

EZRA

Lesson 9, Chapter 5 continued

We'll continue today with the Book of Ezra; however we are in the midst of a substantial detour to look at the invaluable contributions that the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah made to the rebuilding of the Temple. These two Prophets were, predictably, bringing to the Jewish returnees the encouraging and the cautioning Word of God that was needed so desperately to readjust their motives and their priorities.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are almost entirely historical in their content; they list human events and outcomes. Thus we get the perspective of the human beings involved at various stages of rebuilding the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem, and repopulating the land of Judah with native Jews. Haggai and Zechariah, however, give us the divine, spiritual perspective. A long time ago, in our study of the Book of Genesis, I coined a term for this phenomenon of dual spheres of reality, the invisible spiritual and the visible physical, operating simultaneously and cooperatively: the Reality of Duality. And until and unless a human being recognizes this foundational and immutable governing dynamic established at the beginning by Our Creator, we shall forever operate with only a fraction of our available resources, and see our lives, our experiences and our world through but an incomplete, therefore altered, reality.

Therefore whereas we've spent much time establishing a timeline of historical events in Ezra, and trying to put historical activities in perspective and connecting each of the dots, the oracles of God from these 2 prophets affords us the opportunity to examine more of God's nature and His principles and how they affect His people and His enemies as well as mankind's historical trajectory.

Thus as Ezra chapter 5 opens, verse 1 explains that Haggai and Zechariah prophesied to the Judahites in the name of the God of Israel. And verse 2 tells us that as a result of God's oracles Zerubbabel, the leader of the Jewish people, and Yeshua, the High Priest, responded by actively beginning to build the Temple. The rebuilding project had been shelved for 35 years as a result of the constant social and political pressures exerted by various groups of local inhabitants, with the most vocal and antagonistic of the groups being the Samaritans. The Samaritans consisted of gentiles who had been forcibly moved from other nations in the Assyrian Empire into the former territory of the northern 10 Israelite tribes some 2 centuries earlier. And some of them had intermarried with the small fragments of Hebrews that had in various ways escaped deportation or were intentionally left behind to serve their Assyrian conquerors in one capacity or another.

The remaining Ephraim-Israelites had 400 years earlier fallen into a perverted form of worship because Jeroboam, the first king over the 10 northern tribes (after the civil war that tore the nation of Israel into two following King Solomon's death), decided that he wanted not only a political but a religious divide between his kingdom and Judah. Thus he ordered that a golden calf was built as a molten image of YHWH. An alternate and fraudulent priesthood modeled after the Jerusalem based priesthood was established, and also a Temple was built in Samaria.

So when the exiled Jews returned to Jerusalem with the mandate from Cyrus, King of Persia, to rebuild their House of God, they were immediately approached by a delegation of Samaritans who insisted that they be involved in all phases of rebuilding the Temple. They felt that they had an inherent right to be part of the process (meaning that they would also have participation in its operations and rituals), because of a belief that they worshipped the same God as the Jews. Zerubbabel unequivocally refused their offer.

This would be a good opportunity to again address the issue of how one identifies who God is, and when one is seeking or worshipping God just who it is they are seeking or worshipping. Sometimes it seems to us as though this issue was something faced only by ancient and/or primitive people. But this is a present problem in the 21st century, and a growing danger within our Christian institutions. And while a Theologian might want to nuance the matter far more than I do, the bottom line is that you can only know and identify God by means of his name and his attributes (that is, his nature, his character). Thus as concerns our story in Ezra, the moment the Israelites of the 10 tribes built that Golden Calf they assigned to Yehoveh a substantially different attribute than who he actually is. The moment that they created an unauthorized Priesthood, and built a different Temple in a place not chosen by YHWH as the place where His name was to be established, they fundamentally changed the attributes and commandments of the god they claimed to follow. Thus who the northern 10 tribes defined as God evolved into something fundamentally different than who He actually is according to His Torah, His prophets and to all of His Word. Once that happened, they found themselves worshipping a figment of their imaginings and something of their own creation, and not the God of the Bible. They were worshipping a false god even though they didn't think so.

