

STUDIES IN THE  
**OLD TESTAMENT**

Adult Bible Equipping Class  
Anchorage Grace Church  
2015

by Nathan R. Schneider, Th.M.

**OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:**

**Haggai**

**I. Introduction**

Haggai begins the last portion of the collection of writings known as the Twelve. It is the first of three prophets who prophesied (through self-attestation) during the post-exilic period. Like many of the prophets before him, Haggai's message includes rebuke and hope. It focuses not only on the present but also on the future. The genre of the book, however, stands out from the rest in that it is written in the style of historical narrative. Haggai's message is embedded in the narratives, making it somewhat unique among the prophetic literature.

**A. *Date & Authorship***

Apart from this book, Haggai is mentioned only in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14. His name means "feast day," fitting for the occasion on which he made his initial address to Judah. No other information is known about the man. He was among those who returned to the land of Judah, and based on the wording of 2:3, was most likely born in Babylon along with most of the returnees to whom he spoke.

Unique to his book and that of his contemporary Zechariah, Haggai dated his book with extreme precision. In fact, Merrill notes that "no other biblical authors, with the exception of Ezekiel, tied their ministries and messages more closely to a chronological framework."<sup>1</sup> The book contains four specific dates:

1:1	1st day/6th month/2nd year	August 29, 520 B.C.
1:15	24th day/6th month/2nd year	September 21, 520 B.C.
2:1	21st day/7th month	October 17, 520 B.C.
2:10, 20	24th day/9th month	December 18, 520 B.C.

The precision of dates and attention to chronological matters is reflective of the characteristic influence of Babylonian annalistic history writing. The same kind of chronological interest is seen in the writings of Zechariah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. What is interesting to note is that dates during these times now have a new reference point. Whereas the writer of Kings and the Chronicler use the kings of Judah and Israel as a reference point, the exilic and post-exilic writers must now use the Persian kings, since

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 3.

there were no longer any kings of Judah.<sup>2</sup> Thus Haggai's opening reference is to "the second year of Darius the king" (1:1).

### B. *Historical Background*

The events and messages of Haggai, as just noted, comprise a very specific chronological framework. In fact, the first major section of the book (1:1-15) span a time of only 23 days, and the entire book represents a period of 3½ months. Those few months were the product of some very important historical events that led to Haggai's messages to the Jewish exilic returnees.

When Jerusalem had fallen in 586 B.C., the Babylonians carried off most of the wealthy and upper class, killed the majority of the population, and left some of the poor to remain in the land. While passages like Psalm 137 portray the difficulties faced by the exiles, Jeremiah 29:4-7 notes that they experienced normal opportunities for daily living.

However, only 40 years after the sacking of Jerusalem, Babylon's grasp on the international throne was already beginning to slip. By 625 B.C., Cyaxares had become king of Media and northern Mesopotamia, where he proceeded to conquer Persia. By the time of Cyrus II, Babylon had become weakened under the failed leadership of Belshazzar, and his kingdom fell to Cyrus in 539 B.C. One account attributed Babylon's fall to the anger of the Babylonian god Marduk, whom Belshazzar's father had offended. Marduk then purposed to give the kingdom over to a shepherd who would better tend it, i.e., Cyrus.

The OT, however, clarifies that it is Yahweh who raised up Cyrus to be his servant and deliver his exiled nation from Babylonian captivity (Isa 44:24-45:7; 2 Chron 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). In 538 B.C., in keeping with his new policy of repatriation with religious liberty, Cyrus decreed that the Jews could return to their homeland. His decree allowed them to (1) return if they desired, (2) take back the gold and silver vessels that had been captured from the temple, (3) take with them gold, silver, livestock, and other goods given by those Jews who preferred not to return, and (4) build a temple.

Thus, in 538 B.C. 50,000 Jews returned, led by Zerubbabel and Joshua. The former was a descendant of King Jehoiachin through the line of Shealtiel, making him a legitimate Davidic leader, though one who could never be king because of the curse on the line of Jehoiachin (Jer 22:28-30). The latter was the high priest, the son of Jehozadak who had been taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar (1 Chron 6:15), and grandson of Sereiah, the last high priest of the Solomonic Temple (2 Kgs 25:18-21). So, in this first of three exilic returns, the people were led by a civil leader of Davidic descent and a high priest directly descended from the high priestly line of Aaron.

By 537 B.C., the people commenced with the building of the altar (Ezra 3:1-6). In the spring of the following year, they constructed the foundation of the temple (Ezra 3:7-13), an event that garnered praise and shouts of rejoicing among the younger generations mixed with heavy weeping by those who remembered the glory of the Solomonic Temple.

