

Haggai

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Author

The name of the book is also the name of the author. He doesn't tell us anything about his parents, other ancestors, or from which of the twelve Israelite tribes he is descended.

Background

Ezra (chapter 2) gives an enumeration of over 42,000 Jews returning to their home towns in the land of Judah after Cyrus, king of Persia, had captured Babylon and decreed in 538 BC that any of the captives who desired could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple to their God. Ezra doesn't mention Haggai by name in that list, but it is likely that Haggai was among those who returned in 535 BC. Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC when he took a third batch of the Jews captive. So this return was 51 years after the destruction and 70 years after the first batch of Jews (which included Daniel) were taken captive in 605 BC. The returnees were quick to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles and laid the foundation for reconstructing the Temple but there was opposition from neighboring nations which resulted in the construction being delayed for 16 years until there was a change in the Persian government. Haggai's messages may have also influenced the people to quickly return to reconstructing the temple when the new Persian king stopped the opposition and gave them permission to continue. So the people finished the reconstruction in about five years, so in 515 BC.

Date

Haggai is very detailed in recording the dates of his four messages. All of them were in the second year of King Darius I (also known as Hystaspes) of Persia which was 520 BC. But he gives the day and month of each message during that year so we know they span less than four months in that year. It is possible that Haggai didn't actually write down his messages until closer to 515 BC but at least before then because he doesn't mention anything about the Temple reconstruction being completed and that would have made a great finish to his book if he were recalling them at a later time. I personally think he probably wrote them down as he presented them to the people.

Audience

Haggai was specific about each of his messages. The first (1:1) was for Zerubbabel, the Jewish governor of Judah, and Joshua, the high priest, but the remnant of the returnees also hear of it. The second (2:1) was for those two men and the remnant of the returnees. The third (2:10) was for the priests. The fourth (2:20) was for Zerubbabel.

Purpose

In addition to motivating the people to finish reconstructing the Temple, he confronted the people with their misplaced priorities. They were intently building their own houses but neglecting God's house. It was important for them to finish the Temple because only then could they fully resume worship as God had specified in Exodus and Leviticus. God had allowed the city and temple to be destroyed and the people taken into captivity because they had been unfaithful in their worship (See Ezekiel 8). Therefore, the people needed to complete the Temple quickly so they could resume worship which honored and glorified God.

Note: The verse quotations are a direct translation of the Hebrew by Bayit haMashiyach.

Chapter 1

1:1 translates as “In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, in the first day of the month, the word of YHWH came by the hand of Chaggai (Haggai) the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Yahudah (Judah), and to Yahushua (Joshua) the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying:”

This is Haggai’s statement of when he received this message from YHWH and to whom the message is meant to be given.

1:2 translates as “Thus says YHWH of hosts, saying: This people says: The time has not come, even the time for the house of YHWH to be rebuilt.”

This is God’s statement that the people are giving an excuse for having not rebuilt the temple.

1:3-11 translate as “Then the word of YHWH came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, saying: Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate? Now thus says YHWH of hosts: Set your heart on your ways! You have sown much, but harvest little; you eat, but there is not to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not to become drunk; you dress, but warmth is not to one; and he who hires himself is setting himself for a bag full of holes. Thus says YHWH of hosts: Set your heart on your ways! Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the house that I may be pleased with it and be glorified says YHWH. You look for much, but behold, it comes to little; when you bring it home, I blow it away. Why? Declares YHWH of hosts, because of my house which is ruined and you, each man, runs to his own house. Therefore, the heaven above you has held back from dew and the earth is held back from her produce. I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands.”

God asks if it is right for them to live in paneled (fancy) houses while God’s house lies in ruin. The people went into captivity for disobeying their covenant with God, worshipping idols, and dishonoring God by not rebuilding his house while ornately building their own. The phrase “set your heart on your ways” could be put in our way of speaking as “consider or give thought to your ways” or “think about what you are doing.” They have sown seed but don’t get much to harvest. They eat but it isn’t enough to be satisfying. They drink but it isn’t enough to even cause them to be drunk. They have clothes to wear but they aren’t enough to keep them warm. Those who hire themselves (focus on themselves) get a bag with holes so that they lose what they are trying to gain. So God tells them again to think about what they are doing, go up to the mountain, bring wood back and rebuild the temple so God can be pleased with it and glorified. The people look to get much but God blows it away and it is because they are only seeking to glorify themselves and not God. Therefore God has held back the dew so that the land does not produce and has caused the labor of the people to result in little.

1:12-13 translate as “Then Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua, the son of Jehozadak the high priest, with all the remnant of the people hearkened to the voice of YHWH their El and to the words of Haggai, the prophet, as YHWH their El had sent him. And the people feared before YHWH. Then Haggai, the messenger of YHWH, spoke by the message of YHWH to the people saying: I am with you, declares YHWH.”

Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people responded to the words of Haggai because God had sent him and they feared (honored) God. So God sends another word through Haggai that He is with the people which indicates He recognizes their change of heart (attitude).

1:14-15 translate as “So YHWH stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Yahudah, and the spirit of Joshua, the son of Jehozadak the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people and

they came and did the work on the house of YHWH of hosts their El, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of Darius the king.”

So, the end of the first message is that God used it to move the people to do the work on God’s house as they should have been doing. And they began their work on the temple 23 days after God’s first message came to Haggai.

Chapter 2

2:1-5 translate as “In the seventh month, on the twenty-first of the month, the word of YHWH came by the hand of Haggai the prophet saying: Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Yahuzadak the high priest, and to the remnant of the people saying: Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Does it not seem to you as nothing in your eyes? But now take courage Zerubbabel, declares YHWH, take courage also, Joshua, son of Jehozadak the high priest, and all you people of the land take courage, declares YHWH and work for I am with you declares YHWH of hosts. The word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit is abiding in your midst. Do not fear!”

God’s second message came through Haggai on the 21st day of the next month after the first message. This would have been the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles (also called booths). On the first day of this month they would have celebrated Yom Teruah (Day of Blowing see Lev 23:23-27 and Num 29:1-6). It was also called the Feast of Trumpets when the trumpet (shofar) was blown to call the people to assemble before the Lord to consider their life and repent of their sin before the tenth day of the month which is called Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement see Lev 23:26-29). The three consonant, root Hebrew word from which kippur is derived means “to cover” and is also the root for kapporet which is the word for the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. On Yom Kippur two goats are brought to the High Priest so he can lay his hands on one representing the transfer of the people’s sin upon it and then it was taken into the desert and released representing their sin being removed. The other goat was sacrificed and its blood taken by the High Priest into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled on the mercy seat representing the judgment of their sin and the restoration of the people to a right relationship with God. Anyone who did not acknowledge their sin so it was judged and the penalty for it paid by the blood of the sacrifice was to be “cut off from the people” (forced to leave the community and considered and treated as dead.) Then, on the 15th of the month they would have begun the seven day celebration called the Feast of Ingathering which celebrated the end of the last harvest of the year (see Ex 23:16; Lev 23:33-36). During those seven days they would have lived in booths to remember when God brought them out of their bondage in Egypt and they lived in booths (tents) in the wilderness. This feast was also known as the Feast of Tabernacles (booths). In the first chapter of his gospel, John refers to Jesus’ birth as “The Word became flesh and lived (tabernacled) for a while among us. (John 1:14)” At the end of the seven days the people were to hold a day of sacred assembly and present a burnt sacrifice to the Lord at the Tabernacle (and at the temple after it was built). The 8th day would have been the highlight of the feast and the whole celebration would be a happy time of living in the presence of the Lord. So, the day God gave Haggai his second message for Zerubbabel, Joshua the high priest, and the remnant of the people was after they had been called to assemble before the Lord, to consider their life and repent of their disobedience and have it covered by the Lord, and they are just finishing seven days of remembering to live in the Lord’s presence with a sacrifice of food to the Lord. This helps us to understand God’s message to them and how they must have felt hearing it.

This message was intended for the same audience as the first message – Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the remnant of the people. The people had been called by the blowing of the shofar to assemble at the temple mount and begin considering their lives and repent of any sin before the judgment and covering (atonement) of it. Now, after spending seven days in booths remembering God dwelling with them, they are again at the temple to present the burnt offering sacrifice to God. So God has Haggai give his message which asks the older members

of the remnant who had seen the temple Solomon that had built (destroyed 66 years earlier) if they don't consider the present temple at which they are standing as nothing in comparison. Solomon's temple was dedicated at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles 440 years previously (960 BC). So God tells them to take (have) courage and work (rebuild the temple) because he is with them just as he promised when he led them out of their bondage in Egypt. And he ends this message by saying "My Spirit is abiding in your midst. Do not fear!" What an encouragement that must have been after just finishing a time of confessing their sin, have it judged and paid for by the covering of the blood of the sacrifice, and spending seven days remembering God living with them!

2:6-9 translate as "For thus says YHWH of hosts: Yet once, it is a little while, and I shall shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land. I shall shake all the nations and they shall come with the wealth of all nations and I shall fill this house with glory, says YHWH of hosts. The silver is mine and the gold is mine declares YHWH of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says YHWH of hosts, and in this place I shall give peace, declares YHWH of hosts."