Was that their intent; did they mean to create and worship a false god? It certainly doesn't appear so. But this is a profound object lesson that is as fundamental to our faith as is salvation in Christ. To remake God in our own image, no matter how high-minded and pragmatic and feel-good and modern that it might seem to us, is idolatry. Where can we find the true name, attributes and definition of who God is? In the Bible, first and foremost in the Torah. And if we stray from that definition by adding to it; or we subtract from it by disqualifying any of His attributes, or by over emphasizing some attributes while diminishing others; or if we change His name or assign Him new and different characteristics, we have made a grave error that will likely lead to eternal consequences. And that is because what we are actually worshipping is something other than God. I can say with confidence that all beings, human or spiritual, are essentially a sum of their attributes and characteristics. Thus we can no more look

at an Ape and declare that it is but another kind of human being, than we can look at a Golden Calf, or worship a European Jesus, or declare that the Lord has shed all other of His attributes than love and mercy and still call Him Yehoveh, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Open your Bibles to Haggai chapter 2. Last time we discussed chapter 1 at length and discovered that while the Jews felt that the severe opposition they faced that had brought the reconstruction of the Temple to a 35-year halt, was a reasonable cause for ceasing their efforts. And apparently they also felt that God would surely agree because as it says in verse 2:

CJB Haggai 1:2 "Here is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot says: 'This people is saying that now isn't the time- the time hasn't yet arrived for ADONAI's house to be rebuilt.'"

The Jewish people are assuming that because there is tough opposition to rebuilding the Temple, it's not time yet for it to happen. I suppose they expected that building the Temple would not be unlike their release from captivity. That is, they were just kind of living their lives, assimilating into the Babylonian culture, enjoying the favor that Nebuchadnezzar and his successors bestowed upon the Jews, when all of a sudden Persia conquers Babylon and almost overnight their captivity ends. And what did the Jews do to bring their release about? Nothing. God used Cyrus to punish and defeat Babylon and then to deliver His people. So when the exiles go back to Judah and find nothing but opposition and threats, I imagine their instincts were to sit back and wait (as they did up in Babylon) until God removed all the impediments to rebuilding the Temple and the holy city. However that is certainly not what the Lord intended and He tells them so in verse 4.

CJB Haggai 1:4 "So is now the time for you to be living in your own paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?"

Thus we have the physical human perspective clashing with the divine spiritual perspective. The good news is that Haggai's message achieved its purpose and the Jews got back to work, regardless of the fierce opposition to the project.

So let's re-read Haggai chapter 2 and see what came next.

RE-READ HAGGAI CHAPTER 2:1 - 9

In chapter 1, Haggai received his first oracle on the 1st day of the 6th month of Darius's 2nd year

in power. This would have been 521 or 520 B.C. Now about 50 days later towards the end of the 7th month Haggai received a second oracle. Just like the first one, he was to take this message to Zerubbabel and to the High Priest, however this time the message is also to go to the people. And a question begins the oracle: who among you saw the glory of the first house? That is, who of the returnees might have actually seen the Temple before Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it around 70 years earlier? Indeed some had personally seen Solomon's Temple before it became a ruin. They would have been children or young adults at the time but are quite elderly right now. And so the Lord continues with: it seems like nothing to you now, doesn't it? At the moment all that remained of the Temple was an aborted attempt at building a foundation, and just one look at made it obvious that it wasn't going to measure up to what had once been. This greatly disturbed especially those who had envisioned a new Temple that was as fabulous as the original; but now reality was setting in. Nonetheless the Lord encouraged them and told them that they had no reason to keep procrastinating; it was time to build....right NOW.....and that He was with them. Be mindful that these last words mean that God has ended His temporary abandonment of them, and that He is once again with the people of Judah.

Verse 5 says that the reason that He is with them is based on "the word that I promised in a covenant with you when you came out of Egypt." That "word" and covenant are what Moses received on Mt. Sinai and begins with:

^{CJB} **Exodus 20:1** *Then God said all these words:*

² ***"I am ADONAI your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the abode of slavery.***

"I am Adonai **YOUR** God....." YHWH is reminding Judah through Haggai that nothing has changed since the days of Moses. Yes, Judah went astray. Yes, Judah was punished with exile. Yes God turned His holy back on His people for the 70 years that He promised that He would in consequence of their unfaithfulness towards Him. But, through the prophet Jeremiah He also promised that He would take them back; He remains their God.

READ JEREMIAH 29:4 – 14

It was Jeremiah's words that the Jews in exile clung to. It was Jeremiah's words that Daniel keep at the forefront of his mind and as time passed he began to wonder exactly when that 70 years of exile would end. But it was the Mosaic Covenant of Mt. Sinai that the Lord said was the basis for re-establishing His relationship with His people.

Then in verse 6 we hit some controversy. It speaks of the Lord shaking all the nations

(meaning gentile nations) and that great wealth would flow into Judah. In addition this rebuilt Temple would epitomize God's glory. In fact, says the Lord in verse 9, the glory of this new Temple will eventually surpass that of Solomon's. Further it is in this place (in Jerusalem at this Temple) that He would grant shalom, peace and well-being. The controversy is this: is this speaking of a near future to Ezra, or a far future? A future that perhaps has, even today, not yet arrived?

