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HAGGAI

1In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of YHWH came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest.

For the historical setting in which Haggai delivered his oracles, see the Introduction pages 12-13. Verse 1 informs us that he made his first proclamation in 520. This was after Zerubbabel, the grandson of the exiled King Jehoiachin, had been sent from Babylon to Jerusalem as governor. Haggai's main aim was to encourage the rebuilding of the temple that had been destroyed in 587. The temple was a constant reminder of the presence of YHWH in Jerusalem. It was also the centre of the social and economic life of Judah. With the temple still in ruins after 19 years since the return from Babylon, the populace were not able to offer appropriate sacrifices in the proper way.

The prophet's name is given as 'Haggai', which appears to be based on the Hebrew ḥāḡag: to make a pilgrimage. He may have been born on a special pilgrimage feast. Neither here nor where he is mentioned in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14, are we given any details of his lineage. This is unusual (but see also Amos, Habakkuk and Obadiah). We don't know whether he was among those who were left behind in Judah or was part of the group who returned from exile.

He is called a 'prophet' (נָבִי, nābî'; see also 1:3, 12; 2:1, 10; and Ezra 5:1; 6:4), and we are immediately reminded that in listening to what Haggai has to say we are listening to 'the word of YHWH.' The usual expression is that the word comes 'to' the prophet. Here the text has 'by', emphasising the mediatory role of the prophet in conveying God's word to the people.

Haggai's words were addressed to the newly arrived governor of Judah, Zerubbabel. His name indicates that he was born in Babylon. He is the son of Shealtiel, the eldest son of the exiled king Jehoiachin (see also Ezra 3:2). Because his interest lies especially in the reconstruction of the temple, he addresses also the high priest, Joshua (also known by the Aramaic form of the name, Jeshua). He is the grandson of Seraiah, the chief priest who was killed at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 (2Kings 25:18; 1Chronicles 6:14-15).

Inspired by Haggai?

In the difficult circumstances of Jerusalem in the years after the return from exile, the people are doing their best to get their lives together, but they are neglecting the worship of God (see 1:4-9). However, once alerted to this by the prophet, they obey (1:12), and set about rebuilding the temple. God assures them: 'I am with you'(1:13; 2:4); 'my spirit abides among you; do not fear'(2:5).

To neglect the worship of God is to fail to penetrate to our own hearts or to the heart of the world. Though God transcends the limits of creation, we do not experience communion with God by bypassing creation, or the events of our own time, or our own being, for the transcendent God is discovered by penetrating to the heart. This is the temple that ultimately matters.

It is unclear who ‘these people’ are who are stalling on rebuilding the temple. The prevailing economic situation could well have been their key argument, as well as the impossibility of building anything equal to the grandeur of the temple that had been destroyed.

Haggai’s criticism is pointed. They are building for themselves. Surely they should build a place for their God (verse 4). He supports his argument by claiming that the hard times are a sign of YHWH’s displeasure at their failure to honour him (verses 5-6).

The command from God is given in verse 8. If they do God’s bidding that is coming to them through his prophet, YHWH will ‘take pleasure in’ their offering. This is a term used in the cult for God’s accepting a sacrifice (see Amos 5:22; Micah 6:7). The reconstructed temple will cause people to praise YHWH and so to honour him. Clearly, for Haggai, people’s behaviour matters to their God.

Verses 9-11 repeat the points already made in verses 4-6. They are experiencing drought (הָרֵב, ḥōreb), because they have left YHWH’s house in ruins (הָרֵב, ḥārēb).

Twice Haggai tells them to reflect on their situation (verse 5 and 7). In Hebrew the word translated here as ‘consider’ includes the word ‘heart’. They must penetrate beyond the superficial distractions of life, go to their heart, and there reflect, decide and act.

Four times in this short passage, Haggai speaks of God as ‘YHWH of hosts’ (verses 2, 5, 7 and 9). At a time when Judah is reduced in size as a small section of a vast and foreign empire, he is reminding the governor and the high priest of God’s power.

²Thus says YHWH of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild YHWH’s house.

³Then the word of YHWH came by the prophet Haggai, saying: ⁴Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?

⁵Now therefore thus says YHWH of hosts: Consider how you have fared. ⁶You 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 you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes.

⁷Thus says YHWH of hosts: Consider how you have fared. ⁸Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured, says YHWH.

⁹You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says YHWH of hosts. Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses.

¹⁰Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. ¹¹And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the soil produces, on human beings and animals, and on all their labours.

Building the Temple

¹²Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of YHWH their God, and the words of the prophet Haggai, as YHWH their God had sent him; and the people feared YHWH.

¹³Then Haggai, the messenger of YHWH, spoke to the people with YHWH's message, saying, I am with you, says YHWH.

¹⁴And YHWH stirred up 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; and they came and worked on the house of YHWH of hosts, their God,

¹⁵on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month.

We learn here that the governor and the high priest listened to Haggai's message from God, were profoundly moved by the awesome mystery of God's communicating with them in this way, and 'worked on the house of YHWH, their God'. They were joined by the 'remnant' (שְׁאֵרִית, š'ērît). This often refers to those who returned from exile (see Jeremiah 43:5).

God's second message to them through Haggai was a simple and reassuring one: 'I am with you' (verse 13). The note in verse 15 tells us that this second message was conveyed a little less than a month after the first.

