The Meaning of 'Great Mountain' in Zechariah 4:7[1]

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ABSTRACT
The book of Zechariah contains a large amount of visionary material and oracles. Sometimes it is difficult to interpret the different metaphors and symbols used in this material. In most instances these symbols are not explained in the Hebrew text. One of these difficult symbols is the reference to לודגהרה *(great mountain) in Zechariah 4:7. The question posed by this article is: what is the real meaning of these words? Scholars have offered different hypotheses to answer this question. The 'mountain' was interpreted inter alia as a fictional mountain; Mount Gerizim; opposite powers or world empires; a specific person or group of persons; and a heap of rubble at the temple site. This article evaluates the different hypotheses and suggests a possible interpretation, namely that it must be understood in a holistic and open-ended way, referring to a 'mountain' of problems or adversity that could range from a heap of temple rubble to hostile powers.*

A   INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The book of Zechariah contains a large amount of visionary material and oracles. Sometimes it is difficult to interpret the different metaphors and symbols used in this material. In most instances these symbols or metaphors are not explained in the Hebrew text. One of these difficult symbols is the reference to לודגהרה in Zechariah 4:7. The question posed by this article is: What is the real meaning of these words? We know that there is no easy answer to this question. A scholar like Sellin has three different hypotheses in three different publications (cf. Sellin 1930, 1931, 1942/3). There is no consensus among scholars. The different hypotheses range from a literal understanding to a metaphorical understanding.

The article will be structured as follows: we shall briefly investigate the literary structure of Zechariah 4 (section B). Then a summary of all the different hypotheses will be presented (section C) and evaluated (section D). Finally a possible suggestion will be proposed in the light of a translation and different contexts (section E).

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[1]   A shortened version of this article was delivered as a paper at the SBL International Meeting in Auckland, New Zealand (July 6-11, 2008).

B   LITERARY STRUCTURE OF ZECHARIAH 4

In chapter 4 the interpreting angel or messenger, missing from 3:1-10, reappears and wakens Zechariah. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the offices of royalty and the high priest. In the centre of chapter 3 stands the spiritual office of the high priest Joshua and in the centre of the fourth chapter stands the governor Zerubbabel, the builder of the second temple (Hanhart 1998:254).

Most scholars[2] argue that the original vision consisted of Zechariah 4:1-5 or 6a and 10b-14 (Delkurt; Petersen, Redditt, Reventlow; Rudolph, Willi-Plein; et al.). Two separate oracles addressed to Zerubbabel (6b-7 and 8-10a) were inserted into the original vision (Floyd 2000:380-381; Willi-Plein 2002:61). A redactor, possibly Zechariah himself, added these parts. According to Redditt (1995:67, 71) the redactor applied the vision of the lamp stand to the rebuilding of the temple. The original version depicted bounty in the presence of YHWH, and the new version tied the bounty to the reconstruction of the temple under Zerubbabel. Delkurt (2000:197) also believes that verse 12 has a secondary character, perhaps a redactional insertion.

The two oracles were worked into the vision in two different ways. The first one (vv. 6b-7) was incorporated into the angel's reply to the prophet's first question concerning the significance of the scene. This oracle stresses the divine power by which all opposition to the rebuilding of the temple will be removed and the rejoicing which will come at its completion. The second oracle (vv. 8-10a) is introduced so as to interrupt the angel's explanation altogether. The narrator abandons the report of the vision and addresses the audience directly with a non-visionary revelation. This oracle promises success to Zerubbabel (Smith 1984:204; Floyd 2000:381).

Scholars differ over the detailed structure of this chapter.[3] A possible division of chapter 4 may be as follows:

1.	Introduction and description of vision	1-3
2.	Prophet's need of an explanation	4-6a
	Oracular insertion: Zerubbabel and the temple	6b-10a
	• Not by power but through God's Spirit	6b-7
	• The completion of the temple by Zerubbabel	8-10a
3.	Explanation of the seven eyes	10b
4.	Explanation of the two olive trees	11-14

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[2]   Floyd (1999:378-380) argues for the literary unity of this chapter.

[3]   1-6a; 6b-7; 8-10a; 10b-14 (Petersen 1985:214-244; Meyers & Meyers 1987:227; Reventlow 1993:56-63); 1-3; 4-6a and 10b; 11 and 13-14 (Delkurt 2000:197-198); 4:1-5; 10b-14; 6-7; 8-10a (Willi-Plein 2002:61-69).

