

○ **REVIEW OF TIM MEADOWCROFT, *HAGGAI. READINGS: A NEW BIBLICAL COMMENTARY***
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One might wonder how a commentary on a book of only two chapters could consume 259 pages. Indeed, most recent commentaries on Haggai have been part of a larger book. However, when Haggai is read as (almost) a part of Zechariah, the particular emphases of Haggai are easy to gloss over. This commentary by Tim Meadowcroft of the Bible College of New Zealand, having the luxury of treating Haggai on its own, reveals the book in its own right. The next time I teach these books, I will be using this commentary as my textbook for Haggai, and as a thorough yet accessible introduction to the process of reading.

The book begins with a methodological introduction of 40 pages, entitled 'Prolegomena: Reading Haggai as Scripture.' Meadowcroft notes that this introduction might be read after reading the commentary proper (p. 3, n. 8); this is an interesting suggestion. As I read the book beginning with this chapter then moving to the commentary, I read the commentary in light of the methodological considerations laid out in this introduction. The connections are not always made explicit, which led me to wonder how these detailed considerations may be found in the commentary proper. However, if the commentary were to be read first, followed by the methodological introduction, it might have the effect of elucidating what had already been read. Since a first reading can only be done once, I cannot test this hypothesis myself, but recommend other readers attempt this test, and so I will discuss this chapter later in this review.

The second chapter is entitled 'Introduction: Haggai and Haggai's Readers,' and is the introduction that readers would typically expect for a commentary. Meadowcroft seeks to set Haggai in its first context in order to bridge between that context and our context. As part of this bridging, he also looks at the reception history of Haggai. In line with most recent commentators, Meadowcroft sees the book as being set in 520 B.C.E., and thus in a period of Persian imperial stability. He does see the text of Haggai as written when Zerubbabel was still alive.

Meadowcroft makes an important contribution to the problem of the relationship of Zerubbabel and Joshua in Haggai and Zechariah 1–8. His solution is to not read Haggai and

Zechariah 1–8 as one unit (*contra* e.g., the Meyerses), but as closely linked. By introducing this separation, he is able to see Haggai as emphasizing Zerubbabel and Zechariah 1–8 as emphasizing Joshua. Read together, the two texts inform each other. Meadowcroft notes that, seeming paradoxically, Haggai is more concerned with purity issues than Zechariah 1–8 and Zechariah 1–8 is more inclusive of the nations than Haggai; this seems to be the opposite of what we might expect from an emphasis on the (Davidic) governor in Haggai and the priesthood in Zechariah 1–8.

Next examining the setting of Haggai in the canon, Meadowcroft sees the re-formation of the temple (as he notes, always described as a re-formation, not a new building) as linked with the re-formation of the people of God. The figure of Haggai, described as ‘the prophet Haggai,’ and once as ‘the messenger of Yhwh’ (1:13), shows a new understanding of prophet as an actual intermediary rather than a conduit for Yhwh’s word; this intermediary becomes a divine figure in books such as Daniel. [E. Conrad’s commentary on Zechariah for this series sees the figure of Haggai as the messenger who talks with Zechariah in the book of Zechariah.]

The commentary proper is without footnotes, as dictated by the format of the series. Meadowcroft divides the book into six oracles: 1:1–2, 1:3–12, 1:13–15a, 1:15b–2:9, 2:10–19, 2:20–23. He has made these divisions based on discourse analysis (formulae of speech), rather than dividing the book as is usual into five oracles based on form-critical formulae of dates and distinctions between oracle and narrative. Three helpful appendices lay out the discourse analyses, the form critical divisions, and the dating details. He reads the book as a narrative, with a plot, rather than a collection of oracles. As such, he is able to see a progression of the oracles, building one upon the other; each successive oracle addresses concerns brought up by the preceding oracles and poses new questions. He argues that the narrative of the book is structured around the reception of the word of Yhwh *by Haggai* (not by an audience). Each oracle begins with the reception formula, followed by Yhwh’s command to Haggai to speak, then by Haggai’s speech; the oracle often, though now always, concludes with the response of Haggai’s addressees.

