

Notes on Haggai

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Introduction

TITLE AND WRITER

The title of this prophetic book is also the name of its writer.

Haggai referred to himself as simply "the prophet Haggai" (1:1; et al.) We know nothing about Haggai's parents, ancestors, or tribal origin. His name apparently means "festal" or possibly "feast of Yahweh."¹ It is a form of the Hebrew word *hag*, meaning "feast." This has led some students of the book to speculate that Haggai's birth may have occurred during one of Israel's feasts.² Ezra mentioned that through the prophetic ministries of Haggai and Zechariah the returned Jewish exiles resumed and completed the restoration of their temple (Ezra 5:1; 6:14; cf. Zech. 8:9; 1 Esdras 6:1; 7:3; 2 Esdras 1:40; Ecclesiasticus 49:11). Haggai's reference to the former glory of the temple before the Babylonians destroyed it (2:2) may or may not imply that he saw that temple. If he did, he would have been an old man when he delivered the messages that this book contains. In this case he may have been over 70 years old when he prophesied. However it is not at all certain that the reference in 2:2 implies that he saw the former temple.

Some editions of the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate versions of the Book of Psalms attribute authorship of some of the Psalms to Haggai and or Zechariah (i.e., Ps. 111—112, 125—126, 137—138, and 145—149). There is no other evidence that either prophet wrote any of these psalms. The reason for the connection appears to have been the close association that these prophets had with the temple where these psalms were sung.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Babylonians, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including Solomon's temple, in 586 B.C. and took most of the Jews captive to Babylon. There the Israelites could not practice their formal worship (religious cult) as the Mosaic Law prescribed because they lacked an authorized altar and temple. They prayed toward Jerusalem privately (cf. Dan. 6:10) and probably publicly, and they established synagogues where they assembled to hear their Law read and to worship God informally.

¹This is appropriate since much of what Haggai prophesied deals with millennial blessings.

²E.g., Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 28; Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, p. 44. Taylor wrote the commentary on Haggai.

King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jewish exiles to return to their land in 538 B.C. At least three waves of returnees took advantage of this opportunity. The first of these was the group of almost 50,000 Jews that returned under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, and Zerubbabel who replaced him, in 537 B.C. (Ezra 1:2-4).³ Haggai and Zechariah appear to have been two of these returnees, as was Joshua the high priest, though Haggai's name does not appear in the lists of returnees in the opening chapters of Ezra. During the year that followed, these returnees rebuilt the brazen altar in Jerusalem, resumed offering sacrifices on it, celebrated the feast of Tabernacles, and laid the foundation for the reconstruction of the (second) temple. Opposition to the rebuilding of the temple resulted in the postponement of construction for 16 years. During this long period, apathy toward temple reconstruction set in among the residents of Judah and Jerusalem. Then in 520 B.C., as a result of changes in the Persian government and the preaching of Haggai, the people resumed rebuilding the temple.⁴ They finished the project about five years later in 515 B.C. (cf. Ezra 1—6).⁵ Haggai first sounded the call to resume construction, and Zechariah soon joined him. Zechariah's ministry lasted longer than Haggai's.

DATE

Haggai delivered four messages to the restoration community, and he dated all of them in the second year of King Darius I (Hystaspes) of Persia (i.e., 520 B.C.).⁶ His ministry, as this book records it, spanned less than four months, from the first day of the sixth month (1:1) to the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month (2:20).⁷ In the modern calendar this would have been between August 29 and December 18, 520 B.C. This means that Haggai was the first writing prophet to address the returned Israelites. Zechariah began prophesying to the returnees in the eighth month of that same year (Zech. 1:1). Haggai was the most precise of the prophets in dating his messages.

The precision in dating prophecies that marks Haggai and Zechariah reflects the annalistic style of history writing that distinguished Neo-Babylonian and Persian times.⁸ Ezekiel, who was probably an older contemporary of these prophets, was the third most precise in dating his prophecies, and Daniel, another contemporary, also was precise but not as detailed. Likewise Ezra and Nehemiah, who wrote after Haggai and Zechariah, showed the same interest in chronological precision.

Probably Haggai wrote the book between 520 and 515 B.C., the year the returnees completed the temple. Lack of reference to the completion of the temple, while not a

³Ezra led the second wave of 1,700 men plus women and children (perhaps about 5,000 individuals) back to Jerusalem in 458 B.C., and Nehemiah led the third wave of 42,000 Israelites back in 444 B.C.

⁴For details concerning changes in the Persian government, see Robert L. Alden, "Haggai," in *Daniel-Minor Prophets*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 569-71; or Eugene H. Merrill, *An Exegetical Commentary: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, pp. 5-9.

⁵One way to calculate the 70-year captivity is from the first deportation to Babylon in 605 B.C. to the year temple reconstruction began, 536 B.C. Another way is to count from the destruction of the temple in 586 B.C. to the completion of temple restoration in 515 B.C.

⁶Ezekiel and Daniel were probably dead by this time.

⁷Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 365, wrote that Haggai's ministry began before 520 B.C. and continued a few years after it, but that is speculation.