The reference to הַר־הַגָּדֹל (v. 7a) is part of the oracular insertion that stretches from verse 6b to verse 10a. Although we can divide this section into two different oracles, we must also acknowledge the relationship between them. Both of these oracles are concerned with Zerubbabel and the temple building process.

C   הַר־הַגָּדֹל: SUMMARY OF DIFFERENT HYPOTHESES

The reassurance in verse 6b is followed by a strange question in verse 7: 'What/who are you, O great mountain?' There is a lack of scholarly consensus in identifying the mountain. The following is a summary of the different hypotheses which will be evaluated in the next section:

1   Hypotheses that interpret הַר־הַגָּדֹל as reference to a mythological or literal mountain

- Fictional mountain (Robinson & Horst 1938:226).
- Heavenly mountain with two peaks (Sellin 1931:247-248).
- Any mountain that competes with the glory of Zion (Van der Woude 1984:88; 1988:237-248).
- The mountain Gerizim as a threat of idolatry from Samaria (Andinach 2001:1380).[4]

2   Hypotheses that interpret the mountain as opposite powers or world empires

- Persian empire (Sellin 1942/43:70; Rost 1951:216-221).
- Apocalyptic hostile powers (Bic 1962:61-62).
- Babylonian Empire (Rignell 1950:155-156).

3   Hypotheses that interpret the mountain as a specific person or group of persons

- Rival political officials rather than practical ones caused by the state of the temple site (Clark & Hatton 2002:139).
- The high priest Joshua (Petersen 1985:239-240).
- Tattenai[5] the regional administrator or governor from Samaria who attempted to block the temple construction (Petersen 1985:239-240; Deissler 1988:281-282[6]).
- Opposition of the Samaritan authorities (Elliger 1959:126).
- Adversaries of Judah and Benjamin (Ezra 4:1-16),[7] or discouraged group who despised the day of small things (Hag 2:3; Zech 4:10),

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[4]   Andinach (2001:1380) mentions that 'great mountain' may also refer to the rubble of the temple.

[5]   Rudolph (1976:113) also sees Tattenai as a possibility.

[6]   Deissler (1988:281) also refers to the difficulties Zerubbabel experienced.

or deep schism within the community concerning the rebuilding of the temple (cf. Zech 8:10) (Smith 1984:206).

4   Hypotheses that interpret the mountain in connection with the temple building process

- Literal heap, pile or mountain of rubble on the temple site or temple ruins (Sellin 1930:503; Galling 1961:84; 1964:141; Meyers & Meyers 1987:270; Brown 1996:150; Ollenberger 1996:770; Boda 2004:276; Sweeney 2000:608; Bruehler 2001:435; O'Brein 2004:194; Curtis 2006:138).
- Mountain of stones which were to be used for the building project (Stuhlmueller 1988:87).
- The temple area to the north of the city that was higher than the rest of the city (Willi-Plein 2002:64, 68).[8]

5   Hypotheses that intrepret the mountain as unidentified difficulties or opposition

- Metaphor of all the difficulties, obstacles or opposition Zerubbabel will face in the rebuilding of the temple (cf. Isa 40:3-4) (Jones 1962:77; Rudolph 1976:113; Kodell 1982:76; Graigie 1985:177; Reventlow 1993:61; Redditt 1995:69; Merril 2003:143; Phillips 2007:101).

6   Holistic or multi-faceted hypotheses

- The 'great mountain' is not to be limited to the mounds of rubble that impeded building. It also refers to the mountains of opposition to the work both practical and personal (Baldwin 1981:121).
- Laato (1994:66) argues that it concretely refers to the ruins of the old temple which had to be cleared away before the foundation ritual could be performed, but it also contains references to opposition to the building project.
- Conrad (1999:106) believes that the imagery can be taken in two ways (heap of rubble and mountain of problems) but these need not be exclusive of each other.

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[7]   Achtemeier (1986:126) refers to Ezra 4:2, 24, but does not specifically mention the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin. However, the text of Ezra 4 makes it clear that the adversaries approached Zerubbabel (vv. 1-2).

[8]   Willi-Plein (2002:64) translates it into 'Berg des Grossen'. According to Willi-Plein the phrase 'you shall become a plain' does not refer to the carrying away of the 'mountain' or ruins but to the creation or rebuilding of the temple and all its structures.

D   EVALUATION OF DIFFERENT HYPOTHESES

In section C we have merely mentioned the different hypotheses. In this section we shall evaluate the suggestions made in C:1-4. The last two groups (C:5-6) will form part of the author's own viewpoint.