The first oracle introduces all the main characters of the narrative: Darius, Zerubbabel, Joshua, Haggai, Yhwh (of hosts), and the people. Once these characters have been introduced, the second oracle begins the unfolding of the plot of restoration. The third oracle asserts the covenantal aspect of the restoration. The fourth oracle begins a new section of the narrative, which gives the details of the significance of the work initiated and done in the first half of the narrative. Haggai now speaks directly, not acting as a recipient/conduit of Yhwh’s word. The restored temple will be filled with *kabod* (glory, treasure), not because of the people rebuilding the temple, but because of Yhwh’s own actions. The fifth oracle, while seemingly incongruent with the rest of the narrative, deals with the important issues of purity; as Meadowcroft notes, it would have been surprising if purity issues were not part of the discussion of the temple (p. 117). Haggai’s questions to the priest mark his full participation for the first time in the narrative.

The final oracle is a conclusion to the narrative by shifting to focus on Zerubbabel. While it seems to be discontinuous, Meadowcroft argues that it is the ‘refinement of the balance between the eschatological and the temporal,’ and brings in the monarch as the ‘natural companion’ to the temple that has been the main focus of the book (p. 198). Through the narrative, there has been a gradual integration of ‘the people’ into the audience, and Meadowcroft argues that just as the temple is not an end to itself, but rather the symbol by which the people know and are blessed by Yhwh, so Zerubbabel is not an end in himself, but is a symbol by which the people

know Yhwh. There is a re-working of monarchic ideology for the new status as a Persian province. Meadowcroft argues that while the oracles of the narrative may have broader significance (i.e., be eschatological), they may also be indicators of Yhwh's present work. Therefore, Zerubbabel's leadership is an indicator of Yhwh's work in the present as a further step in the process of restoration.

I return now to the methodological introduction. Meadowcroft sees reading as beginning with Schleiermacher's hermeneutical circle: the whole with its parts, and the parts with its whole. Using textual detail and the effect of the text on the reader, he sees tension between authorial intentionality and reader's response, 'objective' and 'subjective' interpretations, interpretation and use, interpretation and critique, and so on, all as expressing a conversation between author and reader. He chooses what the reader brings as his entry into the hermeneutical circle.

Meadowcroft goes on to use narratological, rhetorical and discourse analysis methods of reading, with a focus on the artistry of the received text. However, he sees an ethical issue: a text comes out of a context 'with an intention to communicate' (p. 14), and that intention must be taken seriously. He uses speech-act theory (although without mentioning Austin or Searle) to see communication as locution rather than as code (Jakobson's model, although he does not so name it). He then adds relevance theory from pragmatic linguistics, which is a combination of the code model with the speech-act model: the reader 'takes account of his or her own context, understands the speaker's context, assumes that the speaker is taking account of the hearer's context, and in light of all that is aware of what a speaker means by a particular statement' (p. 21). Thus the responsibilities of the reader and the limits of interpretation are upheld.

Next moving to a discussion of scripture and authority, Meadowcroft notes that he reads Haggai as scripture 'through which [he] expect[s] to hear God speak' (p. 29). Divine discourse is the intent of the Bible, but that does not mean it cannot be critically examined; he refuses either absoluteness of Scripture or absolute readerly privilege of an indeterminate text. What I found interesting was while he carefully situated himself as a Christian reader in the 21st century, he placed less focus on what his spatial context as a New Zealander might bring to his reading. His contextualizing of 21st century readers is discussed further in his conclusion to the commentary – an unusual feature – entitled 'The Contemporary Relevance of Haggai.' After summarizing the main points of the commentary, he goes on to discuss how his reading helps him discern God's voice in his own life and world. The methodological prolegomena finds its most natural expression in this conclusion.