

Notes on Haggai

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Introduction

TITLE AND WRITER

The title of this prophetic book is also probably the name of its writer.¹ Pieter Verhoef mentioned another possibility:

"Koole ... compares the way other prophetic books originated, and concludes that Haggai, like Jeremiah, probably dictated his own notes to one or two of his disciples. This procedure would account for the third person, the brevity of the record, and the peculiar use of the formula or revelation."²

Haggai referred to himself as simply "the prophet Haggai" (1:1; et al.) We know nothing about Haggai's parents, ancestors, or tribal origin. His name apparently means "festal" or possibly "feast of Yahweh." This is appropriate since much of what Haggai prophesied deals with millennial blessings. His name is a form of the Hebrew word *hag*, meaning "feast." This has led some students of the book to speculate that Haggai's birth may have occurred during one of Israel's feasts.³ Ezra mentioned that through the prophetic ministries of Haggai and Zechariah, the returned Jewish exiles resumed and completed the restoration of their temple (Ezra 5:1; 6:14; cf. Zech. 8:9; 1 Esdras 6:1; 7:3; 2 Esdras 1:40; Ecclesiasticus 49:11).

¹See R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 944-48; E. J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 267-69; G. L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, pp. 407-8; H. E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, pp. 326-32.

²Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, p. 13. His reference is to J. L. Koole, *Haggai*, p. 9.

³E.g., Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 28; Verhoef, p. 4; Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, p. 44. Taylor wrote the commentary on Haggai.

Haggai's reference to the former glory of the temple before the Babylonians destroyed it (2:2), may or may not imply that he saw that temple. If he did, he would have been an old man when he delivered the messages that this book contains.¹ In that case, he may have been over 70 years old when he prophesied. However, it is not at all certain that the reference in 2:3 implies that he saw the former temple.

Some editions of the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate versions of the Book of Psalms attribute authorship of some of the Psalms to Haggai and or Zechariah (i.e., Ps. 111—112, 125—126, 137—138, and 145—149). There is no other evidence that either prophet wrote any of these psalms. The reason for the connection appears to have been the close association that these prophets had with the temple where these psalms were sung.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Babylonians, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including Solomon's temple, in 586 B.C. and took most of the Jews captive to Babylon. There, the Israelites could not practice their formal worship (religious cult) as the Mosaic Law prescribed, because they lacked an authorized altar and temple. They prayed toward Jerusalem privately (cf. Dan. 6:10) and probably publicly, and they established synagogues where they assembled to hear their Law read and to worship God informally.

King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jewish exiles to return to their land in 538 B.C. At least three waves of returnees took advantage of this opportunity. The first of these was the group of almost 50,000 Jews that returned under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, and Zerubbabel who replaced him, in 537 B.C. (Ezra 1:2-4). (Another view is that Sheshbazzar was the Chaldean name of Zerubbabel.²) Ezra led the second wave of 1,700 men plus women and children (perhaps about 5,000 individuals) back to Jerusalem in 458 B.C., and Nehemiah led the third wave of 42,000 Israelites back in 444 B.C. Haggai and Zechariah appear to have been two of the returnees who accompanied Sheshbazzar, as was Joshua the high priest, though Haggai's

¹E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets*, 2:293.

²C. F. Keil, "Haggai," in *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 2:176; Pusey, 2:300; Arno C. Gaebelain, *The Annotated Bible*, 2:3:252.

name does not appear in the lists of returnees in the opening chapters of Ezra.

During the year that followed, the first group of returnees rebuilt the brazen altar in Jerusalem, resumed offering sacrifices on it, celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, and laid the foundation for the reconstruction of the (second) temple. Opposition to the rebuilding of the temple resulted in the postponement of construction for 16 years. During this long period, apathy toward temple reconstruction set in among the residents of Judah and Jerusalem. Then in 520 B.C., as a result of changes in the Persian government and the preaching of Haggai, the people resumed rebuilding the temple.¹

Haggai first sounded the call to resume construction in 520 B.C., and Zechariah soon joined him. Zechariah's ministry lasted longer than Haggai's. The returnees finished the project about five years later in 515 B.C. (cf. Ezra 1—6). One way to calculate the 70-year captivity is: from the first deportation to Babylon in 605 B.C. to the year temple reconstruction began, 536 B.C. Another way is: to count from the destruction of the temple in 586 B.C. to the completion of temple restoration in 515 B.C.

DATE

Haggai delivered four messages to the restoration community, and he dated all of them in the second year of King Darius I (Hystaspes) of Persia (i.e., 520 B.C.). Ezekiel and Daniel had probably died by this time. Haggai's ministry, as this book records it, spanned less than four months, from the first day of the sixth month (1:1) to the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month (2:20). Haggai's ministry may have begun before 520 B.C. and continued a few years after it.² But that is speculation.

In the modern calendar, these dates would have been between August 29 and December 18, 520 B.C.³ This means that Haggai was the first writing prophet to address the returned Israelites. Zechariah began prophesying to

¹For details concerning changes in the Persian government, see Robert L. Alden, "Haggai," in *Daniel-Minor Prophets*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 569-71; or Eugene H. Merrill, *An Exegetical Commentary: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, pp. 5-9.

²Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 365.

³Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, pp. 212-13; R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.-A.D. 45*, p. 30.

the returnees in the eighth month of that same year (Zech. 1:1). Haggai was the most precise of all the prophets in dating his messages.

The precision in dating prophecies that marks Haggai and Zechariah reflects the *annalistic* style of history writing that distinguished Neo-Babylonian and Persian times.¹ Ezekiel, who was probably an older contemporary of these prophets, was the third most precise in dating his prophecies, and Daniel, another contemporary, also was precise but not as detailed. Likewise Ezra and Nehemiah, who wrote after Haggai and Zechariah, showed the same interest in chronological precision.

"With the help of evidence from a vast number of Babylonian texts and from new moon tablets calculated from astronomical data, it has proved possible to synchronize the old lunar calendar with the Julian calendar with accurate results."²

Probably Haggai wrote the book between 520 and 515 B.C., the year the returnees completed the temple. Lack of reference to the completion of the temple, while not in itself a strong argument for this view, seems reasonable—since mention of the completion of the temple would have finished off the book nicely.

PLACE OF COMPOSITION

Haggai obviously preached and evidently wrote in Jerusalem, as is clear from his references to the temple in both chapters. Confirming this location is his reference to the nearby mountains (1:8, 11). There were no real mountains in the area of Babylonia where the Jewish exiles lived.

AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

Haggai was as specific about his audience as he was about when he prophesied. The first oracle was for Zerubbabel and Joshua, who were the Jewish governor of Judah and its high priest (1:1). The prophet delivered the second one to those men and the remnant of the people (2:1). The

¹For example, see D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldaean Kings (625-556 B.C.) in the British Museum*.

²Verhoef, p. 5.

third oracle was for the priests (2:11), and the fourth one was for Zerubbabel (2:21). Obviously these oracles had a larger audience as well, namely, the entire restoration community and eventually the general population of the world.

"Haggai is a prophetic history that intends to interpret the religious and theological significance of the historical events that it recounts."¹

Haggai's purpose was simple and clear. It was to motivate the Jews to build the temple. To do this he also fulfilled a secondary purpose: he confronted the people with their misplaced priorities. They were building their own houses but had neglected God's house. It was important to finish building the temple because only then could the people fully resume Levitical worship as the Lord had specified. They had gone into captivity for covenant unfaithfulness. Thus they needed to return to full obedience to the Mosaic Covenant. Furthermore, in the ancient Near East, the glory of a nation's temple(s) reflected the glory of the people's god(s). So to *finish* the temple meant to glorify Yahweh.