1   Mythological or other mountain

The immediate literary context of Zechariah 4:7 does not refer to any fictional, mythological or heavenly mountain. Sellin (1931:248) refers to two verses in Zechariah supporting his hypothesis, namely 1:8 and 6:1. The exact meaning of the hapax legomenon ḥlxm in Zechariah 1:8 is very difficult to determine and interpreters have suggested the following translations: deep/cosmic water; valley; glen; deep rift; deep shadows (cf. Smith 1984:188; Petersen 1985:137; Meyers en Meyers 1987:110; Sweeney 2000:576-577). One thing we know, is that the Hebrew text does not use the word rh in 1:8; therefore this verse cannot be used to support the heavenly mountain hypothesis. Zechariah 6:1 may speak of a mythological or heavenly mountain, but it specifically refers to two bronze mountains. There is no direct comparison between the two bronze mountains in 6:1 and the 'great mountain' in 4:7. Finally, one can say that it is difficult to accept one of the above-mentioned hypotheses since no modern scholar supports this viewpoint.

Two other viewpoints in this category need to be evaluated. According to Van der Woude (1988:240), Zechariah 4:7 refers to a general statement that no mountain, however great and impressive, can ultimately venture to compete with Mount Zion. It is true that according to the Hebrew Bible Mount Zion is the ultimate mountain, the cosmological and theological centre of the world. However, Van der Woude grounds his hypothesis in a specific translation of the text, a translation that is uncertain and not accepted by other scholars. Andinach's proposal (2001:1380) of Mount Gerizim cannot be accepted. There was conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans, but there are no clues in the text that lead us to this hypothesis. The name Mount Gerizim is mentioned four times in the Hebrew Bible (Deut 11:29; 27:12; Josh 8:33; Judg 9:7), none of which refers to the post-exilic context of the book Zechariah. According to the Hebrew Bible the real threat was not the idolatry from the Samaritans or Mount Gerizim.

2   Opposite powers or world empires

The hypothesis that 'great mountain' refers to the destroying mountain of the Babylonian world power cannot be accepted.[9] The Hebrew text refers to the

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[9]   It is true that Jer 51:24-25 refers to Babylon as the destroying mountain (cf. Phillips 2007:101), but one cannot say that Zech 4:7 also refers to Babylon.

fact that the great mountain will become a plain before Zerubbabel. Babylon's power was taken away by the Persian empire, not by Zerubbabel.

The Persian empire could not be the adversary because king Cyrus gave permission for Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple. The Persian empire was not viewed as a hurdle or stumbling block during the time of Zerubbabel (cf. Rudolph 1976:113).

The hypothesis of apocalyptic hostile powers is ruled out by the reference to the role of Zerubbabel and the stone in the immediate literary context. The name of a specific historical person that lived in the time of Darius would not be mentioned if it referred to apocalyptic hostile powers.

3   Specific person or group of persons

The translation of the Hebrew words htaÅym may provide a clue in connection with the understanding of the 'great mountain'. Some translations[10] and commentators translate it into 'what are you' (JB; NASB; NIV;[11] NRSV[12]). The actual meaning of the interrogative ym is 'who' or 'whoever' together with the second person masculine singular pronoun (cf. Afrikaans Nuwe Lewende Vertaling; Afrikaans 1933/53 Vertaling; KJV; NJPS; Smith 1984:203; Meyers & Meyers 1987:228; Conrad 1999:106; Clark & Hatton 2002:139). The use of the word 'who' can mean two things: (1) We have to think about a person and not an object like the rubble of the temple or a stone; (2) This emphasises that the mountain is figurative.

On grammatical grounds we must say that the hypothesis of a person or group of persons cannot be ignored. One problem with this hypothesis is that verse 4b speaks about an object ('top stone' or 'foundational stone') and not a person. This reference to an object in the immediate literary context does not have to be problematic. If the person (e.g. a political opponent) is out of the way and levelled like a plain, everything would be in place to celebrate the refounding of the temple.

There are at least two specific persons suggested by scholars namely Joshua and Tattenai. We shall therefore focus our discussion on them.

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[10]   Some of the modern English translations or paraphrases try to avoid the use of either the word 'what' or 'who' (cf. Afrikaans 1983 Translation; CEV; NEB; NLT; TEV).

