

Haggai: The Prophet of Encouragement

Haggai 1:1-15
Post-Exile Prophet

Throughout the era of the Minor Prophets God has been painting on the canvas of world history, directing the nations according to His purposes and glory. History follows a divine plan. The events of history are not accidental though they may appear so to us. There is purpose in history and what is happening now in the twenty-first century is also part of God's ongoing narrative.

Open your Heart: Beloved Holy Spirit, be our teacher as we study this influential prophet—a man with strong convictions whose book is filled with spiritual principles so relevant to our times.

Getting Started

Reflect on “Points to Ponder” from Lesson 1—in light of Amos, Joel, Nahum and Habakkuk.

Review your observations concerning the book of Haggai from Lesson 1.

Locate Haggai and his contemporaries on the Timeline.

Read the “Synopsis of the Babylonian Captivity” that accompanies this lesson.

Locate the Persian Empire on Map 1.

Haggai and His Times

In the intervening years between Habakkuk and Haggai the world had changed. Another world empire—Babylon—had come and gone. Haggai ministered in the aftermath of the captivity when a new page of history lay bare before the Jewish people.

Three books share the same broad historical setting as Haggai: Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.

According to Ezra 3:10-13, the returned exiles began to rebuild the temple in the second year after the arrival of the first wave of captives sent back by the Persian King Cyrus. Full of bright hope and undaunted by the rubble, they laid the foundation for their new temple (536 B.C.). At this point the Samaritans, a mixture of peoples who had been settled in central Palestine by the Assyrian conquerors, offered to help the Jews. But the Jewish leaders categorically refused the Samaritans' offer because their beliefs were mixed with pagan rites. Thus, the Jews remained firm in their commitment not to compromise. This refusal stirred up bitter resentment among the Samaritans, who then set out to oppose the reconstruction of the temple by every means in their power. They appealed to the Persian court and were successful in bringing the work to a halt. Cyrus had lost interest in the project, so for the remainder of his life no work was done on the temple. Neither was anything done during the reigns of his successors, Cambyses and Smerdis. The zeal of the Jewish pioneers was dampened. Things were not as they had imagined they would be. And since they could do nothing about the restraining order, they turned their attention to their own personal lives. Nothing further was done on the temple for 16 years.

In 521 B.C. King Darius ascended the Persian throne. In an effort to secure the goodwill of the Jews, Darius lifted the ban on rebuilding the temple and the way was cleared to finish the project.

In the interim the Jews had acquired other interests, thus prophets were needed to stir the people out of their lethargy. Haggai and Zechariah became God's instruments to meet this critical need. Haggai was the first of the writing prophets to address the returned remnant. During Haggai's short but potent ministry he received four communications from the LORD. Each message is carefully dated and each has its own clear focus-point. Haggai is the most precisely dated book of the Bible, with dates of each message given to the exact day.

1. **Read and carefully observe** each message that came to the prophet Haggai. Record below the date in which Haggai became the recipient of these messages from the LORD. Note: the second year of King Darius was 520 B.C.

Message 1—Haggai 1:1-15 _____

Message 2— Haggai 2:1-9 _____

Message 3— Haggai 2:10-19 _____

Message 4— Haggai 2:20-23 _____

2. What can we determine about the length of Haggai's prophetic ministry from the dates above?
3. How was Haggai's ministry different from the other prophets we have studied in this series? Consider both the content of his messages and the people's response.

For Thought and Discussion

4. What was the impetus for rebuilding God's temple? Reflect on the role the temple played in the spiritual life of Israel. (2 Chronicles 7:1-3, 11-22)

The second temple became the focal point of Christ's earthly ministry and was later destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.

5. Under the New Covenant—in which we now live—who is the temple of God? (1 Corinthians 3:16-17 and 2 Corinthians 6:14-17.) Share an example of how you see this profound truth being expressed in your life.

Message 1—God’s Word of Reproof: Reread Haggai 1:1-15. Mark Haggai 1:5 and 1:7.

