

Haggai's Edifice Complex: Poverty's only cause and solution?

Haggai mentions five dates between August and December of the year 520 BC, thus setting a precise historical timeframe for his book (Hag 1:1,14-15; 2:1,10,18). The prophet encourages the people to reconstruct the Temple (1:1-11), which was finished quite rapidly (in 516 BC.; see Ezra 6:15-18), he offers priestly instructions on the clean and the unclean (only clean people and things were permitted to enter the Temple), and he concludes with (messianic?) promises to Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah (3:20-23).¹

1 The poor and poverty. Following Cyrus' decree (539) and the return of a remainder of exiles to Judah, economic circumstances were not favorable. The newly returned suffered under droughts, bad harvests and inflation. Furthermore, social tensions arose due to property rights, since in the meantime, poor non-exiles had been occupying terrains that had originally belonged to owners who had been exiled.² In spite of adverse circumstances, an elite among those who had returned had managed to build luxurious houses (1:4,9,12; 2:4), while the great majority remained in poverty. Haggai denounces the leaders and that elite as well, for not having honored Yahweh by rebuilding the Temple (in ruins since the destruction of Jerusalem in 587/6). It was due to this disregard, as Haggai insists, that the whole community suffered a state of relative poverty:

You sow much, but you harvest little; you eat, but never feel satisfied; you drink, but you stay thirsty; you clothe yourselves, but you do not feel warm; and he who earns wages, puts his wages in a bag with holes (Hag 1:5-6).

What is more, droughts and famines sent by Yahweh had contributed to this impoverishment:

Because my house is in ruins, while you busy yourselves each with his own house....that is why the rain does not fall for you, nor does the earth yield its products for you. It is I who brought a drought upon the fields.... (Hag 1:9-11).

Before you started building the Temple, how did you fare? When one came to a heap of twenty measures of grain, he found only ten; and when one came to a wine vat to draw fifty jugs' worth, he found only twenty. It was I who destroyed the fruit of all your efforts with plagues and hail, yet you did not return to me. I, Yahweh, affirm this. Today, twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, all the foundations of my Temple have been laid. Well, you will see that from today onwards there will be no lack of grain in the barn. The vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not given fruit yet, but from this day on I will bless you (Hag 2:15-20).

Obviously, an analysis of Haggai concerning the cause and the solution of poverty turns out to be quite simple, and the book only focuses on the requirement to honor Yahweh with the rebuilding of the Temple (his "house"). The prophet does not denounce the rich, with their fancy houses, for not having shared with the poor, or for having made use of oppressive legal and judicial mechanisms to exploit the poor—he only recriminates them for not

having rebuilt the Temple. Neither does Haggai consider the overall "economic pie" as something static that needs to be distributed more justly, but rather—almost in a capitalist vein—he gives thought to how that pie can be made to grow, for the benefit of all, thanks to the rebuilding of the Temple (→ Malachi 3:6-12, where something similar is said concerning tithes). This is a very simple vision—it seems almost superficial and fundamentalist (cf. → John 4:19-24). We can compare it with the way Mariology functions in Latin America, from the times of conqueror Hernán Cortez up to Pinochet.

Argentinian theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid characterizes the virgin appearances in her home country, similar to those in other Latin American countries:

They tend to come barefoot from the Heavens but always require the construction of temples. One wonders how the Virgin Mary has not become the patroness of architects, engineers and masons in the continent since she has supported their industry so much. Yet she never demands houses for the poor to be built, and has never said 'My children, I want a free school (or a hospital) to be built on this site'; but temples for her statues and medals to be coined are obsessively demanded from the poor, who make collections and donate what they can for such purposes.... There has never been a single apparition of the Virgin in Latin America condemning abuses of human rights or exploitation.³

2 Women. In his five oracles, Haggai makes no mention to any woman (cf. the vision of the woman and the corn measure in → Zech 5:5-11). However, the prophet denounces the well-to-do with the following words:

"These people say that it is still not time to rebuild the Temple. Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in luxurious houses while my Temple lies in ruins?"

In that patriarchal society, it was doubtlessly not only the males, but perhaps particularly their wives (with their life centered on the home and on caring for the children) who insisted on such priorities. Women could be prophetesses, but not priestesses, and for a great part of their life they were not permitted to set foot within the Temple due to various impurities (menstruation, or the time after the birth of a child, or after having prepared corpses for burial, etc.).

3 Sexual minorities. Haggai appears to be an unmarried prophet, similarly to the shamans and spiritual leaders of other cultures, who are usually single. He addresses the High Priest Joshua, and Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, chosen by the king of Persia, Darius I (521-486 BC), and those dwellers of Jerusalem who are affluent. In the Book of Haggai, we find no married couples and no "families"—only "houses" (→ Acts), either of Yahweh (the Temple) or of the people. In such patriarchal households a married male might live with wife, concubines, children, slaves and assorted relatives, but many households consisted exclusively of sexual minorities (→ Romans 16). Haggai's book reminds us that the state of purity or impurity had nothing to do with sin, but was rather a disqualifying factor for entering the Temple during ritual impurity (→ Romans 12:4-27, where Paul qualifies certain Gentile sexual practices not as sinful, but as "uncleanness").

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¹ See the Introductions in NISB, NOAB and JSB; David Pleins 2001:397-400.

² Beth Glazier-McDonald 1992/98:243

³ Althaus-Reid 2001:60