

Haggai 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Haggai chapter 1. In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak the high priest. Thus says the Lord of hosts, these people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.

Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet. Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways. You have sown much and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough. You drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes. Thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it, and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why, declares the Lord of hosts, because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labours. 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 feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message. I am with you, declares the

Lord. And 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 month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king. Haggai the tenth of the book of the twelve is a post-exilic prophet who addressed the returned exiles in Jerusalem.

Haggai is mentioned alongside Zechariah in Ezra chapter 5 verses 1 to 2, the two of them playing an important role in inspiring the rebuilding of the temple. Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jehozadak, arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them. Also in Ezra chapter 6 verses 14 to 15, and the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel, and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia. And this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. Haggai is also mentioned in the apocryphal books of 1st and 2nd Esdras. After the Battle of Carchemish in 605 BC, the last remnants of the Neo-Assyrian Empire were defeated with the Egyptians, and the Near East came under the dominance of Nebuchadnezzar and the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Over the two decades that followed, the Babylonians would tighten their grip upon Judah, until in 586 BC, Jerusalem was overthrown by the Babylonians, and there was a second great deportation of exiles, after the earlier one in 597 BC. Some members of the nobility and royal family had been taken even earlier, Daniel along with them. For around 70 years, as the Lord had foretold by Jeremiah, the nations had been under the power of Babylon. In 559 BC, Cyrus succeeded his father Cambyses as the king of Persia. His mother was the daughter of the king of Media. The Median Empire was the dominant power over Persia at the time.

[4 : 09] The Bible, especially in the book of Daniel, but also in Jeremiah and Isaiah, seems to present a Medo-Persian alliance, in which the Medes were initially the leading power, before the Persians became the more prominent of the two. The figure of Darius the Mede in the book of Daniel, not to be confused with the Darius that he's spoken of at the beginning of Haggai chapter 1, is an important figure to account for, who causes problems for contemporary scholarship, which generally argues that the Persians subdued the kingdom of the Medes in their rebellion in 559 BC.

The possible figure of Cyraxes II, Cyrus' uncle and mentioned in Xenophon, is likely central to the alternative reconstruction of the history, ruling as the elderly senior ruler of a Medo-Persian confederacy, with his nephew Cyrus leading the campaign against Babylon. At the time of his death, shortly thereafter, around 537 BC, the rule of the Medo-Persian empire passed from Cyraxes to Cyrus.

Cyrus encouraged the return of peoples to their homelands, and by his decree recorded in 2 Chronicles chapter 36 verses 22 and 23, supported the Jews in their return to Judah. Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing. Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, the Lord the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him.

Let him go up. The story of the return is particularly recorded in the book of Ezra. Ezra describes an earlier stage of the temple rebuilding during the reign of Cyrus, which was frustrated by opposition. The altar had been rebuilt, and the foundation of the building had been laid, and there had been a recommencement of worship and festal celebration. However, from that limited start in the early 530s BC, the building of the temple had been abandoned. It was into this situation that Haggai the prophet spoke. Delivered chiefly over a period of under four months, Haggai's message would play a pivotal role in turning things around. We don't know much about Haggai. His name is associated with feasts, and maybe the fact that the main events in his book are also connected with feasts, new moons, and the Feast of Tabernacles is significant. Then again, perhaps it's not. We don't know whether he was one of the returned exiles, for instance, or whether he was one of the poorer people who had remained in the land. The book begins with the word of the Lord coming to Haggai in the second year of Darius the Persian, most likely 520 BC, almost two decades since the first return. That return had, according to the book of Ezra, occurred under the leadership of Sheshbazzah, the governor of Judah at the time. In Ezra chapter 5 verse 16, we are informed that the foundations of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem were laid by Sheshbazzah. The relationship between the figures and activity of Sheshbazzah and Zerubbabel is debated. Some have maintained that they were the same person, although if this were the case, it is surprising that both of their names are Babylonian, in contrast to figures like Daniel and his friends or Esther, one of whose names is a Hebrew name, and another is foreign. Another possibility is that Zerubbabel initially held an informal authority in the land as the Davidic heir, recognized by Sheshbazzah the governor. But when Sheshbazzah's period as governor ended, Zerubbabel enjoyed official authority too in that office. The word of the

Lord through Haggai is addressed to the ruler and to the high priest, encouraging them in the task of rebuilding the temple. Already in verse 1 we see the involvement of prophet, ruler and priest in the rebuilding process, the three principal offices in the land. The returnees were a small and beleaguered group in many respects, and as they faced opposition from their neighbours, who used bribery, false reports, and rumours to stir up official resistance to their efforts, were probably very aware of the vulnerability of their position. This probably made it very easy for them to shrink back from the task of rebuilding the temple, not wanting to excite further opposition, keeping their heads down in order to appease the people around them. Perhaps, they reasoned, the divinely appointed time for the rebuilding of the temple had not yet come. Maybe the temple had to be left in ruins for a period of 70 years, corresponding to the 70 years of Babylonian dominance that had begun earlier.

