

JERUSALEM TEMPLE'S REBUILDING AS A RELIGIOUS AND NATIONAL UNITY FACTOR-A CENTRAL TOPIC IN PROPHET HAGGAI'S WRITING

Bogdan-Lucian Șopterean
„Babeș-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Abstract: *Jerusalem Temple represents a religious and political unity symbol for the chosen people. The study aim's is to evidentiate this status of the Temple in Haggai's book. Therefore the author presents the historical context in which the prophet had lived and prophetised highlighting some important aspects of his message. In conclusion he asserts that the prophet reached his goal: the Temple was rebuilt and the postexilic Israelite community consolidated both religiously and politically around it.*

Keywords: Jerusalem Temple, prophet Haggai, religious unity, national unity, postexilic period.

For Jewish people the Jerusalem Temple is not only the epicenter of religious cult but also represents a cohesion symbol which denotes political unity and maturity. This was an actual fact especially during the reign of David and Solomon. The first two members of Davidic dynasty are eager to strengthen the national unity of their subjects. Consequently, they made Jerusalem as capital city, an endeavor that had enabled cult centralization. But the ultimate symbol and bastion of national and religious cohesion was the Temple. David is the one who procured proper materials for its building and Solomon was the one who finalized its construction and participate in Temple's consecration. The main difference between the Temple and the tabernacle resides in its unmovable character being a solid and steady construction for a people that had taken roots in that respective territory. The tabernacle was also a cultic construction but was ambulant thus for a nomadic people ever searching for a stable home. The Temple thus signifies that Israel was finally able to conquer Canaan, having a royal dynasty and God Himself dwelled among them. During Temple's consecration when king Solomon stood in front of the people and priests they saw the grace of God in a cloud form that filled the Temple (1 Kings 8:11) and Israel knew in the moment that God was present and dwells among them.¹

¹ For the Jerusalem Temple as a political unifying factor see: Petre Semen, „Templul din Ierusalim-factor de unitate națională și religioasă”, in *Pax et unitas*, no. I, 2003, pp. 21-32; Petre Semen, „Importanța Templului din Ierusalim pentru menținerea unității religioase și naționale”, in *Analele științifice ale Universității „Al. I. Cuza” din Iași. Teologie*, no. VI, 2001, pp. 101-110; Ioan Chirilă, „Teologia Sionului-ca element de fundamentare a comuniunii și comunității credinței”, in Vasile Stanciu, Cristian Sonea (eds.), *Misiunea*

Before the Babylonian exile the Israeli people regarded the Temple from Jerusalem as a religious and national unity factor even after the kingdom split (see 1 Kings 12:26-27). The destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian exile meant a difficult time for Israel for the fact that they were estranged from Jerusalem's beauty and found it impossible to return. Only after about sixty years (597-538 B. C.) Cyrus king of Persia offered them the opportunity to-and even encouraged them-to return home and rebuild the Temple.² Subsequently prince Zerubbabel and Joshua led the first groups of people from Persia back into the promised land, in kingdom of Judah. Haggai, a post-exilic prophet, was one of the repatriated.³ Haggai's writing started only thirty years after the repatriation and the main objective for that endeavor was to encourage the people to rebuild the Temple. Haggai saw the Temple as the sole entity through which Israel could be truly saved and overcome that period of hardship.⁴

The literature that we had identified concerning Haggai's writing with the topic of rebuilding the Temple is scarce. Many authors only point to this topic when: 1) they make isagogic analysis regarding Haggai's personality and the style of its post-exilic writings;⁵ 2) they study the historic period of the second temple;⁶ 3) they consider the large theme of the Temple in general, both the first and the second⁷ or 4) they evaluate Haggai's book in a biblical commentary.⁸ Moreover, there are studies underlying prince Zerubbabel's personality or the eschatological

parohiei și a mănăstirii într-o lume în continuă schimbare, Cluj-Napoca, Renașterea Printing Press, 2016, pp. 20-32.

² See: Petre Semen, *Introducere în teologia profeților scriitori*, Iași, Trinitas Printing Press, 2008, p. 312.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 312.

⁴ D. J. Clark, H. Hatton, „A handbook on Haggai”, in *UBS Handbook Series*, New York, United Bible Societies, 2002, p. 11.

⁵ Ioan Chirilă et. al., *Introducere în Vechiul Testament*, București, Basilica Printing Press, 2018, pp. 687-695; Petre Semen, *Introducere în teologia*, pp. 312-319.

⁶ Lester L. Grabbe, *Judaic religion in the Second Temple period*, London/New York, Routledge, 2000, pp. 15-17; Daniel L. Smith, „The politics of Ezra: Sociological indicators of postexilic judaean society”, in David J. A. Clines și Phlip R. Davis (eds.), *Journal for the study of the Old Testament supplement series* 117, Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1991, pp. 73-97.

