

The Prophets, Book 15

Haggai

The Prophetic Trio of the Restoration. Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi made up the trio of prophets whose writings closed out the Old Testament; they were the last three of the Old Testament canonical prophets (those whose writings are part of the Bible). All three lived and prophesied during the Restoration--i.e. the return of the Israelites to the Promised Land, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the later rebuilding of Jerusalem and its walls. Haggai and Zechariah ministered during the first phase of the Restoration, the rebuilding of the Temple¹. Malachi ministered during the latter phase, the rebuilding of the walls and the city of Jerusalem.

Malachi was later a member of the Great Synagogue, the governing body of the Restoration which, under the leadership of Ezra, reorganized the religious and political life of the Israelite people, evaluated Scriptures, and closed the Old Testament canon². Some speculate that Haggai and Zechariah were also members of the Great Synagogue; however, if they were, they would have been extremely old³.

Haggai and Zechariah: The Setting. The historical setting for the prophetic ministries of Haggai and Zechariah is recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, where they are both mentioned (Haggai only in Ezra 5:1), and in Esther, where the Restoration has its beginnings. Haggai and Zechariah encourage the rebuilding of the Temple and play a leadership role in the project. Soon after the return of the first group of exiles, under the Edict of Cyrus, the foundation of the new Temple had been laid; but opposition to the project by their enemies already in the land, and the death of Cyrus, who had decreed the return, had caused work on the Temple to cease. Instead, the people had turned to building comfortable homes for themselves.

Meanwhile, a new king, Darius, had assumed the throne of Persia; he was kindly disposed toward the Restoration and ordered that work on the Temple, which had been at a standstill for 15 years, be resumed. In the second year of the reign of Darius, Haggai and Zechariah aroused the people to action and, under the

¹ They ministered during the latter part of the first phase, urging the people to resume the work and finish the Temple, after work had been stopped by opposition from the people already there when they returned.

² Most critical scholars reject the reality of the Great Synagogue and Ezra's role in it; see in this regard, "Closing of the Canon" in Introductory Material.

³ Haggai and Zechariah returned during the first phase of the Restoration, for the rebuilding of the Temple. This occurred about 90 years before Malachi returned with Nehemiah, in the second and final phase of the restoration, to rebuild the walls and the city of Jerusalem.

leadership of Zerubbabel the governor, and Joshua the priest, work on the Temple was resumed. It was finished four years later, about 515 BC.

Haggai's recorded ministry lasted only four months (our August/September to our November/December). Some scholars believe that Haggai was much older than Zechariah and, if true, this may account for the brevity of his recorded ministry. The wording of Haggai 2:1-3 suggests that he may have been one of the few returning exiles who had seen the first Temple.

***NOTE:** It can be a bit difficult to keep the sequence of events and the principal characters in the Restoration Period straight in our minds as we proceed through the books of the last three canonical prophets (at least it can be difficult for me). For a refresher, see "The Sequence of Events in the Restoration Period" in the "Introduction to the Books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, the Last Three Books of History," which precedes the study guide to Ezra.*

It may help to keep a copy of that "Sequence of Events" handy as we make the journey through these last three Old Testament books.

A. Author. The human author of the Book of Haggai was probably the prophet himself. His short book may represent condensations and summaries of his own prophecies. It is written in the third person, perhaps as an act of humility. Of the canonical prophets, only he and Habakkuk identify themselves as prophets in their own writings.

***NOTE:** One of the arguments of critical scholars, against Haggai's authorship of the book that bears his name, is that it is written in the third person⁴. It is interesting (and revealing) to note that Julius Caesar wrote his classic "Commentaries on the Gallic Wars" in the third person; and yet no classical scholars have used this fact to argue that someone else wrote Caesar's Commentaries.*

B. Place and Date. Haggai was probably written in Jerusalem, about 500 BC.

C. Theme. The theme of Haggai is the importance of rebuilding the Temple and living in obedience to God. He also wrote of a great messianic age to come.