We could spent a lot of time going over the many reasonable scholarly debates about this prophecy, and indeed how we interpret this matters to both our understanding of the ancient times and perhaps our future. So to cut to the chase, here is how I interpret this passage: it is both a near term (to Ezra) and a long term prophecy. This it-happens and then it-happens-again nature of prophecies is something we've discussed on numerous occasions and hindsight has shown this aspect of prophecy to be so.

God shaking the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land, and shaking the nations indicates an enormous upheaval and change. And as Zechariah is going to show us, the central change will occur within earthly governments and powers. But what is described is so broadly defined that we can't confine it to only one event or one era. Further, verse 6 begins God's statement by telling us that "it won't be long" until this shaking happens. Therefore, for those who say that now, 2500 years from the giving of this oracle that the Lord STILL hasn't shaken the heavens and earth and the nations, cheapens the plain meaning of the words. Yes, it is true, that to the Lord a day is as a thousand years. And the Lord lives in place of eternity whereas we dwell in a place where time dominates us. Thus it "won't be long" is a way to express relative time. And if He meant that it would be thousands of years, then to say that "it won't be long" would have little meaning to humans. So, did the Lord shake the nations and make huge changes on earth not very long from Ezra's day? Yes He did. Around 190 years later the Greeks would conquer the Persians and fundamentally change the world. A new Empire arose, the Greek Empire, the 3rd Empire as foretold by Daniel's dream statue that symbolizes 4 successive gentile world empires. But did that event shake the heavens (meaning what we see up in the sky....the stars, the galaxies, the moon and the sun)? Not so far as we know, unless this is just a statement of exaggeration or a figure of speech (and I don't believe that it is).

Thus this prophecy would first only partially happen (yet in a very large way) around 330 B.C. when Alexander the Great became king over the known world. But the fullest fulfillment is yet to come. It must always be remembered (and please, tuck this away in your memory banks) that all prophecies are given in relation to Israel and to God's people. They always concern some outcome or another for the land and the people of Israel. What happens to the gentile nations is invariably for Israel's sake and is meant to kick the ball forward in the Lord's redemption plans. Thus the shaking of nations and the shaking of the heavens portends an outcome that is going to bear greatly upon Israel. Will gentiles and gentile nations (meaning every nation on earth EXCEPT for Israel) be affected? Yes, and often to a catastrophic extent. But much like horrific things happened to Egypt for the sake of God's people, so will every

prophetic happening that is still ahead of us happen for the sake of God's people. The good news is that (as it affects individuals) if you are truly redeemed in Yeshua, you are grafted in among God's People, so it is for our sakes as well.

But it is quite different when it comes to nations as opposed to individuals. The Lord is willing to sacrifice every nation on earth for the sake of His land and people Israel. And part of the reason for this is because the human governments of every nation on earth (no matter their political philosophy or structure) must and will come to a crashing end because an entirely new and permanent divine government, led by Messiah Yeshua, will replace all of them. And where will its world capital be? Jerusalem of Israel.

And yet, would Ezra's Temple ever rightfully fulfill the prophecy of verse 9 that says that this new house will surpass the glory of the old? Yes; Ezra's Temple would be renovated, remodeled and expanded by King Herod 500 years later. The glory of Herod's Temple would indeed surpass Solomon's in every way. This same pattern I believe will happen with the next Temple, often called the 3rd Temple; the one that is soon coming. This is the one that the Anti-Christ will enter into and declare himself to be god. While this is only my opinion (because unfulfilled prophecy cannot be seen fully or clearly except in hindsight), I believe that Ezekiel's Temple will be much like Herod's in that it will be a large-scale renovation and expansion of the End Times Temple that could be constructed any time, now. Everything that is needed for the next Temple is ready and in place, except for the will to do it. To clarify: Ezra's Temple was and is seen as the 2nd Temple (Solomon's being the 1st) because Solomon's Temple had been destroyed right down to the foundations and thus Ezra's was a totally new structure. Herod's Temple is usually seen as merely a grand extension of the 2nd Temple (rather than as a 3rd Temple), because Ezra's Temple was not destroyed. And the coming Temple, the 3rd Temple, will be the final Temple, in my view, but later it will be brought to an even greater glory. I see nothing in Scriptures that definitively suggests that the 3rd Temple will be destroyed despite global war and the decimation of Israel that is coming and then replaced by a 4th Temple. Might it be damaged? Certainly. But nothing suggests that it will become a heap, either through war or by a demolition crew to make way for a 4th Temple, described in the Bible as Ezekiel's Temple. Yet, I suppose we'll just have to wait and see, won't we?

