

An Exegesis of Haggai 1

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The Historical Background of Haggai

The Babylonian Captivity, which had been foretold by the Lord through his prophets, especially Isaiah, had come to an end. With the ascension of Cyrus the Great to the throne of Persia the Lord set in motion the next phase of his plan of salvation, namely the return of a remnant of Israel to the promised land. In 536 B.C., Cyrus issued his decree which allowed the Jews to return to Israel and financed the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Apparently fewer than fifty thousand Israelites returned from exile under the leadership of Zerubbabel, the appointed governor of Judah, and Joshua, the high priest. (In Ezra 2:64-65 we are told, “the whole company numbered 42,360, besides their 7,337 menservants and maidservants; and they also had 200 men and women singers.”) When the returning exiles reached the ruins of Jerusalem they first “gave free-will offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God on its site” (Ezra 2:68). They then proceeded with the resettlement of Judah and the work of rebuilding the Temple was put on hold. On the first day of the seventh month after their arrival in Jerusalem the people of Judah gathered at the site of the Temple to offer burnt offerings to the Lord in spite of the fears of the people living near the Temple ruins and the fact that the new foundation of the rebuilt Temple had not yet been laid. On this occasion arrangements were made for cedar logs from Lebanon. Carpenters and masons were also hired to work on the reconstruction of the Temple (Ezra 3:6-7). However, the actual reconstruction work did not commence until the second month of the second year after their return from exile (Ezra 3:8) when the foundation was laid for the restored Temple. Unfortunately, the reconstruction project was brought to a standstill by the peoples who had been relocated in Israel during the time of the Assyrian Empire. These people first requested permission to assist in the reconstruction of the Temple and then, when their request was denied, resolved to oppose any rebuilding of the Temple or the city of Jerusalem itself. Ezra 4:5 tells us, “They hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia.” Finally, by decree of Artaxerxes, the third king of the Persian Empire, the reconstruction work was halted by force. It was not until the coming of the Lord's prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, nearly twenty years after the initial arrival of exiles, that the work of rebuilding the Temple was resumed.

A Brief Introduction to the Book of Haggai

Haggai was a contemporary of the prophet Zechariah who began his work as the Lord's prophet in the eighth month of the second year of the reign of Darius. The word of the Lord first came to Haggai on the first day of the sixth month of the second year of the reign of Darius. In all Haggai tells us of five times that the Lord spoke through him to the people of Israel:

1. on the 1st day of the 6th month (1:2-11)
2. on the 24th day of the 6th month (1:13)
3. on the 24th day of the 7th month (2:2-9)
4. on the 24th day of the 9th month (2:11-20) and
5. a second time on the 24th day of the 9th month (2:21-23)

We might outline the book of Haggai as follows:

- I. A call to build the house of the Lord (1:1-15)
 - A. the Lord reprimands the people (1:1-11)
 - B. the people's reaction (1:12-15)

- II. The promised glory of the rebuilt Temple (2:1-23)
 - A. Encouragement to the builders (2:1-9)
 - B. The Lord's promise to bless his people (2:10-19)
 - C. Encouragement to Zerubbabel (2:20-23)

Exegesis of Haggai, Chapter One, Especially Verses Four Through Eleven

Verse 1—In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah and to Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest.

This verse gives us the setting of this part of God's Word, noting both the prophet through whom the Lord spoke and the particular civil and religious leaders who should have been encouraging and leading the people of Israel in the rebuilding of the Temple. It may be noted that Ezra 2:2 lists eleven leaders of the people who returned from exile and Joshua's name is given as Jeshua. Haggai, by inspiration, mentions only those two individuals who were in the most responsible positions of leadership. This verse also sets the beginning date for Haggai's work as the Lord's messenger. Dr. Theo. Laetsch dates the year as 520 B.C.

Verse 2—This is what the Lord of hosts says, “These people say, ‘It is not the time to come, not the time to build the house of the Lord.’”