D. Highlights. Highlights of Haggai include the following:

1. "Consider Your Ways." (Chapter 1)

Work has ceased on the Temple and only the foundation has been laid. Instead, the people who are building for themselves comfortable homes. Yet, a drought has come, crops are failing, and things are looking grim in the Promised Land. Haggai prophesies to the people, and to Zerubbabel the governor, and Joshua the high priest, that national troubles are the result of national sin. The poor crops,

⁴ For whatever it may be worth, the first six of the 12 chapters of Daniel were also written in the third person because Daniel was recording history--not describing his own visions. He wrote the last six chapters in the first person, for they do record his own visions and prophecies.

drought, and dismal economy are that way, he says, because the people have not obeyed God and rebuilt the Temple. His recurring refrain is "consider your ways," a statement of Haggai that will be quoted by preachers for the next 2,500 years. And, after 24 days of this preaching, Zerubbabel and Joshua are stirred, the people get the message, and work on the Temple is resumed.

2. A Sudden Glimpse of the Distant Future. (2:1-9)

Suddenly, abruptly, Haggai rebukes the people because they think that this Temple will not be as grand as the original one. Peering into the distant future, the prophet seems to speak of the millennial reign of Christ, and the glory of the Temple to be built there, one infinitely more glorious than the one Solomon built. In that day, he says, shall come "the desire of all nations"; the YHWH will fill that Temple with glory; there will be no wars, and the people will live in peace.

***NOTE:** In this context, "the desire of all nations" seems to speak of Christ the King, the infinitely, perfectly just and benevolent King of all nations, reigning from his Millennial Temple after his Second Advent. Modern versions of the Bible, and critical scholars, however, interpret this phrase to mean limitless silver, gold and precious jewels with which to adorn that Second Temple. It is typical of them to interpret Scripture materially, rather than spiritually. It seems to me, however, that "all nations," both wicked and benevolent, through the ages since the fall of man in the Garden, have had lots of silver, gold and jewels; what they (we) have **never** had, is a perfect, just, all-wise, all-powerful, all-loving, incorruptible, King of the World. This, it seems to me, is the unfulfilled "Desire of all nations." And, anyway, when the interpretation is unclear, should we not give the LORD the benefit of any doubt?*

*For a revealing look into the heart and mind of Frances Siewert (Amplified Bible), as she struggled with the traditional and modern approaches to the Bible, see her footnote b. to Hag 2:7. For another, see her footnote d. to Jn 7:53-8:11 (the woman taken in adultery). She was a human bridge between the traditional approach and the modern, critical, approach to the Scriptures, and hers is the only modern version that I consult. It may be helpful at this point to go back briefly to "Introductory Material" at the beginning of this Study Guide to the Entire Bible, and see **The Amplified Bible**.*

3. The Law of Cause and Effect. (2:10-19)

Returning to the present, Haggai reminds the people of the law of cause and effect. Since they had ceased to work on the Temple, things had gone wrong. Drought, crop failure, and struggles to survive had been their lot. The explanation is simple, says Haggai: disobeying God has caused their troubles. Now, through the prophet, the LORD says to them as they resume work on the Temple, "...from this day will I bless you."

***NOTE:** Haggai uses the expression, "from this day upward," meaning "before or prior to this day." He is referring to the past period of drought and general difficulty after they ceased to work on the Temple, and reminding them that they had brought the bad times on themselves.*

4. Another Look into the Distant (Near?) Future. (2:20-23)

And, finally, Haggai prophesies to Zerubbabel about the future. Because the Temple is being rebuilt and the people are again living in obedience, he need not fear the heathen enemies that surround him. The LORD says that He Himself will defeat the enemies of the Israelites, and cause them to kill one another, a miracle of deliverance that He had performed in the past to defend his people (e.g. Judges 7:22; I Sam 14:15-20; II Chron 20:22-24). And He closes by saying that He will make Zerubbabel his "signet," i.e. his representative, with full authority to act for Him. This may mean that, in the near future, Zerubbabel and the returning people of Israel, because they are obeying and rebuilding the Temple, need not fear their hostile neighbors, for the LORD Himself will defeat them.

However, the LORD may be speaking again of the millennial reign of Christ, and speaking of Zerubbabel figuratively, in reference to the future Messiah. Speaking of making him his "signet" seems to indicate this latter meaning, for there is no reason to think that the LORD would have given this imperfect, temporal governor full authority to act as, and for, the GOD of the Universe. It may be a comforting message about the near future, a figurative peering into the distant future, and it may well be both. But it seems wise always to give God the benefit of any doubt, and to carefully avoid humanizing Him and materializing his message.