⁸For example, see D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldaean Kings (625-556 B.C.) in the British Museum*.

strong argument for this view, seems reasonable since mention of the completion of the temple would have finished off the book nicely.

PLACE OF COMPOSITION

Haggai obviously preached and evidently wrote in Jerusalem, as is clear from his references to the temple in both chapters. Confirming this location is his reference to the nearby mountains (1:8, 11). There were no real mountains in Babylonia.

AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

Haggai was as specific about his audience as he was about when he prophesied. The first oracle was for Zerubbabel and Joshua, the Jewish governor of Judah and its high priest (1:1). The prophet delivered the second one to those men and the remnant of the people (2:1). The third oracle was for the priests (2:11), and the fourth one was for Zerubbabel (2:21). Obviously these oracles had a larger audience as well, namely, the entire restoration community and eventually the general population of the world.

"Haggai is a prophetic history that intends to interpret the religious and theological significance of the historical events that it recounts."⁹

Haggai's purpose was simple and clear. It was to motivate the Jews to build the temple. To do this he also fulfilled a secondary purpose: he confronted the people with their misplaced priorities. They were building their own houses but had neglected God's house. It was important to finish building the temple because only then could the people fully resume Levitical worship as the Lord had specified. They had gone into captivity for covenant unfaithfulness. Thus they needed to return to full obedience to the Mosaic Covenant. Furthermore, in the ancient Near East the glory of a nation's temple(s) reflected the glory of the people's god(s). So to finish the temple meant to glorify Yahweh.

". . . he also wrote to give the people hope by announcing that God's program of blessing would come 'in a little while' (Hag. 2:6) when God would again 'shake the heavens and the earth' (2:6, 21)."¹⁰

THEOLOGICAL EMPHASES

Central to Haggai's emphasis is the temple as God's dwelling place on earth, as a center for worship, and as a symbol of Yahweh's greatness. For him the temple was more important than the palace, and the priests were more important than the princes. (There was no king of the Jews after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.) Another theological emphasis was the relative importance of glorifying God compared to living affluently.

⁹Taylor, p. 56.

¹⁰Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 815.

"Governments work on the assumption that a healthy gross national product is the consequence of a proper industrial base, efficient management, skilled workers, and the due operation of market forces—in other words, that economic health depends on an effective economic system. Haggai, however, rose to challenge the view that economics can be left to the economists. Here, too, we live in God's world and unless he is given the central place and honor, the laws he created will work not for our blessing but for our bane. Thus Haggai speaks to our concern that world resources should meet world need and to our longing that not only will needs be satisfied but also that life will be satisfying. He addresses the problem of inflation more explicitly than any other prophet; his book is a tract for our times."¹¹

Other important themes are holiness as a prerequisite for worship, the prophetic word as divine revelation, divine sovereignty, human responsibility, and a future for the Davidic dynasty.¹²

CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES

Haggai is the second shortest book of the Old Testament, after Obadiah. The writer's literary style is simple and direct. The book is a mixture of prose and poetry, the introductory sections being prose and the oracles poetry. The book contains four short messages that Haggai preached to the returned Jews in less than four months of one year, 520 B.C. Haggai was clearly aware that the messages he preached to the Israelites were from God. He affirmed their divine authority 25 times. In contrast to almost all the writing prophets, Haggai was successful in that the people to whom he preached listened to him and obeyed his exhortations.

"The truth is that few prophets have succeeded in packing into such brief compass so much spiritual common sense as Haggai did."¹³

"Interestingly, Haggai's message has none of the elements so characteristic of the other biblical prophets. For instance, he wrote no diatribe against idolatry. He said nothing of social ills and abuses of the legal system, nor did he preach against adultery or syncretism. His one theme was rebuilding God's temple."¹⁴

UNITY AND CANONICITY

Critics have not seriously challenged either the unity or the canonicity of Haggai. Its place in the canon is chronological, leading the postexilic prophetic books and following the pre-exilic and exilic ones.

¹¹J. Alec Motyer, "Haggai," in *The Minor Prophets*, P. 963.

¹²See Taylor, pp. 73-83, for discussion of these themes.

¹³Frank E. Gaebelien, *Four Minor Prophets [Obadiah, Jonah, Habakkuk, and Haggai]: Their Message for Today*, p. 199.

¹⁴Alden, p. 573.

TEXT

There are only a few textual problems in the book (1:2, 9; 2:2, 5, 7, 9, 14, 16). In addition to these, the Septuagint made some additions to the Hebrew text (2:9, 14).

OUTLINE

- I. A call to build the temple ch. 1
 - A. Haggai's first challenge 1:1-6
 - B. Haggai's second challenge 1:7-11
 - C. The Israelites' response 1:12-15
- II. A promise of future glory for the temple 2:1-9
- III. A promise of future blessing for the people 2:10-19
- IV. A prophecy concerning Zerubbabel 2:20-23

One writer saw a chiasmic structure in the book.¹⁵

- A** A pair of oracles delivered on the same day that stress the negative consequences of the unfinished temple followed by a double call to take the Lord's word to heart 1:1-11
 - B** The promise of the Lord's presence that would energize the reconstruction of the temple 1:13-15a
 - B'** The promise of the Lord's presence that would guarantee coming glory 1:15b—2:9
- A'** A pair of oracles delivered on the same day that stress the positive consequences of the finished temple including a double call to take the Lord's word to heart 2:10-23

¹⁵Adapted from Motyer, p. 968.