"... he also wrote to give the people hope by announcing that God's program of blessing would come 'in a little while' (Hag. 2:6) when God would again 'shake the heavens and the earth' (2:6, 21)."²

"No prophet ever preached more directly or earnestly to his own contemporaries, and no prophet was ever more successful."³

"The result of his preaching was a great victory. For, to persuade a whole people to make pecuniary sacrifices, and to postpone their own private interests for the sake of a public sanctuary, was no easy task. But Haggai did it, and by succeeding became the true founder of post-exilic Judaism; his work being preparatory to that of Ezra and Nehemiah."⁴

¹Taylor, p. 56.

²Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 815.

³George L. Robinson, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, p. 138.

⁴Ibid., pp. 142-43.

THEOLOGICAL EMPHASES

Central to Haggai's emphasis is the temple as God's dwelling place on earth, as a center for worship, and as a symbol of Yahweh's greatness. For him the temple was more important than the palace, and the priests were more important than the princes. There was no king of the Jews after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Another theological emphasis was the relative importance of glorifying God compared to living affluently.

"Governments work on the assumption that a healthy gross national product is the consequence of a proper industrial base, efficient management, skilled workers, and the due operation of market forces—in other words, that economic health depends on an effective economic system. Haggai, however, rose to challenge the view that economics can be left to the economists. Here, too, we live in God's world and unless he is given the central place and honor, the laws he created will work not for our blessing but for our bane. Thus Haggai speaks to our concern that world resources should meet world need and to our longing that not only will needs be satisfied but also that life will be satisfying. He addresses the problem of inflation more explicitly than any other prophet; his book is a tract for our times."¹

"The theological problem of this period was simply this: Where was the activity and presence of God to be found?"²

Other important themes are: holiness as a prerequisite for worship, the prophetic word as divine revelation, divine sovereignty, human responsibility, and a future for the Davidic dynasty.³

CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES

Haggai is the second shortest book of the Old Testament, after Obadiah. The writer's literary style is simple and direct. The book is a mixture of

¹J. Alec Motyer, "Haggai," in *The Minor Prophets*, P. 963.

²Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, p. 250.

³See Taylor, pp. 73-83, for discussion of these themes; and Verhoef, pp. 32-39.

prose and poetry, the introductory sections being prose, and the oracles, poetry.

"We may agree with Wiseman, Rudolph, and others that Haggai employed a rhythmic prose style rather than the common poetic form often characteristic of the prophets."¹

"Perhaps it is best to describe the style of Haggai's oracles as 'poetic prose' (Ackroyd, *J[ournal of] J[ewish] S[tudies]* 2 [1952] 164-65)."²

The book contains four short messages that Haggai preached to the returned Jews in less than four months of one year, 520 B.C. Haggai was clearly aware that the messages he preached to the Israelites were from God. He affirmed their divine authority 25 times in 38 verses. In contrast to almost all the writing prophets, Haggai was successful in that the people to whom he preached listened to him and obeyed his exhortations.

"Haggai ... is preeminently the prophet of exhortation."³

"The truth is that few prophets have succeeded in packing into such brief compass so much spiritual common sense as Haggai did."⁴

"Interestingly, Haggai's message has none of the elements so characteristic of the other biblical prophets. For instance, he wrote no 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."⁵

"Most of the other prophetic books consist of collections of prophetic sermons and oracles. Haggai, on the other hand, consists of direct address oracles set in a prose narrative framework (1:1, 3, 12, 15; 2:1, 10, 20) such that the book

¹Ibid., p. 17.

²Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, p. 149.

³Kenneth G. Hanna, *From Moses to Malachi*, p. 524.

⁴Frank E. Gaebelien, *Four Minor Prophets*, p. 199.

⁵Alden, p. 573.

appears as more of a report on Haggai's utterances and the effect they had on the hearers ..."¹

"The prophecy of Haggai and the Epistle of James have much in common. Both put the emphasis upon the daily grind [cf. 1 Cor. 15:58]."²

This book and Hosea are the only inspired prophetic writings in the Old Testament that do not contain one or more oracles against foreign nations.

UNITY AND CANONICITY

Critics have not seriously challenged either the unity or the canonicity of Haggai.³ Its place in the canon is chronological, leading the postexilic prophetic books and following the pre-exilic and exilic ones.

TEXT

There are only a few textual problems in the book (1:2, 9; 2:2, 5, 7, 9, 14, 16). In addition to these, the Septuagint made some additions to the Hebrew text (2:9, 14).

"On the whole we agree with many scholars that the text of Haggai is well preserved."⁴

OUTLINE

- I. A call to build the temple ch. 1
 - A. Haggai's first challenge 1:1-6
 - B. Haggai's second challenge 1:7-11
 - C. The Israelites' response 1:12-15

¹Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 480. Cf. Verhoef, p. 9.

²J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 3:881.

³See Longman and Dillard, pp. 14-17, for further discussion.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 20.

- II. A promise of future glory for the temple 2:1-9
- III. A promise of future blessing for the people 2:10-19
- IV. A prophecy concerning Zerubbabel 2:20-23

One writer saw a chiastic structure in the book.¹

- A A pair of oracles delivered on the same day that stress the negative consequences of the unfinished temple followed by a double call to take the Lord's word to heart 1:1-11
 - B The promise of the Lord's presence that would energize the reconstruction of the temple 1:13-15a
 - B' The promise of the Lord's presence that would guarantee coming glory 1:15b—2:9
- A' A pair of oracles delivered on the same day that stress the positive consequences of the finished temple including a double call to take the Lord's word to heart 2:10-23

MESSAGE

Haggai is the first in the last group of prophetic Old Testament books. Along with Zechariah and Malachi, these books reveal life in the restoration community. The historical book of Ezra deals with the same time period and the same group of people. A remnant of the Israelites was back in the land following the Babylonian Captivity. The returnees remembered stories of the past glories of their nation, before the Captivity. But they also felt great shame since they returned to a land controlled by the Gentiles. They lived in difficult and discouraging times. Their hopes were very shadowy and uncertain in the short range. This was hardly the glorious return to the land that former prophets had promised.

Haggai had a single burden from the Lord. His passion was to motivate the returnees to rebuild their temple so they could resume life in obedience to the Mosaic Law. Zechariah helped him in this mission. Malachi lived some 90 years later and uttered the final warning from Yahweh to His people in the Old Testament.

¹Adapted from Motyer, p. 968.

About 18 years before Haggai ministered, in 538 B.C., about 50,000 Jews had returned from captivity under the leadership of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel. A year later they began to rebuild the temple. They had finished repairing the foundation and were starting on the superstructure when opposition from the native people of the land, the Samaritans, made them stop working.

For about 17 years, they did no work on the temple. Then the Lord led Haggai to challenge the people to resume temple reconstruction. He delivered four short messages, in 520 B.C., that got the people working again. The people went to work after hearing his first message, but then a difficulty arose and they stopped working. So the prophet delivered a second message, and the people got back to work. After a while, another difficulty arose and the people stopped working again. Haggai then delivered two messages on the same day, which moved the Jews to resume and finish their project.

The reason God preserved this book for all time and for all humanity is its permanent value, which is twofold. The Book of Haggai, first, is a revelation of the perils that often accompany a period of adversity. Second, it reveals the duty of people of faith in such a period and God's resources. In other words, Haggai exposes the perils that accompany times when there are discouraging circumstances and hope burns dim. And it helps us see what the duty of God's people should be in such times—and how God will help us.

Each of Haggai's four messages deals with one of these perils. The four perils are: misplaced priority, incorrect perspective, unrealistic expectation, and unnecessary fear.

