**HAGGAI**

Introduction:

*Haggai* is the 2nd shortest book in the OT, next to *Obadiah*. *Haggai* has 600 words. Most sources agree *Haggai* was written from Jerusalem by one of the about 50,000 Jews who returned to Judah in 538 BC after Persian King Cyrus issued his 1st decree allowing exiles to return. *Haggai’s* authorship never has been seriously questioned.

However, Ezra purportedly had a significant role in establishing the canon, and Ezra probably knew Haggai. Haggai is mentioned at Ezr.5:1 & 6:14, and an allusion is made to him in Zech.8:9. Apart from that, not much is known about Haggai, except his name appears in several Apocryphal books, often with Zechariah. Some attribute Psalms 138, 146, 147 & 148 to Haggai. His name generally appeared before Zechariah, so Haggai probably was the older.

Haggai’s name meant “festal” or festival gathering/pilgrimage/feast (*hag*). He may have been born on a great pilgrimage/festival holiday, of which there were 3- Unleavened Bread (Passover), Pentecost, Tabernacles (*Sukkot*). Nothing is mentioned about *Haggai’s* personal life-not parents, hometown, tribe, or trade.

God called Haggai as a prophet at a time when prophecy was rare in Israel. Indeed, God called both Haggai and Zechariah at a critical time in Israel’s history to exhort the returned exiles to rebuild the Temple and live in obedience to God. *Haggai’s* theme was “build the Temple,” also a theme of Israel’s history:

- Moses built the Tabernacle

- David wanted to build a Temple for the Lord

- David’s son, Solomon, built a magnificent Temple

- Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple

- Ezekiel had a vision of the great Temple in God’s kingdom

- The returning exiles rebuilt the Temple

*Haggai* was unlike other prophets, most of whom were met with skepticism and outright hostility. The people responded to Haggai unanimously, positively, and immediately. His ardor for the Temple exceeded even that of his co-prophet, Zechariah. *Haggai’s* soaring rhetoric and oratorical skills caused dramatic reversals in people’s behavior. They listened and obeyed. The Temple was completed in 4 years.

But *Haggai’s* message, unlike most prophets, was not focused on social justice or idolatry. He did not chastise the Jews’ lack of social justice and concern for the poor and downtrodden. *Haggai* had only one message- Build the Temple, the worship place of the Lord in Zion. Indeed, whereas many prophets railed against the Temple and the superficial worship that was happening in that place because Israel thought it could worship at the Temple without changing their lives, *Haggai* exhorted the Temple to be rebuilt. But within *Haggai’*s message was the same admonition other prophets announced: Put God first. The Temple alone would not save; people must repent and make God their 1st priority.

The Word of the Lord was spoken through Haggai to Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, and Joshua, the high priest, the people’s leaders. Zerubbabel was from the line of David; he was the son of Shealtiel and grandson of Jehoiachin, last king of Judah. Joshua was a Zadokite priest, descended from Seraiah, the high priest executed by Babylon’s King Nebuchadnezzar at the time the Temple was destroyed. (2 Kings 25:18-21; 1 Chron.6:14,15).

*Haggai’s* 4 messages to the Jewish exiles in Jerusalem were announced in 520 BC- 18 years after the 1st return from Persia. They were given over a period of 3½ months/15 weeks, between August- December, 520 BC. They all were during the 2nd year of Persian King Darius I. The messages can be found at:

* 1:1-11 = 8/29/520- The 1st day of the New Moon Feast when sacrifices were made, and people often consulted prophets. *Haggai* spoke first to the leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua, and only indirectly to the people.
* 1:12-2:9 = 10/17/520- Feast of Tabernacles/Sukkot (1 month after Temple construction had recommenced on 9/21/520). *Haggai* spoke to Zerubbabel and Joshua as well as to the people.
* 2:10-19 = 12/18/520- First, Haggai addressed Joshua and the priests with a legal question to illustrate that rebuilding Temple itself could not make anyone righteous; rather, only obedience to God would save.

The people seemed to be learning this, and *Haggai* declared God’s message, “From this day on, I will bless you.”

* 2:20-23 = 12/18/520- On the same day as the 3rd message, *Haggai* spoke to Zerubbabel about the future coming of Messiah from David’s line.

