



# **The Temple Motif in the Book of Haggai: A Call for Theocentric Perspective and Priorities in the Post Modern and Technological World**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The temple motif in the Book of Haggai offers timeless truths that remain relevant to every generation of its readers. The Jews, coming from their exile, initially did fairly well in rebuilding their city and their temple in Jerusalem. However, things turned from good to bad when the experience of perennial hardships, economic considerations, and self-centeredness affected the lives of the Jewish returnees. Not only did the Jews lost their interest in rebuilding the temple, but their theocentric perspective had been lost and was replaced by misdirected priorities. It was in this setting that Haggai delivered his message. Utilizing exegetical method and synthetic analysis of the Book of Haggai, this study presents the theological concept of the temple theme in Haggai and relates it to the contemporary time.

The purpose of this study is to find parallel concepts that make the message of the Book of Haggai relevant to the present time. The contemporary period that is characterized by moral, political, and economic chaos seems to diminish Christian's sense of the sovereignty and presence of God who is able to provide during difficult times. On the other side is the continuous resurgence of post modernism, secularism, human-centered ideology, and rapid advance in technology that leads the present generation to a paradigm shift from God-centered way of life to self-centeredness. Generations belonging to the "Millennials," "Generation X," and "Generation Z," that dominate the present era appear to share some basic commonalities - they are digital natives, immersed in technology, internet enthusiasts, and rigorously preoccupied by personal achievements. These mindset appear to place religion at the backseat.

This study found out that the temple motif in the Book of Haggai assures every Christians that God does not leave His people during difficult time. However there is a call for decisive action to make God the center of their life and their priorities. Positive response to the message of Haggai has a far reaching repercussion - God's blessings in the present life and the eschatological hope in the coming Kingdom of God.

**Keywords:** Temple Motif, Millennials, Theocentric Perspective, God's Sovereignty, Eschatological Hope.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The writings of the post-exilic prophets reveal the importance of the Temple among the Jews in the post-exilic era. (Clines, 1993). Peter Ackroyd highlights the significance of the temple

to the religious life of the Jews, their worship and their religious expectations. He points out that “without a properly-built temple, that is a ritually correct place for the worship of God, such worship is impossible. This is not because God is thought of as being limited to the temple, but because this is what He has chosen.” (Ackroyd, 1972).

Prior to their exile the life of the Jews revolved around the temple in Jerusalem. However, the proceeding events, particularly their seventy year captivity had made great impact in their nation and their lives. Because of exile the Jews lost their national, religious, and cultural identity. (McKenzie, 2011). They saw their city and temple completely destroyed.

After the long period of captivity, when King Cyrus of Persia gave permission to the Jews to return to their own land, the Jewish people came face to face with the tragic results of their captivity and exile. Upon their arrival to their homeland they saw the devastation of their city. Jerusalem was reduced to rubble, many Jews were still scattered to foreign lands, the temple of Solomon was in ruin, and worship had ceased.

The exile and the destruction of the first temple had been seen by the Jews in more than physical term. Eric Baker rightly points out that the captivity and exile to a foreign land is “more than physical separation from the Promised Land; It was an exile from the presence of God as the temple was the heart of Israel.” (Baker, 2015). In the same line of thought, Shemaryahu Talmon sees the exile of the Jews as “entailing remoteness from God.” (Talmon, 2001). This prevailing belief of the remoteness from God had been carried over by the returning Jews after the captivity. (Piotrowski, 2017). The messages of the post exilic prophets particular Haggai addressed the issue of God’s presence that called for the rebuilding of God’s temple.