In Old Testament times the Jews kept the first day of each month (the day of the new moon) holy; on it they assembled in the sanctuary and marked the day by a special offering. It was on a day particularly set apart to the LORD that Haggai delivered his first message.

Haggai went on to assert that it was not just he who was speaking, but the LORD Almighty Himself! (verse 2) The Septuagint translates this name of God, *kurios pantokrato*, as “All-Powerful.” This double name of God “The LORD of hosts” (NASB) or “The LORD Almighty” (NIV) is particularly suitable in books like Haggai and Zechariah, says one commentator—books which teach that God’s good providence bends the nations to do His good will for Judah. –Wolff

6. The first words of Haggai’s prophecy were not addressed to the people as such, but to the leaders of the remnant community. Identify these two men and explain their positions of leadership. (Haggai 1:1; Ezra 2:1-2)

7. Consider why Haggai addressed the leaders first. What role can strong leaders play in stirring people to action?

8. After **reviewing** Haggai 1:2, why might God use the inspiration of human leadership to move these people from their lethargy?

9. According to Ezra 3:7, King Cyrus authorized Sidon and Tyre to provide _____
_____ by sea from Lebanon for the rebuilding of the temple.

It appears likely that the remnant of Judah used this superior wood to build their own homes during the years they were not permitted to work on the temple.

The excuse made by the people and the procrastination behind it resulted in penetrating words of reproof by the prophet: “**Give careful thought to your ways.**” (NIV)

10. How did God unmask their hypocrisy and force them to face the results of their selfishness? (See Haggai 1:6-7, 9-11.)

C.S Lewis once said: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

11. Describe a time when you have found yourself making excuses for not engaging in God’s work, only later to be convicted by God.

Heart Check: *What is the most important thing in your life today?* How much time do you spend each day on things that count for eternity compared to your own selfish interests? “Consider your ways,” says the prophet. (NASB) Like the Jewish people, too often we make *excuses* when we should be making *confessions*. *Take time to meditate on Matthew 6:33-34. Write your personal response to God below.*

The People’s Response: Reread Haggai 1:8, 12-15.

12. We have reached an important moment in the history of God’s covenant people! From verses 8 and 12 list each aspect of the story that brings encouragement and hope to your life.

13. Summarize the main truths contained in the message Haggai gave the people following their wholehearted response to God (verses 12-15).

14. God meets each of us where we are and urges us on to greater devotion and obedience to Him. At what point did God meet you in this study, and how is He urging you to plow deeper furrows of faith?

As you “give careful thought to your ways,” stand in holy awe of the Almighty and His ways!

Synopsis of the Babylonian Captivity

The Minor Prophets we have studied so far all lived and prophesied prior to the Babylonian Captivity. Before we study the book of Haggai, *who prophesied after the captivity*, it is important that we recall some of the major events of the captivity of Judah and consider the impact that this life-shattering experience had on God's covenant people.

Reading the Scripture references in this summary will greatly enhance your understanding of God's remarkable acts of grace even during this period of judgment.

The captivity of Judah was predicted 100 years in advance by Isaiah and Micah. (*Isaiah 39:6; Micah 4:10*) It was God's punishment for the rebellious people of Judah, who for hundreds of years practiced spiritual adultery, abandoned their trust in God, and refused to be corrected.

The Setting

Just as Egypt and Babylon were seeking world supremacy, the new young brilliant king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, went out and defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish. He marched on to Judah during Jehoiakim's reign and took many of the finest and brightest young men back to Babylon, including Daniel who became a great prophet during the exile. Some of the articles from the temple were removed and taken to Babylon at this time. This was the first wave of captives, taken in 605 B.C. (*2 Chronicles 36:5-7; Daniel 1:1-6*)

A few years later in 597 B.C. during the reign of king Jehoiachin, Nebuchadnezzar's officers laid siege to Jerusalem and took control of the area. Nebuchadnezzar also came and took king Jehoiachin prisoner, along with 10,000 others (officers, fighting men, artisans and craftsmen). Ezekiel would have been among this group. Nebuchadnezzar also removed all the treasures from the temple of the LORD and the royal palace and carried them off to Babylon. (*2 Kings 24:8-17 provides additional details.*)