Verse 10 begins a 3rd oracle from God through Haggai. It occurred 2 months and 3 days after Haggai's 2nd oracle. So these oracles are coming fast and furious; even faster, really, than it appears to us reading only Haggai. So I need to qualify the statement about this being God's 3rd oracle through Haggai because the Jewish people received another oracle as well; one from Zechariah. They received Zechariah's 1st oracle in between Haggai's 2nd and 3rd oracles. In other words: the 1st oracle God gave to the Jews happened in the 6th month, through Haggai. The 2nd oracle happened in the 7th month, again through Haggai. The 3rd oracle God gave to the Jews was from Zechariah, and it happened in the 8th month. And the one that we're about to discuss is actually the 4th oracle given to the Jews, this one in the 9th month, but now we're back to Haggai as the prophet of record. So as of now, the score is 3 oracles for Haggai versus 1 for Zechariah.

Rather than switch just yet to studying Zechariah, we'll finish out Haggai to keep some continuity. Haggai's 3rd oracle is hugely problematic. I can't begin to tell you the variations of opinions about it that has led even to some rather dramatic changes to the Scripture passage by some scholars, including Rashi. Let's see how quickly you can spot the issue.

READ HAGGAI 2:10 – end

The oracle takes on a strange opening rhetorical question that is said to be aimed at the **cohanim**, the priests. Now, who answered as the representative of the priests, we're not told. We could probably reasonably speculate that it was Yeshua, the High Priest, (as some scholars and Rabbis assert) but it seems awfully easy to merely say Yeshua, or High Priest, if indeed that was the case. So probably it was a council of the most senior common priests who were approached by Haggai, and after some discussion they give Haggai their answer. And here is the question posed to them by Yehoveh:

Haggai 2:12 *if someone carries meat that has been set aside as holy in a fold of his cloak; and then he lets his cloak touch bread, stew, wine, olive oil or any other food; does that food become holy too?"* The cohanim answered, "No."

Then a 2nd question is asked by the Lord through Haggai, presumably to this same group of **cohanim**, priests.

CJB Haggai 2:13 *Then Hagai asked, "If someone who is unclean from having had contact with a corpse touches any of these [food items], will they become unclean?"* The cohanim answered, "They become unclean."

Ok. Anyone have any problems with this, so far? Well I do; and so do many Rabbis. And the problem is quite straightforward: in verse 12, regarding a person carrying sanctified meat in their priestly apron (meaning meat that is part of a sacrificial offering), if that priestly garment accidentally touches other food items, does the food that it touches contract holiness? The priests answer no; and if indeed they did answer the question that way, they are wrong. Because in fact holiness is infectious, and we have a number of examples of infectious holiness in the Bible. One of the most famous being out in the wilderness, during the exodus from Egypt, when Korah thought to get 250 men to bring their fire pans with hot coals and incense in them, and to come to the Wilderness Tabernacle to offer the incense to the Lord. As they neared the Tabernacle, the Lord sent a burst of heat and fire upon them that incinerated every last man. But the Lord commanded this as well:

CJB Numbers 17:1 ADONAI said to Moshe,

² "Tell El'azar the son of Aharon the cohen to remove the fire pans from the fire, and scatter the smoldering coals at a distance, because they have become holy.

³ Also the fire pans of these men, whose sin cost them their lives, have become holy, because they were offered before ADONAI. Therefore, have them hammered into plates to cover the altar. This will be a sign for the people of Isra'el."

The proximity to God at the Tabernacle infected these men, their hot coals, and their metal fire pans with holiness. But the Book of Ezekiel addresses this matter of holiness being infectious from another angle; what happens with holy garments when they touch other things?

Ezekiel 44:17-19 CJB

¹⁷ *"Once they enter the gates of the inner courtyard, they are to wear linen clothing; they are not to wear any wool while serving at the gates of the inner courtyard or inside it.*

¹⁸ *They are to wear linen turbans on their heads and linen underclothes on their bodies, and they are not to wear anything that makes them sweat.*

¹⁹ *Before going out to the people in the outer courtyard, they are to remove the clothes in which they minister, lay them in the holy rooms, and put on other clothes; so that they won't transmit holiness to the people by means of their clothing.*

I could exhibit a number of other passages that express the same thought, but the point is that these priestly garments can and do transmit their holiness; yet these priests said, no they don't. Wrong answer. Could this have been a copyist error? Do we have a bad translation? That is what some scholars think. Rashi goes so far as to say that as used here the that standard word for "holy" in the Bible, the Hebrew word *kadosh*, doesn't mean holy, it means defiled. But that is a rationalization that, for me, is too far-fetched to even consider.

