

# OpenTheo

## September 19th: Haggai 1 & Matthew 14

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The Lord rebukes the people for neglecting his house. The feeding of the Five Thousand.

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## Transcript

Haggai chapter 1. 1. Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, Consider your ways. You have sown much, and harvested little. 2. You eat, but you never have enough.

You drink, but you never have your fill. 3. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. 4. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.

5. Thus says the Lord of hosts, Consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it, and that I may be glorified, says the Lord.

6. You looked for much, and behold it came to little.

And when you brought it home, I blew it away. 7. Why? declares the Lord of hosts, Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. 8. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce.

9. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors. 10.

Then Zerubbabel the son of Sheol-Tiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him.

And the people feared the Lord. 11. Then Haggai the messenger of the Lord spoke to the people with the Lord's message, I am with you, declares the Lord.

12. And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Sheol-Tiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. 13.

And they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king. Haggai the tenth of the book of the twelve is a post-exilic prophet who addressed the returned exiles in Jerusalem. Haggai is mentioned alongside Zechariah in Ezra chapter 5 verses 1-2, the two of them playing an important role in inspiring the rebuilding of the temple.

Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Sheol-Tiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them. Also in Ezra chapter 6 verses 14-15.

And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel, and by decree of Cyrus and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. And this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

Haggai is also mentioned in the Apocryphal books of 1st and 2nd Ezra. After the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC, the last remnants of the Neo-Assyrian Empire were defeated with the Egyptians, and the Near East came under the dominance of Nebuchadnezzar and the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Over the two decades that followed, the Babylonians were tightened their grip upon Judah, until in 586 BC Jerusalem was overthrown by the Babylonians, and there was a second great deportation of exiles, after the earlier one in 597 BC.

Some members of the nobility and royal family had been taken even earlier, Daniel along with them. For around 70 years, as the Lord had foretold by Jeremiah, the nations had been under the power of Babylon. In 559 BC Cyrus had succeeded his father Cambyses as the king of Persia.

His mother was the daughter of the king of Media. The Median Empire was the dominant

power over Persia at the time. The Bible, especially in the Book of Daniel, but also in Jeremiah and Isaiah, seems to present a Medo-Persian alliance, in which the Medes were initially the leading power, before the Persians became the more prominent of the two.

The figure of Darius the Mede in the Book of Daniel, not to be confused with the Darius that is spoken of at the beginning of Haggai chapter 1, is an important figure to account for, who causes problems for contemporary scholarship, which generally argues that the Persians subdued the kingdom of the Medes in their rebellion in 559 BC. The possible figure of Cyraxes II, Cyrus' uncle and mentioned in Xenophon, is likely central to the alternative reconstruction of the history, ruling as the elderly senior ruler of a Medo-Persian confederacy, with his nephew Cyrus leading the campaign against Babylon. At the time of his death, shortly thereafter, around 537 BC, the rule of the Medo-Persian empire passed from Cyraxes to Cyrus.

Cyrus encouraged the return of peoples to their homelands, and by his decree recorded in 2 Chronicles chapter 36 verses 22 and 23, supported the Jews in their return to Judah. Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing. Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, the Lord the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up. The story of the return is particularly recorded in the book of Ezra.

Ezra describes an earlier stage of the temple rebuilding during the reign of Cyrus, which was frustrated by opposition. The altar had been rebuilt and the foundation of the building had been laid, and there had been a recommencement of worship and festal celebration. However from that limited start in the early 530s BC, the building of the temple had been abandoned.

It was into this situation that Haggai the prophet spoke. Delivered chiefly over a period of under four months, Haggai's message would play a pivotal role in turning things around. We don't know much about Haggai.

His name is associated with feasts, and maybe the fact that the main events in his book are also connected with feasts, new moons and the feast of tabernacles is significant. Then again, perhaps it's not. We don't know whether he was one of the returned exiles for instance, or whether he was one of the poorer people who had remained in the land.

The book begins with the word of the Lord coming to Haggai in the second year of Darius the Persian, most likely 520 BC, almost two decades since the first return. That return had, according to the book of Ezra, occurred under the leadership of Sheshbazer, the governor of Judah at the time. In Ezra chapter 5 verse 16, we are informed that the

foundations of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem were laid by Sheshbazer.

