

Haggai: A Very Brief Overview

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The Old Testament is a very interesting section because in it are hid many treasures pointing to the new. That which lies veiled in the Old Testament is unveiled in the New now as the actual rather than the shadow. As a collection of 39 books of varying sizes, genre, content and message, it makes an amazing collection of books, a vast array as it were, baffling the mind, written over a period of 1000 years, with amazing cohesive unity portrayed. While for the casual reader, the fascination in that Testament may not at first strike them, as they carefully navigate their way in it, soon discover many pearls, rubies and precious truths hidden in every corner. Soon, they observe redemptive history as it unfolds right from Genesis through to Malachi before a giant leap of 400 years or so is taken to start the New Testament in Matthew, although some argue that this starts much later in that gospel. Be that as it may, the Old Testament is a self-explanatory, self-evident and self-defending collection of books.

However, as intimated, the Testament is a collection of different books with different slants. Some books are described as “books of the law”, while others are Historical, poetic, writings or Prophetic. It is this latter set of books that captures our attention at this stage before delving on into one book-Haggai as well elucidated by Pastor David Legge, in a four-part sermon series on the book, very insightful indeed. We are indebted to his work and have heavily relied on his work in this overview.

Prophecy, as often is the case is usually confused with the Apocalypse because they seem to have some common or similar traits. Though having shared traits, they are none the less different in some respects. Prophecy has to do with fore or even forth telling God’s word. In fore telling, the speaker, usually a human agent, undertakes to deliver God’s previously unknown revelation to a target audience as Yahweh would want it. The said prophecies are predictive often revealing things yet to happen far into the future with amazing precision and accuracy. Some have been fulfilled while others are yet to be fulfilled in the fullness of time, hence the need to grasp their message so as position ourselves properly. The Prophetic books are therefore documents showing a written record of what God said, intended or carried out. The message is contextual but often has a long term implication on the congregation, set of people or individual. Thus, it is important to appreciate that prophecies in the Bible were revealed to specific appointed Prophets who spoke at different times in the History of Israel and

Judah. We may further say that a good grasp of these facts, sorts out a number of problems or errors we often experience. These Prophets are divided into Minor and Major. They are dubbed “Minor or Major” not in because of weighted importance or message content they carry but rather the length of their prophecies. For Instance, Isaiah is called a ‘major’ prophecy because it is a long book containing prophecies by one Prophet in a given time frame while Jonah is called a “minor prophet” because his prophecy is comparatively short. Yet, the message of each of these is equally weighty as the origin and source is the same.

Now, it is also key for us to appreciate that the prophecies are classified further with respect to when they were given. For instance, some are before the exile of Judah or Israel, others are revealed during the Babylonian/Assyrian captivity while others belong to the period after the exile when the Jews returned to their land having been granted liberty so to return and rebuild the Temple as well as Jerusalem by Persian authorities (i.e. Cyrus or Darius).

Examples of books before the exile (Pre-exilic) are Hosea & Amos (to Israel), Lamentations, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Zephaniah and Habakkuk (To Judah) while those during the exile in Babylon include Ezekiel and Daniel. Others (though not prophetic in nature) highlight the Persian epoch including part of Daniel, Nehemiah, Esther or Ezra. The post exilic prophecies given in Jerusalem include Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. Clearly, we can see that the last books probably in the Old Testament in Testament in Prophetic terms are the three, Haggai included. These books make much sense once their background is appreciated, understood and why they make certain bold pronouncements or claims.

Our focus is the Minor Prophecy of Haggai as told in 520BC, 16 years after the initial work of building the Temple had stopped (Ezra 4:21, 24). Haggai’s message is simple and straight forward, given over a three month period bequeathing four separate messages. The first was given on 29th August, then next in October and the last two given on the same day in December (Legge). The message of the book is simply to encourage the Jews that were seriously discouraged to pick up from where they left off ensuring the work is done. And for sure, after urging them on, the people pick up and finally complete the Temple (*Zerubbabels’* or the Second Temple) followed by dedication (Ezra 6: 16-17). The Prophets’ message over the three month period is broken down and summarized into the following as subdivided by Legge:

Build God’s House

After initial opposition from the Samaritans, wrong report to the King, the Jews had been stopped from doing the work. However, an earlier monarch (i.e. Ezra 1:1-3; 5:13-17; Cyrus) had actually sanctioned the work which was later stopped.