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<sup>2</sup> David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1-8* (London: SCM, 1985), 43.

Yet before long, construction halted when opposition to the rebuilding project arose among the Samaritan inhabitants of the land (Ezra 4), who most likely viewed the Jews and the reestablishment of the temple as a threat to their current lifestyle. What began with a hypocritical offer of assistance in rebuilding (Ezra 4:1-3) quickly turned to open opposition (4:4-5). The episode ended with a letter written to the Persian king, in which the Jews came under verbal assault and were misrepresented. In response, the king ordered the temple reconstruction be stopped (4:6-16).

The reconstruction would not begin until 520 B.C., another 16 years after the foundation had been laid, and while the book of Ezra provides no details on the intervening period, Haggai reveals that the Jews, rather than pursuing the king to recommence building, instead constructed fine dwellings for themselves and had begun to build a comfortable life.

Yet it wasn't entirely comfortable for the people during this time. While they lived in "paneled houses" (Hag 1:4), life had become anything but relaxing. An agrarian society, they relied on bountiful harvests for personal livelihood as well as a thriving economy. Yet no matter the efforts they showed, the land produced only a fraction of the seed that was sown, resulting in a famine-like condition in which crops—and thus, food and wine—were limited, clothing was inadequate to protect them from cooling weather, and earned wages seemed to disappear as if falling out of holes in their pockets (1:6). Haggai severely rebuked them for the apathy they showed toward the temple and the preference they had given toward their own positions, and connected this to their current debilitated state.

## II. Major Themes

Merrill calls Haggai the "most singleminded of all the prophets,"<sup>3</sup> for his book pursues only one theme—"the significance of the temple of the Lord and the need for the people to get at the task of rebuilding it as a symbol of both the Lord's immediate presence among them and of His promise to be their God and dwell among them in the ages to come."<sup>4</sup> Yet an unexpected theme emerges from the book, yet one that is inextricably linked to the function and significance of the temple.

### A. The Temple

The significance of the temple has its roots in the purposes of the Mosaic Covenant. Moses had given in the concluding chapters of Exodus detailed plans on the construction of a tabernacle that would stand in the center of the 12 tribes and would be the dwelling place for the physical presence of Yahweh among the people. God's presence was the fulfillment of his promise to live and dwell among them as their God. This divine presence was critical for their operation, for without it they could not function as a priestly kingdom interceding and mediating between Yahweh and the nations.

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, "The Book of Haggai," in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: 2011), 481.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

When the glory of Yahweh departed the temple (Ezek 1-10), it was the beginning of the end for Judah, for it signified that God was no longer present and the city was not longer divinely protected. The temple's destruction in 586 B.C. was a devastating blow to the nation, with massive theological implications. The very fact that Cyrus had decreed the return of the exiles with the provision of rebuilding the temple was a clear sign that Yahweh had not abandoned his covenant.

Though they had pursued the initial reconstruction in 537 B.C. with zeal, the people's complacency and spiritual apathy towards the temple by 520 B.C. was indicative of a larger problem. No longer concerned with rebuilding the temple, and preoccupied with the concerns of everyday life and comfort, Judah had ostensibly turned their back on the covenant to which Yahweh had so recently shown himself faithful. Their failure to pursue temple reconstruction after the initial Samaritan opposition was representative of their indifference to God's presence among them. In other words, they could take it or leave it if Yahweh dwelt among them, so long as they remained comfortable in their paneled houses.

Haggai's initial prophecy to the people came as a shocking blow. He delivered the message on the 1st day of the 6th month, a time with double significance. It was harvest time, and the farmers would be preparing to bring in the crops they had sown earlier that year. Their current hardships would have certainly given them a fair amount of anxiety as to how the harvest would fair this year. Additionally, the first day of the month was marked as a festival day, where special offerings would be given (Num 28:11-15). He called them point out for their sinful priorities, and warned them that drought and famine would continue until they pursued the rebuilding of the temple (Hag 1:8-11).

The response of the people is immediate. The people connected the dots, feared Yahweh, and immediately resumed the rebuilding project with the encouragement that Yahweh was with them in their efforts (1:12-13), though Haggai is quick to point out that it was in fact Yahweh who had sovereignly initiated the renewal (1:14). A total of 23 days transpired between his message and the resumption of building construction, a delay that can most easily be attributed to the requirement of harvest time.

