

Haggai 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 September 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Haggai chapter 2. In the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet. Speak now to Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory?

How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. For thus says the Lord of hosts, Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land, and I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, 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 shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts. On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet. Thus says the Lord of hosts, ask the priests about the law. If someone carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and touches with his fold bread or stew or wine or oil, or any kind of food, does it become holy?

The priest answered and said, No. Then Haggai said, If someone who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean? The priest answered and said, It does become unclean.

Then Haggai answered and said, So is it with this people, and with this nation before me, declares the Lord, and so with every work of their hands, and what they offer there is unclean.

[2 : 0 1] Now then, consider from this day onward, before stone was placed upon stone in the temple of the Lord. How did you fare? When one came to a heap of twenty measures, there were but ten. When one came to the wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were but twenty. I struck you and all the products of your toil with blight and with mildew and with hail, yet you did not turn to me, declares the Lord.

Consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month. Since the day that the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid, consider, is the seed yet in the barn? Indeed, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have yielded nothing. But from this day on, I will bless you. The word of the Lord came a second time to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month. Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms. I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders, and the horses and their riders shall go down, every one by the sword of his brother. On that day, declares the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, declares the Lord, and make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares the Lord of hosts.

The Lord had rebuked the people through Haggai for their neglect of the rebuilding work on the temple, declaring that they had been suffering the consequences of their failure in the futility of their efforts in many other areas of their lives. At the end of the sixth month, they had committed themselves once more to the task of rebuilding. The ministry of Haggai and Zechariah would be important throughout the rebuilding project, and in this chapter we find some of the messages of divine encouragement given to the people as they worked on the temple.

The dating of the first verse, presumably still in the second year of Darius, places the prophecy on the seventh day of the feast of tabernacles or booths, on the twenty-first day of the seventh month.

The seventh month was, perhaps unsurprisingly, the primary festal month in Israel's religious calendar. Throughout Israel's festal calendar, the number seven was prominent, as we see in Leviticus chapter 23.

[4 : 12] The two most prominent feasts, unleavened bread and tabernacles, were both seven days in length, with an extra day tagged on. The Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, the other pilgrimage feast, was dated as seven sevens after the Feast of Firstfruits. There were seven festivals and seven days of rest. The seventh month was especially dense with feasts, having the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, Tabernacles, and the day after Tabernacles. The festal calendar was a reminder and extension of the principle of the Sabbath, which was the key sign of the covenant that was established at Sinai.

The Feast of Tabernacles, which ended the festal year of Leviticus, mirrored the feast with which the year began, Passover and Unleavened Bread. Both Unleavened Bread and Tabernacles related to the very first days of Israel's departure from Egypt, the former to the cutting off of the old food of Egypt in the Levant, and leaving behind the former dwellings for temporary dwellings in the wilderness in the case of the latter. It was during the seventh month and the Feast of Tabernacles that Solomon's temple had been dedicated. The Feast of Tabernacles was also significant for Zerubbabel and Joshua. After the initial return to Jerusalem, they had re-established the altar and started the rebuilding of the temple, celebrating a joyful Feast of Tabernacles. In Ezra chapter 3 verses 1-8, we read of their earlier efforts.

When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. Then arose Jeshua the son of Josedach with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God. They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, burnt offerings morning and evening. And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon, and at all the appointed feasts of the Lord, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the Lord. From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord. For the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not yet laid, so they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia. Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Josedach made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites, and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity.

They appointed the Levites from twenty years old and upward to supervise the work of the house of the Lord. Hearing this account, we might be forgiven for thinking that two different events have been conflated together. So similar are the situations. However, this is perhaps the point. The Lord is returning the people to that earlier point, helping them to pick up the dropped threads of the narrative and to continue the abandoned work. After a decade and a half on, the Lord is encouraging Joshua and Zerubbabel with his word through Haggai. Joshua and Zerubbabel had perhaps become disheartened, disillusioned, and even cynical after the failure of their earlier endeavours. But now they are reinvigorated and recover something of the joy of that first feast of tabernacles. Haggai is instructed to address the company of the people who would all have gathered together for the feast, asking them some key questions. In Ezra chapter 3 verses 11 to 13, we read of the people's response to the laying of the foundation of the temple shortly after the first return. And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.

[8 : 06] But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping. For the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away. The Solomonic temple had been destroyed in 586 BC, and the rebuilding of the temple began about 50 years later. Many of the older generation among the returned exiles, most over 60 years of age, would have remembered the former temple in some

way or other and its glories. And seeing the small foundations of the new temple in relation to the greatness of Solomon's temple, it would have been too much for many of them to bear, and so they wept. One can imagine that witnessing such reactions to their efforts would have been initially rather dispiriting for Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people.

However, as troubles and opposition accumulated, and the shouts of joy that had accompanied that weeping at first had been silenced, the older generation's sorrow over unrecoverable former glories would have weighed increasingly heavy upon them too. The Lord speaks directly to these sentiments through Haggai. Even at that later time, there would have been some among the people who still remembered Solomon's temple, although many of them would have died since the time of the return.

Looking at the new temple taking shape, they would naturally have felt quite keenly how diminished its structure was from the former edifice, and not merely just in idealising its past majesty.

So the Lord addresses these perceptions. The Lord begins to address the unfavourable comparison between the past and the present temple by drawing the people's attention to the continuity of the covenant bond that was first established at Sinai. However, the current temple might compare with Solomon's, the Lord who dwells in their midst is the same God who brought them out of Egypt.

