AN EXPOSITION OF HAGGAI

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by
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Message

“Obedience to God’s commands by His people brings God’s presence, His blessings, and hope to His people.”

Outline of Haggai

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1 Stephen Bramer, “Haggai,” unpublished class notes for BE 104 (Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall
2 Outline reflects the “4 Message” structure as found in Taylor and Clendenen’s New American
   Commentary along with some language similarities with the outline found at bible.org, Eugene Merrill’s
   study on Haggai.
Exposition

A. The First Message: It Is Time to Rebuild the Temple (1:1-15)

The first section of this book deals with Israel’s neglect in rebuilding the temple, instead opting to rebuild their own houses. Within this section there are two commands to the people along with a promise of Divine help.

1. Introduction to the Message (1:1)

The book of Haggai contains historical markers at the outset of each message. This allows the reader, with a little help, to pinpoint not only when these words were prophesied but also to track the progress and response of the hearers over time. This message was given “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…” which after some figuring ends up to be August 29th, 520 B.C. 3 The timing of this message in the Hebrew calendar is important as well because this message is given on the first of the month which is normally a time for special offerings to the Lord and given the condition of the temple, this practice couldn’t be performed4. The timing of this message is made more significant given the recipients; Zerubbabel, governor of Judah and Joshua, the high priest. Instead of managing the crowds of people at the temple for festival offerings, the governor and high priest stand idle in regards to the house of the Lord, which sits in ruin. Their own indifference is representative of the whole of Israel, which is why they are addressed first5.

2. The Command to Rebuild (1:2-11)

The message from the Lord begins with a refutation of the reason the people have given in not rebuilding the temple. The reason the people give is that they don’t feel the time has yet come to rebuild this temple. In a striking and almost sarcastic question, the Lord inquires of the people of Israel why they should live in “paneled houses” while the temple lies desolate. It is from this question that we begin to see the true state of heart of the people of Israel; a heart that is solely focused on rebuilding and reclaiming what they had personally lost in the exile to Babylon. The real force of this question and answer comes in the comparison between those who were delivered and rebuilt their houses for themselves and their Deliverer whose temple lies desolate.

With this stinging rebuke ringing in the ears of the hearers, the Lord continues and implores them to, “Consider your ways!” This is a phrase that is unique to Haggai and one that calls for deep thoughtful reflection over past behavior and experiences\(^6\). They are asked to consider why what they have attempted to accomplish has not resulted in full measure. They eat but are not full. They sow but do not reap a full harvest. They wear clothes but are not warm enough. These troubles are not in some distant past or part of a future curse but are a present reality put forth for the people of Israel to consider\(^7\) the relation to having less and having a temple not yet rebuilt. This type of consideration is aimed at showing the people how their experience, “…parallels the kinds of curses outlined in the Torah when the covenant relationship between Yahweh and his people was strained (Lev 26; Deut 28-30).\(^8\)”

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\(^6\) Ibid, 90.
In verse 7, the Lord again commands the people to again, “Consider your ways…” The implication of this repeated command is that reflection on their past mistakes should lead to changes in future behavior. The Lord then tells the people of Israel to go to the mountains to obtain wood with which to rebuild the temple. It seems odd that the Lord would only want wood to rebuild the temple but this is more likely a contrasting reference to the nicely paneled houses of the people rather than a list of materials needed to rebuild the temple. The contrast being that instead of the people being pleased and glorified that when the temple is finished, God can be, “…pleased with it and be glorified…”

What continues through verse 11 is another reminder to the people that their expectations of provisions continue to fall short and that, just in case they were wondering why, it is because the temple lies desolate while their houses stand finished and furnished.

The Israelites have had their indifference to the house of God and the resulting shortfalls in their lives pointed out to them. They lived with expectations that were never met and a thirst that was never fully quenched because their hearts were focused so fully on rebuilding what they had lost in the exile. This focus made them selfish and ultimately flung them farther from the One who delivered them back from exile.

3. The People of Israel Respond (1:12-15)

Almost immediately, Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the remnant of Israel begin work on restoring the temple. The strong and biting rhetorical questioning and the commands to consider their current situation had the desired effect on the people and resulted in long

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avoided obedience to the Lord. Often times it is in the midst of pain, frustration, and
disappointment that the Word of God finds a foothold in the lives of His people\textsuperscript{10}. The
result of the word taking hold in the hearts of the people of Israel was a renewed fervor
for God and his commands and once again feared the Lord their God. Their attitude has
changed to one of reverence for their God from reverence to their own desires.