Exposition

I. A CALL TO BUILD THE TEMPLE CH. 1

A. HAGGAI'S FIRST CHALLENGE 1:1-6

1:1 Like Ezekiel, Jonah, and Zechariah, Haggai contains no formal title. Yahweh sent a message to Zerubbabel ("born in Babylon" or "seed of Babylon," an allusion to his birthplace) and Joshua ("Yahweh saves") through the prophet Haggai, though it went to all the Israelites too (vv. 2, 4). Zerubbabel was the political governor (overseer) of the Persian province of Judah who had led the returnees back to the land (Ezra 2:2; et al.). He was the son of Shealtiel ("I have asked of God," Ezra 3:2, 8; 5:2; Neh. 12:1; et al) and the grandson of King Jehoiachin (Jeconiah), one of the descendants of King David (cf. 1 Chron. 3:17-19; Matt. 1:12).¹⁶ Joshua was the high priest of the restoration community and a descendant of Aaron. He was the son of Jehozadak, who had gone into Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C. (1 Chron. 6:15; cf. Ezra 3:2, 8; 12:1, 8).

The Lord gave Haggai this message on the first day of the sixth month in the second year that Darius I (Hystaspes) ruled as king over Persia. This was Elul 1 (August 29), 520 B.C.¹⁷ Each new month began with a new moon, and the Israelites commonly celebrated the occasion with a new moon festival (cf. Num. 28:11-15; Isa. 1:14; Hos. 2:11). This first prophetic revelation that God gave in the Promised Land following the return from exile came on a day when most of the Israelites would have been in Jerusalem. The meaning of Haggai's name (festal, or festal one) was appropriate in view of when the Lord gave this first prophecy through him. The fact that the writer spoke of Haggai in the third person does not exclude Haggai himself from being the writer since this was a common literary device in antiquity.¹⁸

In the historical books of the Old Testament, the writers usually dated the events in reference to a king of Judah or Israel, but the Jews had no king now. They were under the control of a Gentile ruler, in "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24; cf. Dan. 2; Zech. 1:1).¹⁹

¹⁶Zerubbabel apparently had two fathers (1 Chron. 3:17-19). Perhaps his other father, Pedaiah, was his uncle. If this was a levirate marriage (cf. Deut. 25:5-10), Pedaiah would have married a woman and then died. Shealtiel, Pedaiah's brother, would then have married the widow who gave birth to Zerubbabel in place of Shealtiel, Zerubbabel's physical father. Another possibility is that Shealtiel adopted Zerubbabel after Pedaiah died. A third option is that one of these men was really a more distant ancestor of Zerubbabel, perhaps his grandfather.

¹⁷When the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon, they continued to follow the Babylonian calendar and began their years in the spring rather than in the fall (cf. Exod. 23:16; 34:22). R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.-A.D. 75*, p. 30, established the equivalent modern (Julian) dates.

¹⁸Taylor, p. 52.

¹⁹"The times of the Gentiles" are the times during which Israel lives under Gentile control. These times began when Judah lost her sovereignty to Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C., and they will continue until Messiah's second coming when He will restore sovereignty to Israel.

1:2 Haggai announced that his message came from Yahweh of armies, Almighty Yahweh.²⁰ The Lord told Zerubbabel and Joshua that the Israelites were saying that the time was not right to rebuild the temple. By referring to them as "these people" rather than "my people," the Lord was distancing Himself from them. Construction on the temple had begun 16 years earlier but had ceased due to opposition from the Israelites' neighbors who were mostly Samaritans (Ezra 3:8-13; 4:1-5, 24). When the Jews considered resuming construction, most of them said it was not yet the right time.²¹ Their decision may have rested on the continuing threat from their neighbors. Or perhaps they felt that to finish the temple then would violate Jeremiah's prediction of a 70-year captivity (Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10). Another possibility is that they thought God Himself would finish it (Ezek. 40—48).²²

"To refuse to build the [Lord's] house was at best saying that it did not matter whether the Lord was present with them. At worst it was presuming on divine grace, that the Lord would live with his people even though they willfully refused to fulfill the condition of his indwelling that he had laid down."²³

Today many Christians do not do God's will because they feel the time is not precisely right.

"Too often we make excuses when we ought to be making confessions and obeying the Lord. We say, 'It's not time for an evangelistic crusade,' 'It's not time for the Spirit to bring revival,' 'It's not time to expand the ministry.' We act as though we fully understand 'the times and the seasons' that God has ordained for His people, but we don't understand them (Acts 1:6-7)."²⁴

1:3-4 Haggai then spoke to the people for the Lord, in this disputation speech, not just their leaders (v. 2). He rhetorically asked if it was proper for them to build their own houses but not rebuild His. They should have put the glory of their God ahead of their own comfort (cf. 2 Sam. 7:2; Phil. 2:21). Their priorities were upside down.

