

Study 46: Haggai

General Background. Before I began my rather disorganized coverage of the twelve minor prophets, I probably should have provided at least a little background on the whole of these wonderfully prophetic books. Even though I've already addressed quite a few of these books in study guides, I'll try to make up for this oversight by offering a quick overview.

These so-called “minor prophets” are not considered minor because their writings are inconsequential; rather it's because their books are relatively short in length when compared with the four major prophets, i.e., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. In fact, in ancient times, these twelve “books” were joined together in a single scroll, *called “The Book of the Twelve.”* The resulting scroll was actually smaller than the shortest of the major prophets. Only in our contemporary Bibles do we separate the prophecies and treat them as individual books.

Like the major prophets, the twelve appeared during crucial times in the history of the Israelites. Their prophetic messages span a period of more than 300 years, from the Book of Jonah (c. 800-750 B.C.) to the prophecy of Malachi (c. 450 B.C.). These were challenging times for the Israelites, whose tiny nation was at the mercy of a succession of great empires that dominated the Middle East.



The Promised Land was in a strategic location, on the western arm of what geographers call the “fertile crescent” (the green area on the map at left). This was a crescent-shaped piece of land that ran northward from the Nile in Egypt through Palestine and Syria, and then followed the course of the Euphrates River southeastward to the Persian Gulf. Its two arms were separated by a desert 400 miles across.

Throughout Biblical times, every major power – Egypt, Assyria,

Babylon, Persia, Macedonia (Greece), and Rome – and even some of the lesser powers – e.g., Hittites, Phoenicians, Medes... – desired control over or access to this fertile land and its lucrative trade routes. Remarkably, this tiny nation of Israelites managed to survive and maintain its identity despite successive conquests by each of these empires. As a result, Israel gave the world something far greater than the contributions of any of those great powers. Of course, we should expect this since they were God's Chosen People and He led them and cared for them.

Introduction. Haggai is another of the twelve minor prophets we've been addressing in these study guides. Along with Zechariah and Malachi, whom I hope to cover soon, Haggai is one of the later prophets. He proclaimed his message during the years following the Israelites' return from the Babylonian Captivity, beginning in 537 B.C., and the reestablishment of the Jewish community in the Holy Land. His book is brief,

consisting of only two chapters, but his words had a significant effect on both the leadership and people who made up the returning remnant.

We must realize that for several generations the Jews, an agrarian people, had been living in cosmopolitan Babylon. Formerly and agricultural people, they had likely lost the skills needed to farm and raise livestock, so they struggled to resettle the land. These difficulties, the resulting poverty, and a weakened faith probably all contributed to the community's failure to rebuild the Temple for the proper worship of the Lord.

The Persians. Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon in 538 B.C. and almost immediately issued a decree permitting the Jewish captives to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple. Beautifully described in the opening verses of the *Book of Ezra*, it is well worth repeating here:

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, to issue a proclamation throughout his entire kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing:

"Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: 'All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Those among you who belong to any part of his people, may their God be with them! Let them go up to Jerusalem in Judah to build the house of the Lord the God of Israel, that is, the God who is in Jerusalem. Let all those who have survived, in whatever place they may have lived, be assisted by the people of that place with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, together with voluntary offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem'" [Ezra 1:1-4].

Cyrus, it seems, was a rather magnanimous ruler of the nations that made up his extensive and growing empire. Ancient inscriptions indicate that Cyrus also allowed the people of many other captive nations to return to their lands and worship their gods. Ezra, however, rightly attributes the Persian king's behavior to the Lord, *who "stirred up the spirit of Cyrus."* Don't you just love the image these words convey?

Returning to Jerusalem, reestablishing their community, rebuilding the Temple, and resettling in the surrounding countryside of Judah wasn't as easy as Cyrus made it sound in his decree. For one thing, the Babylonians, when they took the Judeans captive, also sent the captives of other nations to settle in parts of the Holy Land where they likely mingled with Jews who had escaped deportation or had returned earlier. Many of these people, although they came to accept Jewish religious ways, were not accepted by the returning Jews because of their mixed or foreign blood. Most had settled in Samaria, and their descendants became the Samaritans we encounter in the gospels.