The first peril was a problem of misplaced priorities. The people did not think that the time was right to proceed with the rebuilding of the temple (1:2). They seem to have been waiting for some indication from God that they should resume building, but they were busy building their own houses and had forgotten God's previous commands to rebuild the temple. They were *very* motivated when it came to building homes *for themselves*. They saw *their own* need and proceeded to do something about *that*.

But when it came to building a house that would honor Yahweh, enable them to worship Him as He had commanded, and exalt His reputation in their land, they were waiting. *Seventeen years* had passed. It was time to

finish the unfinished temple structure, but the people put it on hold while they gave priority to what was more important to them.

The second peril was a problem of incorrect perspectives. When the workers began rebuilding again, some of the people started comparing the structure they were working on to the previous temple that the Babylonians had destroyed. They were saying that the present temple was nothing in comparison to Solomon's temple (2:3). Some of the older people, who had seen the former temple, could not help weeping when they compared the two structures. It looked as though all their work would amount to nothing significant, so they became discouraged and stopped working again.

The third peril was a problem of unrealistic expectations. The people thought that because they had taken on the project of rebuilding the temple, God would begin to bless them greatly. They looked at their external obedience as what God should bless (2:12). Haggai reminded them that it was wholehearted devotion to God that was necessary to obtain His blessing, not just piling stone upon stone.

The fourth peril was a problem of unnecessary fears. The people looked at the strength of the Gentile nations around them, and concluded that their small community would never amount to anything. Haggai had to remind them that God would judge the Gentile nations one day. They needed to look beyond the immediate future, and believe God's promises concerning Israel's ultimate restoration and exaltation over the nations (2:21-22).

God led Haggai to meet each one of these problems by reminding the people of their duty and their dynamic. They had a responsibility to do something different in each case, and then God would provide the enabling grace for them to succeed: the spiritual dynamic.

In regard to their problem of misplaced priorities, the people's duty was to get back to rebuilding the temple (1:8). They needed to give priority to what God said they should do, rather than to what they wanted to do. The dynamic that God would provide was His enabling presence with them. He would be with them and help them (1:13).

With regard to their problem of incorrect perspectives, their duty was to be strong and work. They should not compare the work that God had given them to do with the work that He had given their ancestors to do. They should simply give themselves to carrying out the will of God for them. The

dynamic God promised to provide was, again, His own presence with them (2:4). He would help them to do what He had called them to do.

Regarding their problem of unrealistic expectations, their duty was to learn from their priests, who would remind them of the Lord's will from Torah, that blessing would come in response to genuine obedience. It was not enough simply to rebuild the temple. That was only part of God's will for His people, and not really the most important part.

More important than rebuilding the temple, was their spiritual need for a loyal and obedient spirit, that they should genuinely seek to exalt the Lord in their lives by following Him faithfully. The "dynamic" that Yahweh promised for such heartfelt obedience was *blessing* on their lives (2:19). He would bless them from the day the returnees turned their hearts to obey the Lord. But they should not expect much blessing if their obedience was only external.

Fourth, in regard to their problem of unnecessary fears, the people's duty was to be patient. They might not see a reversal of conditions in the immediate future, but eventually God would restore His people, as He promised. The dynamic that God promised them was His own acting, eventually, to reverse their fortunes (2:22-23). The Gentiles would not lord it over them forever. Their present leader, Zerubbabel, was only a foreview of a greater leader whom God would provide for them in the future. We know that the times of the Gentiles will come to an end when Jesus Christ returns to the earth to reign.

We are now in a position to point out the living message of this book. It is that whenever God's people face problems involving fulfilling His will, we should do our duty as the Word of God reveals it, with the assurance that when we do, God Himself will provide all that we need to succeed.

We often get our priorities out of order. We wait for direction from God to act when He has already told us what He wants us to do. While we wait, we may get involved in matters that require our energy and resources that are self-directed. What we should be doing is reading the Word, learning what God wants us to do, and then putting first things first. We need to make His agenda our agenda. When we do this, He will be with us and will provide all that we need to carry out His will successfully (cf. Matt. 6:33).

"Our business is to care for His things; His gracious business is to care for us in all things."¹

We also frequently lose the proper perspective on what God has called us to do. We may look at our part of the enterprise of fulfilling the Great Commission, and think to ourselves, "How insignificant this is. If only I was living when God was working—when Hudson Taylor, or some other greatly used servant of the Lord, lived—maybe then I could really change the world. Better yet, if only I lived in the days of the apostles." It is easy for many Christians to get so distracted, by looking at the great things that other Christians have done in the past, that they conclude that their little contribution is so insignificant that it is not worth the time and effort.

If that is *our* attitude, we need to remind ourselves that the same God who enabled saints of old to succeed, has promised to be with us, and to enable us to succeed in our calling. We may indeed live in days of apostasy rather than in the glory days, when Christ was more greatly honored in the world. Nevertheless, our task in the will of God is just as important now as the task of other believers was in days gone by. We need to focus on what God has given us to do, not on what others did. We need to concentrate on serving faithfully.

We struggle with unrealistic expectations, too, like the postexilic community did. Why is our church not growing faster? Why are we not seeing more fruit in our ministry? Why do we not see more spiritual power in our lives? Ultimately all these blessings come by the will of a sovereign God who chooses to bless whom and how He will. We tend to underrate the importance of personal holiness and to emphasize activity, just like the returned exiles did.

Perhaps God is not blessing more because our commitment is superficial and shallow. If we expect His blessing simply because we are doing His work, we need to look deeper into ourselves and into His Word. God will bless if we follow Him wholeheartedly. We may not see the blessing this side of the grave, but since He has promised to bless those who follow Him sincerely, we can count on His blessing eventually.

Finally, *we* in the Church Age also struggle with unnecessary fears from time to time. The enemy looks so strong. We look or feel so weak. Things

¹A. Gaebelain, 2:3:254.

may not have changed much for a long time. But our duty is to be patient, to remember, and to believe the promises that the Lord will return and balance the scales of justice one day (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8-13). He will establish His kingdom on the earth. Our duty now is to be single-minded and to work.¹

¹Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:2:303-15.

Exposition

I. A CALL TO BUILD THE TEMPLE CH. 1

This first main part of the book contains two oracles that warned the returnees of the consequences of allowing the temple to remain unfinished, two exhortations to act, and a promise of the Lord's help.

A. HAGGAI'S FIRST CHALLENGE 1:1-6

1:1 Like Ezekiel, Jonah, and Zechariah, the Book of Haggai contains no formal title. Yahweh sent a message to Zerubbabel ("Born in Babylon" or "Seed of Babylon," an allusion to his birthplace) and Joshua ("Yahweh Saves") through "the prophet Haggai," though it went to all the Israelites too (vv. 2, 4).

"Zerubbabel" was the political "governor" (overseer) of the Persian province "of Judah" who had led the returnees back to the land (Ezra 2:2; et al.). He was "the son of Shealtiel" ("I have asked of God," Ezra 3:2, 8; 5:2; Neh. 12:1; et al) and the grandson of King Jehoiachin (Jeconiah), one of the descendants of King David (cf. 1 Chron. 3:17-19; Matt. 1:12).

Zerubbabel apparently had two fathers (1 Chron. 3:17-19). Perhaps his other father, Pedaiah, was his uncle.¹ If this was a levirate marriage (cf. Deut. 25:5-10), Pedaiah must have married a woman and then died. Shealtiel, Pedaiah's brother, would then have married the widow who gave birth to Zerubbabel in place of Shealtiel, Zerubbabel's physical father.² Another possibility is that Shealtiel adopted Zerubbabel after Pedaiah died.³ A third option is that one of these men was actually a more distant ancestor of Zerubbabel, perhaps his grandfather.

¹Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 840.

²Keil, 2:175-76.

³Pusey, 2:300.

