came to asserting authority. Unlike the priests, they could not quote the Law as their basis of authority; unlike the sages, they could not quote precedent and common experience. Prophets had to establish a personal authority for their words, and the first step was to use the right formulae, claim divine intervention and special revelation, then gradually win popular acceptance as what they promised became realized, even if well past the prophet’s own death.

With regard to the hyperbole, if a reader prefers to read the prophet’s words as (1) above, then attributing the promises to the prophet’s own personal hopes avoids what many would see as the problem of God making a false promise. They are an insight into the prophet’s personal longings only, and since so many of the prophets made similar promises (e.g., Ezek 37.21-28; Joel 3.1-8; Amos 9.11-15), hyperbole can be regarded as a “professional trope.” If accepting reading strategy (2) above, then the reader is acknowledging that meaning is not always confined to the words used, that interpreting a biblical text requires a level of sophistication at the literary level—a literal reading may be more than just unhelpful. A proper study Bible will aim to include information along these lines, provide parallel examples in other prophetic books for comparison, and encourage readers to discuss and draw their own conclusions. Only in this way can Bible students become mature readers of the Bible rather than those who know and can quote select favourite verses. A translation *must* include language *and* cultural transfer to qualify as a valid translation.

While many Bible translations render rhetorical questions in terms of their intended purpose, such as making a negative statement, hyperbole is generally rendered almost word-for-word and many readers are unaware of its function, resulting in some very unusual views and ideas supposedly derived from the text. A “good” translation will not only render the sense of the source text at the basic level, it will also endeavour to share with the reader something of the impact of the literary features and style chosen by its author/editors. The book of Haggai presents such a challenge, especially with its outrageous promises that were not, and could never be, realized. Surely the ancient audience knew that. It is unacceptable then for us to leave readers with the raw text in whatever language—all need help to bridge the gap between our times and cultures and those of the ancients. A well-planned study Bible that does not short-change the reader or direct the reader to a specific conclusion, but offers information in all formats

according to the best scholarly consensus, is not a luxury—it is what defines translation, and must be our minimum standard.

As an aside while on the general subject of the Minor Prophets, but also as an illustration of the need for study notes, the troubling issue of Hosea's directive from God to marry a "wife of whoredom" (Hos 1.2) may be understood differently: I would suggest that Hosea attributes to God his own decision to marry a certain northern Israelite woman who was simply a member of that kingdom called "whores" by his southern colleagues. Hosea's decision to marry, made for entirely personal reasons, then provided the parallel he draws between his marriage experience and what was happening between God and the people of Israel, with the children's names a living element in his message that the northern kingdom was condemned. Attributing the marriage to a divine command has the purpose of giving authority to his criticism of the northern nation and its unfaithfulness, while upholding God's special favour for Judah.

This is an interpretation that many would not agree with. However, it can be included in a study Bible as a possible alternative to the more traditional view that God actually told Hosea to marry a woman with such a reputation. For a translation to qualify as one that offers the modern audience genuine insight into the meaning of this text, notes like those of a study Bible should provide readers with the necessary background information and suggest alternative interpretive paths such as this example points to without dictating how the text must be read.