*Haggai* was the 1st post-exilic prophet. He was called to rouse the people from their terrible lethargy and apathetic spirit so the Temple of the Lord would be rebuilt. The returnees had become discouraged by the strident opposition of their neighbors, especially the Samaritans, and their own terrible poverty and crop failures, so they had focused on building their own homes and farms.

No less than 25 times, *Haggai* emphatically declared: “This is what the Lord, God Almighty/the Lord of Hosts (a military image) says…” Haggai was God’s messenger, and unlike most prophets, the people listened to him and did as he instructed. *Haggai’s* single over-arching message was: “Build the Temple,” and that is what they did. He had a simple, direct style, but he must have had a charismatic, persuasive style of speaking to people’s consciences. *Haggai* challenged peoples’ priorities, and they responded by putting God 1st. Then, *Haggai* encouraged the people as they worked.

Historical Background:

*Haggai* began during the reign of Persia’s King Cyrus and continued into the reign of King Darius. Here is some background:

* 559 BC- Cyrus was just king of Anshan, a district in Elam (Media).
* 550 BC- Cyrus joined with Babylonian King Nabonidus to conquer Ecbatana, capital of Media.
* 539 BC- Cyrus broke with Nabonidus and captured Babylon from his son and co-regent, Belshazzar, without a fight, in part because Nabonidus had lost the support of the clergy since he worshipped the moon god, Sin, instead of the chief god, Marduk, and in part because Egypt failed to help Nabonidus.
* 549 BC- Cyrus became king of the Medes and Persians (and Babylon). Cyrus respected and welcomed all religions.
* 529 BC- Cyrus died and his son, Cambyses, succeeded him.
* 530 BC- Cambyses reigned for 7 years, during which time, he put down a revolt in Egypt. On his return from Persia, he travelled through Judah demanding food and resources for his army and diminishing the Jews’ meager resources.
* 522 BC- Cambyses died and several contenders sought the throne, one of whom was pseudo-Smerdis, Cambyses’ brother, who ruled 2 months.
* 522 BC- Darius Hystaspes, 3rd ruler of the [Achaemenid Persian Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Achaemenid_Empire) and 3rd king of Persia, succeeded his brother-in-law, Cambyses. [Darius was Cyrus’ 2nd cousin once removed.] Cambyses had quelled a rebellion in Egypt, but on his return to Babylon, through Judah, he died, under suspicious circumstances- possibly suicide or assassination.
* When Darius, an army officer, returned to Babylon, he allied with

Persian nobles to seize the throne (Herodotus). He defeated Guamata,

who had impersonated Bardiya, Cambyses’ brother, and seized the

throne on Cambyses’ death. Darius, an accomplished military

commander, builder of monuments, and shrew administrator, with a

famous spy network called the “eye and ear of the king,” became king

and ruled until 486 BC.

* By 520 BC, the Persian Empire was at peace, as was attested by the trilingual Behistun inscription and by several historians of the day. [The Behistun inscription was found high on a cliff face in W. Iran. The inscription was 49’ high by 82’ wide and was located 328’ above ground-level at [Mount Behistun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Behistun), on the road between Ecbatana and Babylon in what now is [Iran](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran). By use of its trilingual inscription ([Old Persian, Elamite, and](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Persian)  the [Babylonian variety of Akkadian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akkadian_language)) scholars were able to decipher previously- inscrutable cuneiform script. In other words, it was to cuneiform what the [Rosetta Stone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosetta_Stone) was to [Egyptian hieroglyphs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egyptian_hieroglyphs). Several fragments of the inscription have since been found, including one in Aramaic, which was found in Egypt at the Jewish Elephantine Island colony site and was written in Aramaic. The inscription, which provided a brief autobiography about Darius, also contained a great deal of information about ancient Mesopotamia culture. Translation of the inscription, however, did not occur until the 19thC.]
* 520 BC was the year God spoke to Haggai and told him to encourage Judah’s leaders to rebuild the Temple.

Further background for *Haggai* can be found in the *Ezra* which began with the decree of Cyrus of Persia to allow the exiles to return to Palestine with instructions for them to rebuild the Temple. Ezra 3 described the Israelites’ work to build the alter for sacrifices, which began in the 7th month after the exiles’ return. They built the alter and began making the sacrifices prescribed by Law. They then collected money and began work on the Temple foundation.