²⁰This title appears 14 times in Haggai and 265 times in the Hebrew Bible. "Yahweh" occurs 34 times in the 38 verses of Haggai.

²¹Contrast David's great desire to build a house for the Lord (2 Sam. 7:2).

²²See R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, "The Temple and the Origins of Jewish Apocalyptic," *Vetus Testamentum* 20 (1976):12.

²³Motyer, p. 974.

²⁴Warren W. Wiersbe, "Haggai," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Prophets*, p. 441.

"Their problem was not lack of goods but of good."²⁵

"Paneled houses" apparently describes quite luxurious homes, though the Hebrew word *sapan* ("paneled") can mean simply houses with roofs. Wooden paneling or plaster that covered the walls and possibly the ceilings seems to be in view.

King Cyrus had provided the Jews with money to buy hardwood timber to rebuild the temple (Ezra 3:7; 1 Esdras 4:48; 5:54). It appears that the restoration Jews had used this superior wood to build their own homes rather than to rebuild the temple.

"Many Christians are like those ancient Hebrews, somehow convincing themselves that economy in constructing church buildings [or financing God's work] is all-important while at the same time sparing no expense in acquiring their personal luxuries."²⁶

"Whereas the house of God today is no longer material but spiritual, the material is still a very real symbol of the spiritual. When the Church of God in any place in any locality is careless about the material place of assembly, the place of its worship and its work, it is a sign and evidence that its life is at a low ebb."²⁷

1:5-6 The Lord called "the people" to evaluate what they were doing in the light of their present situation (cf. v. 7; 2:15, 18 [twice]). They were not experiencing God's blessings very greatly. They sowed much seed but harvested only modest crops (cf. vv. 10-11; 2:15-17, 19). The food and drink that they grew only met their minimal needs. They had so little fiber from which to make clothing that their clothes were very thin and did not keep them warm. Their purses seemed to have holes in them in the sense that the money they put in them disappeared before they could pay all their bills.²⁸ This was divine chastening for disobedience (cf. Lev. 26:18-20; Deut. 28:41). They should have put the Lord first.

"An affluent generation of Christians that is wasting God's generous gifts on trivia and toys will have much to answer for when the Lord returns."²⁹

²⁵Motyer, p. 977.

²⁶Alden, p. 581.

²⁷G. Campbell Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit*, 8:315.

²⁸This may be the first reference to coined money in the Bible. The Lydians in Asia Minor were the first to coin money, in the seventh century B.C., and there is archaeological evidence that there were coins in Palestine when Haggai wrote. See Ephraim Stern, *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible in the Persian Period 538-332 B.C.*, pp. 215, 236; idem, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible. Vol. II: The Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods, 732-332 BCE*, pp. 558-59.

²⁹Wiersbe, p. 445.

B. HAGGAI'S SECOND CHALLENGE 1:7-11

1:7-8 Again the Lord called the people to reflect thoughtfully on what they were doing (cf. v. 5). He urged them to go to the mountains where trees grew abundantly, to cut them down, and to continue rebuilding the temple (cf. Ezra 3:7). The completed temple would please and glorify Him.

"The important thing is not the size or magnificence of the house, but the *existence* of it—that they want the indwelling God among them."³⁰

"The hills of Judah were well wooded in Old Testament times, and from Nehemiah 8:15 we know that olive, myrtle and palm were available. It was customary to set layers of wood in stone walls to minimize earthquake damage (cf. Ezr. 5:8); this wood, and heavy timber, long enough to stretch from wall to wall of the Temple to support the roof, would probably have to be imported (Ezr. 3:7)."³¹

"When work is gladly done in order to please God it also brings Him glory."³²

1:9 The Israelites had looked for much blessing from the Lord, but they had found very little. When they brought their grain home, the Lord blew it away. Apparently their grain was so light and small that much of it blew away with the chaff when they threshed it. The reason was clear. They had neglected the temple and had given all their time and energy to providing for themselves by building their own houses.

There are six occurrences of the phrase "declares the LORD of hosts" in Haggai (1:9; 2:4, 8, 9, 23 [twice]) and six occurrences of the shorter phrase "declares the LORD" (1:13; 2:4 [twice], 14, 17, 23). This is unusual for a book as short as Haggai. Obviously the writer wanted to emphasize the divine origin of his message to the people.³³

1:10-11 The hot weather and poor harvests that the returned exiles were enduring were due to their selfish behavior (cf. Lev. 26:19-20; Deut. 28:22-24). Dew was the only form of moisture that plants enjoyed during the hot summer months, beside artificial irrigation, but even that was unavailable. The Lord had decreed drought that affected all their essential products and all aspects of their lives (cf. Deut. 28:38).

³⁰Motyer, p. 977.

³¹Baldwin, p. 41.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., pp. 44-45, wrote an extended note on the name "the Lord of Hosts."

"Those who plan to give to God 'once they have enough for themselves' will never have enough for themselves!"³⁴

C. THE ISRAELITES' RESPONSE 1:12-15

1:12 Haggai's preaching moved Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the remnant of Israelites who had returned from captivity to obey the Lord. This demonstrated reverence for Him.

