

Haggai

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In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘This people says, “The time has not come, *even* the time for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt.”’” — *Haggai 1:1-2 (NASB)*

History is filled with turning points. These points mark that moment when a people or a nation made the transition from talk to action. December 7, 1941 was one such point, as the people of the United States decided to get off the sidelines and enter the global conflict against the Axis powers. For the nation of Britain, this turning point came two years prior in response to actions by Nazi Germany. These turning points left an indelible mark on world history in the 20th century.

520 BC was a turning point for the people of Judah. Although rarely recognized as an important point on the timeline of human history, 520 was a point at which Judah had to make a key decision for action. To understand how this turning point was reached, the reader must look at the state Judah was in, and how they got there.

King Josiah rose to power at the age of eight in 638 BC. The nation of Judah experienced reform and a spiritual renewal under Josiah. In 621 BC he ordered the temple renovated. This event led

to a rediscovery of the law, which Josiah had read aloud to the people. In response, at Josiah's command, they removed the idols and pagan temples and returned to the worship of יהוה alone. This period is recounted in 2 Kings 22-23 and in 2 Chronicles 34-35. However, this spiritual awakening did not appease the anger of the Lord at the deeds committed under Manasseh. When Josiah was killed in battle, ruin was brought on Judah.

After Josiah's death in 609 BC things went from bad to worse for the people of Judah. The rise to power of Nebuchadnezzar coincided with the rule of Judah by ineffective kings who would see the end of Judah's status as an independent nation. In 587 Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, putting a final end to the nation of Judah. The wealth and power of Judah was carried away by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, leaving only the "poorest of the land" (2 Kings 25:12) to be vinedressers and plowmen.

Under the reign of the Neo-Babylonians, the people of Judah formed communities in their new homes and developed a form of Judaism that did not require the temple for worship. When the Persian king Cyrus took control of Palestine, he issued an edict that the people could return to their lands and he ordered the temple rebuilt (2 Chr. 36:23). Although this was a prime opportunity to return to Palestine, many chose not to return. "The vast majority of the Jewish Golah community chose to remain in the Diasporic communities in Mesopotamia, Iran, and Egypt. They had established themselves and their families, and had created a cultural and religious identity that did not require them to return to Jerusalem."¹

Zerubbabel, also called Shesbazzar, led the exiles back to Judah and settled in or near Jerusalem. They quickly set to work clearing the temple area and setup the altar for burnt offerings. By the

¹ Matthews, 113-114

spring of 535 BC, they had laid the foundations of the temple (or begun reconstruction, the meaning of **בָּנִי** in Ezra 3:10 is literally “found” or establish). However, the money that Cyrus had given them ran out, and they experienced stiff opposition from those around them.

After Cyrus died in battle, Judah found itself under the rule of Artaxerxes, who issued a decree that work on the temple should stop (Ezra 4:21). “When the work ceased, the people turned to private affairs and gradually became used to worshipping among the ruins of the once great temple. Desire to rebuild died out, and fifteen years passed.”² This sets the stage for the prophetic ministry of Haggai.

Very little is known about Haggai. His name, **חַגַּי**, is one of several old testament words deriving from the word **חָג**, meaning festival-gathering or feast. He is referred to simply as “the prophet Haggai” both in his writings as well as in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14. This implies that he was rather well known by the people in that no further introduction was necessary.

It is also likely that Haggai was a prophet for much of his life, although we only have the short book of Haggai (and possibly a few Psalms) to read today. Had Haggai only operated as a prophet from August to December of 520 BC, more identifying information about Haggai and his background would have been essential to establish his authority. Contrast the beginning of Amos with the beginning of Haggai to see how this principle manifests itself in the written tradition.

Jewish tradition holds that Haggai lived most of his life in Babylon before returning with the exiles. Haggai 2:3 hints that Haggai saw Solomon’s temple in all its glory. If this is true, then Haggai must have been seventy or eighty years old at the time of his prophecy. The seriousness

² Boice, 138.

with which the people took his message supports this theory, as he must have been well known and respected by those who heard him. The LXX lists Psalms 138 and 146-149 as being authored by Haggai and Zechariah. If this is accurate, then the text of Psalms 138:2 (“I will bow down before your holy temple”) also implies that Haggai was alive while the temple was standing. Whether the psalmist is referring to the first or second temple is open for debate, as is the authorship of these psalms themselves.