[8 : 40] As the temple was destroyed in 587 or 586 BC, some of them might have reasoned that there were still a few years to go. Alternatively, perhaps their argument was one of prudence, given their weak position and the opposition that they were facing. Perhaps it would be better to err on the side of caution and to leave the rebuilding for a few years, rather than provoking stronger neighbouring peoples.

The Lord, however, challenges the people's perspective through his prophet. If it is not time for them to rebuild his house, and they must leave his house in ruins, is it time for them to dwell in their own houses? They are clearly committed to the task of rebuilding more generally, having completed their own dwellings. Perhaps we are to see an indication that some of the people were even living in a measure of luxury, in a reference to panelling. However, that word could be differently understood, to refer to covering in the form of ceilings and roofs. They haven't left their own houses unfinished, and surely many of the concerns that they appeal to for their neglect of the rebuilding of the temple must also apply to their broader building projects. While the rebuilding of the temple is a task in which they might have faced particular opposition, they betrayed their misplaced priorities in their readiness to abandon that task. A number of the curses of the covenant concern the frustration of people's labours.

Despite their efforts, they would enjoy scant reward for their exertions. Rather, many of the fruits of their work would be lost, devoured, or otherwise depleted. By failing to give the Lord their best, they would not be blessed. The Lord wants his people to consider how their neglect of his house has served them. They have been frustrated in their labours, and it shouldn't be a mystery as to why. We find similar curses of futility elsewhere in the prophets. For instance, in Hosea chapter 4, verses 10 and 11. They shall eat, but not be satisfied. They shall play the whore, but not multiply, because they have forsaken the Lord, to cherish whoredom, wine, and new wine, which take away the understanding. Or again in Isaiah chapter 17, verses 10 to 11. For you have forgotten the God of your salvation, and have not remembered the rock of your refuge. Therefore, though you plant pleasant plants, and sow the vine branch of a stranger, though you make them grow on the day that you plant them, and make them blossom in the morning that you sow, yet the harvest will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain. The people are experiencing futility in every area of their lives, in their labour on the land, in their eating and drinking, in their clothing, and in their earning. We should recognise the judgement of futility as a sort of intensification of the original curse, in which the land would yield thorns and thistles as man laboured upon it in the sweat of his brow. The inverse of the curses of futility is, of course, the blessing upon faithfulness that we see in places like Deuteronomy chapter 11, verses 13 to 15. And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart, and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain, and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain, and your wine, and your oil, and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full. The answer to their present plight is straightforward. If they devote themselves to restoring the house of the Lord, they will find that the Lord will bless them in their other activities. The futility that they have been experiencing has been brought about by the Lord himself. However, once they mend their relationship with the Lord, and put him first and his glory above their own comfort, ease, and security, they will discover that the blessing that follows will touch areas of their lives where they have been experiencing frustration, unrewarded toil, futility, and loss. As Deuteronomy chapter 11 discusses, the land of Israel depended heavily upon the seasonal rains, which contrasted with the manner in which the land of Egypt, where they had formerly been, was irrigated. A key judgment of the covenant was the withholding of rain, as we see in Leviticus chapter 26 verses 18 to 20. And if in spite of this you will not listen to me, then I will discipline you again sevenfold for your sins, and I will break the pride of your power, and I will make your heavens like iron, and your earth like bronze, and your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land shall not yield its increase, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit. Perhaps the most notable drought, of course, came upon Israel during the reign of Ahab, according to the prayer of the prophet

Elijah. However, the returned exiles in Haggai's day had also suffered a drought. One aspect of the Feast of Tabernacles was prayer for rains, and considering that this message was delivered just a month before that feast, we might perhaps see this as preparing the people for that feast, at the end of which feast, the prophetic message that opens chapter 2 was delivered. The people responded positively to the message of the Lord by Haggai, fearing the Lord and heeding his rebuke. As the people responded to the message, the Lord also gave them assurance through Haggai of his blessing and presence with them in their labours. As at the beginning of the book of Ezra, verse 14 underlines the Lord's involvement in stirring up people to action, through the work of his prophetic word and by his spirit, within 23 days of the Lord's first delivery of the message to Haggai, they were devoted once more to the rebuilding work.

A question to consider, what are some of the different ways in which we see the Lord bringing people to action in this chapter?