

THE BOOK OF HAGGAI

Message:

Failure to put the interests of the Lord before one's own leads to divine discipline, but putting the Lord first leads to divine blessing.

Author:

According to the superscription (1:1), the author of the book is Haggai. The name means "festive" or "my feast." Some have speculated that the prophet may have been born on feast day. Haggai simply calls himself a "prophet" (נָבִיא). Whether the prophet was born in Jerusalem is uncertain, but he apparently resided there during the time of the messages. Other personal details such as genealogy are unknown. There are only two scriptural references to Haggai elsewhere, both in Ezra (5:1; 6:14; cf. Zech 8:9). Nonetheless, he appears to be the first post-exilic writing prophet in Scripture although he was soon joined by Zechariah. The reference to the Solomonic temple in Haggai 2:3 may indicate that Haggai was an eyewitness to its destruction in 586 B.C. But this would mean that Haggai would probably be well into his seventies by the time that his messages were given. "Some scholars have argued that Haggai was a priest, on the grounds that he appealed to the priest to answer a question on one occasion (2:11); that he was vitally interested in rebuilding the temple; and that his name was connected to some of the psalms in the ancient versions (LXX, 87, 145–148; Vul. 111, 145; Pesh. 125, 126, 145–148)."¹

Recipients:

The original recipients of Haggai's messages were clearly post-exilic Jerusalemites.² More specifically, the first message was addressed to Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the high priest, and indirectly to the people (1:1–2), the second message was for Zerubbabel, Joshua, and "the remnant of the people" (2:2), the third message was for the priests (2:11), and the fourth message was for Zerubbabel (2:21).

Dating:

Haggai is the most precisely dated book of the Minor Prophets. The book references four specific dates. According to 1:1 the first message was on the second year of Darius I Hystaspes on the first day of the sixth month (Elul). This would mean that the message was given on August 29, 520 B.C. The second date was on the twenty-fourth day of the same month (1:15) and corresponds to September 21. Haggai 2:1 mentions a third date, the twenty-first day of the

¹ Ralph L. Smith, *Micah - Malachi*, ed. John D. W. Watts, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 32 (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 147.

² This is confirmed by the references to the house of God (the temple) and the reference in 1:8 to obtain wood from nearby mountains.

seventh month (Tishri). This would work out to October 17. Finally, both 2:10 and 2:20 are dated to the twenty-fourth day ninth month (Chislev). This would correspond to December 18, 520 B.C. Therefore, the period from the first message to the last consisted of less than four months. During this period, Zechariah also began prophesying, beginning in the eighth month (between the time of Hag 2:1 and 2:10 [see the table below in the Haggai and Other Prophets]).

Historical Setting:

The Israelites had been in captivity in Babylon for about seventy years. However the situation changed for the Israelites after the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians. The Persian king Cyrus adopted a general policy allowing the captive peoples (including the Israelites) to return to their homelands. Thus, in 538 B.C., Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Israelites to return and rebuild their temple (Ezra 1–3).³ About two years after returning, construction began on the foundation of the temple (Ezra 3:8–13). Unfortunately, opposition to the temple’s rebuilding stopped the work for a period of fourteen years. The people soon lost their zeal for rebuilding the temple and instead began to rebuild their own lives. This failure led to divine discipline (Hag 1:7–11). Thus, prophets such as Haggai and Zechariah were called to remind the people to return to covenant faithfulness in Yahweh. Consequently, the rebuilding of the temple was resumed in 520 with a generous subsidy provided by the new king Darius I (Ezra 6:1–12). The temple was completed in 516/515 B.C.

Purpose:

The main purpose of Haggai’s messages was to encourage the Israelites to rebuild the temple by moving their focus from themselves to the things of God. Haggai also wrote to motivate the Israelites to renew the priority of temple worship and personal holiness and to remind his hearers that pursuing this priority would result in divine blessings.