This is a continuation of the second message and the people probably moved from encouragement to joyous expectations hearing that God would shake the nations so that they would bring their wealth to the temple and that the glory of the temple would be greater than the former. So, not only would they think that the temple they have started rebuilding will be greater than Solomon's but that God will also bring peace at the temple. I'm sure they missed the part about shaking the heavens, earth, sea, and dry land or just considered that to mean God would work through all of those things to bring the nation of Israel to power as his kingdom ruling over everything. Obviously the Lord wasn't talking about the temple they were rebuilding because he never acknowledged it as he did Solomon's and the Tabernacle with the smoke of his glory coming into it. Some people today could see the temple that the people finally rebuilt and that Herod was beautifying with his renovations as the "glory" coming to the temple. Others might refer to Simeon's statement about the infant Jesus as "the glory of your people Israel" as see that as being the glory of God coming to the temple. But while this part of the message may have brought more encouragement to the people, it seems from all that has happened since that time and with the revelation of the end times given to the Apostle John, that the temple God means is the Millennial temple that Jesus will have built after he has shaken the heavens, earth, sea, and land during the seven year Tribulation. This is what was revealed to Ezekiel to tell the people (Ezek 43). So this part of the message is actually a prophecy about the end times and God establishing his kingdom on earth as had been partially revealed by other Old Testament writings.

2:10-19 translate as "On the twenty-fourth of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of YHWH came to Haggai the prophet, saying: Thus says YHWH of hosts: Ask now the priests the law, saying: Behold, a man carries holy meat in the wing of his garment and touches his wing to the bread, or cooked food, wine, oil, or any other food, shall it become holy? And the priests answered and said: No. Then Haggai said: If the unclean of body touches any of these, shall it be unclean? And the priests answered and said: It shall be unclean. Then Haggai answered and said: So is this people, and so this nation is before me declares YHWH, and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean. But now, I ask, set your heart on it. From this day onward, before a stone was laid on a stone in the temple of YHWH, from then onward when one came to a heap of twenty measures, there were but ten. And when one came to the wine vat in order to draw fifty measures from the press, and there were twenty, I smote you and every work of your hands with blasting wind, with mildew and with hail. Yet you did not come back in me, declares YHWH. Now set your heart from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, from the day when the temple of YHWH was established, set your heart. Is the seed still in the barn? Even including the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree, it has not brought forth. Yet from this day on I shall bless you."

The dating of this third message puts it in the ninth month (Kislev) of 520 BC (which would be December 18). This date doesn't hold any specific significance because it doesn't mark any feast or any other notable event in their history at this time. But, during the two months from the previous message to this one, Zechariah

has begun his ministry in Jerusalem (Zech 1:1). This message is particularly directed to the priests. It asks them to judge about ceremonial defilement. They answer correctly and that is then applied to the people to reveal that their sacrifices were not acceptable because they were unclean when they were disobedient to their covenant with God. The priests were reminded of what was said in chapter 1, verses 5 to 11, about God reducing their harvests because of the unfaithfulness of the people. But then they were to note that from the day the people started rebuilding the temple, their hardships had continued because the effects of the judgment for disobedience had to run its course. But as of the day of this message God would begin to bless the people with better harvests. From this, we learn that God will not erase the punishment that previous disobedience has made necessary, but those people who put their faith in God and let him be in charge as demonstrated by their obedience to his revealed will, may be assured that His blessing upon their lives will eventually return.

2:20-23 translate as “Then the word of YHWH came a second time to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month, saying: Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Yahudah, saying: I shall shake the heavens and the earth. I shall overthrow the thrones of kingdoms and destroy the power of the kingdoms of the nations; and I shall overthrow the chariots and their riders and the horses and their riders shall go down, everyone by the sword of his brother. On that day, declares YHWH of hosts, I shall take you, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, my servant, declares YHWH, and I shall make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares YHWH of hosts.”

The same day as the message for the priests, God gives Haggai a message for Zerubbabel. God again says he will shake the heavens and earth (divine judgment) through which he will overthrow the rulers of the kingdoms of the world and destroy their power by turning their armies and weapons against each other. (See Zech 12:2-9; 14:1-4; Rev 16:16-18; and 19:11-21) On the day that happens, God promises to take Zerubbabel as “My servant.” The phrase “My servant” is seen in Old Testament prophecies as a reference to the Messiah. (See 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) God says he will make him like a signet ring. A signet ring was a symbol of power, authority, and ownership of a king. If a king gave a person his signet ring, it recognized that the person belonged to the king and bestowed the power and authority of the king upon that person to speak and act as if it were the king personally speaking and acting. (See Gen 41:39-43; 1 Kings 21:8; Dan 6:17; Esther 8:8) God says he has chosen Zerubbabel as his chosen one on the day he overthrows all the kingdoms of the world to have his authority and power and speak for him. Matthew 1:12 identifies Zerubbabel as a direct descendant of David through whom the Messiah would come so God is encouraging and promising Zerubbabel that when the kingdoms of the world are overthrown, his descendant, the Messiah, will rule over God’s kingdom with all authority and power. Remember that at the end of Matthew’s gospel, after Jesus has paid the price for everyone’s disobedience of God and conquered death in his resurrection, Jesus said “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me” (Matt 28:18) so Zerubbabel has been promised that he, like his ancestor David, will see his descendant, the Messiah, ruling over the Kingdom of God. This will occur during the Millennium.