

An Isagogical Review of Haggai

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A study of the book of Haggai is rather appropriate. The work the Lord wanted done was not being done by the Israelites. Their standard of living was high, but evidently inflation was rampant. The prices for the necessities of life were so exorbitant that the money they earned seemed to have been put into a bag "with holes" (v.6). There seemed to be a willingness to spend on themselves, but not to do the work of the Lord.

Today our WELS finds itself in a budget crunch, caused by inflation and resulting high interest rates. Cutbacks are necessary; expansion is hardly thought of; we hope to hold the line. The Lord's work is not expanding the way it should. Individual congregations experience the same thing. Yet we live in a country with a high standard of living. It seems the people are willing to spend on themselves, but the contributions to the church lag far behind the rate of inflation. The message from Haggai is important for us to study and apply to our situation today.

The Author

Gleason Archer says: "Of all the books of the Old Testament, this one enjoys the unusual status of being uncontested by all critics of every persuasion. It is acknowledged to be the work of the prophet Haggai himself, and the date it assigns to each message is accepted as reliable."

Haggai is one of the three prophets who belonged to the period after Return from Captivity, the period told about in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. Zechariah and Malachi are the other post-exilic prophets.

The name Haggai means "festal". Some feel that the prophet received this name because he was born on the Feast of the Passover or some other major feast. He is mentioned with his co-worker Zechariah in Ezra 5:1,2 and 6:14,15. The fact that Haggai is mentioned first could indicate that he was older than Zechariah. Some think that he was an old man who had seen the first temple, which was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. They base this on 2:3 where Haggai speaks of those who had seen the first temple. However; he does not specifically state that he himself saw it.

There is no information about the family of Haggai.

The Date

Laetsch gives this historical background of the era of Haggai and Zechariah: "The Babylonian Exile: foretold already by Isaiah in the days of Hezekiah (Is. 39:6), God's punishment upon His rebellious people (Jer. 25:3-12), had run its course of seventy years (Jer. 25:11f.). Cyrus the Great, ascending the Persian throne in 559 BC, annexed the powerful kingdom of the Medes, rapidly extended his realm northward to the Caspian, Black and Aegean Seas, and in 539 conquered the mighty city of Babylon, proud mistress of the world. By divine direction (Is. 44:24 - 45:7; Ezra 1:1ff.) Cyrus issued the decree permitting the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the Lord's Temple, 536 BC. This decree was in keeping with his policy to return the captive people and their gods to their homelands. Not all the Jews in Babylonia availed themselves of this opportunity, fewer than 50,000, a small number (cp. 2, Sam. 24:9); those "whose spirit God had raised" (Ezra 1:5). They settled in Jerusalem and the surrounding cities (Ezra 1:2f.; 2:1-70). The leaders of this group were Jeshua, also called Joshua,

the high priest, and Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel (Ezra 3:2). The latter is also called Sheshbazzar while he was in Babylon (Ezra 1:8,11) and in a letter addressed to Darius (Ezra 5:14;16); hence this is evidently his Babylonian name."

The returning exiles in 536 BC had immediately begun the work of restoring the city of Jerusalem and rebuilding the destroyed Temple, as God had commanded them through the edict of Cyrus, king of Persia (2 Chron. 36:22,23; Ezra 1:1ff.) But hardly had they begun when they were stopped by the hostile Samaritans. Then, for about 14 years; nothing was done to rebuild the Temple. Haggai came upon the scene in the year 520 BC to encourage the sluggish and disheartened Jews to go on with the rebuilding of their Temple.

Halley gives this chronology:

536 BC	50,000 Jews, under Zerubbabel, return to Jerusalem
536 BC	7th month, they build the Altar, and offer sacrifice
535 BC	2nd month, work on the Temple begins, and is stopped
520 BC	6th month, 1st day, Haggai's 1st Appeal (Haggai 1:1-11)
	6th month, 24th day, building begins (Haggai 1:12-15)
	7th month, 21st day, Haggai's 2nd Appeal (Haggai 2:1-9)
	8th month, Zechariah's Opening Address (Zech. 1:1-6)
	9th month, 24th day, Haggai's 3rd & 4th Appeal (Haggai 2:10-23)
	11th month, 24th day Zechariah's Visions
518 BC	9th month, 4th day, Zechariah's Visions
516 BC	12th month, 3rd day, the Temple is completed

The Contents: 1st Appeal (Haggai 1:1-11).

Haggai points out that the time for the rebuilding of the Temple is long overdue. No doubt "reasonable" excuses were advanced, but the fact remains that an indifference had arisen which made the people content to build their own houses while the Lord's house was neglected. (v. 4) The people were getting along fairly well in a material way and were putting up their own "ceiled houses" (paneled with costly woodwork) and provided for their personal comforts, but they had nothing to spare for the house of God. Warnings from God in the form of drought and want had gone unheeded (v. 6,11). National adversity often follows national disobedience to God. The people were accustomed to live without the temple, The prophet urges them to put the temple first in their plans. "Consider your ways" (1:7). The problem is not in times and conditions but in your own hearts- the prophet implies. Jesus put it this way.- "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you." (Mt. 6:33).