For years the people of Israel have neglected the work of rebuilding the Temple and the Lord, through his prophet Haggai, now reprimands the people for their sin. He addresses them as “these people”, HAZZEH HAYAM, not the “Lord's people”, or “my people”, or even simply “the people”. We can almost hear the reprimanding tone in the Lord's voice as he speaks to and about this remnant of his chosen people. There's a touch of anger and disgust in the Lord's words to these people who have failed to follow through on the Lord's instructions.

In this verse we also hear the people's hurried excuses for their lack of progress in rebuilding the Temple. “It's not the time to come, not the time to build the Lord's house” they stammer quickly whenever mention is made of the reconstruction project. The people of Israel have sufficient time to live their own lives, time to do what they want to do, time for themselves and their families, but there's never enough time for the task which the Lord has placed before them. Years have passed by, years in which the people have firmly established themselves in the land of Judah and yet the Lord's Temple still lies in ruins. But all of the excuses which the people keep on making will not hold water.

Verse 3—Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai,

This verse introduces the main body of the Lord's reprimand of his people for their laziness and neglect in the rebuilding of his house. What the Lord is about to say to the people is intended to sting their consciences and to convict them of their sin. As he did in the Garden of Eden, as God's Law always does, so the Lord is on this occasion about to expose the sin of his people. The Lord's intention in all of this is that his people would have a change of heart and, in joyful obedience, complete the rebuilding of the Temple. He wants them to very carefully consider their on-going neglect of his house while at the same time they have devoted countless hours to their own families, homes, occupations, and businesses. That this is true is illustrated by the Lord with one glaring example.

Verse 4—“Is it time for you yourself to live in your paneled homes and this house is in ruins?”

Whenever mention was made of the work of rebuilding the Temple, time was always used as an excuse. Either there wasn't enough time or it wasn't the right time. And yet as the Lord reminds his people there's been enough time for them to rebuild their homes, time enough, in fact, to make their homes more than just livable. Using their own excuses "It's not the time", the Lord asks his people (HE interrogative) if it's time for them to live in their paneled homes while the Temple still lies in ruins. The contrast is striking. While the Lord's house is rubble, the homes of the people are very livable, if not luxurious. The verb SAPHAN means to cover a surface with wood; to lay flooring, to install beams or rafters in the ceiling, or to cover a wall with boards. And although we cannot say which component of home remodeling is referred to here (the NIV indicates the walls while the KJV points to the ceiling) it is still obvious that the people have expended much time and effort on their personal homes. And all of this has been done to the neglect of the Lord's house.

Verse 5—Now this is what the Lord of hosts says, "Give careful thought to your ways,

Having exposed the sinfulness of their excuses the Lord now encourages his people to give careful thought to their ways, that is, the way in which they have been living. The verb SIM means to place or to put. It may also mean to set or to turn and when used with LEVAH, the heart, the sense is clearly introspective. The Lord wants his people to very carefully consider their actions, or more precisely, their lack of action in connection with the Temple. He wants them to seriously consider their sin and change their way of thinking. The Lord's call is to repentance. That the Lord is serious in this urging can be seen in the fact that he repeats the encouragement in verse seven.

Verse 6—You have planted much and harvested little; you eat, but are not satisfied; you drink, but are not full; you put on clothing, but are not warm; you earn wages (and put them) into a purse with holes."

That the Lord is not pleased with his people's neglect of the Temple reconstruction project is obvious from Haggai's message. It should have already been obvious from the fact that the Lord was withholding his blessings from the most important areas of their lives. Despite all of their hard work nothing seems to be going right for the people of Israel. They plant extensively; but the harvest is always small. They consume food and drink, but there's a lingering, gnawing feeling of emptiness. They put on clothing and still they're cold. They work hard to earn their income, but the money goes so quickly that it seems as if it must be dropping out a hole in their pocket or purse. So it goes when the Lord withholds his blessings. Nothing seems to turn out as expected. It's been going this way for the people of Israel for a long time and the Lord wants his people to know that it will continue (the infinitive absolutes of AKAL—to eat, SHATHAH—to drink, and LAVASH—to clothe all express duration) until they give careful thought to their sin.

Verse 7—This is what the Lord of hosts says, "Give careful thought to your ways."