Contribution:

The major contribution of Haggai was motivating the Israelites to resume the rebuilding of the temple. On a practical level it points to the fact that spiritual complacency can strike even after traumatic experiences such as national defeat and exile. Although Haggai’s messages are brief⁴ they were to the point and effective.⁵ “Interestingly, Haggai’s message has none of the elements so characteristic of the other biblical prophets. For instance, he wrote no

³ See the famous Cyrus Cylinder.

⁴ As Gaebelien has noted, “The truth is that few prophets have succeeded in packing into such brief compass so much spiritual common sense as Haggai did.” Frank E. Gaebelien, *Four Minor Prophets Their Message for Today; a Devotional Commentary on Obadiah, Jonah, Habakkuk, and Haggai* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), 199.

⁵ Haggai competes against only Jonah for the Minor Prophet who appeared to have the most effective ministry.

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."⁶ Nonetheless, Haggai was the first post-exilic prophet to challenge the returning remnant to covenant faithfulness.

Haggai and the Other Prophets:

Haggai's ministry crisscrossed the ministry of Zechariah as the table below indicates.

A COMPARISON OF HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH'S MINISTRIES		
Dates (B.C.)	Haggai	Zechariah
August 29, 520	Haggai's first sermon (Hag 1:1–11; Ezra 5:1)	
September 21, 520	Temple building resumed (Hag 1:12–15; Ezra 5:2)	
October 17, 520	Haggai's second sermon (Hag 2:1–9)	Zechariah begins his ministry (Zech 1:1–6)
October–November 520		
December 18, 520	Haggai's third and fourth sermons (Hag. 2:10–23)	
February 15, 519		Zechariah's eight visions (Zech 1:7–6:8)
December 7, 518		Zechariah's message on fasting (Zech 7:1–13)
March 12, 515	Temple dedicated (Ezra 6:15–18)	

Haggai in the New Testament:

Haggai 2:6 (LXX) is quoted in Hebrews 12:26–27 in relation to divine judgment. Allusions to Haggai occur in Matthew 24:29 and Luke 21:26 (Hag 2:6, 21) and Matthew 28:20 (Hag 1:13). The reference to Zerubbabel in 2:23 has Messianic implications. "In summary, we may say that in comparison to other Old Testament writings the little Book of Haggai does not exercise an extensive influence on New Testament theology or argumentation. Haggai's direct contribution to the New Testament utilization of Old Testament themes is rather modest. In the case of one citation, however, that of Heb 12:26, the message of Haggai is used to very good effect in a demonstration of the abiding permanence of God's new order that finds its fulfillment in the person of Jesus."⁷

⁶ Robert L. Alden, "Haggai," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 573.

⁷ Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, *New American Commentary*, vol. 21a (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 91-2.

Literary Issues:

The Book of Haggai probably contains poetic oracles framed by narrational sections (1:1, 3, 12, 15; 2:1, 10, 20). Although it must be acknowledged that this conclusion is highly debated. Most major English translations have presented the text in prose form, although a number of translators would acknowledge some poetic elements in the text. As Eugene Merrill notes, “The matter is not easily decided since elevated prose differs little from ‘ordinary’ Hebrew poetry.”⁸ Perhaps the literary ambiguity resulted from the original oracles being delivered in poetic form, yet recorded in third person prose form. This may suggest that an editor put Haggai’s into the final form in which we have it.⁹ In any case, with only thirty-eight verses, it is the second shortest book in the Old Testament, yet it contains an abundance of dates and explanatory details.

It has often been noted that “Haggai does not rise to the literary heights of his colleague Zechariah,”¹⁰ or the other writing prophets for that matter. Yet Haggai does employ a number of literary features such as chiasms (1:4, 9, 10; 2:23), paronomasia (1:4, 11), rhetorical questions (1:4, 9; 2:3, 19), and repetition (e.g., the use of the introductory statement “This is what the LORD says” and similar phrases twenty-six times).¹¹

Structure:

The structure of the Book of Haggai is built around four major sections (1:1–15; 2:1–9; 2:10–19; 2:20–23). Each of these major sections is introduced with a chronological statement and an introductory statement about the Word of the Lord coming to Haggai (1:1; 2:1, 10, 20).