Another key to the book of Haggai is to understand that this was not a time of open rebellion against God. Haggai is speaking to the remnant, approximately 50,000 people, who were willing to leave their lives in Babylon and return to Judah for the purpose of rebuilding the temple and the city of Jerusalem. As Boice so eloquently states: {they were} “the right people, living in the right place, trying to do the right work for the right reasons. Yet the years had gone by, and they were sufficiently caught up in their own pursuits to let the work for which they had come to Jerusalem slide”³ The makeup of the people and their enthusiasm for the rebuilding of the temple is a significant element to how quickly Haggai’s message was received; and more importantly, how quickly it was acted upon.

It is with these things in mind that we turn to the content of Haggai itself, and analyze the message of the prophet and its impact on its audience. The book of Haggai is best understood by breaking it into five pieces. These five pieces are: Haggai’s challenge, the people’s response, the encouragement to keep working, the promise of future blessing, and the special blessing on Zerubbabel.

³ Boice, 141.

The first is a challenge to the people of Judah regarding the state of the temple. It begins with a very clear and concise date that commentators identify as August 29, 520 BC. Haggai identifies his oracle as coming to Zerubbabel and Joshua by his hand, a very unusual introduction to a prophetic book. The only similar introduction in scripture is Malachi 1:1. Typically oracles are introduced as coming to the prophet himself.

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘This people says, ‘The time has not come, *even* the time for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt.’” — *Haggai 1:2*

The first oracle of Haggai begins by assessing the current state of affairs in Judah, and then issuing a challenge to the people to rectify the situation. The people of Judah were claiming that it was not yet time for rebuilding of the temple. Matthew Henry summarizes well the state of Judah:

“Our time has not come for the doing of it, because we have not yet recovered, after our captivity; our losses are not repaired, nor have we yet got before-hand in the world. It is too great an undertaking for new beginners in the world, as we are; let us first get our own houses up, before we talk of building churches, and in the mean time let a bare altar serve us, as it did our father Abraham”⁴

Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying “Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house *lies* desolate?” — *Haggai 1:3-4*

While a certain level of shelter is necessary, it is important to remember that the people of Judah returned to Jerusalem with the express purpose of rebuilding the temple. The people of Judah had gone beyond basic shelter and created comfortable homes while the temple sat in ruin. This condition is pointed out with a particular clarity by the use of a double pronoun in verse 4, something that is generally lost in translation: הֲעֵת לְכֶם אֲנִיִּם. The double pronoun is often translated “you yourselves” but loses some impact when translated this way. The double pronoun is there to place a very distinct “you, mere mortal, dwell in splendor” to the rebuke. As Calvin

⁴ Henry, Electronic Text.

put it “Hence the Prophet inquires, whether it was consistent that mortal men, who differ not from worms, should possess magnificent houses, and that God should be without His Temple.”⁵

There is some debate among scholars as to whether the Hebrew word סִפְיָנִים in Haggai 1:4 implies extravagance or simply a roof. “The same root is used to describe work that is ‘finished’ in 1 Kgs 6:9 and ‘covered’ in 1 Kgs 7:7. In 1 Kgs 6:15, the root describes a ceiling and in its verbal form is translated as ‘roofed’ in 1 Kgs 7:3.”⁶ Although differing slightly on the meaning, the point is the same: The houses of the people were finished, while the temple of the Lord lay desolate.

Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, “Consider your ways! You have sown much, but harvest little; *you* eat, but *there is not enough* to be satisfied; *you* drink, but *there is not enough* to become drunk; *you* put on clothing, but no one is warm *enough*; and he who earns, earns wages *to put* into a purse with holes.” Thus says the LORD of hosts, “Consider your ways! — *Haggai 1:5-7*

This attention paid to personal comfort, rather than showing proper respect to God, is one that has dire consequences according to Haggai. The remainder of the first section of Haggai serves to illustrate how God is rewarding their current attitude and behavior. Haggai begins by telling his audience to consider their ways, a key phrase in his writings. The Hebrew actually reads “Set your heart on your ways” drawing the listener to reflect on their own behavior and deeds.

Haggai then draws a vivid picture of people toiling in futility. The picture that he draws is one of a people continually working towards a goal, and never even getting close. It brings to the mind of the reader an image of a ram pounding away at a block wall, never accomplishing anything except gaining a terrific headache.