[11]   The NIV uses 'what' in the main text, but mentions in a footnote that it can also be translated as 'who'.

[12]   It is interesting to note that the NRSV translate ym into 'whoever' in verse 4 and hm into 'what' in verses 2, 4, 5, 11, 12 and 13. Verse 7 is the only translation that does not comply with the regular use of these two interrogatives.

a   Joshua

Petersen (1985:239) says the following: 'The most obvious figure is Joshua, the high priest, who is here being warned to leave matters of reconstruction to the royal house.'[13] Petersen (1985:239-240) argues that the Hebrew words lwdghArh (great mountain) form a deft play on lwdgh ÷hkh (high priest). Two questions may be posed: Is it so obvious that Joshua is the man? Does the Bible portray conflict between Joshua and Zerubbabel? Some scholars have referred to the conflict between different groups within the post-exilic community (cf. Hanson 1979:241-248; 260-262; Kessler 2001:138-142). Most of the returnees were strongly Yahwist and seemed to follow the nationalist and exclusivist theology of Deuteronomy. This meant that anyone considered impure by the strict Yahwists could only take part in the Jerusalem cult after they had 'separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land to worship the Lord the God of Israel' (Ezra 6:21). The vision of Zechariah in chapter 3 suggests that even the high priest Joshua falls short of this strict Yahwism. Miller and Hayes (1986:459) believe that the strict Yahwists were led by Zerubbabel and the less strict Yahwists were represented by Joshua. Therefore the work on the temple could not proceed until a compromise between these two groups and their leaders had produced a 'peaceful understanding' and cooperation (Zech 6:13). These tensions may explain Zerubbabel's disappearance from the scene.

We accept that there was some conflict in the community during the time of Haggai and Zechariah. However, the biblical text does not provide us with direct evidence of conflict between Joshua and Zerubbabel. There are hints in the Hebrew Bible (Hag, Zech and Ezra) that suppose a balance of leadership (equal status) and a harmonious relationship, especially the vision in Zechariah 4 and Zechariah 6:13 (Laato 1994:65; Brown 1996:152; Tollington 1993:175-176; O'Kennedy 2003:384-385).[14] Lastly, one can say that the prophets Haggai and Zerubbabel would not advocate a diarchic model of leadership if there were major conflict between these leaders. Two leaders with conflicting viewpoints would not be the best for the rebuilding of the temple and nation.

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[13]   Petersen (1985:240) later acknowledges that the identification of the adversary as the high priest is tentative and mentions Tattenai as another possibility.

[14]   Bartlett (1994:225-226) supports the viewpoint that Zech 4:14 and 6:12-13 refer to the equal position of Joshua and Zerubbabel (cf. also Jer 33:20-22; Hag 1:1; 2:2). He, however, mentions that there are also other viewpoints in Haggai and Zechariah. In Zech 3 and 6:9-11, 14 Joshua is portrayed as the prominent leader while Hag 2:20-23 and Zech 4:6-10 refer to the important role of Zerubbabel. We accept the fact that some conflict between these two leaders was possible, but according to the Biblical text one cannot say that Joshua was the 'great mountain'.

b   Tattenai

The province of Judah or Yehud came under the authority of the Persian satrapy Ebir Nari ('Beyond the river') and Tattenai was the regional administrator or governor. At the beginning of Darius' reign, Governor Tattenai, accompanied by his chancellery and court, made a tour of inspection of Jerusalem. They found the Jews busy rebuilding the temple of YHWH. According to Ezra 5:3-17 Tattenai attempted to block the temple construction and wrote a letter to king Darius (Deissler 1988:281-282; Briant 2002:488). It may be true that Tattenai was a stumbling block or 'mountain' in the beginning, but after the decree of Darius (cf. Ezra 6:6-12) it is reported that Tattenai respected Darius' decree: 'Then, according to the word sent by King Darius, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what King Darius had ordered'[15] (Ezra 6:13). There are only four references to Tattenai in Ezra and no reference to him in Zechariah or any other book of the Hebrew Bible. If Tattenai was the 'great mountain' that had to be levelled, one should expect that his name would at least occur in the book of Zechariah.

c   Other opposition groups

Besides Joshua and Tattenai scholars have also suggested other opposing groups like the Samaritan authorities (Elliger 1959:126) or adversaries of Judah and Benjamin (Smith 1984:206) or another discouraged group who despised the day of small things (Hag 2:3; Zech 4:10) (Smith 1984:204). Passages in Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Zechariah refer to conflict in the post-exilic community (cf. Ezra 4:1-16; Neh 4:1-23; 6:1-14; Zech 8:10) but there are no compelling arguments that 'great mountain' refers to one specific group. The post-exilic texts of the Hebrew Bible reflect a position in which Zerubbabel had to contend both externally with opposition from the surrounding authorities (e.g. Ezra 4-5) and internally with a lack of motivation on the part of the returned exiles (e.g. Hag 1:1-15a) (Floyd 2000:381-382).