"Haggai referred to the people as a **remnant** (here and also in v. 14 and in 2:2), not merely because they were survivors of the Babylonian Exile but also because they were becoming what the remnant of God's people should always be—those who are obedient within their covenant relationship to the Lord (cf. Isa. 10:21)."³⁵

This term probably refers to the entire Judean population, consisting of both those who had returned from Babylon and those who had remained in the Promised Land (cf. Jer. 8:3; Ezek. 5:10; 9:18; 11:13).³⁶

"When times are prosperous, it may be easier to dismiss a word of prophetic rebuke; but hard times often expose raw nerves of the spiritual life that has grown insensitive to God's spirit. Frequently it is in the midst of exceptional human difficulty that God's word finds its greatest success."³⁷

"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."³⁸

1:13 The people's obedient response resulted in the Lord sending another message to Haggai, His messenger. He reported that Yahweh was with them (cf. 2:4). This assurance of His divine enablement guaranteed their success as they continued obeying by rebuilding the temple. It is God's presence with us more than anything else that guarantees our success as we carry out His will (cf. Josh. 1:1-9). Our loving obedience results in Him drawing close, but our disobedience leads Him to withdraw His presence.

³⁴Dyer, p. 816.

³⁵F. Duane Lindsey, "Haggai," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1540.

³⁶See Taylor, p. 139.

³⁷Ibid., p. 137.

³⁸C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 81.

1:14-15 The Lord stirred up the two leaders and the people to resume work on the temple (cf. 2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:5). Work began again on the twenty-fourth day of that very month. Perhaps it took three weeks for the people to make their decision and make preparations, including cutting wood (cf. v. 8). There was also a harvest of figs, grapes, and pomegranates in the month of Elul, which may also have delayed them.³⁹

"God is not portrayed here as a divine puppeteer who manipulates people, but as a sovereign king who rewards obedience by giving it a boost."⁴⁰

II. A PROMISE OF FUTURE GLORY FOR THE TEMPLE 2:1-9

2:1 The Lord revealed another message, an oracle of encouragement, to Haggai almost one month later, on the twenty-first day of the seventh month (Tishri, modern October 17) of the same year, 520 B.C. This was the last day of the feast of Tabernacles (Booths). Tishri was a month of celebrations for the Israelites. On the first of this month they celebrated the feast of Trumpets, and on the tenth, the day of Atonement. The feast of Tabernacles lasted seven days, and the following day was a day of rest (Lev. 23:33-44).

2:2 The audience was the same as the one that received the first message: Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the entire Judean population.

2:3 The Lord asked if the older members of the restoration community who had seen Solomon's temple, which perished 66 years earlier, did not think the present temple was nothing in comparison (cf. Zech. 4:10). The Lord's three questions forced the people to admit that the present temple was not as grand as the former one had been.⁴¹ The dedication of Solomon's temple took place 440 years earlier at the feast of Tabernacles (1 Kings 8:2; 2 Chron. 7:8-10), so that was perhaps the reason the Lord gave this message to Haggai on this day.

2:4 The Lord again encouraged Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people to work, and He promised again to be with them (cf. 1:13). David had given the same charge and promise to Solomon regarding the first temple (1 Chron. 28:10, 20). Comparisons can be discouraging when doing the Lord's work, so people involved in it need to remind themselves that He is with them (cf. Matt. 28:20; Mark 6:50).

³⁹P. A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, p. 88.

⁴⁰Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets*, p. 452.

⁴¹The older returnees had made a similar negative comparison when the foundation of the temple was laid 16 years earlier in 536 B.C (cf. Ezra 3:8-13).

"The key to tackling despondency is found here: stop listening to ourselves and start listening to him and his word of promise."⁴²

2:5 The Lord reiterated the promise He had made to the Israelites when they left Egypt in the Exodus. His Spirit would stay in their midst, so they did not need to fear (cf. Exod. 19:4-6; 33:14). The returnees could identify with their forefathers who departed from Egypt because they had recently departed from another captivity in Babylon. As the Lord had been with them in the cloudy pillar, so He was with them now. As David had encouraged Solomon to build the first temple with the promise that God would be with him (1 Chron. 28:20), so Haggai encouraged Zerubbabel and Joshua to build the second temple with the same promise.

"There must have been those who were theologically naive and doubted that God could be with them if the temple and the ark in particular were not intact.

"Undoubtedly fear gripped many of the returnees—fear that God had written an eternal 'Ichabod' over Jerusalem, fear that no amount of praying or piety would induce him to bless them again, fear that the whole endeavor was in vain, fear that the political enemies would in fact win, fear that all was lost."⁴³

2:6 The basis of their confidence and lack of fear was a promise from Almighty Yahweh. He would do again in the future what He had done at the Exodus and at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 19:16, 18; Ps. 68:8; 77:16-18). Shaking the heavens and the earth describes an earthquake, which was an evidence of the Lord's supernatural intervention (cf. Isa. 2:12-21; 13:13; Ezek. 38:20; Amos 8:8). This will occur when Christ returns to the earth (Joel 3:16; Matt. 24:29-30).