Through the prophetic ministry of Haggai, the Jewish returnees, both leaders and people were motivated to rebuild the ruined city and their temple. The earnest efforts of Haggai served to arouse the Jews to rebuild the house of the Lord. With the positive response of the Jews, the temple had been rebuilt as depicted in Ezra 1-6.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Factors That Contributed to a Pessimistic Attitude of Rebuilding the Temple of God**

Haggai was the earliest prophet of the post exilic restoration of Judah. His book shows a strong devotion to the temple. The fourfold prophetic utterances of the book in verse 1:1-15; 2:1-9; 10-19; 20-23) show that the temple theme occupies a central place in the book since all these prophetic utterances center on temple issues. (Assis, 2008). The first chapter of

Haggai contains the prophet's strong appeal to rebuild the temple in the midst of the Jews' indifferent attitude. The setting is crucial as the Jews became disinterested in the reconstruction of the house of the Lord (cf. Hag. 1:2). The message of the Lord in the first chapter of Haggai primarily deals with the Jew's lack of enthusiasm to continue the rebuilding of the temple. Haggai's first prophetic message is an urgent call to build the house of the God. (Assis, 2007)

The prophetic word was given to prophet Haggai in the second year of King Darius, about twenty years after the return from Babylon. The word of the Lord was addressed to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, and Joshua the high priest. The historical data in the Book of Ezra shed light to the historical background prior to and during the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah. Around 538 BC, Cyrus King of Persia issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple (cf. Ezra 1:2-4). Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, around 50,000 Jews went back to their homeland and started to rebuild the temple. After two years (536 BC), the foundation of the temple had been laid with rejoicing among the returnees except those old men, priests and Levites who had seen the first temple (Ezra 3:8-13). However, their initial success and the progress of temple reconstruction aroused the opposition of the Samaritans and their surrounding neighbors. These enemies of the Jews exhausted all means to stop the project and successfully put the work into halt until the second year of Darius (520 BC, cf. Ezra 4:1-5:24). This historical background explains the attitude of the Jews to rebuild the house of the Lord. The Jews' excuses for not building the temple of the Lord as mentioned at the beginning of Haggai's preaching (Hag. 1:2) are based on the combination of three prohibiting factors -economic, political, and religious. (Assis, 2007)

In the economic viewpoint, the Jews upon their return saw the desolation of their city and the difficulties surrounding them. Life was not easy for the returning Jews as they beheld the ruined city and the destroyed temple. The enthusiasm that they initially had to rebuild the temple (cf. Ezra 3:8-13) was replaced by pessimism upon seeing and experiencing the suffering and economic difficulties attending their work. Such experience plus the opposition of their neighbors led them to conclude that the "time has not come, even the time for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt" (Hag 1:2 NASB).

The returning Jews were all aware that on top of their economic situation, the political status of their nation is still far from the ideal. (Carter, 1999). The Persians rule over them and their governor – Zerubbabel does not have much authority except those granted him by the

ruling empire. All around them are hostile neighbors whose desire is not favorable to the Jews. Both the economic and political factors affected their religious view as well. The Jewish returnee thought that the time to rebuild the house of God has not yet come. The prophecy of Jeremiah regarding the restoration of God's people to their land had either been misinterpreted or doubted. As a result, there was pessimism whether God was with them in their endeavor to build the house of the Lord.

Confounding these problems was their personal desire to prioritize their own interests above the need of rebuilding God's house. Haggai 1:3,4 implies the personal prosperity and comfort of the Jews as they were living in their complete and paneled houses. Instead of prioritizing the reconstruction of the temple the Jews began to work for their own economic security which the Lord through the prophet Haggai strongly rebuked.