The relationship between the figures and activity of Sheshbazer and Zerubbabel is debated. Some have maintained that they were the same person, although if this were the case, it is surprising that both of their names are Babylonian, in contrast to figures like Daniel and his friends or Esther, one of whose names is a Hebrew name and another is foreign. Another possibility is that Zerubbabel initially held an informal authority in the land as the Davidic heir, recognised by Sheshbazer the governor, but when Sheshbazer's period as governor ended, Zerubbabel enjoyed official authority too in that office.

The word of the Lord through Haggai is addressed to the ruler and to the high priest, encouraging them in the task of rebuilding the temple. Already in verse 1 we see the involvement of prophet, ruler and priest in the rebuilding process, the three principal offices in the land. The returnees were a small and beleaguered group in many respects and as they faced opposition from their neighbours, who used bribery, false reports and rumours to stir up official resistance to their efforts, were probably very aware of the vulnerability of their position.

This probably made it very easy for them to shrink back from the task of rebuilding the temple, not wanting to excite further opposition, keeping their heads down in order to appease the people around them. Perhaps, they reasoned, the divinely appointed time for the rebuilding of the temple had not yet come. Maybe the temple had to be left in ruins for a period of 70 years, corresponding to the 70 years of Babylonian dominance that had begun earlier.

As the temple was destroyed in 587 or 586 BC, some of them might have reasoned that there were still a few years to go. Alternatively, perhaps their argument was one of prudence, given their weak position and the opposition that they were facing. Perhaps it would be better to err on the side of caution and to leave the rebuilding for a few years, rather than provoking stronger neighbouring peoples.

The Lord, however, challenges the people's perspective through his prophet. If it is not time for them to rebuild his house, and they must leave his house in ruins, is it time for them to dwell in their own houses? They are clearly committed to the task of rebuilding more generally, having completed their own dwellings. Perhaps we are to see an indication that some of the people were even living in a measure of luxury, in a reference to panelling.

However, that word could be differently understood, to refer to covering in the form of ceilings and roofs. They haven't left their own houses unfinished, and surely many of the concerns that they appeal to for their neglect of the rebuilding of the temple must also apply to their broader building projects. While the rebuilding of the temple is a task in which they might have faced particular opposition, they betrayed their misplaced priorities in their readiness to abandon that task.

A number of the curses of the covenant concern the frustration of people's labours. Despite their efforts, they would enjoy scant reward for their exertions. Rather, many of the fruits of their work would be lost, devoured, or otherwise depleted.

By failing to give the Lord their best, they would not be blessed. The Lord wants his people to consider how their neglect of his house has served them. They have been frustrated in their labours, and it shouldn't be a mystery as to why.

We find similar curses of futility elsewhere in the Prophets, for instance in Hosea 4, verses 10 and 11. Or again in Isaiah 17, verses 10-11. The people are experiencing futility in every area of their lives, in their labour on the land, in their eating and drinking, in their clothing, and in their earning.

We should recognise the judgement of futility as a sort of intensification of the original curse, in which the land would yield thorns and thistles as man laboured upon it. The inverse of the curses of futility is of course the blessing upon faithfulness that we see in places like Deuteronomy 11, verses 13-15. The answer to their present plight is straightforward.

If they devote themselves to restoring the house of the Lord, they will find that the Lord will bless them in their other activities. The futility that they have been experiencing has been brought about by the Lord himself. However, once they mend their relationship with the Lord and put him first and his glory above their own comfort, ease, and security, they will discover that the blessing that follows will touch every area of their lives.

The people are experiencing futility in every area of their lives, where they have been experiencing frustration, unrewarded toil, futility and loss. As Deuteronomy 11 discusses, the land of Israel depended heavily upon the seasonal rains, which contrasted with the manner in which the land of Egypt, where they had formerly been, was irrigated. A key judgement of the covenant was the withholding of rain, as we see in Leviticus 26, verses 18-20.

And if in spite of this you will not listen to me, then I will discipline you again sevenfold for your sins, and I will break the pride of your power, and I will make your heavens like iron, and your earth like bronze, and your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land shall not yield its increase, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit. Perhaps the most notable drought, of course, came upon Israel during the reign of Ahab, according to the prayer of the prophet Elijah. However, the returned exiles in Haggai's day had also suffered a drought.