The writer of Hebrews quoted this verse in Hebrews 12:26. He then added that we who are in Christ have an unshakable kingdom that will endure the coming cosmic earthquake (Heb. 12:28-29). Haggai's prophecy still awaits fulfillment.

"The New Testament writer sees in Haggai's language an implicit contrast between the transitory nature of the old economy and the abiding permanence of the new economy that was initiated by the mission of Jesus."⁴⁴

⁴²Motyer, p. 987.

⁴³Alden, p. 585.

⁴⁴Taylor, p. 159.

2:7 At the same time, Almighty Yahweh would shake all the nations; His return will upset the political and governmental structures of the world (cf. Zech. 14:1-4). The nations would bring their wealth to the Israelites, like the Egyptians gave their treasures to the departing Hebrews at the Exodus (cf. Exod. 3:21-22; 11:2-3; 12:35-36).

Some English translations have "the desire of all nations will come." This "desire" could be an impersonal reference to the wealth that the nations desire (cf. Isa. 60:5; Zech. 14:14),⁴⁵ or it could be a personal reference. In this case it could be a messianic prophecy, which is why some translations capitalized "Desire."⁴⁶

"It is well to remember . . . that from earliest days the majority of Christian interpreters followed the Jewish tradition in referring the passage to the coming of Israel's Messiah."⁴⁷

The Hebrew text does not solve the problem, which is interpretive. Perhaps the Lord was deliberately ambiguous and had both things in mind: the wealth of the nations and Messiah.⁴⁸

The Lord also promised to fill the temple with glory. The temple in view must be the millennial temple rather than the second (restoration) temple in view of the context. This glory could be the wealth that the nations will bring to it (cf. Isa. 60:7, 13). Or the glory in view may be the glory of God's own presence (cf. Exod. 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:10-11; Ezek. 43:1-12). Simeon referred to the infant Jesus as "the glory of your people Israel" (Luke 2:32). However, Jesus' presence in Herod's temple only prefigured the glory that will be present in the millennial temple.

2:8 This verse seems to support the view that impersonal wealth is in view in verse 7. The Lord reminded the people that He controlled all the silver and gold in the world, so He could cause the nations to bring it to the temple in the future.⁴⁹ This reminder would have encouraged Haggai's contemporaries as they rebuilt the temple as well. God could bring more financial resources to them so they could glorify their presently modest temple.

⁴⁵Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "A Theology of the Minor Prophets," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 421; idem, *Handbook on . . .*, pp. 452-53; Taylor, p. 161-65. See Ezra 6:8-12; 7:12-26, 2 Macc. 3:3; and Matt. 2:1-11 for other past instances of wealth coming to Israel from the nations.

⁴⁶Charles Wesley followed this interpretation when he wrote the Christmas hymn "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." "Come, Desire of nations, come! Fix in us Thy humble home."

⁴⁷Charles L. Feinberg, "Haggai," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 893.

⁴⁸Herbert Wolf, *Haggai and Malachi*, pp. 34-37.

⁴⁹Merrill, p. 41, suggested that "the point may well be that because all such things are His and are therefore not of value to Him, His own glory is what is central."

2:9 Even though the present temple was less glorious than Solomon's temple, the Lord promised that the final glory of the temple would be greater than its former glory. The Lord also promised to bring peace to the site of the temple, Jerusalem. Neither of these things has happened yet, so the fulfillment must be future (millennial). Lasting peace will only come when Messiah returns to rule and reign (cf. Isa. 2:4; 9:6; Zech. 9:9-10). Jesus Christ's adornment of the second temple, as renovated by Herod the Great, with His presence hardly seems to fulfill the exalted promises in this prophecy.⁵⁰

The Lord used the occasion of the feast of Tabernacles to encourage the builders of the temple in Haggai's day. This feast looked back to the Exodus, reminded the Israelites of their wilderness wanderings, and anticipated settlement in the Promised Land. This message also looked back to the Exodus, referred to the present temple construction, and anticipated the glory of the future temple.

III. A PROMISE OF FUTURE BLESSING FOR THE PEOPLE 2:10-19

2:10 Another prophecy came from the Lord on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month of 520 B.C. (Kislev 24, December 18). This date holds no particular significance; it does not mark an important feast or other event in Israel's history. During the two months between this prophecy and the former one (vv. 1-9), Zechariah began his ministry in Jerusalem (Zech. 1:1).

2:11 Almighty Yahweh instructed Haggai to request a ruling from the priests. The priests were the official interpreters of the Mosaic Law, and what follows deals with matters of ceremonial defilement. This is a didactic sermon, designed to teach an important lesson about religious impurity.