As he has already done in verse five, the Lord calls the people to repentance, true repentance which is both a change of heart in regard to sin and a resulting change in how the sinner lives. Just as John the Baptist would urge his hearers to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance" so the Lord, through Haggai, urges this remnant of his chosen people to cease and desist their neglect of the Temple rebuilding project.

Verse 8—"Go up the mountain and bring down timber and build the house and I will take pleasure in it and be honored," says the Lord.

Continuing his call to repentance, the Lord plainly spells out for his people what they should be doing. By referring to only one aspect of the rebuilding project, the gathering of timber which would be used for a variety of purposes, the Lord points his people in the right direction. The Temple of the Lord should be rebuilt now, without further delay. And the Lord assures the people that he will take pleasure in the rebuilt Temple. He

will also be honored (the plural form of CAVAD is passive) by his people when he once again blesses their other endeavors.

Verse 9—“You expected much, But look! It’s (just a) little. What you brought home I blew away. Why? Because of what the Lord of hosts utters, because of my house which is ruins and you are busy with your own homes.”

This verse echoes what the Lord has already said to his people in verse six. The Lord reminds his people that their expectations of a proportionately good return on their hard work have not been realized. Rather than enjoying an abundance of good things there has been little. And even what they do bring home seems to vanish into thin air, like chaff that is blown away by a strong wind. Rather than enjoying prosperity, they have had to endure hard times. And the reason for these hard times is again made clear by the Lord. His house remains nothing more than ruins. Instead of working diligently to rebuild the Temple the people have sinfully chosen to busy themselves with their own homes their own wants and needs. But the situation could not remain as is.

Verses 10 and 11—“Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth has withheld its rain. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain and the new wine, on the oil and what the ground produces, on people and cattle and all the work of your hands.”

There can be no doubt. The drought, as well as the hard times and shortages which it caused, have come from the Lord. The Lord here spells that out for his people so that they will not think that the lingering drought is just an unfortunate dry spell. It has come because of their sin. In fact, everything that they have been experiencing is because of their failure to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. But it’s not just the crops and herds that will suffer. Everything that the people undertake will end in failure. And all because of their failure to rebuild the Lord’s house. The Lord is lovingly disciplining his children so that they will listen to his word. With this verse the Lord concludes his reprimand, through Haggai, of his disobedient people. In verses twelve through fifteen Haggai records by inspiration the Spirit-worked reaction of the people to Lord’s reprimand.

Verse 12—Then Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel and Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all the remnant of the people listened to the voice of the Lord their God and to the words of Haggai the prophet because the Lord their God had sent him. And the people obeyed the Lord.

In Isaiah 55:10-11 the Lord tells us that his word is effective, that it achieves the purpose for which he sends it. In this verse we see that the Lord’s words do accomplish what he desires. Haggai records that the Lord’s reprimand works repentance in the hearts of Zerubbabel, Joshua, and all of the exiles who had returned from captivity. The verb SHAMA’ means more than to simply hear. They listened to the Lord’s reprimand and took it to heart. As the Lord had said they should, they gave serious consideration to their sins and through the working of the Holy Spirit were brought to repentance. That they listened to Haggai is self-evident but not redundant. The Lord was speaking to his people through his appointed prophet. When the people listened to Haggai they were listening to their Lord. Conversely, if they had not listened to Haggai, then they would not have listened to God. But they did listen to the Lord and obey him. As verses fourteen and fifteen tell us the people began the completion of the reconstruction project on the 24th day of the 6th month of the 2nd year of the reign of Darius.

But before they resume the rebuilding of the Temple the Lord once again speaks to his people.

Verse 13—Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, delivered this message of the Lord to the people. “I am with you’ declares the Lord.”

By God’s grace the people of Israel, who had long neglected the Lord and his house, have responded as the Lord desired. Now, before they get into the reconstruction project full swing, the Lord encourages his people. He tells them “I am with you.” It may sound simple, but nothing that the Lord could have said would have been more comforting to the people of Israel than the assurance that the Lord of all creation, their God, was with them and had forgiven their sins. Nothing could ever be more comforting to any redeemed child of God than to be assured that in good times and bad the Lord is with us. With this assurance of the Lord ringing in their ears and filling their hearts the people are further blessed by the Lord with an aroused enthusiasm for the work of rebuilding the Temple.