At this time Nebuchadnezzar appointed King Zedekiah to rule as his representative over Judah. After reigning for nine years as a puppet king, Zedekiah led Judah in a rebellion against Babylon. This resulted in Nebuchadnezzar again laying siege to Jerusalem. Two years later Jerusalem fell! The year was 586 B.C. The captain of the king's guard came to Jerusalem and burned the temple, the king's palace and all the important buildings in the city. They broke down the walls around Jerusalem, smashed the bronze from the pillars of the temple and carried the bronze to Babylon. *The sum total of the articles taken from Solomon's temple was incalculable.* They put out the eyes of king Zedekiah and carried him in chains to Babylon with the majority of Jewish people who remained. Some of the poorest of the land were left to work the vineyards and fields. (*2 Kings 25; Jeremiah 52:1-27*)

Note: Not all of the Jews were taken into exile to Babylon. Some fled to Egypt because of the deplorable conditions in Judah. The prophet *Jeremiah* was among this group. (*Jeremiah 42:15-22; 43:1-7; 44:26-28*)

As the Jewish captivity into Babylon was underway, Ezekiel was given a great vision of the impending destruction of Jerusalem. In his visionary tour Ezekiel witnessed the soon-departure of the Shekinah Glory (God's Divine presence) from the temple—in stages. (Ezekiel 9:3; 10:18, 19; 11:22-25)

Yet God did not leave Himself without a witness to His exiled people. Ezekiel and Daniel ministered to them with extraordinary power. Although the throne of David had been destroyed, the line of David remained. It was revived in a spiritual sense with the coming of Jesus Christ and will find its consummation at the glorious second coming of our LORD Jesus Christ!

The mood of the people of Judah during the Babylonian captivity is well expressed in the book of Lamentations, likely penned by the prophet Jeremiah shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The book expresses the deep emotion of one who has experienced the awful horrors of the destruction of the holy city and the temple. (*Read Lamentations chapter 1, Psalm 79 and Psalm 137:1-4.*)

While Judah was in exile God made some extraordinary promises through the prophet Ezekiel that restored hope to this disillusioned and desperate nation. God would make a new covenant with the house of Israel. He would remove the heart of stone and give them a new heart and a new spirit. God was going to change them from the inside out! (*Ezekiel 36:16-27*)

The Babylonian policy allowed the Jews to settle in towns and villages along Chebar River. They lived in communities together and engaged in farming and other sorts of labor to earn income. The Jews were encouraged by the prophet Jeremiah from Jerusalem to take wives, build houses, plant gardens and take advantage of their situation because they were going to be there for seventy years. Many Jews eventually became wealthy. (*Jeremiah 29:4-11*)

“Then it will come to pass, when seventy years are completed, that I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans for their iniquity, says the LORD, and I will make it a perpetual desolation.” (Jeremiah 25:12)

This prophecy was fulfilled in Cyrus, founder of the Persian Empire, who attacked Babylon and overthrew the empire in 539 B.C. (*Daniel chapter 5*) God granted Cyrus his victories in order for Cyrus to restore God's people to their homeland. (*Isaiah 45:1*) This hope was fulfilled in 538 B.C. when Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Jews residing in Babylon/Persia to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and its temple. (*2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-11*)

A portion of the nation of Israel returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel (a descendant of David), another portion under Ezra and the third group under Nehemiah. (*Ezra chapter 2 and Nehemiah 2:1-9*)

Israel's second Exodus was not as impressive as the first because only a **faithful remnant** returned. Sadly, many Jews chose to remain in Persia because they had become comfortable with their way of life there. But the faithful Jews who chose to return to their homeland became a separate people. They repented of their sins and gave up idolatry completely! (*Nehemiah 9:1-3, 38; 10:28-39*)

-Bev Horn