⁷ Ronald E. Regans, *God and Temple*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1965, pp. 123-134.

⁸ See, for example: R. A. Taylor, E. R. Clendenen, „Hagaai, Malachi”, in *The New American Commentary* 21A, Nashville, Broadman&Holman Publishers, 2007; C. L. Meyers, E. M. Meyers, „Haggai, Zecharia 1-8: A new translation with introduction and commentary”, in *Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2008; D. J. Clark, H. Hatton, *A handbook on Haggai*.

theology in Haggai's book.⁹ We had identified four studies with an in-depth approach towards rebuilding of the Temple. The first one belongs to David J. A. Clines. Utilizing a deconstructionist approach he shows what the prophet had intended to say in his discourse.¹⁰ The other three studies belong to Elie Assis, professor at Bar-Ilan University of Israel, department of Biblical Studies. His first study analyzes the internal polemic in Judah which the rebuild of the Temple lead to. This polemic happens between the prophet and the people, the former trying to explain to the last the fundamental importance and the theological implications of the house of God.¹¹ In his second study, Assis „*discuss the Temple ideology that characterizes the book of Haggai*” and shows what role had the Temple in the life of Israel.¹² And in his third study, he is concentrate on the first part from the second chapter from the book of Haggai emphasizing the reason why Haggai is so eager to see a new temple built: it will be a glorious masterpiece that will overshadow the first construction.¹³

Although not very extensive, the book of Haggai is important for understanding the process and the problems faced in it when Israel, returned from Persia, decided to reorganize from point zero. Once they returned hardship and need hit them so their first preoccupation resided not on spiritual matters but in setting up the agriculture and households. The daily preoccupation for providing and establishing an income left them no time to think let alone start working on the Temple. It is in this context when Haggai arouse and start preaching that poor material conditions and precarious economy are caused by the very lack of preoccupation towards the Temple of God. Rebuilding of the Temple should have been the main preoccupation not only for political and religious elites (for them this endeavor should have been a must) but for all the people. Haggai's intention did not neglect the political and social aspects but he knew that by rebuilding the Temple, the political and

⁹ Bob Wielenga, „Eschatological hope in Haggai: A homiletic reading”, in *In die Scriflig*, no. XLIX, 2015, pp. 1-13; Greg Goswell, „The Fate and Future of Zerubbabel in the Prophecy of Haggai”, in *Biblica*, no. XCI, 2010, pp. 77-90.

¹⁰ David J. A. Clines, „Haggai's Temple, Constructed, Deconstructed and Reconstructed”, in David J. A. Clines, Philip R. Davis (eds.), *Journal for the study of the Old Testament supplement series* 175, Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1994, pp. 60-87.

¹¹ Elie Assis, „To Build or Not to Build: A Dispute between Haggai and His People (Hag 1)”, in *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, no. CXIX, 2007, pp. 514-527.

¹² Elie Assis, „The temple in the book of Haggai”, in *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, no. XIX, 2008, pp. 2-10.

¹³ Elie Assis, „A Disputed Temple (Haggai 2,1-9)”, in *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, no. CXX, 2008, pp. 582-596.

social cohesion would be implicitly assured, just as before the exile. This is the very topic of this research of which main research hypothesis is that the preoccupation for households and domestic agriculture led to an individualization weakening the already soft national cohesion sentiment. The rebuilding of the Temple would have engaged all the people efforts (as a reverse action of individualization resulted from working their own piece of land) and it would have served as an incontestable symbol of a national collective effort for unity in faith of Israeli community.

But before we would analyze these theological aspects of Haggai's book (national unity by faith, rebuilding of the Temple as a symbol of community cohesion) we shall explore the historical context in which Haggai activated. After understanding the context, we can analyze Haggai's advices towards the rebuilding of the Temple. We considered this topic to be relevant nowadays given the depreciation of religious sentiment and patriotism.¹⁴ And we are saying this because the values that Haggai proposed could be taken into account anytime in history.

Rebuilding the community by rebuilding the Temple. Some aspects on the prophet Haggai's message

It is paramount to understand Haggai's prophetic activity as an integral part of Israel's returning from the exile which happened in 538 B. C. after Cyrus king of Persia conquered the Babylonian empire. Unlike Babylonians conquer policy of deporting the defeated nations Cyrus adopted a different strategy. Persian approach was an open one in which cultic practices and national identities were respected and thus guaranteed. In this context, Cyrus decided in 538 B. C. to express his permission for the Israelites to return in their homeland (Ezra 1) without forcing them to do so. The process of returning happened in multiple waves, the first one being led by prince Zerubbabel and Joshua consisting in 50.000 of individuals.¹⁵ They settled in Jerusalem and in its

¹⁴ Many countries of the world face these problems. For this reason, some scholars searched some ways to draw attention that the religion and the patriotism are important for a nation. In their studies, they treat some political aspects or some remarkable personalities. See, for example, Sahrul, „Religion and Social Conflict in Aceh Singkil, Nanggroe Aceh Darusalam, Indonesia”, in *Astra Salvensis*, no. II, 2017, pp. 723-736; Lucian Zenoviu, „Sfântul Dimitrie Basarabov-simbol al unității naționale românești”, in *Astra Salvensis*, Supplement no. I, 2018, pp. 575-581.