4   Hypotheses that interpret the mountain in connection with the temple

A large group of scholars believe that 'great mountain' refers to a literal heap, pile or mountain of rubble on the temple site or temple ruins (cf. C5). According to O'Brein (2004:194) positing a symbolic meaning of the verse is unnecessary, since it may serve as a hyperbole. This understanding corresponds well with the statement that the mountain will become a plain. The pile of building stones will be gradually reduced to a level plain as the work progresses. Once the mountain of rubble was cleared, the foundation laying began with the royal figure laying the first stone of the new foundation. The immediate literary con-

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[15]   Quotations are taken from the NRSV unless mentioned otherwise.

text may support this hypothesis. The oracle describes Zerubbabel's perfor-mance of a ritual act celebrating the temple's re-founding and the reference to the hvarhA÷bah in the same verse (cf. Floyd 2000:381; Sweeney 2000:608; Laato 1994:53-69; Merril 2003:143; Boda 2004:276).

E   A POSSIBLE SUGGESTION

1   The translation of Zech 4:7

In the light of the Hebrew text of Zech 4:7 one may pose the following three questions: (i) How does one translate the words htaAym? (ii) Are the words lwdghArh grammatically correct or must we accept another reading? (iii) Is verse 7a a question or a statement?

We have already said that the Hebrew words htaAym create a problem for translators (cf. D3). Some translate it into 'what are you' and others into 'who are you'. A few recent translations avoid the use of the words 'who' or 'what'. At least one translation (NIV) mentions in a footnote that both words could be used. The Hebrew word ym is usually translated into 'who' but the immediate literary context leads us to think of an object as well (i.e. 'what are you'). It is therefore possible to use both words (who or what) in a translation.

On grammatical grounds we find it difficult to translate the Hebrew words lwdghArh into 'great mountain'. We have a determinate adjective (lwdgh) together with an indeterminate noun (rh). Both words should rather be inde-terminate or in direct speech both words could be determinate. According to Willi-Plein (2002:67) the words must be translated as a construct relationship, that is 'Der/du Berg des Grossen' (the mountain of greatness). The text-critical apparatus of BHS acknowledges the grammatical problem and suggests that one should read rhh ta instead of rh hta. If one accepts the text-critical sug-gestion we may therefore translate it into 'great mountain'. The Septuagint supports this suggestion by using the words to; o[ro" to; mega. Van der Woude (1988:240) and Bartlett (1994:207) believe that we can retain the current He-brew text and state that perhaps the article before rh is lacking for euphonic reasons[16] (cf. Ps 104:18).

If we accept the translation 'mountain of greatness', how do we understand the meaning of these words? Willi-Plein (2002:67-68) argues that we find the same construct relationship in the name 'Mount Sinai'. She therefore believes that 'mountain of greatness' refers to the real temple area that is situated north of the pre-exilic city and lies higher. After the Babylonian destruction this site would have been in a terrible condition. Through the work of Zerubbabel this

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[16]   In Ps 104:18 the definite article is also missing in the reference to 'high moun-tains' (μyhbgh μyrh). The text-critical apparatus of BHS reckons that it was left out in Ps 104 because of haplography.

will become a plain. Willi-Plein reckons that verse 7b does not refer to the carrying away of the 'great stones/rubble', but refers to the creation of the foundation upon which the temple and courtyard could be built. This same action occurred at the building of the Solomonic temple as well as the temple of Herod. Willi-Plein's translation makes sense on grammatical grounds if one does not want to change the text. However, her explanation of the mountain of greatness that will become like a plain creates more questions than answers. One should rather think that the text would refer to the 'mountain of greatness' that will be lifted or exalted and not levelled. We can either accept a minor alteration in the Hebrew text or try to change the whole understanding of the literary and socio-historical (or geographical / archaeological) context. I would rather choose the first option (or the 'euphonic' option presented by Van der Woude) and accept the text critical suggestion of BHS supported by the LXX.