Interestingly, it's thought that only a small remnant of the Jews in Babylon actually took advantage of Cyrus' decree and returned to their homeland. Most had no memory of Jerusalem and Judah, and had learned to live rather comfortably in their Babylonian homes. To resettle in an unknown country and face what would surely be a hard life did not appeal to many.

The resettlement of Jews in Judah did not happen all at once. As mentioned above, the first resettlement occurred immediately after Cyrus issued his decree in 538 B.C. Soon, however, a second, and probably larger group, led by Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest, also returned. By the time Haggai proclaimed his message in 520 B.C., Cyrus was dead, reportedly killed in battle (530 B.C.), and Darius I had ascended to the Persian throne. Like Cyrus the Great (559-530 B.C.), Darius I (522-486 B.C.) had a long reign.

Zerubbabel, a descendant of King David, had been appointed governor of Judah, now a province of the Persian Empire. Together with the high priest, Joshua, they had the responsibility of leading the people as, together, they rebuilt the nation and the Temple.

This, then, is the situation faced by Haggai as he began to prophesy, proclaiming God's message to this needy, complaining remnant.

Reading. Open your Bible now and read the *Book of Haggai*. As I've already stated, it is a short book of only two chapters, so take your time and try to absorb all that Haggai revealed to the Jewish leaders and the people. As you read try to place yourself in the position of these pioneer-like people who had returned with the hope of reestablishing their once powerful nation and the Jerusalem of their ancestors, including the restoration of the Temple built by Solomon. For many, though, these hopes were dashed by the challenges they had to face. Looking for a reason to continue, to regain the hope they once had, they are confronted and challenged by the words of the prophet Haggai.

Author and Time. Like many of the minor prophets, we know almost nothing about Haggai the man. We are told only that *"the Word of the Lord came through Haggai the prophet"* [Hg 1:3]. *The Book of Ezra*, however, mentions Haggai several times, thus confirming his prophetic work and its impact:

"Then the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, son of Iddo, began to prophesy to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel" [Ezr 5:1].

And...

"The elders of the Jews continued to make progress in the building, supported by the message of the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, son of Iddo. They finished the building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus and Darius, and of Artaxerxes, king of Persia" [Ezr 6:14].

Although we know little about Haggai himself, we know exactly when he prophesied. His ministry as prophet was brief, really only a few months long, from August through December of 520 B.C. Referring to the dates found throughout the book, his five prophecies can be dated as follows:

1. First Prophecy (Hg 1:1-12) on the first day of the 6th month (Ellul), August 520 B.C.
2. Second Prophecy (Hg 1:13-15) on the 24th day of *Ellul*, September 520 B.C.
3. Third Prophecy (Hg 2:1-9) on the 21st day of the 7th month (Tishri), October 520 B.C.

4. Fourth Prophecy (Hg 2:10-19) on the 24th day of the 8th month (Chislev), December 520 B.C.
5. Fifth Prophecy (Hg 2:20-23), on the same day as the fourth prophecy

Being able to date these events so accurately is, of course, most unusual, but the exactness of the dates included in the book only adds to our certainty regarding the content of the prophecies. It also reinforces Haggai's message that God is in charge of the destiny of this remnant and will ensure their continued survival as a people to do His will in the world.

This, then, was a critical time for God's people, and God chose two men, Haggai and Zechariah, to deliver His message, offer hope, and call the Jews to right worship in the Temple. It's important to understand that only during Solomon's reign was there a Temple in which all Jews worshipped. Prior to Solomon – from Abraham to David – there was no Temple; the Jews worshipped at sacrificial altars and in portable tents. After Solomon, when the kingdom divided, the Jews of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, no longer worshipped at the Temple in Jerusalem. For many who had returned from Babylon, the Temple was hardly a well-established tradition, so the prophecy of Haggai was extremely important. Through the prophet God revealed His expectations for them.

The Book of Haggai and Its Message. As mentioned above, *Haggai* can be divided into five parts, each related to one of the five prophetic messages. But more commonly the book is divided into two major sections, corresponding to the book's two chapters: (1) Haggai's Prophetic Call to Rebuild the Temple; and (2) Haggai's Oracles of Hope and Encouragement. We'll now look at each in some detail.