Outline

- I. First Message: Expectation to Complete the Temple (1:1–15)
 - A. Introduction and Setting (1:1)
 - B. The Condemnation for Not Rebuilding the Temple (1:2–4)
 - C. The Consequences of Not Rebuilding the Temple (1:5–11)
 - D. The Commitment to Rebuilding the Temple (1:12–15)

- II. Second Message: Expectation of a Glorious Temple (2:1–9)
 - A. Introduction (2:1)
 - B. The Expectation in Light of the Past (2:2–3)
 - C. The Expectation in Light of the Present (2:4–5)
 - D. The Expectation in Light of the Prophecy (2:6–9)

⁸ Eugene H. Merrill, *An Exegetical Commentary; Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 11.

⁹ Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. D. J. Wiseman, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972), 29-30.

¹⁰ Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 11.

¹¹ For other cases of repetition see Alden, “Haggai,” 574.

- III. Third Message: Expectation of a Holy People (2:10–19)
- A. Introduction (2:10)
 - B. The Reasons for Ceremonial Defilement (2:11–14)
 - C. The Results of Ceremonial Defilement (2:15–17)
 - D. The Reversal of Ceremonial Defilement (2:18–19)
- IV. Fourth Message: Expectation of a New Leader (2:20–23)
- A. Introduction (2:20)
 - B. A New Leader and Divine Destruction (2:21–23)

Chart

First Message: Expectation to Complete the Temple (1:1–15)			Second Message: Expectation of a Glorious Temple (2:1–9)			Third Message: Expectation of a Holy People (2:10–19)			Fourth Message: Expectation of a New Leader (2:20–23)	
Introduction 1:1	Condemnation for Not Rebuilding the Temple	Consequences of Not Rebuilding the Temple	Introduction 2:1	Expectation in Light of the Past	Expectation in Light of the Present	Introduction 2:10	Reasons for Ceremonial Defilement	Results of Ceremonial Defilement	Reversal of Ceremonial Defilement	Introduction 2:20 A New Leader and Divine Destruction
	1:2–4	1:5–11		1:12–15	2:2–3		2:4–5	2:6–9	2:11–14	
August 29, 520 B.C.			October 17, 520 B.C.			December 18, 520 B.C.				

Expositional Outline of Haggai:

- I. FIRST MESSAGE: EXPECTATION TO COMPLETE THE TEMPLE (1:1–15)**
- A. Introduction and Setting (1:1)
 - B. The Condemnation for Not Rebuilding the Temple (1:2–4)
 - C. The Consequences of Not Rebuilding the Temple (1:5–11)

D. The Commitment to Rebuilding the Temple (1:12–15)

1. The commitment affirmed (1:12)
2. Their commitment acknowledged (1:13)
3. The commitment activated (1:14–15)

II. SECOND MESSAGE: EXPECTATION OF A GLORIOUS TEMPLE (2:1–9)

- A. Introduction (2:1)
- B. The Expectation in Light of the Past (2:2–3)
- C. The Expectation in Light of the Present (2:4–5)
- D. The Expectation in Light of the Prophecy (2:6–9)

III. THIRD MESSAGE: EXPECTATION OF A HOLY PEOPLE (2:10–19)

- A. Introduction (2:10)
- B. The Reasons for Ceremonial Defilement (2:11–14)
 1. Righteousness is non-transferable (2:11–12)
 2. Unrighteousness is transferable (2:13–14)
- C. The Results of Ceremonial Defilement (2:15–17)

- D. The Reversal of Ceremonial Defilement (2:18–19)

IV. FOURTH MESSAGE: EXPECTATION OF A NEW LEADER (2:20–23)

- A. Introduction (2:20)
- B. A New Leader and Divine Destruction (2:21–22)
- C. A New Leader and Divine Deliverance (2:23)

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