Ezra 4 described the plot of the returnees’ enemies/neighbors to thwart the Temple construction. Ultimately, they obtained a stop work order from the king, the result of which was cessation of all work on the Temple for 16 years. No city walls were built; the Temple remained unfinished; famine gripped the land; and Judah still was not independent; it was ruled by Persia.

Then, God called Haggai and Zechariah to prophesy and rouse the Jews to recommence work on the Temple. The opposition then sent a petition to the regional governor, Tattenai, seeking to halt the recently recommenced Temple rebuilding. Tattenai properly forwarded the petition to Darius, who recently had become king of Persia.

Darius had subdivided the Empire into large areas, called satrapies, further divided into smaller districts controlled by governors. Tattenai was one of those governors whose territory was called “Trans-Euphrates”/”Beyond the river” because it was west of the Euphrates. The district included Judah as a small sub-territory called “*Yehud*.” Tattenai properly determined this was not an issue within his jurisdiction and forwarded the petition to the King. Darius researched the petition and found that, years before, King Cyrus explicitly had given the Jews permission to rebuild the Temple. Indeed, he had given them money and returned their Temple treasurers to assist in that effort. So, Darius denied the petition to stop the rebuilding and ordered the governor to supply the Jews with funds and regular money for their sacrifices.

Chapter 1:

As was noted, the events in *Haggai* began and ended in the 2nd year of Persian King Darius’ reign- 520 BC. At that time, Judah included just a small amount of territory around Jerusalem- a fraction of its former size. It was not independent; it was under Persian rule. The people were desperately poor. They recently had suffered severe drought and crop failures, and the desert was encroaching into their land.

Samaritans from the north and other enemies/neighbors consistently thwarted and discouraged the returnees. After the bulk of the Jews were exiled, neighboring peoples had moved into their lands and claimed them as their own. This condition had persisted for about 70 years- more than one generation. Now the Jews were returning to reclaim their hereditary lands. Friction was inevitable.

Few priests had returned from Persia- only 4 of 24 orders of priests returned. (Ezr.2:36-39). Only 74 Levites and 329 Temple servants had returned. Later returns were not much better- 37 Levites and 220 Temple servants.

The returnees arrived in Jerusalem in 538 BC. The Temple foundation was laid in 536 BC (Ezr.4). Then work stopped on the Temple. At that point, the returnees focused on clearing rubble from Jerusalem and rebuilding their homes, farms, and businesses. It was exhausting work, but they preferred to focus on staying alive and taking care of themselves than to work on a Temple.

That was the condition of Jerusalem and its people when the Lord Almighty /Lord of Hosts spoke to Haggai. 16 years had elapsed since the return. The foundation had been laid in 536 BC, but it was now 520 BC. Nothing more had been done on the Temple. The people had forgotten about building a Temple for God. Their focus had been deflected from God by their neighbors’ opposition and their own desires to begin new homes,, farms, and businesses.

God told Haggai to go to Zerubbabel and Joshua, the people’s leaders, and say, “These people say, the time has not yet come for the Lord’s house to be built.” God emphasized the leaders’ responsibility for the people’s failures. *Haggai* confronted them about people living in paneled houses. (Much debate has focused on this phrase. It is highly doubtful that any of the common people lived in such homes. Paneling was a luxury reserved for palaces and temples.)

After chastising the leaders, *Haggai* addressed the people, repeatedly warning them, “Give careful thought…” He told them God had withheld His blessings from them because they had concentrated on themselves rather than on Him. [This was consistent with the Deuteronomic covenant. God would bless Israel’s obedience and curse their disobedience. But note: When God withheld His blessing, nature also turned against the people. The people and the land suffered together.] *Haggai* declared that their current plight was due to their failure to seek God first rather than their own comfort. Their lives were in God’s hands; therefore, their primary concern should have been their relationship with Him. *Haggai* wanted the people to know God, not them, controlled reality.

Failure to rebuild the Temple was a collective sin which brought disaster to the land. They had suffered blight, mildew, hail, drought, and other calamites due to their disobedience to God and wrong priorities. Israel’s major crops were grain, grapes, and olives. They could not grow without water. Dew was as valuable as rain during the growing season (April- October), and the absence of dew was devastating during the summer dry season. The grain crops had been cut in half, and the grape harvest was only 60% of its usual volume. In short, their agrarian society stood in ruins, just like the Temple. (Archaeological evidence confirms the Holy Land was relatively impoverished during the Persian Period.)