2:12 The question was, if someone carries consecrated food in his garment and touches other food of any kind with the garment, will that food become holy? Holy meat was meat set apart for a particular sacrificial purpose (cf. Lev. 6:25; Num. 6:20). The answer was, no it would not become holy. The meat carried in the garment would make the garment holy, but the holiness would not be communicated beyond the garment to anything else (cf. Exod. 29:37; Lev. 6:27; Ezek. 44:19; Matt. 23:19). The people were apparently thinking that since they were working on the holy temple all that they contacted and did became holy.⁵¹

2:13 A second question was, if someone who has become unclean, for example by touching a corpse, touches food of any kind, will the food become unclean? The answer was, yes it would become unclean. The Mosaic Law

⁵⁰Chisholm, "A Theology . . .," p. 421.

⁵¹Another view is that the Lord sought to discourage His people from taking gifts from pagan rulers and using them to build the temple (cf. Ezra 6:8-10). See *ibid.*, pp. 45-46, 49.

taught that moral uncleanness could be transmitted, but moral cleanness could not (cf. Lev. 6:18; 22:4-6; Num. 19:11-16).⁵²

"The long disobedience of the nation rendered their work unprofitable before God."⁵³

- 2:14 Haggai then made an application of this principle to the people for the Lord. Their sacrifices were unacceptable to God because they were unclean. They should not think that contact with something holy, such as the temple they were working to complete, made them acceptable to God. They had previously been unclean, so their present sacrifices were unacceptable to God.
- 2:15-16 The people needed to give careful consideration to something again (cf. 1:5, 7). They needed to remember that before they began to obey the Lord by rebuilding the temple (1:12) they had been disobedient to the Mosaic Covenant (cf. 1:5-11). The Lord's punishment for their covenant unfaithfulness had been greatly reduced harvests. Their grains had decreased by 50 percent and their grapes by 60 percent.
- 2:17 The Lord had used hot winds, mildew, and hail to smite the people and what they had planted, but they still did not repent (cf. Amos 4:9). Hot winds posed problems for crops because of the dry heat, and mildew created other problems because of excessive moisture. Perhaps these conditions are a merism describing polar opposites that together mean all types of weather-related problems.⁵⁴ Hail, one of the plagues on Egypt (Exod. 9:13-35), caused severe damage to unprotected crops.
- 2:18-19 The people were to notice something on the day this prophecy reached their ears, the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month. They were to notice that from the day they started to rebuild the temple, their hardships had continued (cf. 1:14-15). They still suffered shortages of staples such as seed, grapes, and olives, and luxuries such as figs and pomegranates. However, the Lord revealed that He would now bless them, beginning that very day, the twenty-fourth of the ninth month.

This oracle explained why agricultural blessing had not begun immediately after the people resumed reconstruction on the temple. Their present dedication and obedience did not wipe out their previous covenant unfaithfulness and its punishments. That punishment had to run its course, but now, as of the day of this prophecy, God would begin to bless the people with better harvests.

⁵²The same principle applies in the area of physical health. A sick person can transmit his or her illness to healthy people and make them sick, but a healthy person cannot transmit his or her health to sick people and make them well.

⁵³*The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 962.

⁵⁴Taylor, p. 185.

God will bless His people for their obedience, but sometimes He will not erase the punishment that previous sins have made necessary. Sin always brings death (Rom. 6:23). Sometimes that punishment must run its course before blessing can begin.

IV. A PROPHECY CONCERNING ZERUBBABEL 2:20-23

- "The final verses of his book reveal Haggai as the literary equivalent of an impressionist painter—he gives general tone and effect without elaborate detail."⁵⁵
- 2:20 The Lord gave Haggai a second message on the same day as the previous message (v. 10), the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month (Kislev 24, December 18). This was an oracle of salvation.⁵⁶ Its purpose was to announce the Lord's intention to raise up a new leader for His people.
- 2:21 Haggai was to tell Zerubbabel that Yahweh was going to shake the heavens and the earth. Again a divine judgment is in view (cf. v. 6). That Zerubbabel, not Joshua or the people, is the recipient suggests that the message deals with a royal prediction.
- 2:22 The Lord announced that He was going to overthrow the rulers of the nations of the earth (cf. Exod. 15:5; Dan. 2:34-35, 44-45). He would defeat their armies by turning them against each other (cf. Zech. 12:2-9; 14:1-5; Rev. 16:16-18; 19:11-21).
- 2:23 When He did that, the Lord promised to make Zerubbabel His servant. The title "my servant" is often messianic in the Old Testament (cf. 1 Sam. 3:18; 1 Kings 11:34; Isa. 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13—53:12; Ezek. 34:23-24; 37:24-25).⁵⁷ He would make him like a signet ring because He had chosen him for a special purpose. A signet ring was what kings used to designate royal authority and personal ownership (cf. 1 Kings 21:8; Dan. 6:17; Esth. 8:8). God had chosen Zerubbabel to designate royal authority and personal ownership, namely, the coming Messiah. God had revealed through Jeremiah that if Jehoiachin, Zerubbabel's grandfather, was His signet ring, He would take it off and give it to Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Jer. 22:24-25). Thus it is clear that this figure of a signet ring views Zerubbabel as the descendant of David and Jehoiachin through whom God would provide the victory promised in verses 21 and 22.⁵⁸ He will do that

⁵⁵Motyer, p. 1000.

⁵⁶See Claus Westermann, *Prophetic Oracles of Salvation in the Old Testament*.