Finally, one may ask whether Zechariah 4:7 is a statement or question. Van der Woude (1988:240) believes that fresh light is thrown on the words lwdghArh htaAym by the Phoenician inscription KAI 13 and translates Zechariah 4:7a into 'Whatever you are, great mountain, in the eyes of Zerubbabel (you shall be) like a plain.' According to Van der Woude this verse can be understood as a general statement that no mountain, how great or impressive it may be, can ultimately compete with Zion. The New JPS Translation differs from Van der Woude's specific viewpoint, but also prefers a statement instead of a question: 'Whoever you are, O great mountain in the path of Zerubbabel, turn into level ground!' Some of the other translations or paraphrases (CEV; NLT; TEV) translate verse 7a as a statement,[17] but their intention is to interpret the Hebrew text so that it is more accessible for modern readers. Their aim is not to deal with intricate grammatical issues or to present a more 'literal' translation. One must acknowledge that the Hebrew word ym may be used as an indefinite pronoun (cf. Ex 32:33; Judg 7:3) (Van der Merwe, Naude & Kroeze 1997:211). However, the Hebrew word ym placed in the beginning of a sentence is commonly used as an interrogative and there are no compelling reasons to change this in verse 7. Zechariah 4 describes a conversation between the interpreting angel and the prophet. Questions are an integral part of the whole chapter.

In the light of the above discussion a possible translation for Zechariah 4:7a is: 'Who or what are you, great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain.'

2   Evidence from the immediate literary context

We have already discussed the statement by Petersen (1985:239-240) that the Hebrew words lwdghArh (great mountain) forms a deft play on lwdgh ÷hkh (the

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[17]   'Zerubbabel, that mountain in front of you will be leveled to the ground' (CEV); 'Nothing, not even mighty mountain, will stand in Zerubbabel's way.' (NLT); 'Obstacles as great as mountains will disappear before you' (TEV).

high priest). The question remains: Can one accept this hypothesis? Do we have other evidence from the immediate literary context?

According to Petersen (1984:240) the imagery in verse 7 is that of contrast: Zerubbabel, the mountain, versus someone else, the plain. The text refers to the clash of different powers. The power of the 'great mountain' on the one side with the power of YHWH and his spirit on the other side. If we take this as a clue we must accept that 'great mountain' refers to a specific power or powers.

The vision described in Zechariah 4 deals with the role of Zerubbabel in the rebuilding of the temple. Several symbols and metaphors are used to emphasize this: golden lamp stand; bowl; ‏האבן הראשה‎ *bahĀta* (top stone or foundation stone);[18] tin stone, tin plate or plummet.[19]

Smith (1984:206) reckons that Zechariah 4:10 may help us in identifying the 'mountain of opposition'. According to him the opposition might have been the discouraged group who 'has despised the day of small things'. Who are these people? Scholars have the following viewpoints: (a) These people may be those who wept at the re-founding of the temple, remembering the glory of the former temple not matched by this new building (cf. Ezra 3:12; Hag 2:3) (Bruehler 2001:439); (b) The individuals mentioned here are those who found it difficult to accept the suitability of the temple site or the legitimacy of Zerubbabel (Meyers & Meyers 1987:251-252).

We can conclude that the immediate literary context refers to both the physical temple building process as well as people who were against the process. At the end these people experienced grace (v. 7) and joy (v. 10).

3   Evidence from Ancient Near Eastern texts

The specific context of Zechariah 4:7 suggests a temple-building process. We must therefore learn from the temple building procedures in the Ancient Near East. Laato (1994:53-69) studied the Akkadian royal building inscriptions and emphasized the fact that when a temple was restored, reference is usually made to the levelling of the site down to the foundation of previous temples. It was

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[18]   The hapax legomenon ‏האבן הראשה‎ *bahĀta* is difficult to translate. Viewpoints differ from topstone/capstone (Smith 1984:203; Stuhlmueller 1988:87; Merril 1994:161) to premier stone or foundation stone (Petersen 1985:240-241; Meyers & Meyers 1987:246-249; Laato 1994:62-65; Boda 2004:277).

[19]   The literal translation of ‏אבן הבדיל‎ *bah* is 'stone of tin'. Boda (2004:277) writes the following: 'This stone of tin likely refers to a building deposit incorporated into the foundation, probably when the foundation was completed'. The translation of plummet is a strong possibility and supported by the LXX. Curtis (2006:139) believes it makes little sense to translate it as 'plummet' because an object of a lightweight metal like tin cannot be used as a plummet.

often stressed that the kings had to search for the foundation deposit in order to build the new temple on the same spot. The older foundation deposit symbolizes the continuity between the older and the new temple.