So, *Haggai* exhorted leaders and the people to persevere and go up to the mountains to gather timber for the Temple. The Law could not be fulfilled without a Temple. Rebuilding was sovereignly ordained by God.

God stirred up the spirits of the leaders and of the people. Zerubbabel, Joshua and all the people immediately responded. Temple rebuilding resumed on 9/21/520 BC- 23 days after Haggai’s 1st prophecy. Haggai, the Lord’s messenger, assured and encouraged the people with God’s promise of future blessing.

Chapter 2:

*Haggai’*s 2nd message was delivered on 10/17/520 BC, the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles/*Sukkot.* On this day a special celebration of the Great Day of Salvation, *Hoshana Rabbah,* was observed. Worshippers made 7 circuits around the sacrificial alter waving a *lulav*, a closed date palm frond with myrtle, willow and [*etrog*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Etrog), a yellow citron, as the congregation recited *Hoshanot* (poetic prayers)*,* and the [Torah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torah) scrolls were removed from the Ark and processed around the altar.

Haggai spoke to Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people and asked who had seen Solomon’s Temple in its glory. (They would have been over 67 years old.) Haggai recognized what most of them were thinking. They were discouraged that the meagre Temple they were building was not as magnificent as Solomon’s. It was a puny structure, without the Ark of the Covenant, with the stone tablets, Aaron’s budding rod, the jar of manna, or the Urim and Thummin. The eternal alters fire and treasures that reminded of God’s mighty acts also were gone.

*Haggai* issued a 3-fold admonishment to Zerubbabel, Joshua, and all the people to be strong and work. The Lord Almighty had covenanted with them in Egypt and His Spirit was with them; therefore, they should not fear. This was an attitude issue. God, not Solomon, had filled the 1st Temple with glory. Solomon knew the Temple he built was not worthy. (1 Kings 8:27). Now the Lord Almighty was with them, not because they deserved it, but because of His love. [*Ezekiel* saw God’s glory leave the 1st Temple; he also saw it return in the last times.]

Israel’s unfaithfulness had broken the covenant with God, but He would not forget His promises. His Temple would be great and magnificent, and He would grant *shalom* to all the world in the end when God would bring about a time of universal peace - speaking eschatologically. (This did not refer to Herod’s Temple.) God was sovereign and had all the power and authority to make it so.

*Haggai* pronounced his 3rd message on 12/18/520 BC, addressing the priests led by Joshua. He posed a question about whether consecrated food could “rub off” and consecrate a garment it touched. The answer was NO. But according to the Law, unclean things could defile what they touched. (For example, if a person touched a dead body or even a tomb, they would be deemed unclean just as the body/tomb they touched was unclean.)

He used the analogy to explain that mere work on the Temple did not mean the people could earn God’s blessing. *Haggai* was taking about obeying God. Building the Temple alone would not save anyone; repentance and obedience to God were required. On the other hand, association with sinful people could cause one to become a sinner because sinfulness contaminates everything it touches.

Again, *Haggai* admonished the people to give careful thought/remember. A few apathetic, selfish people had infected the community. Then everyone had abandoned Temple construction and started work on their own homes. As they focused on themselves, they began to lack the necessities of life. It was a hard lesson. God wanted their hearts to return. So, God sent a prophet to explain the connection between their behavior and the unproductive soil. Now, as they began to obey and prioritize God, He said, “from this day on,” He would bless them.

On the same day, 12/18/520 BC, *Haggai* delivered his 4th message, this time just to Zerubbabel, whom he did not address as an individual, but as holder of the Davidic office. Referring to Jer.22:24, where Judah’s King Jehoiakim cursed God, Who temporarily tore the signet ring off his hand and sent him into Babylonian exile, *Haggai* announced that God now had placed the ring on the hand of Zerubbabel, who had led the reconstruction of the Temple. (But Zerubbabel remained governor, not king. His descendant, Jesus, would be that king.)

*Haggai* brought forth an eschatological apocalyptic image of God shaking the earth- the 2nd Coming. God affirmed that He would keep His promises. The kingdoms of the earth would bring their riches to Zion. Messiah, the anointed ruler of God’s kingdom, would come and bring peace to the world. Israel would be a shining light to which all peoples would come.