Haggai's Prophetic Call to Rebuild the Temple [Hg 1:1-15]. After the opening verse, in which Haggai establishes the time, place, and key people (King, Governor, and High Priest), he begins his prophecy by criticizing the people for their delay in rebuilding the Temple:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: This people has said, "Now is not the time to rebuild the house of the Lord" [Hg 1:2].

Haggai continues by shaming the people, in effect telling them if "now is not the time" for God, it must be the "time for you":

Is it time for you to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies in ruins? [Hg 1:4]

One gets the impression that as Haggai proclaimed God's Word, he was standing right in front of the ruins of "*this house*" -- Solomon's Temple -- destroyed by the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, in 587 B.C. The shattered shell of the Temple could hardly be ignored by the people of Jerusalem and Judah. And yet, even though the Persian king, Cyrus, inspired by God, had instructed them to "*build the house of the God of Israel,*" they had done nothing. The people, however, while ignoring God's house, had not neglected to rebuild their own homes, their "*paneled houses.*"

To convince the people of the importance of obeying God, Haggai explained that the source of all their problems is their disobedience, their failure to rebuild God's house

and worship Him. Twice he calls on them to *“Reflect on your experience!”* [Hg 1:5,7], using the phrase to bracket a litany of their problems:

*You have sown much, but have brought in little;
You have eaten, but have not been satisfied;
You have drunk, but have not become intoxicated;
You have clothed yourselves, but have not been warmed;
And the hired worker labors for a bag full of holes* [Hg 1:6].

Haggai then commanded the people, urging them to do all that was necessary to begin the rebuilding project. *“Go up into the hill country; bring timber...”* he instructed, reminding them that their work is for God’s glory, not theirs [Hg 1:8]. To emphasize this, he repeated his earlier chastisement that God’s house *“lies in ruins, while each of you runs to his own house”* [Hg 1:9]. And again, he reminded them of their agricultural troubles, problems God allowed as punishment for their disobedience:

*Therefore, the heavens withheld their dew, and the earth its yield.
And I have proclaimed a devastating heat
upon the land and upon the mountains,
upon the grain, the new wine, and olive oil,
upon all that the ground brings forth;
upon human being and beast alike,
and upon all they produce* [Hg 1:10-11]

Responding to God’s Word, as proclaimed by Haggai, the entire community *“obeyed the Lord their God and...feared the Lord”* [Hg 1:12]. But Haggai offered them an additional message, a consoling and encouraging message from the Lord, their God:

“I am with you!” [Hg 1:13]

The chapter concludes with further assurance that both the leadership and the people responded to the prophet’s words:

“And so the Lord stirred up the spirit of the governor of Judah, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, and the spirit of the high priest Joshua, son of Jehozadak, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people so that they came to do the work in the house of the Lord of Hosts, their God...” [Hg 1:14]

Once again, the prophet used that wonderful phrase, *“the Lord stirred up the spirit,”* providing us with a sense of the joy and enthusiasm the people experienced knowing God would be with them as they fulfilled His will.

Haggai’s Oracles of Hope and Encouragement (Hg 2:1-23). Chapter Two begins with the prophet again proclaiming God’s Word to the governor, Zerubbabel, the high priest, Joshua, and the *“remnant of the people.”* The Word they heard was designed to strengthen them and give them the encouragement they would need to do all that God demanded of them.

Haggai asked if any present had seen the Temple before it was destroyed, asking them to compare that with its present state: *“like nothing in your eyes.”* In *Ezra* we read of the reaction of those elders who had been alive before the Temple was razed by Nebuchadnezzar’s invaders:

“Many of the priests, Levites, and heads of ancestral houses, who were old enough to have seen the former house, cried out in sorrow as they watched the foundation of the present house being laid. Many others, however, lifted up their voices in shouts of joy. No one could distinguish the sound of joyful shouting from the sound of those who were weeping; for the people raised a mighty clamor which was heard far away” [Ezr 3:12-13].

The humanity of this scene, with its unexpected and blended unity of sorrow and joy, convinces us of its reality. Haggai’s question also helps set the stage for his Messianic prophecy of the glory of God’s house, the Temple to come.

