

"THE DESIRE OF ALL NATIONS" IN HAGGAI 2:7: MESSIANIC OR NOT?

Herbert Wolf*

Anyone who studies the Book of Haggai in depth encounters some intriguing questions of interpretation. One of the most interesting and perplexing is the meaning of "the desire of all nations" mentioned in 2:7. Down through the years, some scholars have seen a messianic prediction in that expression. In more recent days, however, a decided swing away from a messianic interpretation has been in vogue. The problems in understanding the phrase are compounded by uncertainties relating to its contextual terms and by grammatical difficulties within verse 7 itself.¹

The second chapter of Haggai is an attempt to define the glory of the new temple, which the prophet has challenged the former exiles to build. Odious comparisons with Solomon's magnificent temple were sure to be made, and the people needed encouragement to proceed with the project. Haggai assures them that God will be with them to enable them to complete the temple. In 2:6-9 the prophet explains why the temple is worth rebuilding. God was fully able to provide the resources for construction, and he promised that the latter glory of the new building would be greater than the glory of Solomon's temple. Strengthened by that astounding prediction, the small Jewish community led by Zerubbabel dug in and finished the temple by 516 B.C.

Within this motivational section are found the words of verse 7: "I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come" (KJV) or "they will come with the wealth of all nations" (NASB). Beginning with the 1901 ASV, which rendered "desire" as "precious things," the major translations have abandoned the personal "desire" of the KJV for an impersonal idea. For example, JB translates "the treasures of all the nations shall flow in," close to the NEB's "the treasure of all nations shall come hither." The trend away from the messianic idea is clear, but it may not be altogether justified.

One argument in favor of understanding verse 7 in terms of "valuable things" is the reference to the shaking of the nations and of heaven and earth in verses 6 f. Verse 22 mentions the overthrow of kingdoms and their rulers, and both these sections allude to the exodus and the destruction of Egypt, which resulted in the acquisition of

*Herbert Wolf is associate professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College and author of a recent volume entitled *Haggai and Malachi: Rededication and Renewal* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976).

¹One who still sees a messianic element is C. Feinberg in C. F. Pfeiffer and E. F. Harrison, eds., *Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), p. 893.

valuable spoils by the former slaves. Isaiah 14:16 f. describes the king of Babylon as one who "shook kingdoms" and "overthrew ... cities." Ezekiel 31:16 says that the nations will quake at the downfall of Egypt. Clearly, the collapse of political powers as a result of the judgment of God is involved in such passages.

The writer of Hebrews 12:26 f. emphasizes the eschatological expression "yet once more" that introduces the judgment in Haggai 2:6. There is little doubt that the ultimate fulfillment awaits the second coming of Christ, because Joel 3:16 (4:16 Hebrew) connects the shaking of heaven and earth with God's rout of the nations that are attacking Jerusalem. Similarly, Isaiah 13:13 links the trembling of the world with the Day of the Lord (v. 9), using terms similar to those found in the Book of Revelation. It will be an awesome, climactic shaking.

Another passage that talks about the shaking of nations and the bringing of glory to God's house is Isaiah 60:1-9. Verse 5 reads: "Because the abundance of the sea will be turned to you, the wealth of the nations will come to you." The verb "will be turned" (niphal of *hāpak*) is the same as "I will overthrow" in Haggai 2:22, and Haggai's overthrowing of the throne of kingdoms is directly tied to "I am going to shake the heavens and the earth" of 2:21. In Isaiah 60:5 the "turning" or "overthrow" refers partially to the enrichment of Israel by the nations during the kingdom period. This enrichment is very likely in view in Haggai 2:6 f. also. The "sea" is parallel to "nations" in Isaiah 60:5, and the same correspondence holds in Haggai 2:6 f. Thus, after the cataclysmic shaking accompanying the Lord's judgment, the wealth of the nations will be "turned over" to Israel.

Yet one can hardly relegate all of this "shakeup" to the distant future, because Haggai 2:6 includes the expression "in a little while," words not found in Hebrews 12, where the Septuagint was followed. Passages like Jeremiah 51:33 strongly imply a near fulfillment within the foreseeable future. Jeremiah predicted that Babylon would be judged after the "little while" of some fifty years, and it may be that Haggai has reference to the fall of the Persian empire and the rise of Greece and Rome.

In the light of Isaiah 60:1-9, the near fulfillment may include reference to the financial help given to the temple project by King Darius. Ezra 6:8 f. presents the decree of the Persian king reinforcing the initial decree of Cyrus (6:3-5) to that effect. This "turnover" of resources to the Jews foreshadows the future contributions of Isaiah 60:5.