The next question asked about uncleanness regarding a person coming into contact with a corpse, and then touching food, and whether the food becomes unclean; the priests give the correct answer: "yes". Then through Haggai, in verse 14, the Lord says that being unclean is the condition of this people (*am*) and this nation (*goy*) before Me. Here we have another conundrum. It is usual for the Lord to refer to His people as His *am*, His people. But *goy* has long been a term reserved for the gentile nations, not for Israel or Judah. So the question is: is the Lord just repeating Himself and calling the Jews BOTH His *am* (a people) and a *goy* (a nation)? Or is He speaking about two different entities? My best stab at it is that since there

indeed are representatives of two different groups that will be involved in one way or another with the rebuilding of Temple (the **am**, meaning the Jewish people, and the **goy**, referring the part Hebrew/part gentile Samaritans who will necessary be supplying building materials and other needed construction items), both are being called equally unclean before the Lord because of their behavior and attitudes.

Further, notice this: after answering the question about the holy priestly garments being used to carry sacrificial meat touching other food and, according the priests, NOT transmitting their holiness to the food, the question and its answer are just left hanging. In other words, the 2nd question about uncleanness, which IS answered correctly, is what the Lord uses to illustrate His determination that the **am** and the **goy** are unclean in His eyes. There is no follow-up with the substance or purpose of the 1st question. And, we notice that the priests are not exempt from this determination that all are unclean. It makes me think that we are meant to notice the wrong answer from the priests who ought to know the answer to whether holiness can be transmitted by their priestly garments in order that we see that the priests and the common people are all unclean in God's eyes because they are willfully ignorant about the most basic questions of the operation of holiness and defilement, which are fundamental to the Laws of Moses and therefore to the worship of God.

Remember; up in Babylon the Law of Moses was not observed so far as we read in the Scriptures. And we also learn that the exiles began to invent rituals and observances to try to obtain a measure of cleanness and atonement, even though those inventions are not authorized by the Torah. So why should we think that the laypeople or the priests were knowledgeable on the intricacies of the Law?

So starting in verse 15, the Lord explains that it is because the Jews don't obey the Law (even though they might think they do) their harvests are small, winds dried up the ground, hail came and harmed crops and animals, and more. However says the Lord in verse 19, from this day forward (the day they begin work on the Temple in a ritually clean manner) the Lord will reverse His policy of holding back and frustrating His people's efforts and instead will allow His blessings to flow abundantly on His people. He will now view the people as clean instead of unclean.

Then to end the Book of Haggai, a 4th oracle to Haggai (the 5th one overall counting the one through Zechariah) is given. And in some ways it is an expansion of the 2nd one. God says that He will shake the heavens and the earth, overturn kingdoms, destroy their strength, and then speaking of chariots and riders and horses, says essentially that He will destroy their war-making implements and capacity.

But the final verse needs a bit of explanation. It says that "when that day comes" the Lord shall wear Zerubbabel like a signet ring, for God has chosen him. First, this can only be

referring to a time when kingdoms have been overturned and war machinery has been destroyed, etc. because that is the context. None of this happened during Zerubbabel's or Ezra's or Nehemiah's time. I think the tremendous 19th century Bible scholar C.F. Kiel has it right; it is not the person of Zerubbabel but the office that Zerubbabel holds that is being referred to. Zerubbabel is the current Jewish leader of the Jewish people. But even more, from God's perspective the issue is that he is a royal descendant of King David through Zerubbabel's father **Sh'alti'el**. So this is very likely a Messianic End Times prophecy and that is why it is given separately, as Haggai's 4th oracle. This prophecy explains that after the final shaking of the earth and heavens and of nations, the leader of the Jews, who is a member of the Royal House of David, will be worn by the Father as His signet ring. That is, this Jewish leader will have the full authority of the Father. Who else can that be but Yeshua HaMashiach, sitting on His throne after He returns? The prophets and the Book of Revelation tells us that after Armageddon when all the world's war machines and armies have been defeated, and after the heavens have been shaken and the moon turns bloody red and the stars fall from the sky, then shall our Lord Yeshua, a descendant of King David, rule the world as King.

Next time we'll take up the prophet Zechariah.