### **The Temple as Assurance of God's Presence**

One basic theological insight that Haggai contributed to the temple concept during the post-exilic period is the urgency and necessity to have the temple of God rebuilt. In other words, Haggai strongly advocates the rebuilding of God's house because it was unthinkable and intolerable for the post-exilic Jews to live in their land without the temple of the Lord. This concept had not been emphasized more by the prophets of the pre-exilic era. Assis considers the temple perception in the book of Haggai as urgent and necessary as an innovation to address the immediate need of the time. (Assis, 2008). The message of Haggai, urgently calling the Jews to continue rebuilding the temple of God are based on three grounds; first, to arouse the Jews from their spiritual lethargy; second, to strongly teach them of prioritizing the cause of God (building the temple) over their own personal interests; third and more important, is to assure them of God's presence in their midst. (McDonald and Hulster, 2013). The very presence of the temple in their midst assures them that God is with them. (Clements, n.a.). This assurance of God's presence echoes a number of passages in the Old Testament; first, the promise of God's presence was given in the command to build the tabernacle in the wilderness (cf. Exod. 25:8); second, the promise of strength for doing the work echoes God's words to Joshua when he led Israel into the promised land (cf. Hag. 1:13; 2:4; Josh. 1:1); third, God's presence was assured to Solomon when he was given the heavy responsibility of building the first temple (1 Chron. 28:10; 20); fourth, and the enabling power of God's Spirit was assured to Moses and the seventy when they were empowered by the Spirit to lead Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness (cf. Hag. 2:5; Numbers 11:16-17; 11:25).

With the favorable response of the Jews to the message of Haggai, God assures them that He is with them (1:13; 2:4). The promise “I am with you” is at the core of the A, B, B, A chiastic structure of the Book of Haggai.

- (1) The Negative Effect of Unbuilt House (1:1-11)
  - (A) The Lord’s Presence (I am with you) to Energize the Work (2:12-15)
  - (B) The Lord’s Presence (I am with you) Assures the Future Glory (2:1-9)
- (2) The Positive Effect of the Rebuilt House (2:10-23).

Thus, in the first part of God’s message through Haggai, the building of the temple is closely linked to a major theological theme – the theology of God’s presence. Paul R. House rightly points out that the “temple signifies God’s presence (1:12-14; cf. Ex. 32-34; 1 Kings 8) and demonstrates commitment to the Lord.” (House,1998).

The theological understanding of God’s presence in the midst of hardships of life has a timeless significance. The experience of suffering and hardships is always part of human existence. Data shows that the acceleration of human suffering from various causes has become more prominent especially in South Asia. (Lyons, 2012) Many Christians struggle for their faith as they try to reconcile their belief in the loving and omnipotent God with their experiences of pain and lost. These struggles and dilemma have been manifested through the large body of literature about suffering produced throughout the centuries. (Lewis, 1940). The Book of Haggai speaks to Christians who face ordeals in their lives. The presence of God assures every Christian that God could be trusted in times of spiritual and material crisis. Although no physical temple should be built at present, the principle of prioritizing and trusting God in the time of crisis is of utmost importance. Haggai made it clear that the covenant blessings of God are reserved to those who make God their priority and the object of their trust.

### **The Temple and God’s Covenant of Blessings and Curses**

Haggai’s temple messages associate the obstacles of building the house of God with the spiritual laxity, indifference and misguided priorities of the Jews. While in the national level, the Jews did not fare well economically, in their private lives there were traces of material prosperity. (Huntington, 2005). The Jews made sure that they dwell in paneled houses while the temple of God remained in ruin. For this reason, curses hovered over them, God had sent

drought and meager harvests, making economic conditions deplorable. In the blessings and curses stipulated in the covenant, Moses had explicitly pointed out to the people of Israel that failure to keep the covenant would bring about calamities and disasters, and eventually captivity (Deut 28:38-40). (Porter, 2003). The blight and mildew stated in Haggai 2:17 are particularly included as covenant curses in Deuteronomy 28:22. Rather than giving priority of bringing into completion the building of the temple, the returned Jews were beautifying their own houses and letting the Lord's house remained in ruin ( Hag 1:4 ). Twice in chapter 1 God through Haggai appealed to the people to consider their ways (1:5, 7). God through Haggai explicitly enumerated the curses of abandoning the temple construction and this is very much reminiscent to the curses mentioned in Deut. 28. (Tarazi, 1979)

You have sown much, but harvest little; you eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes. You look for much, but behold, it comes too little; when you bring it home, I blow it away. "Why?" declares the LORD of hosts, "Because of My house which lies desolate, while each of you runs to his own house. Therefore, because of you the sky has withheld its dew and the earth has withheld its produce. I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands. (Hag 1:6, 9-11)