"Joshua" was "the high priest" of the restoration community and a descendant of Aaron. He was "the son" of "Jehozadak," who had gone into Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C. (1 Chron. 6:15; cf. Ezra 3:2, 8; Neh. 12:1, 8). He was apparently the grandson of Seraiah, who was the high priest when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, whom Nebuchadnezzar had executed at Riblah (2 Kings 25:18-21; Jer. 52:24-27).¹

The Lord gave Haggai this message on "the first day of the sixth month," "in the second year" that Darius I (Hystaspes; 521-486 B.C.) ruled as king over Persia. This was Elul 1 (August 29), 520 B.C.² When the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon, they continued to follow the Babylonian calendar and began their years in the spring rather than in the fall (cf. Exod. 23:16; 34:22).

Each new month began with a new moon, and the Israelites commonly celebrated the occasion with a New Moon festival (cf. Num. 28:11-15; Isa. 1:14; Hos. 2:11). This first prophetic revelation that God gave in the Promised Land, following the return from exile, came on a day when most of the Israelites would have been in Jerusalem.

"In the book of Haggai the formula of revelation, in its various forms, occurs not less than twenty-seven times."³

The meaning of Haggai's name (festal, or festal one) was appropriate, in view of when the Lord gave this first prophecy through him. The fact that the writer spoke of Haggai in the third person does not exclude Haggai himself from being the writer, since this was a common literary device in antiquity.⁴

In the historical books of the Old Testament, the writers usually dated the events in reference to a king of Judah or Israel, but the Jews had no king now. They were under the control of a Gentile ruler, in "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke

¹Keil, 2:177.

²Parker and Dubberstein, p. 30, established the equivalent modern (Julian) dates.

³Verhoef, p. 45.

⁴Taylor, p. 52.

21:24; cf. Dan. 2; Zech. 1:1). "The times of the Gentiles" are the times during which Israel has lived under Gentile control. These times began when Judah lost her sovereignty to Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C., and they will continue until Messiah's Second Coming, when He will restore sovereignty to a converted Israel.

1:2 Haggai announced that his message came from Yahweh of armies, Almighty Yahweh. This title appears 14 times in Haggai, 53 times in Zechariah, 24 times in Malachi, and 265 times in the Hebrew Bible. "Yahweh" occurs 34 times in the 38 verses of Haggai.

"The emperor of Persia had at that time sovereign sway over his vast empire, including the minor province of Jerusalem-Judah. The emperor's word was law, even to the Jewish community. Now, however, another word was conveyed to them, the word of the Lord Almighty, he being the highest and the most absolute Potentate in the whole universe, including the Persian empire!"¹

The Lord told Zerubbabel and Joshua that the Israelites were saying that "the time" was not right to rebuild the temple. By referring to them as "this people," rather than "My people," the Lord was distancing Himself from them. Construction on the temple had begun 16 years earlier but had ceased, due to opposition from the Israelites' neighbors who were mostly Samaritans (Ezra 3:8-13; 4:1-5, 24). When the Jews considered resuming construction, most of them said it was not yet the right time. Contrast David's great desire to build a house for the Lord (2 Sam. 7:2).

"God doth well-nigh all things which He doeth for a man through the hands of men."²

Their decision may have rested on the continuing threat from their neighbors. Or perhaps they felt that to finish the temple

¹Verhoef, pp. 52-53.

²Pusey, 2:299.

then would violate Jeremiah's prediction of a 70-year captivity (Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10). Another possibility is that they thought God Himself would finish it (Ezek. 40—48).¹ Furthermore, the Persian king had not (recently) ordered the work to be done.²

"To refuse to build the [Lord's] house was at best saying that it did not matter whether the Lord was present with them. At worst it was presuming on divine grace, that the Lord would live with his people even though they willfully refused to fulfill the condition of his indwelling that he had laid down."³

"The need to rebuild is urgent, because temples in their world are the center for administering the political, economic, judicial, social, and religious life of the nation. In other words, rebuilding /AM's temple would symbolize his rule over the life of his people and his prophesied rule of the world (cf. Zech. 1:14-17)."⁴

Today many Christians do not do God's will because they feel the time is not precisely right.

"Too often we make excuses when we ought to be making confessions and obeying the Lord. We say, 'It's not time for an evangelistic crusade,' 'It's not time for the Spirit to bring revival,' 'It's not time to expand the ministry.' We act as though we fully understand 'the times and the seasons' that God has ordained for His people, but we don't understand them (Acts 1:6-7)."⁵

¹See R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, "The Temple and the Origins of Jewish Apocalyptic," *Vetus Testamentum* 20 (1976):12.

²Verhoef, p. 55.

³Motyer, p. 974.

⁴Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 846.

⁵Warren W. Wiersbe, "Haggai," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Prophets*, p. 441.

"Saying that it is the Lord's will to do this or not to do that is a Christian cliché that covers a multitude of sins."¹

"The first of the prophet's messages focuses attention upon an ever present problem of spiritual living—the universal human tendency to put off doing what God requires [i.e., procrastination]."²

1:3-4 Haggai then spoke to the people for the Lord, in this disputation speech, not just their leaders (v. 2). He rhetorically asked if it was proper for them to build their own houses but not rebuild His. They should have put the glory of their God ahead of their own comfort (cf. 2 Sam. 7:2; Phil. 2:21). Their priorities were upside down.

"Their problem was not lack of goods but of good."³

"Paneled houses" apparently describes quite luxurious homes, though the Hebrew word *sapan* ("paneled") can mean simply houses with roofs. Wooden paneling or plaster that covered the walls and possibly the ceilings seems to be in view.

"Such were the houses of the rich and of the more distinguished men (cf. Jer. xxii. 14; 1 Kings vii. 7)."⁴

King Cyrus had provided the Jews with money to buy hardwood timber to rebuild the temple (Ezra 3:7; 1 Esdras 4:48; 5:54). It appears likely that the restoration Jews had used this superior wood to build their own homes rather than to rebuild the temple.

"Many Christians are like those ancient Hebrews, somehow convincing themselves that economy in

¹McGee, 3:884.

²F. Gaebelien, p. 209.

³Motyer, p. 977.

⁴Keil, 2:178.

constructing church buildings [or financing God's work] is all-important while at the same time sparing no expense in acquiring their personal luxuries."¹

"Whereas the house of God today is no longer material but spiritual, the material is still a very real symbol of the spiritual. When the Church of God in any place in any locality is careless about the material place of assembly, the place of its worship and its work, it is a sign and evidence that its life is at a low ebb."²

1:5-6 The Lord called "the people" to evaluate what they were doing in the light of their present situation (cf. v. 7; 2:15, 18 [twice]).³ They were not experiencing God's blessings very greatly. They sowed much seed but harvested only modest crops (cf. vv. 10-11; 2:15-17, 19). The food and drink that they grew only met their minimal needs. They had so little fiber from which to make clothing, that their clothes were very thin and did not keep them warm. Their purses seemed to have "holes" in them, in the sense that the money they put in them disappeared before they could pay all their bills.

"... that poverty which they thought to prevent by not building the temple God brought upon them for not building it."⁴

This passage may be the first reference to *coined* money in the Bible. It is the first reference to a purse used for carrying money. The Lydians in Asia Minor were the first to coin money, in the sixth century B.C., and there is archaeological evidence that there were coins in Palestine when Haggai wrote.⁵ This

¹Alden, p. 581.

²G. Campbell Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit*, 8:315.

³See H. A. Ironside, *Notes on the Minor Prophets*, pp. 329-31, for helpful applications to today.

⁴Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1171.