⁵⁷Zechariah, Haggai's contemporary, used another messianic title to refer to Zerubbabel: the branch (Zech. 3:8; 6:12; cf. Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23:5-6; 33:14-16).

⁵⁸The curse on Jehoiachin that none of his descendants would sit on David's throne or rule in Judah (Jer. 22:30) may have referred to his immediate descendants (i.e., children). However, Jesus Christ qualified as a Davidic king because He was the physical descendant of Nathan, one of David's sons, not Solomon. Jesus was the adopted son of Joseph, who was a physical descendant of Solomon and Jehoiachin (cf. Matt. 1:12-16; Luke 3:23-31).

not through Zerubbabel personally but through one of his descendants, namely, Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 1:21).

"God reverses to Zerubbabel the sentence on Jeconiah."⁵⁹

Zerubbabel represents or typifies the Messiah here (cf. Joshua's similar role in Zech. 6:9-15).⁶⁰ The certainty of this promise is clear from the threefold repetition of "Yahweh," twice as "Yahweh of hosts."

"... key events of the past (David's coming to power, Sodom, the exodus, Gideon) became symbols of the coming day, and the same is true of key people. David became so identified with what the Lord would yet do that not only was every successive king compared with him but the Messiah was even called David (Ezek. 34:23)."⁶¹

"By calling Zerubbabel His 'servant' and 'chosen' one God gave him the same status David had enjoyed (cf. 2 Sam. 3:18; 6:21; 7:5, 8, 26; 1 Kings 8:16). The comparison to a 'signet ring' indicates a position of authority and reverses the judgment pronounced on Zerubbabel's grandfather Jehoiachin (cf. Jer. 22:24-30).

"The words of Haggai 2:21-23, though spoken directly to Zerubbabel, were not fulfilled in his day. How is one to explain this apparent failure of Haggai's prophecy? Zerubbabel, a descendant of David and governor of Judah, was the official representative of the Davidic dynasty in the postexilic community at that time. As such the prophecy of the future exaltation of the Davidic throne was attached to his person. As with the Temple (cf. Hag. 2:6-9), Haggai related an eschatological reality to a tangible historical entity to assure his contemporaries that God had great plans for His people. Zerubbabel was, as it were, the visible guarantee of a glorious future for the house of David. In Haggai's day some may have actually entertained messianic hopes for Zerubbabel. However, in the progress of revelation and history Jesus Christ fulfills Haggai's prophecy."⁶²

⁵⁹Edward B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets*, 2:320. Cf. Chisholm, *Handbook on . . .*, p. 455.

⁶⁰His name becomes a code name (atbash) for the promised Messiah. See Herbert Wolf, "The Desire of All Nations in Haggai 2:7: Messianic or Not?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 19 (1976):101-2.

⁶¹Motyer, p. 1002. Other passages that speak of Messiah as David include Jer. 30:9 and Hos. 3:5.

⁶²Chisholm, "A Theology . . .," p. 422.

"Perhaps the prophecy should be taken at face value, but with an implicit element of contingency attached. The Lord may have desired to restore the glory of the Davidic throne in Zerubbabel's day, only to have subsequent developments within the postexilic community cause him to postpone that event, thereby relegating Zerubbabel to an archetype of the great king to come."⁶³

"Were these pronouncements actually fulfilled in Zerubbabel? Did he usher in a restoration of Israelite monarchy that was accompanied by the overthrow of Gentile nations in the fashion that Haggai describes? The history of this period provides no evidence that he did so. Haggai's promises did not come to fruition in the person of Zerubbabel. On the contrary, not long after this prophecy was given, Zerubbabel dropped into obscurity and passed off the scene. History is silent about what became of him or under what conditions he concluded his life."⁶⁴

"That Haggai himself necessarily expected a delayed fulfillment of his words is not likely. He had no way of anticipating the temporal distances that might exist between prediction and fulfillment."⁶⁵

This final oracle promises a future overthrow of the Gentile nations that were, in Haggai's day, exercising sovereignty over Israel. A descendant of King Jehoiachin, and before him David, would be God's agent in that day. He would come from Zerubbabel's descendants and would be similar to Zerubbabel in that He would be the political ruler of God's people. Whereas God had withdrawn His signet ring (symbolic of divine selection and investiture with authority) from Jehoiachin (Jer. 22:24), He would give it back to a future descendant of Zerubbabel. This was an act of pure grace and faithfulness on sovereign Yahweh's part since the Israelites did not deserve such a future nor could they bring it about on their own. Such a message would have encouraged and motivated the returned exiles to complete the temple since there was still a glorious future for their nation in God's plans.

"Haggai's sermons alternated between accusation and encouragement. (This is true of most of the prophets and in a sense should characterize all ministry.) The first sermon was basically negative. The second one aimed to encourage. [The third] . . . one is again essentially chiding and accusation. And . . . the last one is positive and uplifting."⁶⁶

⁶³Idem, *Handbook on . . .*, p. 455.

⁶⁴Taylor, pp. 198-99.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 201.

⁶⁶Alden, p. 588.

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