One aspect of the Feast of Tabernacles was prayer for rains, and considering that this message was delivered just a month before that feast, we might perhaps see this as preparing the people for that feast, at the end of which feast the prophetic message that opens chapter 2 was delivered. The people responded positively to the message of the

Lord by Haggai, fearing the Lord and heeding his rebuke. As the people responded to the message, the Lord also gave them assurance through Haggai of his blessing and presence with them in their labours.

As at the beginning of the Book of Ezra, verse 14 underlines the Lord's involvement in stirring up people to action, through the work of his prophetic word and by his spirit. Within 23 days of the Lord's first delivery of the message to Haggai, they were devoted once more to the rebuilding work. A question to consider, what are some of the different ways in which we see the Lord bringing people to action in this chapter? Matthew chapter 14 But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask.

Prompted by her mother, she said, Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter. And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother.

And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus. Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.

When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, This is a desolate place, and the day is now over. Send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.

But Jesus said, They need not go away. You give them something to eat. They said to him, We have only five loaves here and two fish.

And he said, Bring them here to me. Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

And they all ate and were satisfied, and they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.

And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came he was there alone. But the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them.

And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the

disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified and said, It is a ghost! And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid.

And Peter answered him, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water. He said, Come. So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus.

But when he saw the wind he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, Lord, save me! Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, O you of little faith, why did you doubt? And when they got into the boat the wind ceased, and those in the boat worshipped him, saying, Truly you are the Son of God. And when they had crossed over they came to land at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognised him they sent around to all that region and brought to him all who were sick, and implored him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment.

And as many as touched it were made well. Matthew 14 begins with the story of the death of John the Baptist, but it is introduced in a surprising way. Herod hears word of Jesus' miracles and actions, and then wonders whether John the Baptist has been brought back to life.

Then we hear the story of the death of John the Baptist, after which Jesus responds to hearing the news of the death of John the Baptist. It's an interesting way to tell us the story. It highlights the theme of resurrection.

Jesus is John the Baptist raised up again. And here we might think of the story of Elijah and Elisha, as the ministry of Elisha continues from the ministry of that of Elijah. Elisha is anointed with the spirit of Elijah.

He has the double portion of the spirit of Elijah, and continues his ministry, completing it. Likewise with John the Baptist, his ministry is a ministry of the desert that is completed by the ministry of Christ in the land. There are other themes of the ministry of Elijah and Elisha that are in play here.

Themes of widespread rejection, but also of a remnant. As we have already noted in studying this book, John the Baptist's story is very similar to that of Elijah. They're both people of the wilderness.

They're both dressed in similar garments. John the Baptist is one who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah. He's the Elijah that is to come.

And in all of these ways, there is an association between those characters. But here we have a story that brings out further associations. The story of Elijah and 1 Kings is dominated by a conflict with King Ahab and his manipulative wife Jezebel.

And here we have a similar pair, Herod and his wife Herodias, who are in conflict with

John the Baptist. Once again, there's a manipulative wife who's trying to spur her husband on to destroy the prophet. There's a further aspect of Old Testament background that might come to our mind at this point.

It's a story that has two key women who influence their husbands greatly. In that story, Ahasuerus the king offers up to half his kingdom to the woman who pleases him, Esther. Herod does the same thing.

Once again, it's at a feast. And Herodias is like an anti-mordecai to her daughter, who's an anti-Esther. She's someone who represents the polar opposite of Esther.

The character of Herodias might also remind us of Zeresh, who spurred Haman on in his attempt to kill Mordecai, the man who wouldn't bow to him. In Esther 5, verses 9, we read, And he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh. And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king.

Then Haman said, Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, It's a very similar dynamic that's playing out here. Haman, we should remember, is an Agagite, a descendant of Agag and a descendant of Amalek. Amalek sought to kill the Jews.

And Herod is an Idumean, a descendant of Edom, like Amalek. And maybe there's a connection between their two characters. The descendant of Esau is trying to kill the descendant of Jacob.

John, then, is Elijah. Jesus is Elisha. And Elisha, as one of his first miracles, performs the multiplication of loaves.

In 2 Kings 2, verse 42, 20 loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. And Elisha said, But his servant said, Jesus is a new Elisha, performing that multiplication of loaves, but on a much higher level. A multitude follows Jesus into the wilderness, where he gets his disciples to serve them food that's multiplied.