The result of the prophet's warning is that 24 days later the people, led by Zerubbabel and Joshua, set to work on the temple (1:12,14), while the prophet assures them that the Lord is with them (1:13).

2nd Appeal (Haggai 2:1-9).

About a month later the prophet brought them another word of God to encourage those who mourned over the fact that the second temple would be a very humble edifice in comparison with Solomon's gorgeous Temple. Haggai assured them that God would bestow much greater glory on their smaller house of worship than the Temple of Solomon ever enjoyed. For in Zerubbabel's Temple (though made more magnificent by Herod), Christ, the Messiah, would

make His appearance and would put in its place the glorious temple of His New Testament church.

Halley comments on the future glory of God's House: "Haggai came forward with his vision of the Temple's Future beside whose Glory Solomon's Temple itself would pale into insignificance. This is distinctly a Messianic vision. Haggai's mind was on that Temple which he was helping Zerubbabel to build. But his words were Gods words, and God's mind; in a sense deeper perhaps than even Haggai himself realized, was on Another Temple, yet to be, of which Solomon's Temple and Zerubbabel's Temple were but dim pictures: the Church, built not of stone but of Souls of the Redeemed. The Church, the Fadeless. Endless, Ineffable Glory, the Consummation of all God's wondrous works is the Temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21), of which Haggai here dreamed.

3rd Appeal (Haggai 2:10-19)

In the 9th month Haggai added a sequel to his first prophecy. As the touch of the unclean pollutes the clean so the Jew's neglect of God's house polluted their labor. Haggai rebukes them because of their work-righteousness, empty formalism in religion, and their spiritual impurity of heart, for which reasons God could not bless them. But since they were showing a change of heart God would henceforth graciously reward their labors.

4th Appeal (Haggai 2:20-23)

On the same day the prophet had a special message of assurance for the godly leader of the Jews. Zerubbabel, a descendant of David and an ancestor of Christ. He was to serve as a link between David and Christ, Matt. 1:13. As a chosen servant of God he was to be a type of Christ and a true forefather of the spiritual Israel of the New Testament.

Applications

Our country is dotted with Christian churches, both rural and urban. When conditions were primitive, most churches were of necessity small and humble edifices. But we are now living in times of unprecedented wealth and high living standards. Most church people live in splendid homes and enjoy every modern convenience and luxury. It would therefore be disgraceful for them to be content with inadequate and unattractive houses of worship. Their indifference toward their church property would tend to cheapen their religion and would have a bad effect on the unchurched. Our church, the house we worship in, should be thought of as an extension of our own homes, the houses we live in. Home and church are so intimately connected that our love for one should include the other. We should not let our affection be lavished only upon furnishing the home and limit it in its provision for the house of God. A neglected church structure is a sad commentary on the spiritual decline of those who permit it to happen.

Haggai explains why God had withheld His temporal blessings from the Jews. There are such today who say, "If God gives me great abundance, I will increase my contributions to the church." That was the excuse of the Jews, (Hag. 1:9). God does not want us to figure and bargain that way; He wants us to give to Him what we have, then He promises to give more. Since Christians in times of prosperity have forgotten the needs of the church, God has had to chastise and discipline them with hard times, as He did the Jews in 520 BC.

Consider what we must now give for taxes, defense costs, inflation, in comparison with our church contributions of the past. Doesn't Gal. 6:7-10 apply? Hard times are the result in

many instances, not the cause, of our failure to live as faithful stewards of the talents God has entrusted to our use.

To Haggai's joy the Jews repented and changed their attitude; he had the satisfaction of seeing them respond energetically to his message from the Lord. The zeal of the leaders and the laity was fired to see the thing through. Would that the same would happen in all the projects of our Synod and local congregations.

Although our congregations and our Synod have during the past decade raised larger sums of money than ever before for parish needs and for missions, it remains a deplorable fact that less than one third of the membership is carrying the burden of supplying the available money and a service; two thirds are doing little or almost nothing. The constant rise of budgets and the deficits in the treasuries tends to discourage the willing givers. These therefore need continued encouragement from God's Word to keep on doing the best they can, and others need ever to be admonished to give as the Lord would have them give. All Christians are to be workers, not shirkers in the church.

We should remember that all we do for the church enhances the glory of God and His kingdom. That is the only purpose for which the Lord lets His people remain on this earth, to be co-builders with Him of His Church. Our Synod has written a glorious chapter in the history of the church by preserving the pure doctrine and spreading the Gospel over many parts of the globe. Today new doors of opportunity are open to it for greater conquests, and to meet these opportunities, larger gifts and more willing workers (full-time and part-time) are needed. Because of the boundless spiritual and material blessings God has showered upon us, how dare we be so selfish as to keep them for ourselves. We are a part of Christ's church, and as we love and serve it we shall share in its glory now and in eternity. In this work we surely want to have a part. God's promise to Zerubbabel is likewise His promise to us, Like a signet ring we are closely attached to our Savior. (John 14:23) To us; therefore, Haggai also says: "Be strong and work" (2:4). "For I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts."

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