In verse 13 Haggai is called a 'messenger' (מְלַאֲכָי, mal'ak). As in verse 1 we are being told that Haggai's words convey God's. It was this message of assurance from 'their God' (3 times in verses 12 and 14), that 'stirred the spirit' of the remnant and their leaders to work on rebuilding the temple. The word 'work' (מְלַאֲכָה, m'la'kâ) echoes the sound of 'messenger'.

This third message is dated a month after the previous one. It coincides with the seventh day of the New Year Festival, the pilgrimage feast of Tabernacles (Sukkôt), which celebrates creation, and God's presence in his city bringing blessings on his people. It celebrated also Solomon's dedicating of the temple (see 1Kings 8:1-13, 62-66).

As in 1:1 God's word comes 'by' the prophet (chapter 2 verse 1). This time, besides addressing Zerubbabel and Joshua and the remnant, Haggai also offers assurance to 'the people of the land' (verse 4) – probably a reference to those who had stayed behind in Judah during the Exile.

From verse 3 it is clear that, though the temple was being rebuilt, it could not compare with the splendour of Solomon's temple. Haggai asks them to put aside their disappointment, for YHWH assures them, once again: 'I am with you' (verse 4; see 1:13). Things were grim in Egypt, and during the long years of the wilderness journey. But YHWH is the one who freed them and who led them to the Promised Land. His spirit abides among them. They must not fear. YHWH will keep his promises to them (verse 5).

Verses 6-9 give them another reason not to lose heart. Their God is all-powerful (YHWH of hosts). He will 'fill this house with splendour' (verse 7). The temple they are rebuilding appears poor to them now, but it will surpass the beauty of the old temple, when the 'treasures of the nations shall come' (verse 7). This would seem to include the treasures of the former temple that have been taken and distributed among the nations (see 2Kings 25:13-17). God will see that they are returned. Haggai may also intend to include the nations themselves, coming with their treasures to adore YHWH in this renewed temple.

God will give 'prosperity' (שָׁלוֹם, šālôm) to them in it (verse 9). In this temple they will enjoy fullness of peace and prosperity.

¹⁵In the second year of King Darius, ^{2:1}in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of YHWH came by the prophet Haggai, saying: ²Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say,

³Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? ⁴Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says YHWH; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says YHWH; work, for I am with you, says YHWH of hosts, ⁵according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.

⁶For thus says YHWH of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; ⁷and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendour, says YHWH of hosts.

⁸The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says YHWH of hosts. ⁹The latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former, says YHWH of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says YHWH of hosts.

¹⁰On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of YHWH came by the prophet Haggai, saying:

¹¹Thus says YHWH of hosts: Ask the priests for a ruling: ¹²If one carries consecrated meat in the fold of one's garment, and with the fold touches bread, or stew, or wine, or oil, or any kind of food, does it become holy? The priests answered, "No."

¹³Then Haggai said, "If one who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?" The priests answered, "Yes, it becomes unclean."

¹⁴Haggai then said, So is it with this people, and with this nation before me, says YHWH; and so with every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean.

¹⁵But now, consider what will come to pass from this day on. Before a stone was placed upon a stone in YHWH's temple, ¹⁶how did you fare? When one came to a heap of twenty measures, there were but ten; when one came to the winevat to draw fifty measures, there were but twenty. ¹⁷I struck you and all the products of your toil with blight and mildew and hail; yet you did not return to me, says YHWH.

¹⁸Consider from this day on, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month. Since the day that the foundation of YHWH's temple was laid, consider:

¹⁹Is there any seed left in the barn? Do the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree still yield nothing? From this day on I will bless you.

The dating puts this message in December 520, two months after the previous one.

Haggai is instructed to put two questions to the priests for a 'torah', that is, a ruling according to law. The first question (verse 12) relates to the extent to which other objects are drawn into the realm of the holy by contact with something that has been consecrated. The priests declare that indirect contact does not make holy. The second question (verse 13) is the opposite. Does something that is ritually unclean contaminate what it touches. The answer is that it does. Haggai's point is that they cannot expect to offer clean sacrifices to God on an altar and in a place that has been desecrated (verse 14). The altar had to be re-consecrated.

Verses 15-19 state that 'from this day on' things are going to be different. 'This day' is the day of the consecration of the foundation stone of the renewed temple (verse 15).

Till now times have been hard. 'From this day' they are assured of YHWH's blessing (verse 19).

This fifth message is communicated through Haggai on the same day as the previous one (verse 20, compare verse 10).

It is to be addressed to the governor (verse 21). He is being given the assurance that he should not fear the great empires of this world. His warrior God (YHWH of hosts) is more than powerful enough to deal with them (verses 21-22).

The final words are addressed personally to Zerubbabel, whom God calls ‘my servant’ (verse 23). God has a special mission for him, which requires Zerubbabel’s obedient acquiescence.

A signet ring (חֹתָם, ḥôtām) is a treasured possession that authenticates documents as belonging to the authority to whom the ring belongs. God is choosing Zerubbabel as his treasured possession and vesting him with his authority.

²⁰The word of YHWH came a second time to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month:

²¹Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, ²²and 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 fall, every one by the sword of a comrade.

²³On that day, says YHWH of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, son of Shealtiel, says YHWH, and make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you, says the YHWH of hosts.