However when the work resumes after encouragement from the Prophet, there is further opposition but providentially, the reigning monarch (Ezra 4:24; 6:7-11; Darius) gives his blessing because he valued the Tribal or conquered national liberty to worship (as long as they were willing obedient vassals, paying due homage and taxes, Ezra 4:13, 19) unlike the Samaritans who attempted to stir some needless fear. Additionally, the monarch observes the inalterable law of the Medes (Daniel 6:8). The work begins in earnest but only after the Prophet, in a sense, rebukes the people. The reason for their complacency could be attributed to two reasons: They had misunderstood the 70 year exile prophecy thinking that that period had not yet elapsed. And as such they sat back. Second, they had become pre occupied with themselves, building houses and in the process neglecting the house of God, hence the challenge, as to why they lived in panelled houses while the Temple remained in ruins. They were materialistic, just as many of us are wont to be in these degenerate days.

The Best is Yet to Be

As they build the Temple, some among the people that returned from diaspora had seen the previous Temple, in its former splendour. Solomon's Temple was a magnificent piece and so when the foundation is done, some weep while others rejoice (Ezra 3:10-12). But in this book, God states that the rebuilt Temple will be even better and more magnificent. At that stage, this seemed impossible and not probable because the following were missing:

- a. The Ark of God
- b. Holy fire
- c. Shekinah glory
- d. Spirit of Prophecy and
- e. The Urim or God's guidance

These probably made some weep sore but God encourages and comforts them that if they obey, greater things will be in future.

Bringing God's Blessing Down

God promises that He will bless Jews if they obey Him. He states "*From this day, I will bless you*". This must have greatly encouraged the hearers but God only acts when we respond to His bidding, dictates, stipulation and law. That said, He acts in sovereign ways and yet in all cases for our good. Certainly, Haggai's audience must have been greatly motivated to serve God better and see His

promises pour out in due course. Leaving captivity was a blessing in itself but when the Temple is re-built and worship restored, God is pleased with correct worship. They Jews were stirred to do just that through their leaders Zerrubabbel (Civil leader) and Joshua the High Priest. God will not bless a work if sin is present, hence the need to obey Him with all our hearts, soul and body. We should loathe sin, touch no unclean garment and rend our hearts not our garments. Holiness and sincerity was key if God was to bless them. Sin impedes much progress, the earlier we discard it, the better then we shall see unprecedented showers of blessing.

His day will come

Finally, Haggai does encourage the people that God's day of final blessing will come in the near and distant future. He is *Jehovah-Tsabaoth* and will certainly respond at his own time. Though some may ignore, despise or hate the word of God, turning to all manner of wickedness, His day will come. We need to be ready!

Conclusion

We trust it has abundantly been made evident that the apparently confusing book of Haggai is in fact full of meat and drink for the soul. It highlights human tendencies to slide back, sin or become inward looking while ignoring what God has said should be done. Although the opposition may be there, it is often not that great to warrant a stoppage of God's work. If we walk in the Spirit, hear God's voice and resolve to conquer all in His name, we can achieve far much more than hitherto has been the case. It is also clear that past success and glory sometimes can dim the present or make us lose heart if not carefully and meticulously handled. The lesson is never to despise the day of small beginnings because fresh success is at embryo stage and may soon bud, shattering all our fears, faintheartedness and reservations. We must try the Lord and see His blessings pour out of Heaven than hitherto has been the case, little yield after much toilsome labour. Oh that the Church of God might flee idolatry and embrace Christ!

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