Verses 14 and 15—And the Lord aroused the spirit of Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God.

Some Closing Comments

As Lutheran pastors we have been taught and, with God’s help, always work to apply the Word of God first to our own lives and then to the lives of those who hear us. The process of applying Haggai, chapter one, to our present-day situation as individual believers, congregations of believers, and a larger fellowship of believers known as the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod will, it seems to me, result in a number of interesting questions and subsequent discussions. For example:

To what extent is our situation, as individual believers and as Christian families, similar to that of the remnant of Israel to whom the Lord spoke through the prophet Haggai? Are we also neglecting the work of building the Lord’s spiritual house while we go on living in our “paneled homes”?

Or...

Is it perhaps true that as a synod we are more involved in a “maintenance ministry” than in energetically and enthusiastically reaching out with the Gospel in ever-widening circles of influence? Do we really need to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in new construction at our preparatory schools when trained and eager workers stand idle and mission opportunities wait in ever greater numbers?

Or...

Consider the fact that mission offerings, adding both budgetary and special, have increased dramatically in recent years (1986 offerings of \$17,024,053 were 76% more than 1983, 84% more than 1980, and 186% more than 1976). And yet each biennium we still fall far short of budgetary requests to maintain programs as is, to say nothing of dozens of new and expanded areas of the Lord’s work which are always approved by our synod conventions. Are we as a synod putting money into a “purse with holes”?

Whatever the answers are to these and other similar questions, one fact is clear. Like the remnant of Israel to whom Haggai spoke, we also need to give serious consideration to the word of the Lord of hosts, our God, and then live in joyful obedience to him who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. As he did for the remnant of his Old Testament people, so the Lord assures us “I am with you.” May the Gospel always sustain and strengthen us as we build the Lord’s house.

Verb Form Identification

Verse 4	tbe#self	qal infinitive from b#\$ayF—to sit or rest
	MynIw@ps ;	qal passive participle from Npasf—to cover with wood
Verse 5	w@my#&;	qal imperative from My#&i—to place or put
Verse 6	Mt@e (; rAz :	qal perfect from (rAzF—to scatter or disperse, to plant
) b' hfw :	hiphal imperfect from) wOb@—to bring in
	lwOk@) f	qal infinitive absolute from lka) f—to eat
	wOt#\$f	qal infinitive absolute from hta#\$f—to drink
	#\$wOblf	qal infinitive absolute from #\$bal f—to put on clothing
	rk@at@a#&; mi	hithpael participle from rka#&f—to earn wages

Verse 8	bw@qnF	qal passive participle from bqanF—to hollow out, to bore
	w@l(a	qal imperative from hla(f—to go up
	Mte)b'hjwAhiphal	perfect from)wOb—to bring in
	w@nb;w@	qal infinitive from hnfbf—to build
	hcer:)ew:	qal imperfect from hcfrF—to be delighted, to take delight
	dFb;kf)ew:	pual imperfect from dbakf—to honor
Verse 9	Mte)b'hjwAcf. verse 8	
	hnOpf	qal infinitive absolute from hnFpf—to look for
	yt@h;panFw:	qal perfect from hnFpf—to blow away
	M)un:	qal passive participle from M)anF—to utter or declare
	MycirF	qal imperfect from cw@r—to run
Verse 10	w@)l;k@f	qal perfect from)lfkf—to restrain or hold in
	h)fl;k@a	qal perfect from)lfkf
Verse 11)rFq;)ewF	qal imperfect from)rFqf—to call or cry out
)yciwOt@	hiphal imperfect from)cfyF—to go out (hiph. cause to go out)
Verse 12	wOxlf#;\$;	qal perfect from xla#\$f—to send
	w@)r:yy%Iw:	qal imperfect from)r"yF—to fear
Verse 13	M)un:	cf. verse 9
Verse 14	r(ay%FwA	hiphal imperfect from rw@ (—to arouse or awaken