Deeply stirred by Haggai's strong words, the people turned away from their laxness and with one accord resume the work on the temple. Zerubbabel and Joshua led the people to obey the word of the Lord through Haggai (Hag. 1:14 ). God promised that "from this day on I will bless you" (2:19). Following the expressed command of the Lord brings about God's blessing, as stated in Haggai 2:6-8;

For thus says the LORD of hosts, "Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land. 'And I will shake all the nations; and they will come with the wealth of all nations; and I will fill this house with glory,'" says the LORD of hosts. "The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine," declares the LORD of hosts.

The people's willingness to obey the voice of the Lord and building His house in their midst bring both material and spiritual blessings. Harvests would once again be in abundance as the drought and famine would come to an end. Haggai's oracle links the temple with the blessings and curses of the covenant written in the Pentateuch, thus emphasizing the need of obedience to the expresses will of Yahweh. (Andrews, 2011)

Haggai's consistent appeal to the people to consider their ways (cf. Hag. 1:5, 7) makes a huge impact to every generation that shifted their God-centered view to self and material-centered focus. This is particularly true with the present generation characterized as career oriented, multitaskers, gadget enthusiasts, with high level of skepticism, and grown up with highly sophisticated media and computer environment. God has oftentimes been relegated at the backseat. The message of Haggai appeals to these generations to consider their ways and re-focus their priorities from material-self to the Divine.

### **The Eschatological Role of the Temple During the Post Exilic Era (Hag. 2:6-9, 20-23)**

The message of Haggai articulates the relationship between the physical temple and the Jewish eschatological expectations. The eschatological hope of the Jews is to be defined in two terms - the start of the new order of things (new age), and the future. (Lecureux, 2017). In the minds of the Jews the prime indication of the setting of the new order that leads into its future hope is the restoration of the Jewish nation, both land and people, to its former Davidic glory. This eschatological element in Haggai has been termed as "realized eschatology." This realized eschatology of the temple assures prosperity, economic wealth, and peace embedded in the first three oracles of Haggai.

The second element of eschatology in Haggai is the futuristic eschatology. (Pettersen, 2010). It involves the upheaval of nations and its old order. It is universal in scope. There will be the setting of the Divine judgment in the shaking of heavens and the earth, the overthrowing and destructions of the kingdoms of the nations. (Kessler, 1987). This has been explicitly stated in Haggai 2:21-23.

Speak to Zerubbabel governor of Judah saying, 'I am going to shake the heavens and the earth. 'And I will overthrow the thrones of kingdoms and destroy the power of the kingdoms of the nations; and I will overthrow the chariots and their riders, and the horses and their riders will go down, everyone by the sword of another. "On that day," declares the LORD of hosts, "I will take you, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, My servant," declares the LORD, "and I will make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you," declares the LORD of hosts.

Twice in chapter two Haggai states that the Lord will shake the heavens and the earth (vv. 6, 21). Verse 7 then predicts that God "will shake all nations" and verse 22 speaks of overthrowing thrones and kingdoms. Hebrews 12:26 quotes Haggai 2:6 as it looks ahead to the second coming of Christ and the defeat of the kingdoms of this world.

Haggai presents in a distinct way the eschatological role of the physical temple. To this context, Haggai speaks of eschatology using the language of creation (cf. Hag. 2:6). At the same time the temple points forward to the hopeful future. The temple reconstruction, however small and insignificant it might seem to be, unites past and future of redemptive history in the present, creating hope amongst the Jewish people. Baker identifies six congruencies between the creation (protology) and the eschaton. First, both of them connote the concept of beginning, using similar terminologies; second, both of them stem from the sovereignty of the Lord; third, both of them are cosmic in scope; fourth, both of them are part of God's creative action; fifth, both of them are eternal; sixth, both creation and eschaton carry the theme of relationship, that is the restoration or renewing of relationship between God and humanity. (Baker, 2015). Without the temple being rebuilt no cosmic peace would arrive, because there would be no God Almighty in their midst, fulfilling his promise of cosmic peace spreading out from the temple.