He's providing food in the wilderness, like the manna was provided in the wilderness. That's a connection that's particularly explored in the Gospel of Matthew. Each one of the Gospels records this particular miracle.

It seems to be especially important for them. There are five loaves and two fish. The five loaves, perhaps, connect with the five loaves of 1 Samuel, chapter 21.

In that chapter, fleeing from Saul, David comes to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest, and asks for some food for his men. He says, And the priest answered David, Having just heard about the death of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod, maybe we're supposed to connect Herod with Saul. Jesus, upon hearing about the death of John the Baptist,



withdraws to a deserted place, and the people follow him.

They're like the men around David as he flees from Saul. And he provides for them, as David provided for his men, with five loaves. There's no mention of the distribution of the fish in this particular account in Matthew.

Which, perhaps, is because Matthew wants us to connect it with what happens later on in the Gospel, which is the institution of the Lord's Supper. He looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds, and they all ate and were satisfied.

And later on, in chapter 26, verse 26, Jesus breaks the bread and gives it to his disciples, who give it to the crowd. We can maybe see there a pattern for liturgy in general, that Christ breaks the bread that he gives to his church through his ministers. That this is a pattern that's being foreshadowed in the events of the feeding of the 5,000.

The gathering up of the bread afterwards, the remainder of the bread, is an event given some significance. Every single one of the Gospels records the number of the baskets that are gathered up. And later on we're asked whether we saw the significance of this.

The 12 maybe suggest the connection with the 12 disciples themselves. Maybe it's a connection with Israel. Maybe we're supposed to see that they are sufficient for their ministry, and that there will be enough left over for each one of them.

Now one strange detail about this account that you may have noticed is that there are 5,000 men besides women and children. That's an interesting detail. It's not what you'd expect if you were going to feed a large number of people.

You'd expect all the people who are fed to be listed. But this suggests that there's a numbering according to some different principle. You number men only when you're numbering people for military rank, when you're numbering people for fighting.

In the Exodus there is this same language that's used in verse 37 of chapter 12. And the people of Israel journeyed from Ramesses to Succoth, about 600,000 men on foot besides women and children. And then later on we're told, And on that very day the Lord brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts.

And then in 13 verse 18, And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. Or in 50s. Now in the other Gospel accounts there are references to the meaning divided into 50s, which maybe underlines this point.

There is, as it were, the preparation of a military band within the wilderness. The story of the walking on the water follows this. And here we might once again see many Exodus themes.

The disciples are struggling in the water while Jesus is up on the mountain. And when evening comes he's there alone. But they are struggling with the waves and the sea which is all against them.

And in the fourth watch of the night, just before the dawn, he comes to them walking on the sea. They are terrified thinking it's a ghost. But he tells them not to be afraid, that it is him.

And then Peter asks to go out on the water. Now there are a number of details that we've probably already picked up on that trigger associations in our mind. Perhaps we've thought back to the story of the Red Sea Crossing, where they walk through the water.

And it's in the last watch of the night that they are finally delivered. As the dawn comes the Egyptians are drowned. Then as that event is recounted later on in scripture, in places like Psalm 77 verse 19, we read things like So what's taking place here might recall the event of the Red Sea Crossing and the Exodus.

Just as those early references to the feeding in the wilderness might remind us of the manna and other elements of that particular event. But I think the greatest thing we're supposed to associate this with is the event of Jesus' death and resurrection itself. We've just seen the institutions, as it were, of the Lord's Supper prefigured.

And now we have what comes next. Going out into the darkness, struggling in the darkness, and this battering of the winds and the waves, this testing time. And Christ seeming to be gone.

Christ then comes walking on the water. They think it's a ghost as he comes just as the morning watch is about to dawn. And then he greets them saying, not to be afraid, that it is him.

And in all of these ways we're seeing some anticipation of what's going to happen at the time of the resurrection. Their response at this point is to worship him and to declare that he is truly the Son of God. And that will be their response as well when the resurrection occurs.

Peter's stepping out onto the waves and coming towards Christ partly anticipates what he will do later on in his ministry to the Gentiles. But his faith here is faltering. And while it exceeds that of the other disciples, he still fails and he needs to be delivered by Christ.

A question to consider. How does the death of John the Baptist prefigure the death of Christ as it is told within the Gospel of Matthew?