⁵ Calvin, Electronic Text.

⁶ O’Brien, 142.

After describing the plight of the people, Haggai again tells them to “consider your ways” as they think about what is happening. Haggai is driving the message home that this state of affairs is directly related to the choices they have made.

“Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified,” says the LORD. — *Haggai 1:8*

Haggai then tells the people what must be done. It is significant that this is a very practical instruction. “There is no specific mention of repentance, but by obeying they will be turning their backs on apathy and indifference, so demonstrating their repentance in action”⁷ The action described is interesting as well, in that no mention is made of stone or other materials, only wood. This helps us understand that the temple will be nothing like the one Solomon constructed. Although stones likely remained at the temple mount and would be used in construction, this temple was, from the outset, much simpler than the glorious edifice that had been built by Solomon.

Another key point to be drawn from this passage is that God is not concerned with the temple itself as much as he is concerned with the hearts of his people. As Calvin writes:

“Though then the Temple itself was of no great importance before God, yet the end was to be regarded; for the people were preserved by the visible Temple in the hope of the future Christ; and then it behoved them always to bear in mind the heavenly pattern, that they might worship God spiritually under the external symbols. It was not then without reason that God was offended with their neglect of the temple; for it hence clearly appeared, that there was no care nor zeal for religion among the Jews. It often was the case that they were more sedulous than necessary in external worship, and God scorned their assiduity, when not connected with a right inward feeling; but the gross contempt of God in disregarding even the external building, is what is reprehended here by the Prophet.”⁸

⁷ Baldwin, 41.

⁸ Calvin, Electronic Source.

Thus the state of the temple was an outward sign of the state of the hearts of the people of Judah. It is for this reason that Haggai is called to turn the people back to God and rebuild the temple in order that God may be glorified. Even though this temple would be inferior to the original, God would be glorified and pleased with it because of what it represented in the hearts of His people.

“You look for much, but behold, *it comes* to little; when you bring *it* home, I blow it *away*. Why?” declares the LORD of hosts, “Because of My house which *lies* desolate, while each of you runs to his own house. Therefore, because of you the sky has withheld its dew and the earth has withheld its produce. I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands.” — *Haggai 1:9-11*

After telling them what they need to do, Haggai returns to drawing direct comparisons between the state of the temple and their current state of affairs. Haggai also shows his audience that they have no excuse for not recognizing the signs of God’s displeasure, by drawing reference to Amos 4:6-10, Micah 6:15, and Hosea 4:10. Having been active over two hundred years prior to Haggai’s time, the words and writings of those prophets would have been common enough that Haggai expected his audience to quickly see the parallels between the circumstances about which those prophets spoke and their own experience.

Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him. And the people showed reverence for the LORD. Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke by the commission of the LORD to the people saying, “‘I am with you,’ declares the LORD.” So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of Darius the king. — *Haggai 1:12-15*

The second section of the book of Haggai is the response of the people to the message of the prophet. If there was any doubt as to Haggai’s stature and level of respect in the community, it is

removed by the speed with which the people responded to his message. The people knew they had heard from the Lord, and they responded in kind.

It is here that we witness the extraordinary leadership gifts of Zerubbabel and Joshua. After fifteen years of inaction, it took only twenty three days for the work on the temple to resume after hearing the message of Haggai. The temple was completed in approximately four years under their leadership. This is even more remarkable when you compare this project to the original temple construction:

“The sheer size of Haggai’s proposal is set in perspective when one recalls the nature of the original temple constructed in the time of Solomon. It had taken seven years to build and had been supported by heavy taxation and forced labour. In contrast, Haggai’s proposal, the temple was to be rebuilt by what amounted to voluntary labour.”⁹

Another key to this passage is that Haggai pronounced that God was with the people during this process before it had begun. Clearly the response by the people of Judah was such that there was no doubt as to their complete dedication to seeing it through to completion, and a total reprioritization of their lives. This was what God was truly seeking, far more than the construction of a building. “Hence, though the book of Haggai places great emphasis on the rebuilding of the temple, this unit indicates that of even greater importance is the people’s proper attitude and reverence for God. The reconstructed temple is a sign of respect for Yahweh, God of Israel.”¹⁰

On the twenty-first of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet saying, — *Haggai 2:1*

⁹ Craigie, 142

¹⁰ O’Brien, 146

The third section of the book of Haggai comes after the work has begun. The date given is the last day of the feast of tabernacles. The work had only been underway for a month, and had been interrupted by both the feast of tabernacles and yom kippur. It is likely that people began to look critically on the work that had been done, and were beginning to feel a bit overwhelmed at the task ahead of them. This second oracle comes as a much needed encouragement at this critical phase of the project.

“Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people saying, ‘Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Does it not seem to you like nothing in comparison?’ — Haggai 2:2-3

As the people looked at the work they had done, they were unimpressed: “...that they could not build such a temple now as Solomon built, not so large, so stately, so sumptuous, a one as that was. This fetched tears from the eyes of many, when the dimensions of it were first laid (Ezra 3:12), and it still made the work go on heavily”¹¹ It is very likely that there were people in the audience who had been alive and seen Solomon’s temple in its former glory, perhaps even Haggai himself. To them this temple looked pitiful. The people needed encouragement.

‘But now take courage, Zerubbabel,’ declares the LORD, ‘take courage also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land take courage,’ declares the LORD, ‘and work; for I am with you,’ declares the LORD of hosts. ‘As for the promise which I made you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!’ — *Haggai 2:4-5*

There is a key difference in the language used in the third section of the book of Haggai to that used in the first. The language is now encouraging rather than rebuking. The relationship between God and His people has been restored, and he is now working with them, not against

¹¹ Henry, Electronic Source.

them as in Haggai 1:9-11. More importantly, God is active and working in His people again, something that the people would have considered lost during the exile.

“For thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land. ‘I will shake all the nations; and they will come with the wealth of all nations, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the LORD of hosts. ‘The silver is Mine and the gold is Mine,’ declares the LORD of hosts. ‘The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘and in this place I will give peace,’ declares the LORD of hosts.” — *Haggai 2:6-9*

In the fourth section of his book, the language used by Haggai now makes a shift into future events. God is promising to fill this house with the wealth of the nations, making up for what the people do not already possess. God’s provision for His own house is played out in Ezra 6:8-11 as Darius insures that the construction is funded and that the implements of the temple are returned. Haggai shows how the people’s own inadequacies are made up for by the tremendous power and resources of God.

This prophecy does not stop with the current construction, but seems to look forward to the time of Christ when the temple would be rebuilt with the help of the gentiles, and it would see the glory of the incarnate Christ. This heavenly glory is the only way that this temple ever exceeds the glory of Solomon’s; for even as its external structure was mostly restored it never held the ark, the urim and thummim, or the other key sacred vessels.

Significant in this prophecy is that these things are being foretold long before the temple reconstruction is complete. As a further testimony to the changed hearts of the people, God is not withholding his blessing until completion:

“Although God alone will shake the nations and restore the glory of the Temple, God’s action is preceded by the community’s resolution to work on the Temple. Important is

that God's action is predicated not on the completion of the Temple, but on the people's change of heart that leads them to begin the project."¹²

Some commentators have been critical of the book of Haggai, stating that it is overly focused on the construction of a building rather than the plight of the people. This criticism is unfair when read in light of passages like this that show the true focus of the book is on the priorities and hearts of the people, not on the physical construction of the building itself.

On the twenty-fourth of the ninth *month*, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to Haggai the prophet, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Ask now the priests *for* a ruling: 'If a man carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and touches bread with this fold, or cooked food, wine, oil, or any *other* food, will it become holy?'" And the priests answered, "No." Then Haggai said, "If one who is unclean from a corpse touches any of these, will *the latter* become unclean?" And the priests answered, "It will become unclean." Then Haggai said, "'So is this people. And so is this nation before Me,' declares the LORD, 'and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean. — *Haggai 2:10-15*

After a few more months of construction, Haggai receives another oracle. The purpose of the first part of this oracle is to insure that the people do not assume that simply because they are part of a holy project in rebuilding the temple, that they are now considered holy before God. Their prior actions have still made them unclean, and until the temple is consecrated, it is unclean and their sacrifices are unclean. As Baldwin puts it "The ruined Temple, a witness to sins of negligence, stood like a corpse in the midst."¹³ Furthermore, if their moral behavior wasn't of the highest standards, they could defile the very temple during its construction.