¹⁵ Petre Semen, *Introducere în teologia*, pp. 312-313.

outskirts¹⁶ and one of their first initiative was the rebuilding of the Temple. In the book of Ezra, chapter 3, we found the story of laying down the Temple foundation and the national joy as a consequence of that endeavor. However, two main causes made the construction to cease for 17 years:¹⁷ 1) the opposition of Samaritans;¹⁸ and 2) the precarious economic conditions. According to Ezra 4:24 „[...] *the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia*” (520 B. C.).

It is unknown why the work had not been resumed earlier but probably the answer must be sought in Persian political power struggles. What happened then at the top of Persian ruling elites? The death of king Cambyses (530-522 B. C.) the successor of Cyrus left a power void that many military chieftains fought each other in order to fill. In this chaotic situation Darius successfully concentrates the power in his hands. He ruled between 522-486 B. C.,¹⁹ but the riots are ended only in 520 B. C.²⁰

Darius inspired himself from Cyrus tolerance policy and even came in aid to foreign nations from his Empire. In the book of Ezra, we find information regarding how king Darius issued an order that the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the Temple in Jerusalem, are to be returned to their places (Ezra 6:1-5). He agreed for the resuming of the construction of the Temple, and endeavor made possible with the implication of prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 6:14).²¹

One particular aspect is highlighted more than others in Haggai's book: the prophet is not concerned with Judah external challenges. For Haggai all the external political aspects in which Judah exists: domination of the Persian Empire and the possibility for the everyday life to be

¹⁶ For a detailed work on Jews returning from the exile see: Diana Edelman, *The origins of the Second Temple. Persian imperial policy and rebuilding of Jerusalem*, London, Equinox Printing Press, 2005, pp. 151-206.

¹⁷ D. J. Clark, H. Hatton, „A handbook on Haggai”, in *UBS handbook series*, New York, United Bible Societies, 2002, p. 11.

¹⁸ Haggai is not concerned in his book with external affairs, so we do not enter in details. For a detailed work on the dispute between the Israelites and the Samaritans see: Ioan Chirilă et. al., *Introducere în Vechiul Testament*, pp. 688-689; cf. Elie Assis, „To Build or Not to Build”, p. 515.

¹⁹ Petre Semen, *Introducere în teologia*, pp. 314-315.

²⁰ Michel Casevitz et. al., „Introducere la Agheu”, in Cristian Bădiliță et. al. (eds.), *Septuaginta*, volume 5, Iași, Polirom Printing Press, 2009, p. 471.

²¹ See: John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, *Comentariu cultural-istoric al Vechiului Testament*, Oradea, 2014, p. 855.

affected by decisions taken in Persian Empire simply does not matter. He refers to them as temporarily contexts (Haggai 1:1). This is a result of Haggai's faith in the mighty God which has the ultimate word concerning his chosen people (and all the people on earth also). But that pride of being the people chosen by God should had been manifested concretely in the preoccupation for the house of God, thus that privilege is not to be taken lightly. This is the reason why Haggai sees the future of Judah not in terms of political autonomy or other social aspects because the rebuilding of the Temple as the true symbol of the presence of God among the people is the main feature of which Israelites should have been obsessed. God will set and decide their history and their well-being not the Persian Empire, subsequently the fact that Judah is a part of that Empire is not a problem because God remains Judah's ultimate true and sole king around which Israeli kings, priests and people should gather.²²

Thus Haggai has two important roles in the Jewish society first being related to religious field where he reminds Israel that it has to put all his trust towards the Lord because He had watched over Israel's destiny ever since (Haggai 1:13). In that order it is paramount for them to restart at once the construction of the Temple for God to dwell again among them. Haggai's second role is linked with the political field because by rebuilding the Temple he sought to restore the Davidic societal environment where the society was closely united by one single religious cult concentrated at Jerusalem.²³

Haggai's advices towards the rebuilding of the Temple and Israelite community

Haggai's advices towards rebuilding the Temple make up virtually the entire meaning of his book and in close relationship with it lies the theme of resurgence of the Davidic royal line. Rebuilding the Temple would have been according the Haggai a true evidence of the fact that Israel survived the exile and is ready to reorganize as a coherent people. The Temple thus serves the link between Haggai days when Zerubbabel was the ruler and the glorious period of David or Solomon.²⁴ Haggai 2:9

²² D. J. Clark, H. Hatton, *A handbook on Haggai*, pp. 11-12; Elie Assis, „To Build or Not to Build”, pp. 518-519.