The response from God is not another rhetorical jab or charge to consider again.
Instead, in response to their obedience and renewed heart He brings his presence back to
rest with them again. It may be better translated as, “I am at your side,” or “I am beside
you.”\textsuperscript{11} Having had their minds turned towards the restoration of the covenant
relationship with God, they now had the presence of the same God who parted the Red
Sea, the Jordan River, and brought down Jericho. Surely this God would lead them
spiritually but also through His presence, the temple would be completed. It would only
be through God’s presence in their lives that they would be able to accomplish what He
charged them to attempt. This is shown more in detail in verse 14 as Haggai describes the
“stirring” of the spirits of Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the remnant to work on the temple of
the Lord. The Lord, however, is gracious in his demands for obedience in that He
demands obedience from his people and also stirring the hearts of his people with his
presence to accomplish what he has required of them.

E. The Second Message: The Glory to Come (2:1-9)

This second message focuses around the past glory of the Solomonic temple and
the future glory that will be present in the finished future temple. In light of the

Clendenen et al., vol 21a, (Nashville: Broadman,&Holdman, 2004), 137.

grandiosity of the Solomonic temple the people are reminded again how it will be accomplished; through the presence of the Lord.

1. Introduction to the Message (2:1-2)

The second message begins much in the same way the first did, with a timestamp. The timing of this message comes almost two months later, October 17th, 520 B.C. The work of rebuilding and restoring the temple would have been well underway when this message would have gone out. The recipients of the message are Zerubbabel and Joshua and specifically the remnant of Israel. This is different because the message isn’t just to the representatives of the people for the people but in this case for the leaders and people who have been obedient in rebuilding the temple.

2. A Reminder of Former Glory (2:3)

After almost two months of rebuilding and restoring the temple, the people were discouraged. It turned out that building a temple fit for their God was harder and going to take longer than anticipated. In rhetorical fashion similar to the first round of questioning in chapter 1, the Lord begins questioning the people present about the Solomonic temple. Though unlikely, there may have been people who survived the sacking of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., subsequent exile, and eventual return to their own land. If there were no personal witnesses still alive, the splendor and magnitude of the temple that Solomon built would have been passed down through the generations, possibly enduring storytelling license, making the temple that much more grand and stunning. Either way, the comparison from the older to the present would not have been flattering to those

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attempting to rebuild and restore the temple\textsuperscript{14}. Haggai, in identifying the source of frustration and discouragement will now challenge his people to become courageous in light of their situation\textsuperscript{15}.

3. A Reminder of God’s Presence (2:4-5)

Haggai personally addresses and exhorts each group present, Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the remnant to take courage and work. What continues is an encouragement much in the same way as He did in chapter 1. The focus here is not the motivation to start working but instead to keep working, though it looks impossible. The same God who brought them out of Egypt and preserved them through the desert is the same God whose presence will sustain them and accomplish this task through them. The impetus is again on those present to look back and see God’s faithfulness to them over the ages and for that picture to result in the courage to continue on in obedience. Just as God was with Moses and Joshua, so He will be with them now and the result will be a temple that will make Solomon’s temple pale in comparison.

4. A Reminder of the Glory to Come (2:6-9)

As if to remind the Israelites that the words, promises, and commands that Haggai is prophesying have come from the Lord, he reintroduces the speaker again as, “…the Lord of hosts…” What follows must only be taken as a promise from the Lord and not from man so that the Israelites will obey or disobey the words of the Lord and not confuse them with the words of man\textsuperscript{16}. Verse 6 continues with the Lord forecasting an

\textsuperscript{15} Mark J. Boda, “Haggai, Zechariah,” in \textit{The NIV Application Commentary}, ed Terry Muck, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 120.
imminent upheaval originating from God and continuing throughout all creation. This upheaval though, is not about destruction but about a time in the future when Yahweh returns and makes right all that is wrong\textsuperscript{17}. The result is that the armies of the world that used to war against Yahweh now bring tribute to the one true God. The gold, silver, and finest furnishings will be presented in worship to Yahweh for his temple. It should be noted that the focus here isn’t on material wealth but on the glory of God himself since all wealth is God’s already\textsuperscript{18}; acquiring this just serves to illustrate His greatness among all nations. Not only will this future temple be more stunning, beautiful, and worthy of Yahweh but His coming will bring peace to a world at war. This picture isn’t to gloss over the present discouragement but to breed hope in a future that is vastly different thanks to the triumphant return of Yahweh\textsuperscript{19}.

C. The Third Message: Defilement and Blessing (2:10-19)

This third message centers on the infectious nature of the disobedience present in Israel. Here Haggai in concise form shows that impurity is more pervasive and more easily contracted than purity\textsuperscript{20}.

1. Introduction to the Message (2:10)

This message begins again with a chronological statement and the recipients. This message is dated to December 18\textsuperscript{th}, 520 B.C., just over two months after the previous message and four months from the first initial command from God to rebuild the temple

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\textsuperscript{17} Mark J. Boda, “Haggai, Zechariah,” in \textit{The NIV Application Commentary}, ed Terry Muck, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 124


in late August. The recipients of this message aren’t the general public but the priests of Israel so that the Lord may inquire of those who serve the nation.