His presence remains with them, irrespective of the size and the splendour or lack thereof of the temple. The building never contained him, and its proportions are not the measure of his presence with them. His covenant commitment is where they should look for assurance, not to a building in Jerusalem. We should also consider some of the other concerns that the people might have had.

[10 : 22] After the sin with the golden calf at Sinai, Moses had interceded with the Lord, so that he would not remove his presence from his people. One could imagine some of the people wondering whether the presence of the Lord had departed from Israel after the temple was destroyed and Judah exiled.

The prophet Ezekiel had described the departure of the Lord's glory from the temple in Jerusalem prior to its destruction, and perhaps some might have believed that the Lord's glory had not and would not return, that they were doomed to continued fruitlessness, having been abandoned by the Lord.

Haggai's message directly challenges this impression. The spirit of the Lord remains in their midst, much as the spirit had been in their midst in leading them out of Egypt. Indeed, not only does the Lord continue to dwell in their midst, the new temple, despite its far more modest proportions, would be a site of greater works of God and a fuller manifestation of his glory.

The temple is a symbol of the Lord's sovereignty in the midst of his people and in the midst of the nations. The Lord is enthroned above the cherubim, and the Ark of the Covenant represents his footstool.

The temple building may be greatly diminished, but the Lord's throne will be elevated. The Lord is about to shake the earth and the sea and the dry land. This theophanic imagery is about unsettling the existing world order and its structures and powers, presumably in order to establish a new one in its place.

[11 : 43] While the temple had formerly had its riches stripped from it by the nations, the general shaking of the world that the Lord would bring about would have the effect of bringing the riches of the nations to the temple, something that had already occurred to some degree with the return of temple items and other treasures by Cyrus. Similar statements can be found elsewhere in the prophets. For instance, in Zechariah chapter 14 verse 14, And the wealth of all the surrounding nations shall be collected, gold, silver, and garments in great abundance. Or in Isaiah chapter 60 verses 3 to 7, And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around and see. They all gather together. They come to you. Your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant. Your heart shall thrill and exult. Because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you. The wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you. The young camels of Midian and Ephah. All those from

Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you. The rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you.

They shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house. As Mignon Jacobs mentions, the entry of the riches of the nations into the house of the Lord might represent plunder taken from defeated enemies, or tribute from vassals, or the return of what was once stolen, or perhaps offerings that they are bringing as worshippers. However, as she notes, the image of filling the house with glory in verse 7 is broader than any of these one themes by themselves, even though they might be elements of a larger picture. While Christians might be inclined to jump straight to thinking about Christ when reading about such prophecies, we ought to consider ways in which this was already being fulfilled prior to the arrival of Christ.

Solomon's temple had been a glorious building at the heart of the land of Israel, the site where people gathered from all of its corners. The restoration temple, while initially much less glorious, would represent the Lord's throne as his rule was extended more fully over many other regions, not least as the diaspora of the Jews prospered in many lands beyond Israel, to the extent that there were many more Jews living outside of the land than there were within it by the time of Jesus.

The wealth of the temple is not primarily to be measured in gold or silver or other treasures, all of the gold and silver belongs to the Lord already, but in the Lord's presence within it, and his rule from it. The Lord's encouragement of his people here is that, regardless of the limits of their capacity to build him a glorious building, their humble efforts would become the stage on which he would display a much more exceeding glory than ever was achieved in the more glorious building that preceded it. In particular, the temple would be a site from which the Lord will establish peace.

[14:38] There are similar promises in places like Isaiah chapter 60 verses 17 to 18. Instead of bronze, I will bring gold, and instead of iron, I will bring silver. Instead of wood, bronze, instead of stones, iron. I will make your overseers peace, and your taskmasters righteousness.

Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders. You shall call your walls salvation, and your gates praise. The Lord addresses the people again through Haggai a couple of months later, a month after Zechariah seems to have begun his ministry, as we see in Zechariah chapter 1 verse 1.

The Lord instructs Haggai to ask the priests a question. Haggai is not asking the priests the question because he does not know the answer, but because asking the question serves a didactic purpose. It seems that some of the people might have had a notion of sacralization through association with the priesthood, yet Haggai's questions serve to puncture that notion.

Holiness is not the same contagious principle that uncleanness is. While the people might think that their works become holy by connection with the priesthood, the Lord teaches that it is rather their moral uncleanness that proves contagious, defiling their sacrifices. Rather than their sacrifices being made acceptable to God through some magical, sacralizing priestcraft, it is their impurity that is threatening to invalidate their offerings. The result of this was the futility of their efforts in so many areas of their life. Verse 17 alludes back to Amos chapter 4 verse 9.

I struck you with blight and mildew, your many gardens and your vineyards, your fig trees and your olive trees the locusts devoured, yet you did not return to me, declares the Lord. Now, however, as they have turned to do the work of the Lord in rebuilding the temple with a full heart, they will be blessed in all that they do. This prophecy would have been delivered around the time of sowing, and considering the problems that they seem to have had with former harvests, this would be a cause of great encouragement. The final word of the chapter and of the book is another prophecy that was delivered on that same day, this time to Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel was the heir of David and also the governor of Judah. The Lord declares once again that he is about to shake the nations, as he had done in verses 6 and 7. He is going to overthrow the war machines of great powers, their chariots and riders. However, even as the world order is thrown into some degree of tumult, the Lord will establish Zerubbabel as a symbol of his authority, like a signet ring. He has been chosen by the Lord, and he will be made strong. We might perhaps see this as a reaffirmation of the promises of the Davidic covenant. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which the prophecies of this chapter could be seen as looking forward to the time of Christ?