

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Haggai

The Temple still lay in ruins nearly twenty years after the Hebrews returned to the land of Judah from exile in Babylon. Yet the people of Judah themselves were living in comfortable homes. Surely God's house deserved better! Haggai pointed out this discrepancy and successfully roused the people to rebuild the Lord's Temple. Haggai gave Israel a renewed vision of how their efforts would serve God's plan for his people.

Setting

In 538 BC Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, issued a decree permitting conquered peoples who had been deported by the Babylonians to return to their homelands (see [Ezra 1:1-11](#)). The first emigrants to return to Jerusalem were led by Sheshbazzar, the first governor of the restored community ([Ezra 1:5-11](#)). In their enthusiasm, the returned exiles soon began to rebuild the altar and the Temple ([Ezra 3:1-13](#)), but local pagan residents threatened the Israelites and discouraged them from their God-given work ([Ezra 4:4-24](#)). The construction site lay neglected for nearly twenty years after their return.

The Hebrew people were gloomy during this period. Selfishness crippled community spirit, and apathy and disillusionment detracted from their worship. Only a small percentage of Hebrew exiles had actually returned to Judah, the city walls still lay in ruins, the Temple of God was a pile of rubble, and drought and blight ravaged the land. Judah languished as a Persian vassal state while the surrounding nations harassed the leadership in Jerusalem and thwarted their timid improvement efforts.

When Haggai began preaching in 520 BC, a severe drought was affecting the land ([Hag 1:11](#)). God sent him to motivate the Israelites to rebuild God's Temple and to encourage the spiritual renewal of the people of Jerusalem. In response, the people resumed the rebuilding ([1:14](#)), and the project was completed in March 515 BC (see [Ezra 6:15](#)).

Summary

Each of Haggai's four messages highlights a different theological concern. The first sermon ([ch 1](#)) challenged the Judeans to stop giving their personal comfort first priority and to focus on restoring proper worship of God by rebuilding his Temple.

The second message ([2:1-9](#)) assured the community that God had not forgotten the promises of blessing and restoration made by the earlier prophets. The glory of the Lord would once again fill the Temple ([2:7](#)). These were not just empty words to bolster a beleaguered remnant, but the sure words of God's promise to his chosen people.

The third message ([2:10-19](#)) has ritual purity as its dominant theme. Haggai reminded his audience that the instructions of the law of Moses were still operative. God expects his people to be holy, even as he is holy (see [Lev 11:44-45](#)).

Haggai's final and perhaps most important message ([Hag 2:20-23](#)) reestablished the prominence of King David's descendants in Israel's religious and political life. David's dynasty was crucial to the restoration of the Hebrew people after the Babylonian Exile (see [Jer 23:5; 33:15](#); [Ezek 37:24](#)). Zerubbabel was a descendant of King David; his commission to serve as the Lord's "signet ring" marked the beginning of God's restoration of Israel ([Hag 2:23](#); cp. [Jer 22:24](#)) and pointed to Jesus Christ, a descendant of David ([Matt 1:1](#)) who would rule in righteousness forever.

Authorship

The book of Haggai is silent as to its authorship, but it is probable that Haggai wrote his own sermons ([1:1](#), [3](#)). The Bible records no biographic information about the prophet Haggai, but his ministry is attested by [Ezra 6:14](#). Haggai probably wrote his book sometime between delivering his sermons (520 BC) and the completion of the Temple (515 BC), an event that the prophecy does not mention.

Date

Haggai delivered his messages between August and December of 520 BC, the second year of the rule of Darius I, king of Persia (see [Hag 1:1, 15; 2:1, 10](#)). Haggai's ministry in postexilic Judea overlapped that of Zechariah, who began preaching in Jerusalem in November of that year (see [Zech 1:1](#)).

Literary Genre

While not a magnum opus like the books of Isaiah or Jeremiah, Haggai does have literary character. Haggai especially uses rhetorical questions to emphasize his thesis in three of the four messages (see [1:4](#); [2:3](#), [19](#)). He repeats words or phrases to set the tone for his sermons (e.g., the repeated “look at what’s happening,” [1:5](#), [7](#); [2:15](#)), and he engages in wordplay on occasion (e.g., Hebrew khareb, “ruins” [[1:4](#)] and khoreb, “drought” [[1:11](#)]).

Haggai’s written messages are presumably summaries of more lengthy sermons. The messages are *oracles*—authoritative messages inspired by God. Oracles often include formulaic expressions that use stock words and phrases. Several of these formulas occur in Haggai: the “date” formula (e.g., “the second year of King Darius’s reign,” [1:1](#); [2:1](#), [10](#), [20](#)), the “message” formula (“the Lord gave/sent a message,” [1:1](#); [2:1](#), [10](#), [20](#)), the “God-as-speaker” formula (“says the Lord,” [1:7](#), [13](#); [2:4](#)), and the “covenant relationship” formula (“I am with you,” [2:4–5](#)).

Meaning and Message

Haggai's four brief sermons sounded a wake-up call to a community that was spiritually asleep. His message was to "get up and go to work" rebuilding the Lord's Temple in Jerusalem.

Haggai correlated the community's lack of agricultural and economic success with their neglect of the Lord's Temple. He rebuked the people for their disinterest in worshiping God and called them to repentance and spiritual renewal. When the people responded positively and began the work of rebuilding, Haggai encouraged them with the promise of God's continuing presence and help.

Haggai called the people of Jerusalem to authentic worship, trust in God's word, personal holiness, and obedience to divinely appointed leadership. Haggai emphasizes the abiding presence of God's Spirit ([1:13–14](#); [2:4–5](#)), a theme shared with his contemporary Zechariah ([Zech 1:16](#); [8:23](#); see also [Ezek 37:27–28](#)).