### **The Temple of God and the Messianic Foreshadowing**

There are Messianic predictions in Haggai that are closely linked with the temple. Even though the splendor of the first temple far surpasses the glory of the second, God assures Zerubbabel, Joshua, and all the people that the glory of the second temple will be greater than the former for He will fill this house (the second temple) with glory; (House, 1998). "And I will shake all the nations; and they will come with the wealth of all nations; and I will fill this house with glory," says the LORD of hosts." (Hag. 2:7). The phrase *כְּלִי-הַגִּוִים* in Haggai 2:7 can be translated as "Desire of all Nations," or "wealth of all nations." The idea can be referring to a person or to treasure. Herbert Wolf presents a literary analysis of the usage of the phrase and came up with the conclusion that both translations are possible. (Wolf, 1976). However, Wolf points out that if the Messianic concept is to be followed, it would be tied nicely with verse 9 and verses 21-23. The greater glory of the second temple could only be made possible with the personal presence of God. New Testament context reveals that when the child Jesus was brought to the temple by Joseph and Mary, Simeon praises God by introducing Jesus as "A light of revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of your people Israel." (Luke 2:3). (Ibid, n.a.).

Verses 21-23 are eschatological predictions that go beyond the literal fulfillment in the person of Zerubbabel. (Schreiner, 2015). These verses are highly Messianic for they foretell the overthrowing and destruction of kingdoms and nations. The Messianic titles ascribed to



Zerubbabel as “servant,” and “chosen,” are titles attributed to the Messiah (cf. 2 Samuel 3:18; 1 Kings 11:34; Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12; Ezekiel 34:23-24; 37:24-25). As God’s “signet ring,” (cf. Hag. 2:23), Zerubbabel becomes a picture of the future Messiah, Jesus Christ, who will establish His people in the Promised Land (House, 1998), construct an even grander temple (cf. Zechariah 6:12-13), and lead the righteous in never-ending worship. (Kessler, 2006).

## **CONCLUSION**

The messages of prophet Haggai contributed much to the understanding of the significance of the temple in the lives of the post-exilic Jews. Not only did Haggai arouse the people from their spiritual lethargy and set their priorities to the work of God, the prophet also assures the post-exilic Jews that the temple is the evidence of God’s presence in their midst. Thus, the temple symbolizes both the presence of God and the people’s commitment to Him.

Even though there is no temple that ought to be built at present, the theological insight of Haggai points to an assurance that God is always with His people during difficult times. On the other side, the Book of Haggai rebukes those who make the things of God secondary in their lives. Haggai calls for a decisive action to value God over all competing claims of the world. Instead of placing confidence on what humans can do through internet and technology, the faith of God’s people should be centered on God.

Haggai shows a close link between the temple and the covenant. In the Pentateuch, God through Moses announced the blessings and curses of the covenant. Disobedience brings curses while faithfulness to Yahweh results to economic and spiritual well-being of the nation. The building of the house of the Lord signifies the people’s obedience to the expressed command of God that leads to God’s favor.

The post-exilic temple of God also points to the coming of the Messiah. Desire of nations (cf. Hag. 2:7) who will make the second temple greater and more glorious than the former is in person refers to the coming of Jesus the Messiah. The titles applied to Zerubbabel are Messianic titles that points to the greater person. Thus, Zerubbabel appears to be just a miniature representative of the coming Messiah.

Lastly, the temple of the Lord points to the eschatological hope of the post-exilic Jews. The setting in of the new age that leads to the hopeful future permeates the writings of the canonical and extra canonical prophets of the post-exilic era. The words of God in Haggai regarding the shaking of the nations and throwing down of the kingdoms (Hag. 2:6) had been

seen by the Jews as the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises to His people. In the New Testament, Heb. 12:26 alludes to Hag. 2:6 to emphasize the coming of God's kingdom that cannot be shaken.

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