It is also likely that Haggai wanted to remind the people that the completion of the temple would not make them holy. They would still have to honor God with their behavior and sacrifices. As Calvin explains: "...but when the people thought that God required nothing more than a

¹² O'Brien, 150

¹³ Baldwin, 51

splendid Temple, it was manifest superstition; for the worship of God, we know, is corrupted when it is confined to external things...”¹⁴

‘But now, do consider from this day onward: before one stone was placed on another in the temple of the LORD, from that time *when* one came to a *grain* heap of twenty *measures*, there would be only ten; and *when* one came to the wine vat to draw fifty measures, there would be *only* twenty. ‘I smote you *and* every work of your hands with blasting wind, mildew and hail; yet you *did not come back* to Me,’ declares the LORD. ‘Do consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth *month*; from the day when the temple of the LORD was founded, consider: ‘Is the seed still in the barn? Even including the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree, it has not borne *fruit*. Yet from this day on I will bless *you*.’” — Haggai 2:15-19

Haggai again tells the people to reflect upon their experience, thinking back to the struggles of the last fifteen years, the disappointing harvests, and the crop-ruining weather they had been experiencing. He draws for the people a clear connection between the state of the temple (and its reflection on their hearts) and the trials they faced. He then makes a bold prediction of a bountiful harvest and a promise from the Lord that from this day forward they will receive blessing. “The prophet, in other words, predicts a bumper harvest of crops and fruit at a time in the agricultural year when no sensible agronomist would risk his neck.”¹⁵

As mentioned earlier, the book of Haggai is about bringing the heart of the people back to God. As God sees their heart manifested through their actions, He blesses them far ahead of the completion of the temple itself. God’s interest is not in a building. His interest is in receiving the worship of His people. Haggai is brought on the scene to bring about that turning point when the people will return to God and away from worldly pursuits.

¹⁴ Calvin, Electronic Source.

¹⁵ Craigie, 150

Then the word of the LORD came a second time to Haggai on the twenty-fourth *day* of the month, saying, “Speak to Zerubbabel governor of Judah, saying, ‘I am going to shake the heavens and the earth. ‘I will overthrow the thrones of kingdoms and destroy the power of the kingdoms of the nations; and I will overthrow the chariots and their riders, and the horses and their riders will go down, everyone by the sword of another. On that day,’ declares the LORD of hosts, ‘I will take you, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, My servant,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will make you like a signet *ring*, for I have chosen you,’” declares the LORD of hosts. — *Haggai 2:20-23*

The book of Haggai closes with a final oracle directed to Zerubbabel. During the time of the exile, the people had given up on the idea that the royal line of David would be source of their salvation. There was no longer any royalty in Judah, and they were a province of the Persian empire. This oracle comes to Haggai to remind the people that the line of David exists; and when viewed in the scope of the entire book, the line of David is integral to the latter glory of the temple. Haggai’s final oracle serves to remind God’s people that He will bring salvation to them through the line of David as he promised.

Haggai is as relevant today as it was to the people of Judah in 520 BC. It serves as a reminder to us that we need to put God first in our lives. Haggai is often taught as a simple book about priorities. While this is true, there is much more to the book of Haggai. Haggai’s comments on ritual cleanliness remind us that merely going to church or being part of Christian activities is not enough; our hearts must be set on God and our attitude must be one of worshipful obedience.

In 520 BC, the people of Judah reached a turning point and chose to return to God. They responded to the word of the Lord through the prophet Haggai and turned their attention to the eternal matters of God over the daily matters of life. The writings of Haggai have been preserved in the canon to give the modern reader the same opportunity to consider their ways, and to focus their lives on the things of God, not of men.

A word about older sources:

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden *wisdom* which God predestined before the ages to our glory; — 1 Cor. 2:1-7

It seems to be in vogue in scholarly circles to dismiss older sources simple because of their age. It is often argued that their resources were not as good, and their results are therefore suspect. I disagree with this line of thinking. It seems to me that the Holy Spirit is the same today as He was in Calvin's time, and that His ability to impress the word upon the hearts of the authors of these old commentaries was not impeded by their lack of resources.

I think the proper approach to scholarly study and exegesis is to utilize these commentaries, drawing upon the wisdom and insight contained therein. At the same time, the student of scripture must consult current sources that have available to them the superior resources and tools of the day, as well as the benefit of scholarly thought and writing on the subject since the earlier commentaries were written.

As such, in my papers I will always make an attempt to blend sources old and new, drawing upon the wisdom of God as it has been revealed to scholars throughout the ages.

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