Texts from the Ancient Near East also refer to a close relationship between mountain and temple. The temple is seen as the architectural embodiment of the cosmic mountain. One good example of this is the hymn to Ekur: 'The great house, it is a mountain great / The house of Enlil, it is a mountain great / The house of Ninlil, it is a mountain great' (Pritchard 1969:582). From the time of Sargon II onwards the cult room of Assur in the temple of Assur was called 'House of the great mountain of the land'. This perception is also found in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Ps 48:2; Isa 2:2). Lundquist (1983:207) believes that these conceptions of Zion as holy mountain go back to the holy Sinai mountain and its heavenly temple.

Ancient texts can also help us with the translation of specific words. Van der Woude (1988:240) argues that fresh light is thrown on the Hebrew words lwdghArh htaAym by Phoenician inscription KAI 13, line 2 which runs as follows: *my 't kl 'dm 's tpq 'yt 'rn z* ('Whoever you are, each man, who shall open this sarcophagus'). In the light of this inscription Van der Woude translates the Hebrew of Zechariah 4:7 into 'Whatever you are, great mountain, in the eyes of Zerubbabel you shall be like a plain.'

Information from the Ancient Near East helps us to a better understanding of the broad relationship between mountain and temple, and the detail of the temple building process. Unfortunately it still leaves us with a few questions concerning the exact meaning of 'great mountain' in the specific historical context of Zechariah 4:7.

4   lwdghArh **in canonical perspective**

a   **Use in Zechariah and Book of the Twelve**

Besides Zechariah 4:7 there are only three other references to mountain or mountains in the book of Zechariah: 'And again I looked up and saw four chariots coming out from between two mountains — mountains of bronze.' (Zech 6:1); 'Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts shall be called the holy mountain' (Zech 8:3); 'And you shall flee by the valley of the LORD's mountain, for the valley between the mountains shall reach to Azal; and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of King Uzziah of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him'. (Zech 14:5). Two of these verses refer to

Mount Zion in Jerusalem (Zech 8:3; 14:5) and Zechariah 6:1 speaks about the mythological bronze mountains.[20]

Besides the references in Zechariah one finds the following references to mountain/s in the Book of the Twelve: (1) Eight references to mountain (Joel 2:1; 3:17; Ob 16; Micah 3:12; 4:1, 2; 7:12; Zeph 3:11); (2) Seventeen references to the plural form 'mountains' (Hos 4:13; 10:8; Joel 2:2, 5; 3:18; Am 4:13; 9:13; Jon 2:6; Micah 1:4; 4:1; 6:1, 2; Nah 1:5, 15; 3:18; Hab 3:6, 10). Of the eight references to 'mountain' seven refer to Mount Zion as the holy mountain or temple mountain (only Micah 7:12 is excluded). None of the plural form instances ('mountains') refers to Mount Zion. It is interesting to note that none of these singular and plural references belong to the post-exilic prophets of Haggai and Malachi.

Lastly, one must acknowledge that none of the references in Zechariah or the Book of the Twelve provides us with information regarding the identity of 'great mountain'. The word 'mountain' is never used as a metaphor or symbol in these biblical books.

b   Use in the rest of the Hebrew Bible[21]

Unlike the Book of the Twelve, mountain as a metaphor for opposition or resistance is common in the classical prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, especially when it is overcome and reduced to a valley or plain (cf. Isa 40:4; 41:15; 42:15; 64:1, 3; Jer 4:24; 51:25-26) (Merril 2003:170). There is a similarity between the language of Zechariah 4:7 and that of Isaiah 40:4 ('Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain'). Both passages speak about the mountain that will become level like a plain (Smith 1984:206).

There are several references to mountain or mountains in the Hebrew Bible, but besides Zechariah 4:7 only one verse that refers to 'great mountain'.[22] In Daniel 2:35 one reads the following:

> 'Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, were all broken in pieces and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them

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[20]   In ancient Mesopotamia the sun-god Shamash was depicted as rising between two mountains. Zech 6:1 differs from this viewpoint because four chariots emerged from the mountains instead of God (Redditt 1995:75).

[21]   This article focuses on the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. However, the canonical perspective can include the New Testament. The idea of moving mountains of opposition is prominent in the New Testament (Matt 17:20; 21:21-22; Mark 11:22-23; Luke 17:6; 1 Cor 13:2) (Smith 1984:206).