⁵See Ephraim Stern, *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible in the Persian Period 538-332 B.C.*, pp. 215, 236; and idem, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible. Vol. II: The Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods, 732-332 BCE*, pp. 558-59.

was divine chastening for disobedience (cf. Lev. 26:18-20; Deut. 28:41). They should have put the Lord first.

"Haggai's theology was grounded in the curses and blessings of covenant theology (cf. Lev 26; Deut 28). Specifically poor harvests (Deut 28:38), insufficient food (Deut 8:10), inadequate clothes (Deut 10:18) were the result of failure to keep the covenant."¹

"An affluent generation of Christians that is wasting God's generous gifts on trivia and toys will have much to answer for when the Lord returns."²

Procrastination is not only the thief of time, it is also the thief of blessings.³

B. HAGGAI'S SECOND CHALLENGE 1:7-11

1:7-8 Again the Lord called the people to reflect thoughtfully on what they were doing (cf. v. 5). They were guilty of having a conflict of interests. He urged them to "go ... to the mountains" where trees grew abundantly, to cut them down ("bring wood"), and to continue rebuilding "the temple" (cf. Ezra 3:7). The completed temple would please and glorify Him.

"The important thing is not the size or magnificence of the house, but the *existence* of it—that they want the indwelling God among them."⁴

"The hills of Judah were well wooded in Old Testament times, and from Nehemiah 8:15 we know that olive, myrtle and palm were available. It was customary to set layers of wood in stone walls to minimize earthquake damage (cf. Ezz.

¹Smith, p. 153.

²Wiersbe, p. 445.

³F. Gaebelien, p. 212.

⁴Motyer, p. 977.

5:8); this wood, and heavy timber, long enough to stretch from wall to wall of the Temple to support the roof, would probably have to be imported (Ezr. 3:7)."¹

"In the ruins of the temple and in its immediate vicinity were ample stones for building purposes. Because all the timber of the temple was burned in 587 B.C., it was necessary only to obtain large quantities of timber from the forests on the nearby hills surrounding Jerusalem."²

"God's work *must* come first; it *must* come before our own work."³

"When work is gladly done in order to please God it also brings Him glory."⁴

"Very frankly, laziness is the reason Sunday school teachers don't succeed. Laziness is the reason preachers don't succeed. Laziness is the reason people fail in their Christian lives. You have to *work* at it. I do not think that the Holy Spirit will ever bless laziness."⁵

"As a distinguished missionary put it, it is possible to have a saved soul and a lost life. He meant that, though eternal salvation is assured through faith in the atoning work of Christ, a whole lifetime of opportunity for fruitful service may be lost through indolence and neglect."⁶

J. Vernon McGee quoted Dr. Frank Morgan, who pointed out three appeals in this passage: the appeal to the *mind* (How is it that you think it is not the time to build the Lord's house

¹Baldwin, p. 41.

²Verhoef, pp. 65-66.

³F. Gaebelien, p. 214.

⁴Baldwin, p. 41.

⁵McGee, 3:888.

⁶F. Gaebelien, p. 216.

when you are living in fine houses?), the appeal to the *heart* ("Consider your ways!"), and the appeal to the *will* ("Go up ... and rebuild the temple.").¹ Some students of Haggai consider verses 7 and 8 as the book's key verses.²

1:9 The Israelites had looked "for much" blessing from the Lord, but they had found very "little." When they brought their grain home, the Lord blew it away. Apparently their grain was so light and small that much of it blew away with the chaff when they threshed it. The reason was clear. They had neglected the temple and had given all their time and energy to providing for themselves by building their own houses.

There are six occurrences of the phrase "declares the LORD of hosts" in Haggai (1:9; 2:4, 8, 9, 23 [twice]) and six occurrences of the shorter phrase "declares the LORD" (1:13; 2:4 [twice], 14, 17, 23). This is unusual for a book as short as Haggai. Obviously the writer wanted to emphasize the divine origin of his message to the people.³

1:10-11 The hot weather and poor harvests that the returned exiles were enduring were due to their selfish behavior (cf. Lev. 26:19-20; Deut. 28:22-24). "Dew" was the only form of moisture that plants enjoyed during the hot summer months, besides artificial irrigation, but even that was unavailable. The Lord had called for drought, and it affected all their essential products and all aspects of the agrarian productivity of their lives ("all the labor of" their "hands"; cf. Deut. 28:38).

"The inclusion of animals in such contexts along with human beings is characteristic of the OT. The love and righteousness of the Lord are manifested in the preservation of both 'man [*'adam*] and beast [*behema*]' (Ps. 36:7 [Eng. 6])."⁴

¹McGee, 3:888.

²E.g., Hanna, p. 524.

³Baldwin, pp. 44-45, wrote an extended note on the name "the Lord of Hosts."

⁴Verhoef, p. 77.

"Those who plan to give to God 'once they have enough for themselves' will never have enough for themselves!"¹

C. THE ISRAELITES' RESPONSE 1:12-15

1:12 Haggai's preaching moved "Zerubbabel," "Joshua," and "all the remnant of the people" (Israelites) who had returned from captivity to obey the Lord. This demonstrated "reverence" for Him.

"Haggai referred to the people as a **remnant** (here and also in v. 14 and in 2:2), not merely because they were survivors of the Babylonian Exile but also because they were becoming what the remnant of God's people should always be—those who are obedient within their covenant relationship to the Lord (cf. Isa. 10:21)."²

This term probably refers to the entire Judean population, consisting of both those who had returned from Babylon and those who had remained in the Promised Land (cf. Jer. 8:3; Ezek. 5:10; 9:8; 11:13).³

"This was the beginning of a conversion. In this one thing they began to do, what, all along, in their history, and most in their decay before the captivity they refused to do—obey God's word."⁴

"When times are prosperous, it may be easier to dismiss a word of prophetic rebuke; but hard times often expose raw nerves of the spiritual life that has grown insensitive to God's spirit. Frequently it is in the midst of exceptional human difficulty that God's word finds its greatest success."⁵

¹Dyer, p. 816.

²F. Duane Lindsey, "Haggai," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1540.

³See Taylor, p. 139.

⁴Pusey, 2:305.

⁵Taylor, p. 137.

"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."¹

1:13 The people's obedient response resulted in the Lord sending another message to Haggai, His messenger. He reported that Yahweh was "with" them (cf. 2:4). This assurance of His divine enablement guaranteed their success as they continued obeying by rebuilding the temple. It is God's presence with us, more than anything else, that guarantees our success as we carry out His will (cf. Josh. 1:1-9; Matt. 28:19-20). Our loving obedience results in Him drawing close, but our disobedience leads Him to withdraw His presence.

"God's promise to the people of Judah was that the name of the Coming One would be Immanuel, meaning 'God is with us' (see Is. 7:14)."²

1:14-15 The "LORD stirred up" the two leaders and the people to resume work on the temple (cf. 2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:5). Work began again "on the twenty-fourth day" of that very month. Perhaps it took three weeks for the people to make their decision and make preparations, including chopping down trees and cutting (sawing and planing) wood (cf. v. 8). There was also a harvest of figs, grapes, and pomegranates in the month of Elul, which may have delayed them.³

"God is not portrayed here as a divine puppeteer who manipulates people, but as a sovereign king who rewards obedience by giving it a boost."⁴

"This promise Jehovah fulfilled, first of all by giving to Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people, a willingness to carry out the work."⁵

¹C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 81.

²*The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 1533.

³Verhoef, p. 88.

⁴Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets*, p. 452.

⁵Keil, 2:184.

II. A PROMISE OF FUTURE GLORY FOR THE TEMPLE 2:1-9

2:1 The Lord revealed another message, an oracle of encouragement, to Haggai almost one month later, "on the twenty-first" day of "the seventh month" (Tishri, modern October 17) of the same year, 520 B.C. This was the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths). Tishri was a month of celebrations for the Israelites. On the first of this month they celebrated the Blowing of Trumpets, and on the tenth, the Day of Atonement. The Feast of Tabernacles lasted seven days, and the following day was a day of rest (Lev. 23:33-44).