The next Word of God proclaimed by Haggai urges them all to be strong. He tells them again, *“For I am with you,”* reminding them of God’s care for their ancestors when Moses led them out of Egypt. Just as He guided and protected His chosen ones as they journeyed to the Promised Land, He will also care for this remnant who have returned to that same land:

“My spirit remains in your midst; do not fear!” [Hg 2:5]

This is followed by a prophecy that points to the Messianic times to come and, ultimately, to the Heavenly Temple [See Rev 21:26]:

“I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all the nations, so that the treasures of all the nations will come in. And I will fill this house with glory – says the Lord of hosts” [Hg 2:6-7].

It is a prophecy we see repeated in the Letter to the Hebrews:

His voice shook the earth at that time, but now has promised, “I will once more shake not only the earth, but heaven.” That phrase, “once more,” points to the removal of shaken, created things, so that what is unshaken may remain. Therefore, we who are receiving the unshakable kingdom should have gratitude, with which we should offer worship pleasing to God in reverence and awe. For our God is a consuming fire [Heb 12:26-29].

Haggai’s prophecy continues as God then revealed that the glory of “this house” will exceed that of Solomon’s:

“Greater will be the glory of this house, the latter more than the former...and in this place I will give you peace...” [Hg 2:9]

Yes, indeed, the gift of peace, through the Prince of Peace. Many Early Church Fathers considered this a Messianic prophecy pointing to Jesus who, as the Son of God, will give great glory to God’s house. He will be the new Temple. For Jesus – His Body, His Manhood [Jn 2:19] – is foreseen as the New Temple of the New Law, the New Covenant.

But this New Temple must be taken as a whole, for it is the Mystical Body in its entirety. As St. Paul reminded the Corinthians:

“Now you are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it [1 Cor 12:27].

Under the Old Law, the Old Temple was made of stone. Under the New Law, the New Temple is a spiritual community with Jesus Christ as its cornerstone. Its members, living stones, make up its structure. Again, St. Paul explains:

“So then, you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the capstone. Through Him the whole structure is held together and grows into a Temple sacred in the Lord; in Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” [Eph 2:19-22].

“Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” including the prophet Haggai whose single-minded focus was the building of *“a Temple sacred to the Lord”* and whom God blessed with a vision of the far greater Temple of the Prince of Peace.

Here we encounter God’s continuing revelation of the Temple: as the manifestation of His Presence in His house of worship; as the Body of His Son [Jn 2:19]; as the Mystical Body, the Church [1 Cor 12:12-31]; and, ultimately, as the Heavenly Temple [Rev 11:19; 21:22-27].

Instructed by the Lord, Haggai asked the priests whether holiness and sanctity, or defilement and uncleanness, could be passed from one to another and is told that sanctity cannot, but defilement can. From this Haggai believed that the people’s sacrifices had been unacceptable. Here he continues by repeating his earlier challenge [Hg 1:4-11], using similar language -- *“What was your experience?”* [Hg 2:16] and *“Reflect from this day forward...”* [Hg 2:18] – to remind them that God controls their destiny [Hg 2:16-19], and that their obedience and right worship will bring only good for them:

“From this day, I will bless you” [Hg 2:19].

The Book of Haggai concludes with a final prophecy, a message of enduring hope, addressed appropriately only to Zerubbabel, who as a descendant of King David, is in the line that will lead to Messianic fulfillment [Mt 1:12-13]. Again, we hear a prophecy that God will *“shake the heavens and the earth”* and overturn the nations. God will, however, make Zerubbabel *“like a signet ring”* preserving the Messianic promise through him. This promise will, therefore, endure despite all the calamities and conflicts that must precede the establishment of the Messianic kingdom [Hg 2:21-23].

Haggai’s Message for Today. I have long thought of Haggai as a prophet of hope, that wonderful virtue that drives fear from our hearts. Haggai offered hope to a fearful people and led them to a deeper faith in the Lord their God. And remember, fear is the opposite of, or perhaps more accurately, the absence of faith. When our faith is weak, our fears multiply, but God’s message of hope dispels all fear. This is why St. John Paul II preached that *“The power of Christ’s Cross and Resurrection is greater than any evil which man could fear.”* This power, you see, the power of our Redeemer, gives us hope, for only this divine gift of hope, a hope that leads to faith, can overcome the fears that plague today’s world. Haggai’s little book, overlooked by so many today, should encourage us all to be like this hopeful prophet, to be proclaimers of hope to a despairing, confused world.