²³ R. A. Taylor, E. R. Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, p. 42.

²⁴ Zerubbabel was the grandson of Jehoiachin, a descendant of King David. Consequently, „Haggai would not let Israel neutralize the everlasting promises to David, as Second Isaiah was willing to do (Isaiah 55:3)”. Carroll Stuhlmüller, „Rebuilding with hope: A

express this very desire of restoring Israel's previous glory and even overcoming it.²⁵

Haggai's book does not represent a message narrowed to a specific target group. It involves both the ruling political and religious elites and the ordinary people (Haggai 1:2.7.13; 2:1.11.20). But Haggai addresses prince Zerubbabel and high priest Joshua in particular because they served the ultimate example for the people and if they would have been prioritizing the Temple reconstruction the people would have followed in spite of their conviction that it was not the proper time to do it (Haggai 1:2). The main field towards the Israelites thought it would be critical to invest was their own households (Haggai 1:9). On the other side, Haggai shows that the precarious economic conditions and the drought are caused by the ignorance towards the Temple (Haggai 1:6.9.10-11). The exile however flattened the spiritual enthusiasm and created doubt among the Israelites that the Lord is still their protector.²⁶ That was the very attitude that led them to the brink of economic collapse. Haggai felt the need for a spark that will light the dormant religious enthusiasm in Israelites and the rebuilding of the Temple would have done such a thing.

Full of enthusiasm and confidence Haggai instigates the people and its elites to rebuild the Temple first by signaling some important issues. The first one by pointing to the wrong path Israel had taken by putting distance between them and the Lord. The second one is the assurance that the Lord is still with them (Haggai 1:13). Those words of the prophet did not remain in vain but reached their goal and motivated the people in such a way that in only 23 days: „[...] *the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Josedech, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and did work in the house of the Lord of hosts, their God*” (Haggai 1:14).²⁷

commentary on the books of Haggai and Zechariah”, in *International theological commentary*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans/Handsels Press, 1988, p. 13.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 13-14.

²⁶ Based on this fact Elie Assis says that: „[...] *the people were disappointed that their expectations for salvation had not been fulfilled, and thus doubts were raised as to whether God was in their midst. The feeling of abandonment by God would seem to be a continuation of the popular and prevalent exilic and post-exilic view that God had abandoned and rejected His people; that they were no longer His chosen people*”. Elie Assis, „To Build or Not to Build”, p. 518.

²⁷ The expression „the Lord stirred up the spirit of” is fairly common in the later parts of the Old Testament; see: 1 Chr 5:26; Jer 51:1; compare Ezra 1:5. It is well translated by Today's English Version in natural modern English as „*The Lord inspired*”. D. J. Clark, H. Hatton, *A handbook on Haggai*, p. 36.

After a month since the construction, was resumed those who envy the beauty and glory of the first Temple started to discourage those who were working at the construction. The second Temple was considerably smaller than the first one and the materials used were also less precious. It was difficult to maintain a constant effort at the construction when their own kind discouraged them in doing so; thus Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people lost enthusiasm, but Haggai intervened and said to them: „[...] *now be strong, O Zerubbabel, saith the Lord; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedech, the high priest; and be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work: for I am with you*” (Haggai 2:4). King David encouraged king Solomon before starting building the first Temple in a similar fashion: „[...] *be strong and of good courage, and do it: fear not, nor be dismayed: for the Lord God, even my God, will be with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee, until thou hast finished all the work for the service of the house of the Lord*” (1 Chronicles 28:20). Just as God helped Solomon and the people to raise the first Temple He will do the same under Zerubbabel in the post-exilic period.²⁸ Israel’s community will be consolidated and will strengthen and the rebuilding of the Temple will be a success because during the entire process God will be with them and His presence generates prosperity, peace, unity and love.

Conclusions

The second Temple was constructed after approximately four years of work (in the sixth year of king Darius-according to Ezra 6:14-15). It is unknown whether Haggai lived to see it finished but what is certain is that his message fulfilled its goal. His influence was paramount for the sons of Israel to start rebuilding the Temple of God (Ezra 6:16). The prophet managed to drag his compatriots from their apathy and desolation and to restore the hierarchical order of priorities showing them that God needs to be central in their priorities. Religious and political unity were thus restored according to the preexilic fashion where the king, the priests and the people shared a spiritual bond around the Temple of Jerusalem, where the peace of God dwelled (Haggai 2:9).

²⁸ R. A. Taylor, E. R. Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, p. 146.