"The close then of this feast could not but revive their [the people's] sadness at the glories of their first deliverance by God's *mighty hand and outstretched arm*, and their present fewness and poverty. This depression could not but bring with it heavy thoughts about the work, in which they were, in obedience to God, engaged ..."¹

2:2 The audience was the same as the one that received the first message: Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the entire Judean population.

2:3 The Lord asked if the older members of the restoration community who had seen Solomon's temple, which perished 66 years earlier, did not think the present temple was "like nothing in comparison" (cf. Zech. 4:10). The Lord's three questions forced the people to admit that the present temple was not as grand as the former one had been.

"It is sometimes the fault of old people to discourage the services of the present age by crying up [i.e., glorifying] too much the performances and attainments of the former age."²

The older returnees had made a similar negative comparison when the foundation of the temple was laid 16 years earlier in

¹Pusey, 2:307.

²Henry, p. 1172.

536 B.C (cf. Ezra 3:8-13). The dedication of Solomon's temple took place exactly 440 years earlier, at the Feast of Tabernacles (1 Kings 8:2; 2 Chron. 7:8-10), so that was perhaps the reason the Lord gave this message to Haggai on this day.

"To the devout and earnest Jew the second Temple must, 'in comparison of' 'the house in her first glory,' have indeed appeared 'as nothing.' True, in architectural splendour the second, as restored by Herod, far surpassed the first Temple."¹

"Though Zerubbabel's temple was leveled to the foundations by Herod when he renovated it, his temple was considered still the second temple."²

"The Talmud expressly calls attention to this, and mentions as another point of pre-eminence, that whereas the first Temple stood 410, the second lasted 420 years."³

2:4 The Lord again encouraged Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people to "work," and He promised again to be "with" them (cf. 1:13). David had given the same charge and promise to Solomon regarding the first temple (1 Chron. 28:10, 20). Comparisons can be discouraging when doing the Lord's work, so people involved in it need to remind themselves that He is with them (cf. Matt. 28:20; Mark 6:50).

"The key to tackling despondency is found here: stop listening to ourselves and start listening to him and his word of promise."⁴

¹Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple*, p. 61.

²Charles Lee Feinberg, *Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi*, p. 90.

³Edersheim, f. 2.

⁴Motyer, p. 987.

"It doesn't make any difference how large or how small the work is. We need to remember, 'Be strong.'"¹

2:5 The Lord reiterated "the promise" He had made to the Israelites when they left "Egypt" in the Exodus. His "Spirit" would stay in their "midst," so they did "not" need to "fear" (cf. Exod. 19:4-6; 33:14; Isa. 63:11-14). The returnees could identify with their forefathers who departed from Egypt, because they had recently departed from another captivity in Babylon. As the Lord had been with them in the cloudy pillar, so He was with them now. As David had encouraged Solomon to build the first temple with the promise that God would be with him (1 Chron. 28:20), so Haggai encouraged Zerubbabel and Joshua to build the second temple with the same promise.

"There must have been those who were theologically naive and doubted that God could be with them if the temple and the ark in particular were not intact.

"Undoubtedly fear gripped many of the returnees—fear that God had written an eternal 'Ichabod' over Jerusalem, fear that no amount of praying or piety would induce him to bless them again, fear that the whole endeavor was in vain, fear that the political enemies would in fact win, fear that all was lost."²

2:6 The basis of their confidence and lack of fear was a promise from Almighty Yahweh. He would do again, in the future, what He had done at the Exodus and at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 19:16, 18; Ps. 68:8; 77:16-18). Shaking "the heavens and the earth," including "the sea ... and the dry land," describes an enormous literal earthquake, which was an evidence of the Lord's supernatural intervention (cf. Isa. 2:12-21; 13:13; Ezek. 38:20; Amos 8:8).³ This will occur when Christ returns to the

¹McGee, 3:893.

²Alden, p. 585.

³Cf. Keil, 2:191-92.

earth (Joel 3:16; Matt. 24:29-30). However, 520 B.C. was a year in which the Persian Empire experienced much turmoil as well.¹

The writer of Hebrews quoted this verse in Hebrews 12:26. He then added that we who are in Christ have an unshakable kingdom that will endure the coming cosmic earthquake (Heb. 12:28-29). Haggai's prophecy still awaits fulfillment.

"The New Testament writer sees in Haggai's language an implicit contrast between the transitory nature of the old economy and the abiding permanence of the new economy that was initiated by the mission of Jesus."²

2:7 At the same time, Almighty Yahweh would "shake all the nations"; His return will upset the political and governmental structures of the world (cf. Dan. 2:35, 44; Zech. 14:1-4; Matt. 21:44). "The nations" will bring their "wealth" to the Israelites, like the Egyptians gave their treasures to the departing Hebrews at the Exodus (cf. Exod. 3:21-22; 11:2-3; 12:35-36).

Some English translations have "the desire of all nations will come." This "desire" could be an impersonal reference to the wealth that the nations desire (cf. Isa. 60:5; Zech. 14:14).³

"The thought seems to be that the lack of adornment in Zerubbabel's temple would be more than compensated for by the rich treasures which are going to be brought in the day when the millennial temple will be built."⁴

Or this could be a personal reference. In this case, it could be a messianic prophecy, which is why some translations

¹Robinson, p. 141.

²Taylor, p. 159.

³Keil, 2:192-94; McGee, 3:896; Verhoef, p. 104; Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Interpreting the Minor Prophets*, p. 223; idem. "A Theology of the Minor Prophets," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 421; idem, *Handbook on ...*, pp. 452-53; Taylor, p. 161-65.

⁴McGee, 3:896.

capitalized "Desire."¹ Charles Wesley followed this second interpretation when he wrote the Christmas hymn "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." "Come, Desire of nations, come! Fix in us Thy humble home." The Hebrew text does not solve the problem, which is interpretive. Perhaps the Lord was deliberately ambiguous and had both things in mind: the wealth of the nations and Messiah.²

"It is well to remember ... that from earliest days the majority of Christian interpreters followed the Jewish tradition in referring the passage to the coming of Israel's Messiah."³

The Lord also promised to "fill" the temple ("this house") "with glory." The temple in view must be the millennial temple, rather than the second (restoration) temple, in view of the context. This glory could be *the wealth* that the nations will bring to it (cf. Isa. 60:7, 13). Or it could be the splendor of the *temple* itself.⁴ Or the glory in view may be *the glory of God's own presence* (cf. Exod. 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:10-11; Ezek. 43:1-12). Simeon referred to the infant Jesus as "the glory of your people Israel" (Luke 2:32). However, Jesus' presence in Herod's temple only prefigured the divine glory that will be present in the millennial temple.

"By shaking all kingdoms He [Yahweh] can induce the nations to present their treasures to Him as gifts for the glorification of His house."⁵

2:8 This verse seems to support the view that impersonal wealth is in view in verse 7. The Lord reminded the people that He owned and controlled all "the silver" and "the gold" in the world, so He could cause the nations to bring it to the temple in the future.

¹Feinberg, p. 88. Cf. Gaebelein, 2:3:257.

²Herbert Wolf, *Haggai and Malachi*, pp. 34-37.

³Charles Lee Feinberg, "Haggai," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 893. See also George Adam Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets Commonly Called the Minor*, 2:243.

⁴Ironside, p. 336.

⁵Keil, 2:194.

"The point may well be that because all such things are His and are therefore not of value to Him, His own glory is what is central."¹

This reminder must have encouraged Haggai's contemporaries as they rebuilt the temple as well. God could easily bring more financial resources to them, so that they could some day glorify their presently modest temple.