With this data as an introduction, we come to an examination of "desire" versus "treasures" or "wealth" in Haggai 2:7. One of the major points of controversy revolves around the plural verb "come" and the singular noun "desire" or "wealth." This lack of agreement between subject and predicate accounts for NASB's adverbial translation "they will come *with* the wealth" (italics mine). Several other options are open, however, for the singular noun could have a collective sense and thus govern a plural verb. Even more likely is a revocalization of the construct noun *hemdat* to *hāmûdôt*. The same consonants are involved, and this was

the rationale behind the Septuagint's plural rendering *ta eklekta*.

But even though the most probable reading is the plural form for both the noun and the verb, this in itself does not decide whether a personal element is involved. The singular and plural nouns are both used to refer to an individual. 1 Samuel 9:20 speaks about "the desire of Israel" being directed toward Saul, and Daniel 11:37 mentions "the desire of women," perhaps referring to the worship of the god Tammuz (Adonis), in whom women had found delight since Sumerian times. It is possible that 1 Samuel 9:20 means, "For whom is all that is desirable in Israel?" Yet the more subjective "desire of Israel" fits the context nicely. Saul was an impressive man to whom people were naturally drawn. Contrast the reaction to the suffering servant in Isaiah 53:2, whose appearance was not such "that we should be attracted to him." The verb here is *hāmad*.

The Daniel reference has also been interpreted in a different sense—not the "desire of women" but the "desire for women," perhaps meaning that the wicked king will be devoid of normal affection for the opposite sex. But the point of the text is that since he claims deity himself he will tolerate no other god, not even one desired by women.

Ezekiel 24:16 similarly uses "desire" (*maḥmūd*) in a personal way. God revealed to the prophet that the "desire" of his eyes would be taken from him. His wife died soon afterward as a sign that the temple in Jerusalem, the "desire" of the people's eyes, would soon be destroyed.

The plural noun *hāmūdôt* also has a clear personal reference the three times it is used to designate Daniel. Twice in chapter 10 (vv. 11 and 19) Daniel is called "man of high esteem" or "man of desirability/preciousness." In Daniel 9:23 the genitive construction is implicit when Gabriel says to Daniel, "You are highly esteemed" (*hāmūdôt 'attâ*). NEB renders the phrase as "you are a man greatly beloved," and JB translates: "You are a man specially chosen." An accompanying note in the last-named version explains that "the word signifies God's approval of Daniel." Whatever the translation, the plural construction in 9:23 refers indubitably to one individual.

Another possible use of this plural noun to describe a person occurs in Genesis 27:15, where Esau may deserve this appellation. The usual way of handling that verse is to translate *hāmūdôt* as "best" and have it modify "clothes": "Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her elder son, which were with her in the house." Literally, the adjectives are strung out in this pattern: "the clothes of Esau her son the older the desirable (best)." Hebrew requires that the appositional adjectives "her son" and "the older" follow the word "Esau," but it is unusual to have two modifiers of the nomen rectum (in this case, "Esau") followed by a modifier that goes back to the nomen regens (in this case, "clothes"). As far as I am aware, this would be unparalleled in Hebrew grammar. The rationale for linking "desirable" with "clothes" has been the plural form of "desirable," but the occurrences of the plural to refer to Daniel show that this is not necessary. It can modify Esau equally well.

If "best clothes" is intended, one wonders what Esau's valuable garments were doing in Rebekah's house and why she would select his

best clothes anyway. Jacob should have been given hunting clothes to match the activity of Esau and help deceive his father. Rebekah was in a hurry (v. 30) and probably used whatever clothes were available. Moreover, "desirable" does not modify "clothes" elsewhere, and in the nearest parallel to this adjectival usage (Dan. 9:23) it refers to a man. Under this interpretation, the translation of Genesis 27:15 should be "the garments of her son Esau, the favored (esteemed) older son." Esau was favored by his father, "selected" to receive the valuable "death-bed" blessing.

A word closely cognate to *hāmūdōt* also parallels its meaning in the plural. The expression *kullō mahāmaddīm*, "he is altogether lovely" or "wholly desirable" (Song of Sol. 5:16), clearly illustrates the same kind of reference to an individual.

While it is true that both the singular and plural forms of "desire" can refer to persons, it is equally evident that they can modify valuable possessions, especially silver and gold. Frequently the phrase "vessels of desirability" occurs, either *k*lē hēmdā* or *k*lē hāmūdōt*, referring to the valuable articles of the house of God or of a king. This term with the singular noun is found in 2 Chronicles 32:27 and 36:10, and in Daniel 11:8. With the plural noun, the idiom occurs in 2 Chronicles 20:25. These examples illustrate forcefully how interchangeable the terms are. Another related usage with the plural noun is "tasty food," the "bread of desirability" mentioned in Daniel 10:3.

To sum up, it is difficult to separate the personal from the material usages of these terms. Highly valued persons or possessions can be the point of reference. From the passages cited, it is evident that the exilic and post-exilic books use these words most frequently.