2. Israel is Declared Unclean (2:11-14)

Yahweh instructs the prophet Haggai to request a ruling from the priests in regards to ceremonial defilement. This questioning is designed to lead to an important lesson about religious impurity.

The first question centers on whether or not holiness is transmitted from consecrated meat in his garment to other foods. The answer from the priests is a simple no. While the meat carried in the garment would make the garment itself holy, it would not communicate that holiness to anything else. This first of the scenarios presented shows the difficulty in transmitting holiness. The Israelites who had been working may have thought that because the temple was holy, they and all they contacted had become holy.

The second question centers on whether or not impurity can be transmitted from an unclean man, who touched a corpse, to any of the foods for worship mentioned in the first question. The answer given from the priests is that the foods touched will become unclean. Nothing that has anything to do with death can have anything to do with Yahweh. This instruction was extremely important for the newly returned nation of Israel. How they were are to act and what makes them impure in the sight of God will

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22 Ibid, 15.
23 Ibid. 15.
begin to govern how they relate to God\textsuperscript{25}, which is precisely why rebuilding the temple is so vital.

Haggai turns these questions to application for the Israelites. The Lord declares the nation of Israel because they have made the error of thinking that their mere association with the temple made them holy. It was an incomplete understanding of the fuller obedience God desired from them in repentance and sacrifice.

3. Obedience Leads to Blessing (2:15-19)

In order for the Israelites the blessings that will result from their obedience, the Lord again asks the Israelites to consider their former lives outside of the blessings of God. This life was a life when grain and wine expectations were never met. This was a life when, even in the face of the wind and hail, Israel did not return to their God. The Lord is imploring the Israelites to remember what it was like in their disobedience so that they would not return to it as a way of life. In verse 18, we see Haggai again imploring the Israelites to remember their past afflictions and shortfalls. He repeats the date from verse 10 likely to give ceremonial significance to this day as the day that stones were laid on the temple mount\textsuperscript{26}. This ceremony is used by Haggai to encourage the people of Israel to look back at what was as they were disobedient; to look at the present at what has been accomplished through the presence of God, and what will come as a result of the obedience. This passage ends climatically with the Lord promising his blessing on the children of Israel despite their disobedient past.

D. The Fourth Message: Zerubbabel the Chosen One (2:20-23)

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 92.
\textsuperscript{26} Mark J. Boda, “Haggai, Zechariah,” in The NIV Application Commentary, ed Terry Muck, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 149.
This message is the shortest of the messages Haggai declares to Israel. This final message looks beyond the current conditions towards an apocalyptic interruption of human history ushered in by the Lord’s choice of a new leader27.

1. Introduction to the Message (2:20)

This message was received and given on the same day as the previous message, December 18th 520 B.C. However, there is nothing unusual or “suspect” about a prophet receiving two oracles in one day28. This message is addressed to Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah.

2. Divine Destruction (2:21-22)

In addressing this message specifically to Zerubbabel, the emphasis is on the royal nature of the message. That is, the implications are for the leadership and royal house of Israel29. The message is similar to that of verse 7, the Lord will, “…shake the heavens and the earth…” The difference here is that the scope of this change will not be limited to paying tribute or building a temple but instead, all of creation, every nation, and every warrior will be subjugated under Yahweh. Both the passage in vv. 6-9 and this passage are pictures of the same future event with different emphasis30. The picture painted is one of final and total revolution ending with all of creation under the feet of Yahweh.

The message then takes a personal turn to Zerubbabel himself. Until this point, Zerubbabel has been addressed as “governor of Judah.” It is here that we see that this has

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28 Ibid, 192.
29 Ibid, 192.
changed to “…Zerubbabel…My servant…” The title has been appointed to him as it was given to his forefather David (2 Sam 7:5, 1 Kings 11:32). This title was given as recognition of his willing obedience in faithfully rebuilding the temple. Zerubbabel had lead his people to obedience and through discouragement to eventually build what God had commanded them to build. The message continues promising to make Zerubbabel a “signet ring.” Haggai is using language from Jeremiah 22:24-30 where the Lord takes away the earthly authority of Jeconiah, the then king of Judah. Jeconiah was eventually taken to Babylon and never did return. The focus of revival in Israel then focused on Jeconiah’s sons and grandsons. As a son of Jeconiah, Zerubbabel was a descendant in the line of David and this would have brought great hope to the people of Israel that God had restored the community in line with his covenant promise (2 Sam 7:16, Ps 89:24-37).

More than just a promise to Zerubbabel for the present, this was God promising that the future messiah would be from the line of David and would be his representative to the world on that day of upheaval in the nations. The obedience of Zerubbabel and the remnant has brought the presence of God, which has brought along with it material blessings, courage in the Lord, and a hope in a future in which the Messiah is the representative of God to all his creation.

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Bibliography

Bramer, Stephen, “Haggai,” unpublished class notes for BE 104 (Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall Semester, 2011).