2:9 Even though the present temple was less glorious than Solomon's temple, the Lord promised that the final ("latter") "glory" of the temple "will be greater than" its "former" glory. The Lord also promised to bring "peace" to the site of the temple, Jerusalem (cf. Isa. 60:18; Joel 3:17; Mic. 5:4).² Neither of these things has happened yet, so the fulfillment must be future (millennial).³ Lasting peace will only come when Messiah returns to rule and reign (cf. Isa. 2:4; 9:6; Zech. 9:9-10). Jesus Christ's adornment of the second temple, as renovated by Herod the Great, with His presence hardly seems to fulfill the exalted promises in this prophecy.⁴

The Lord used the occasion of the Feast of Tabernacles to encourage the builders of the temple in Haggai's day. This feast looked back to the Exodus, reminded the Israelites of their wilderness wanderings, and anticipated settlement in the Promised Land. This message also looked back to the Exodus, referred to the present temple construction, and anticipated the glory of the future temple.

III. A PROMISE OF FUTURE BLESSING FOR THE PEOPLE 2:10-19

2:10 Another prophecy came from the Lord "on the twenty-fourth" day "of the ninth" month of 520 B.C. (Kislev 24, December 18). This date holds particular significance because it was on this day, five years later, that the temple was rededicated. The Jews celebrated this event with the Feast of Chanukah (lit.

¹Merrill, p. 41.

²Keil, 2:195.

³Chisholm, *Interpreting the ...*, p. 224.

⁴Idem, "A Theology ...," p. 421.

Dedication), and still do. During the two months between this prophecy and the former one (vv. 1-9), Zechariah began his ministry in Jerusalem (Zech. 1:1).

2:11 Almighty Yahweh instructed Haggai to request "a ruling" from "the priests." The priests were the official interpreters of the Mosaic Law, and what follows deals with matters of ceremonial defilement. This is a didactic sermon, designed to teach an important lesson about religious impurity.

2:12 The question was, if someone "carries" consecrated food in "his garment" and touches other food of any kind with the garment, will that "food ... become holy"? "Holy meat" was meat set apart for a particular sacrificial purpose (cf. Lev. 6:25; Num. 6:20). The answer the priests gave was "No," it would not become holy. The meat carried in the garment would make the garment holy, but the holiness would not be communicated beyond the garment to anything else (cf. Exod. 29:37; Lev. 6:27; Ezek. 44:19; Matt. 23:19).

The people were apparently thinking that, since they, as God's *holy and chosen people*, were working on the holy temple, all that they contacted and did became holy. Another view is that the Lord sought to discourage His people from taking gifts from pagan rulers and using them to build the temple (cf. Ezra 6:8-10).¹

2:13 A second question was, if someone who has become "unclean," for example by touching "a corpse," touches food of any kind, will the food "become unclean"? The answer was, yes, "it will become unclean." The Mosaic Law taught that moral uncleanness could be transmitted, but moral cleanness could not (cf. Lev. 6:18; 22:4-6; Num. 19:11-16).

The same principle applies, by the way, in the area of physical health today. A sick person can transmit his or her illness to healthy people and make them sick, but a healthy person cannot transmit his or her health to sick people and make them

¹See Merrill, pp. 45-46, 49.

well. Similarly, dirty water will contaminate clean water, but clean water will not purify dirty water.

"Friend, you can *swim* in holy water, and it won't make you holy."¹

"Trying to make yourself acceptable with God through ceremonies and all of that sort of thing is like pouring a gallon of Chanel No. 5 on a pile of fertilizer out in the barnyard in an effort to make it clean and fragrant. My friend, it won't work."²

"The long disobedience of the nation rendered their work unprofitable before God."³

2:14 Haggai then made an application of this principle to the people for the Lord. Their sacrifices and offerings were unacceptable to God because they were "unclean." They should not think that contact with something holy, such as the temple they were working to complete, made them acceptable to God. They had previously been unclean, so their present sacrifices were unacceptable to God.

"What had happened was that the people were confusing their work on the temple with the sanctification that comes only from the Lord."⁴

2:15-16 The people needed to give careful consideration to something again (cf. 1:5, 7). They needed to remember that before they began to obey the Lord by rebuilding the temple (1:12), they had been disobedient to the Mosaic Covenant (cf. 1:5-11). The Lord's punishment for their covenant unfaithfulness had been greatly reduced harvests. Their grains had decreased by 50 percent and their grapes by 60 percent.

2:17 The Lord had used hot winds ("blasting wind" [blight, excessive drought]), "mildew" (excessive moisture), and "hail"

¹McGee, 3:898.

²Ibid., 3:899.

³*The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 962.

⁴F. Gaebelin, p. 234.

to strike the people and what they had planted, but they still did not repent (cf. Amos 4:9). Hot winds posed problems for crops because of the dry heat, and mildew created other problems because of excessive moisture. Perhaps these conditions are a merism describing polar opposites that together mean all types of weather-related problems.¹ Hail, one of the plagues on Egypt (Exod. 9:13-35), caused severe damage to unprotected crops.

2:18-19 The people were to notice something on the "day" this prophecy reached their ears, "the twenty-fourth day of the ninth" month. They were to notice that from the day they started to rebuild the temple, their hardships had continued (cf. 1:14-15). They still suffered shortages of staples such as seed, grapes, and olives, and luxuries such as figs and pomegranates. However, the Lord revealed that He would now "bless" them, beginning that "very day," the twenty-fourth of the ninth month.

This oracle explained why agricultural blessing had not begun immediately after the people resumed reconstruction on the temple. Their present dedication and obedience did not wipe out their previous covenant unfaithfulness and its punishments. That punishment had to run its course, but now, as of the day of this prophecy, God would begin to bless the people with better harvests. This message surely must have encouraged the Jews to persevere in their obedience.

"This tenth day of the tenth month in the ninth year of Ezekiel's captivity in Babylonia [referred to in Ezekiel 24:1-2], is also clearly given in 2 Kings xxv. 1, as the day when the siege [of Jerusalem] began. This is the first time in the historical books that an event is dated to the very day. The same exact date is also given in Jeremiah lii. 4. At the very hour when the Babylonian army was in the act of surrounding the Jewish capital, the fact of it was revealed of God to the prophet Ezekiel, hundreds of miles away in Babylonia, where, at this time, he had already been in exile since Nebuchadnezzar's earlier deportation of Jewish captives, recorded in 2 Kings xxiv. 11-16. This day, then, which marked the investing of

¹Taylor, p. 185.

Jerusalem, Ezekiel is told to write down emphatically for observation and preservation—the tenth day of the month Tebeth, 589 B.C. This day has been observed as an annual fast by the Jews ever since. It was this day, the tenth of Tebeth, 590 B.C., which marked the beginning of the seventy year's period of the 'desolations.' The momentous fact to grasp is that from this date down to the date emphasized by Haggai, namely, the twenty-fourth day of the month Chisleu, 520 B.C., was a stretch of 25,200 days, that is, exactly seventy years of 360 days each."¹

God will bless His people for their obedience, but sometimes He will not erase the punishment that previous sins have made necessary. Sin always brings death (Rom. 6:23). Sometimes that punishment must run its course before blessing can begin.