If a personal reference is possible for the "desire" of Haggai 2:7, one must still account for the plural verb. Normally when a plural noun specifies one person, a singular verb is employed. "Elohim," the generic noun for "God," is usually construed with a verb in the singular, but Genesis 35:7 is an exception. In the clause "because there God had revealed himself to him (Jacob)," both the verb and the noun are plural while at the same time referring to only one person. A second example occurs in Genesis 20:13, in Abraham's statement: "When God caused me to wander from my father's house...." Since he was speaking to a pagan king, some commentators feel that Abraham may have left the "God/gods" ambiguity on purpose.² I doubt that this was the patriarch's intention, but I think the plural verb in Haggai 2:7 does leave the way open for this kind of ambiguity. The interpreter is free to include both the personal "desire" and the material "treasures."

Parallel passages provide strong support for seeing the concept of "valuable treasures" in Haggai. In the previously-cited Isaiah 60:5, one reads that "the wealth of the nations will come to you." As in Haggai 2:7, "wealth" is singular and "will come" is plural, presenting an identical grammatical difficulty. Like the word "desire" or "preciousness,"

²But compare Joshua 24:19, where "holy God" employs a plural adjective in a monotheistic context.

"wealth" (*ḥayil*) in Isaiah 60:5 can also have a personal connotation, for it can mean "army, force." The common expression *gibbôr ḥayil*, "mighty man of valor," is close to the "man of desirability" in Daniel in both form and meaning. Yet the context favors "wealth" as the primary meaning, and Zechariah 14:14 describes "the wealth of all the nations" in terms of silver, gold and garments. In our Haggai passage, the very next verse (2:8) mentions silver and gold.

Why does Haggai fail to use the same term for "wealth" as Isaiah and Zechariah use, since the contexts are so similar? Probably he selected "treasure/desire" because it afforded the exact ambiguity he needed, while the other term for "wealth" (*ḥayil*) tended to exclude the personal reference. Ultimately it applies to the gathering of the treasures of the nations after the second coming of Christ and to "the glory and honor of the nations" brought into the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:26), but it can also refer to that "treasure" or "desire of nations," "the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight" (Mal. 3:1). Ever since Abraham's day, the world has awaited the One in whom "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). Though the nations may not have recognized him when he became incarnate, yet he is the only One who can fulfil their desire for peace on earth (Hag. 2:9). He is the light of the world, but the world in general did not receive him (Jn. 1:7-11).

This double meaning applied to "treasure" corresponds to the twofold use of "glory" in the same verse. "Glory" can signify equally well material splendor or the presence of God.³ Haggai 2:8 leans toward a material explanation, but verse 9 favors the personal aspect. When Christ entered the temple in the first century, the Lord's house was filled with glory as it had never been before. "The latter glory of this house" outstripped the former (v. 9). Strictly speaking, whenever God fills his house with glory in the Old Testament, a visible cloud signifying the presence of God enters the sanctuary (Ex. 40:34 f.; 1 Kgs. 8:10 f.; 2 Chr. 7:1 f.). Haggai 2:7 does not mention "the glory of the Lord" per se, but the only glory said to "fill the temple" in Scripture is the *shekinah* cloud itself. Isaiah 60:7 connects the wealth of the nations with the glorifying of God's house (see v. 13 also), though the "filling with glory" is not mentioned. The personal presence of God is necessary to fill the temple with glory.

When the child Jesus was brought to the temple by Mary and Joseph, the aged Simeon expressed his profound thanks to God for being permitted to see his salvation. He identified Jesus with "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Lk. 2:32 NIV).

If a messianic reference can be maintained for the words "desire" and "glory" in Haggai 2:7, it would tie in nicely with the prediction at the end of the Book. Verses 21-23 describe eschatological events of messianic proportions as kingdoms and nations are overthrown. Zerubbabel is named in connection with these great events, but it is not likely that he was considered to be the Messiah. As in 2:7, there is a

³Compare Genesis 31:1; 1 Chronicles 29:12; Psalm 26:8.

veiled reference to the Person of Christ. Governor Zerubbabel is given the messianic titles "my servant" and "chosen" (Isa. 42:1; 52:13) because this Jewish leader was a pledge or guarantee that the Davidic dynasty would some day produce the Messiah. He is compared with a signet ring to indicate that the curse against Jehoiachin, the cast-off signet ring of Jeremiah 22:24 (there referred to by his shorter name, Coniah), might be reversed so that the family of Jehoiachin might be reinstated. The promises made to David were indeed valid, and the appearance of Jehoiachin and Zerubbabel in the genealogy of Matthew 1 shows their link with the Christ, the light of the Gentiles, the "desire of all nations."