Yet in Haggai's second message, roughly one month later, it is clear that the "glamour" of this new temple was incomparable to the glory of Solomon's temple (2:1-3). Thus the prophet encourages the people with a promise of eschatological proportion. He promised that God was with them just as he had been with their ancestors during the days of the exodus (2:4-5). Yet he exhorts them to look beyond the past and the present to the future. "With his feet firmly planted in the world of the sixth century B.C., Haggai lifted up his eyes and those of his people to the eschaton as well—to the day when the Lord would fill His house with His glory and peace (Hag 2:7-9)."<sup>5</sup> He spoke of a time when Yahweh would "shake the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the dry ground" (2:6), a reference to the tremendous upheavals that will attend the Day of Yahweh. In that day, the prophet says that the nations will come to recognize and acknowledge Yahweh's sovereignty and bring tribute to the new temple, which will one day be filled with even greater glory than that of Solomon's temple (2:9).

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<sup>5</sup> Merrill, *Haggai, Zephariah, Malachi*, 17.

Nevertheless, the people remain ceremonially defiled, and Haggai's third message, dated two months following his second (2:10), takes the form of a series of questions that OT scholars have come to dub the "priestly Torah." Based on the holiness and cleanliness codes of Leviticus, Haggai leads the priests through a series of questions designed to reveal the people's current state of defilement. "To that date," Merrill writes, "the people had not been spiritually qualified to measure up to the anticipated glory of the temple (Had 2:14). Having now recommitted themselves to the Lord and His program, they could expect His blessing (2:19), the eschatological expression of which would be the revival of the line of David through his offspring Zerubbabel."<sup>6</sup>

## B. The Davidic Line

Deuteronomy 12 had created an inextricable link between the temple and the kingly line of Israel. In it, he made the provision that once in the land, Yahweh would meet with his people in "the place Yahweh your God chooses from all your tribes to put his name for his dwelling" (Deut 12:5). As Israel's history progressed into the time of David, it became clear that Jerusalem was that place, and both David and Solomon recognized the city as the only suitable location for a permanent structure (2 Chron 3:1). The fact that the Davidic Covenant and the permanent establishment of David's "house" was initiated in response to David's desire to build Yahweh a "house" creates a clear "linkage between the temple and the Davidic monarchy . . . as a crucial theological datum."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the absence of the temple during the exilic period implied more than Yahweh's abandonment of the Mosaic Covenant. It signified the collapse of the Davidic Covenant as well. As Merrill explains, "Only a second temple, rebuilt on the ashes of the first, could provide assurance of the renaissance of the Davidic line as well, one eventuating in a messianic figure who would rule not only Israel but the whole world forever."<sup>8</sup>

On the same day that Haggai delivered his "priestly Torah" to the priests (2:10-19), he also delivered a personal message to Zerubbabel, the Persian-appointed governor of Judah. Zerubbabel, it has been noted, was the descendant of Jehoiachin and thus a legitimate Davidic descendant. In clearly apocalyptic language picturing the shaking of the heavens and earth and the shattering of all the nations, Haggai reveals that Yahweh has sovereignly chosen Zerubbabel to be his signet ring—an item which was used to seal inscriptions and that which represents the owner's authority and bears his name.

Significant to Haggai's message is the words of Yahweh in Jeremiah 22:24-30, where he pronounced on Jehoiachin—the last king of Judah—a curse, swearing that none of his sons would ever sit on David's throne: "As I live," declares Yahweh, "even though Coniah the son of Jehoiakim king of Judah were a signet ring on my right hand, yet I would pull you off" (Jer 22:24).

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<sup>6</sup> Merrill, "Haggai," 481.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

This promise has opened up a theological question as to what Haggai is saying regarding the Davidic Covenant. Some suggest that here, the prophet is promising that Zerubbabel would be a representative of the Davidic Dynasty in anticipation of an eschatological Davidic ruler—namely Jesus Christ, who is a direct descendant of Zerubbabel (Matt 1:12-13). Jesus' virgin birth allowed him to rightfully sit on David's throne, circumventing the curse on Jehoiakim's line through his lineage through Mary (Luke 3).

Others, however, suggest that Haggai's message effectively reverses the curse that Jeremiah had pronounced on the line of Jehoiakim. Though Yahweh had effectively removed Jehoiakim's line from his finger, with Zerubbabel, he had once again put it back on.

### III. Purpose

*The challenge was presented to the leaders and people to rebuild the temple.*

### IV. Literary Structure

Haggai's careful attention to chronological details provides a clear organizing element for his book. The book comprises four messages:

#### HAGGAI

1st MESSAGE		2nd MESSAGE	3rd MESSAGE	4th MESSAGE
Aug. 29, 520 B.C.	Sept. 21, 520 B.C.	Oct. 17, 520 B.C.	Dec 18, 520 B.C.	Dec 18, 520 B.C.
Rebuke for not Building the Temple	Renewed Work on the Temple	The Coming Glory	Rebuke for Uncleanness	The Reign of the Future King
1:1	1:12	2:1	2:10	2:20