[22]   In Dan 2:35 we have the Aramaic words br rwfl that can be translated into 'great mountain'.

> could be found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.'

Unfortunately Daniel 2:35 does not refer to the temple or Mount Zion or to a metaphor of opposition. It speaks about the dream of king Nebuchadnezzar of the huge statue that was broken in pieces.

Evidence from the rest of the Hebrew Bible (especially the prophetic books) confirms that we can understand 'mountain' as a metaphor for opposition.

5   A holistic hypothesis

We have mentioned earlier (C6) that some scholars prefer a holistic hypothesis. After evaluating all the different hypotheses one can say that we must look at Zechariah 4:7 in a holistic way. The references to 'great mountain' do not merely refer to one specific hypothesis. It includes different perspectives, from a heap of temple rubble to hostile powers. The following reasons lead the author to accept this hypothesis:

- The difficulties with the translation of verse 7 emphasise that 'mountain' can either refer to 'what' (an object) or 'who' (a person).
- The immediate literary context speaks about a temple and the role that a specific person (Zerubbabel) plays in the temple building process.
- In the rest of the Hebrew Bible the term 'mountain/s' can refer to a literal mountain or a metaphor for obstacles or problems.
- The fact that there is no scholarly consensus may indicate that there is more than one option. One good example is the viewpoint of Laato (1994:66). He discusses the influence of Akkadian royal inscriptions on the understanding of Zechariah 4:4b-10; therefore the whole aim of his article is to study the literal understanding of the temple building process in the light of the Ancient Near East. He comes to the conclusion that ‎lwdghArh cannot merely refer to the clearing away of the temple rubble, but must include the metaphorical understanding of 'great mountain' as opposition to the building project.

One may think in a holistic way of the 'great mountain'. This metaphor may refer to all the obstacles that stood in the way of the temple building (people like Tattenai and others; and things like the heap of temple rubble). When anyone is confronted with a majestic task like the rebuilding of a temple everything seems to be like a great mountain, not necessarily one person or one thing. The post-exilic books of the Bible testify that Zerubbabel encountered obstacles of both a material and an attitudinal sort (cf. Ezra 4-5; Hag 1:1-15; etc.).

F   SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The above discussion has led the author to come to the following preliminary conclusions:

- There is no consensus amongst scholars regarding the exact meaning of lwdghArh (Zech 4:7); therefore, several different hypotheses were presented, from a fictional mountain to the mountain as unidentified difficulties or opposition.
- The meaning of specific words is directly influenced by their translation. Unfortunately the Hebrew text of verse 4:7a created a few problems and is translated in different ways. A possible translation for Zechariah 4:7a is: 'Who or what are you, great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain.'
- The immediate literary context of verse 7 refers to both the physical temple building process as well as people who were against the process.
- Information from the Ancient Near Eastern texts help us to get a better understanding of the broad relationship between mountain and temple, and the detail of the temple building process. Unfortunately it does not provide us with real evidence concerning the exact meaning of 'great mountain' in Zechariah 4:7.
- None of the mountain/s references in Zechariah (3x) or the Book of the Twelve (25x) provides us with information regarding the identity of 'great mountain'. The word 'mountain' is never used as a metaphor or symbol in these biblical books. Most of the passages using the singular form (mountain) refer to Mount Zion as the holy or temple mountain.
- The use of the word 'mountain' in the prophetic books supports the viewpoint that it may be used as a metaphor for opposition or resistance (cf. Isa 40:4; 41:15; 42:15; 64:1, 3; Jer 4:24; 51:25-26).

We can conclude that lwdghArh must be understood in a holistic or multi-faceted way. It does not merely refer to a single person, world power or object. This symbol or metaphor refers to all the obstacles that stood in the way of the temple building (people like Tattenai and others; and objects like the heap of temple rubble). Finally, one can perhaps say that the intention of the author was not to refer to a specific circumstance or person, but to have a more 'open' approach. A good metaphor does not need to be explained or interpreted. The readers and hearers in post-exilic Yehud may have interpreted this verse in different ways. This may also be the case for other metaphors used in the book of Zechariah (e.g. the shepherd metaphor).[23]

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[23]   Meyers and Meyers (1993:265) write the following in connection with the shepherd metaphor in Zechariah 11:8: '"Three shepherds" is deliberately vague and, thereby, inclusive.'

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