IV. A PROPHECY CONCERNING ZERUBBABEL 2:20-23

"The final verses of his book reveal Haggai as the literary equivalent of an impressionist painter—he gives general tone and effect without elaborate detail."²

- 2:20 The Lord gave Haggai a "second" message on the same day as the previous message (v. 10), the "twenty-fourth day" of the ninth month (Kislev 24, December 18). This was an oracle of salvation.³ Its purpose was to announce the Lord's intention to raise up a new leader for His people.
- 2:21 Haggai was to tell Zerubbabel that Yahweh was "going to shake the heavens and the earth." Again a divine judgment is in view (cf. v. 6). That "Zerubbabel"—not Joshua or the people—was the recipient, suggests that the message deals with a royal prediction.
- 2:22 The Lord announced that would "overthrow" the rulers ("thrones") of the nations of the earth, and "destroy" the

¹J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 4:228-29.

²Motyer, p. 1000.

³See Claus Westermann, *Prophetic Oracles of Salvation in the Old Testament*.

Gentile kingdoms' "power" (cf. Exod. 15:5; Dan. 2:34-35, 44-45). He would defeat ("overthrow") their armies ("chariots," "horses," and their "riders") by turning them against each other—"everyone ... will go down ... by the sword of another" (cf. Zech. 12:2-9; 14:1-5; Rev. 16:16-18; 19:11-21).

2:23 When He does that, the Lord promised to "make ... Zerubbabel" His "servant." The title "My servant" is often messianic in the Old Testament (cf. 2 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). Zechariah, Haggai's contemporary, used another messianic title to refer to Zerubbabel: "The Branch" (Zech. 3:8; 6:12; cf. Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23:5-6; 33:14-16). The LORD would "make ... Zerubbabel ... like a signet *ring*," because He had chosen him for a special purpose. A signet ring was what kings used to designate royal authority and personal ownership (cf. 1 Kings 21:8; Dan. 6:17; Esth. 8:8).

"A signet ring was so precious that, to guard it against theft or misuse by an unauthorized person, it was usually worn on a chain around the neck, or as a ring on the right hand."¹

God had chosen Zerubbabel to designate royal authority and personal ownership to, namely, the coming Messiah. God had revealed through Jeremiah that if Jehoiachin, Zerubbabel's grandfather, was His signet ring, He would take it off and give it to Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Jer. 22:24-25). Thus it is clear that this figure of a signet ring views "Zerubbabel"—figuratively—as the descendant of David and Jehoiachin through whom God would provide the victory promised in verses 21 and 22. He will do that, not through Zerubbabel personally, but through one of his descendants, namely: Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 1:21).²

"This vivid figure of the signet ring attested to the renewed election of the Davidic line, represented by Zerubbabel, the person in whom God had again

¹Verhoef, p. 147.

²See Keil, 2:213-15.

invested the authority, promised to David and his dynasty."¹

The curse on Jehoiachin that none of his descendants would sit on David's throne or rule in Judah (Jer. 22:30) may have referred to his immediate descendants (i.e., children). However, *Jesus Christ* qualified as a *Davidic king* because He was the physical descendant of Nathan, one of David's sons, not Solomon. Jesus was the legal son of Joseph, who was a physical descendant of Solomon and Jehoiachin (cf. Matt. 1:12-16; Luke 3:23-31).

"God reverses to Zerubbabel the sentence on Jeconiah for his impiety [Jer. 22:24]."²

Zerubbabel represents or typifies the Messiah here (cf. Joshua's similar role in Zech. 6:9-15). His name becomes a code name (*atbash*) for the promised Messiah.³ The certainty of this promise is clear from the threefold repetition of "Yahweh," twice as "Yahweh of hosts."

"... key events of the past (David's coming to power, Sodom, the exodus, Gideon) became symbols of the coming day, and the same is true of key people. David became so identified with what the Lord would yet do that not only was every successive king compared with him but the Messiah was even called David (Ezek. 34:23)."⁴

Other passages that speak of Messiah as David include Jeremiah 30:9 and Hosea 3:5.

"By calling Zerubbabel His 'servant' and 'chosen' one God gave him the same status David had enjoyed (cf. 2 Sam. 3:18; 6:21; 7:5, 8, 26; 1 Kings 8:16). The comparison to a 'signet ring'

¹Verhoef, p. 147.

²Pusey, 2:320. Cf. Chisholm, *Handbook on ...*, p. 455; and Kaiser, p. 252.

³See Herbert Wolf, "The Desire of All Nations in Haggai 2:7: Messianic or Not?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 19 (1976):101-2.

⁴Motyer, p. 1002.

indicates a position of authority and reverses the judgment pronounced on Zerubbabel's grandfather Jehoiachin (cf. Jer. 22:24-30).

"The words of Haggai 2:21-23, though spoken directly to Zerubbabel, were not fulfilled in his day. How is one to explain this apparent failure of Haggai's prophecy? Zerubbabel, a descendant of David and governor of Judah, was the official representative of the Davidic dynasty in the postexilic community at that time. As such the prophecy of the future exaltation of the Davidic throne was attached to his person. As with the Temple (cf. Hag. 2:6-9), Haggai related an eschatological reality to a tangible historical entity to assure his contemporaries that God had great plans for His people. Zerubbabel was, as it were, the visible guarantee of a glorious future for the house of David. In Haggai's day some may have actually entertained messianic hopes for Zerubbabel. However, in the progress of revelation and history Jesus Christ fulfills Haggai's prophecy."¹

"Perhaps the prophecy should be taken at face value, but with an implicit element of contingency attached. The Lord may have desired to restore the glory of the Davidic throne in Zerubbabel's day, only to have subsequent developments within the postexilic community cause him to postpone that event, thereby relegating Zerubbabel to an archetype of the great king to come."²

"Were these pronouncements actually fulfilled in Zerubbabel? Did he usher in a restoration of Israelite monarchy that was accompanied by the overthrow of Gentile nations in the fashion that

¹Chisholm, "A Theology ...," p. 422.

²Idem, *Handbook on ...*, p. 455.

Haggai describes? The history of this period provides no evidence that he did so. Haggai's promises did not come to fruition in the person of Zerubbabel. On the contrary, not long after this prophecy was given, Zerubbabel dropped into obscurity and passed off the scene. History is silent about what became of him or under what conditions he concluded his life."¹

"That Haggai himself necessarily expected a delayed fulfillment of his words is not likely. He had no way of anticipating the temporal distances that might exist between prediction and fulfillment."²

This final oracle promises a future overthrow of the Gentile nations that were, in Haggai's day, exercising sovereignty over Israel. A descendant of King Jehoiachin, and before him David, would be God's agent in that day. He would come from Zerubbabel's descendants, and would be similar to Zerubbabel, in that He would be the political ruler of God's people. Whereas God had withdrawn His signet ring (symbolic of divine selection and investiture with authority) from Jehoiachin (Jer. 22:24), He would give it back to a future descendant of Zerubbabel.

This restoration of the royal signet ring (i.e., the throne of David), was an act of pure grace and faithfulness on sovereign Yahweh's part, since the Israelites did not deserve such a future nor could they bring it about on their own. Such a message would have encouraged and motivated the returned exiles to complete the temple, since there was still a glorious future for their nation in God's plans.

"Haggai's sermons alternated between accusation and encouragement. (This is true of most of the prophets and in a sense should characterize all ministry.) The first sermon was basically negative. The second one aimed to encourage. [The third] ... one is again essentially chiding and accusation. And ... the last one is positive and uplifting."³

¹Taylor, pp. 198-99.

²Ibid., p. 201.

³Alden, p. 588.

"What, then is Haggai saying to Christians today? These four things constitute the basis of his message; these are his principles for serving the Lord. 1. The Lord's work takes priority over every other obligation. ... 2. Those who obey God and work, trusting in His abiding presence, are kept from discouragement. ... 3. The Lord's work demands clean instruments, separated from sin. ... 4. The Lord's work, believably carried on, is linked to His sovereign plan for men and nations."¹

¹F. Gaebelein, p. 244. Paragraph divisions and italics omitted.

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