

# OpenTheo

## Haggai: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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## Transcript

Haggai, the tenth of the Book of the Twelve, is a post-exilic prophet who addressed the returned exiles in Jerusalem. Haggai is mentioned alongside Zechariah in Ezra chapter 5, verses 1-2, the two of them playing an important role in inspiring the rebuilding of the Temple. Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them.

Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozedach arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them. Also in Ezra chapter 6, verses 14-15, And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia.

And this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. Haggai is also mentioned in the apocryphal books of 1st and 2nd Ezra. After the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC, the last remnants of the Neo-Assyrian Empire were defeated with the Egyptians, and the Near East came under the dominance of Nebuchadnezzar and the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Over the two decades that followed, the Babylonians were tightened their grip upon Judah, until in 586 BC, Jerusalem was overthrown by the Babylonians, and there was a second great deportation of exiles, after the earlier one in 597 BC. Some members of the nobility and royal family had been taken even earlier, Daniel along with them. For around 70 years, as the Lord had foretold by Jeremiah, the nations had been under the power of Babylon.

In 559 BC, Cyrus had succeeded his father Cambyses as the king of Persia. His mother was the daughter of the king of Media, the Median Empire was the dominant power over Persia at the time. The Bible, especially in the book of Daniel, but also in Jeremiah and Isaiah, seems to present a Medo-Persian alliance, in which the Medes were initially the leading power, before the Persians became the more prominent of the two.

The figure of Darius the Mede in the book of Daniel, not to be confused with the Darius that is spoken of at the beginning of Haggai chapter 1, is an important figure to account for, who causes problems for contemporary scholarship, which generally argues that the Persians subdued the kingdom of the Medes in their rebellion in 559 BC. The possible figure of Cyraxes II, Cyrus' uncle and mentioned in Xenophon, is likely central to the alternative reconstruction of the history, ruling as the elderly senior ruler of a Medo-Persian confederacy, with his nephew Cyrus leading the campaign against Babylon. At the time of his death, shortly thereafter, around 537 BC, the rule of the Medo-Persian empire passed from Cyraxes to Cyrus.

Cyrus encouraged the return of peoples to their homelands, and by his decree, recorded in 2 Chronicles chapter 36 verses 22 and 23, supported the Jews in their return to Judah. Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing. Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, The story of the return is particularly recorded in the book of Ezra.

Ezra describes an earlier stage of the temple rebuilding during the reign of Cyrus, which was frustrated by opposition. The altar had been rebuilt and the foundation of the building had been laid, and there had been a recommencement of worship and festal celebration. However, from that limited start in the early 530s BC, the building of the temple had been abandoned.

It was into this situation that Haggai the prophet spoke. Delivered chiefly over a period of under 4 months, Haggai's message would play a pivotal role in turning things around.

We don't know much about Haggai.

His name is associated with feasts, and maybe the fact that the main events in his book are also connected with feasts, new moons and the feast of tabernacles is significant. Then again, perhaps it's not. We don't know whether he was one of the returned exiles, for instance, or whether he was one of the poorer people who had remained in the land.

The book begins with the word of the Lord coming to Haggai in the second year of Darius the Persian, most likely 520 BC, almost two decades since the first return. That return had, according to the book of Ezra, occurred under the leadership of Shesh-Bazer, the governor of Judah at the time. In Ezra 5, verse 16, we are informed that the foundations of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem were laid by Shesh-Bazer.

The relationship between the figures and activity of Shesh-Bazer and Zerubbabel is debated. Some have maintained that they were the same person, although if this were the case, it is surprising that both of their names are Babylonian, in contrast to figures like Daniel and his friends, or Esther, one of whose names is a Hebrew name and another is foreign. Another possibility is that Zerubbabel initially held an informal authority in the land as the Davidic heir, recognized by Shesh-Bazer the governor, but when Shesh-Bazer's period as governor ended, Zerubbabel enjoyed official authority too in that office.

The word of the Lord through Haggai is addressed to the ruler and to the high priest, encouraging them in the task of rebuilding the temple. Already in verse 1, we see the involvement of prophet, ruler and priest in the rebuilding process. The three principal offices in the land.

The returnees were a small and beleaguered group in many respects, and as they faced opposition from their neighbours, who used bribery, false reports and rumours to stir up official resistance to their efforts, were probably very aware of the vulnerability of their position. This probably made it very easy for them to shrink back from the task of rebuilding the temple, not wanting to excite further opposition, keeping their heads down in order to appease the people around them. Perhaps, they reasoned, the divinely appointed time for the rebuilding of the temple had not yet come.

Maybe the temple had to be left in ruins for a period of 70 years, corresponding to the 70 years of Babylonian dominance that had begun earlier. As the temple was destroyed in 587 or 586 BC, some of them might have reasoned that there were still a few years to go. Alternatively, perhaps their argument was one of prudence.

Given their weak position and the opposition that they were facing, perhaps it would be better to err on the side of caution, and to leave the rebuilding for a few years, rather than provoking stronger neighbouring peoples. The Lord, however, challenges the people's perspective through his prophet. If it is not time for them to rebuild his house,

and they must leave his house in ruins, is it time for them to dwell in their own houses? They are clearly committed to the task of rebuilding more generally, having completed their own dwellings.

Perhaps we are to see an indication that some of the people were even living in a measure of luxury, in reference to panelling. However, that word could be differently understood, to refer to covering in the form of ceilings and roofs. They haven't left their own houses unfinished, and surely many of the concerns that they appeal to for their neglect of the rebuilding of the temple, must also apply to their broader building projects.

While the rebuilding of the temple is a task in which they might have faced particular opposition, they betrayed their misplaced priorities in their readiness to abandon that task. A number of the curses of the covenant concern the frustration of people's labours. Despite their efforts, they would enjoy scant reward for their exertions.

Rather, many of the fruits of their work would be lost, devoured, or otherwise depleted. By failing to give the Lord their best, they would not be blessed. The Lord wants his people to consider how their neglect of his house has served them.

They have been frustrated in their labours, and it shouldn't be a mystery as to why. We find similar curses of futility elsewhere in the prophets. For instance, in Hosea chapter 4, verses 10 and 11.

Or again, in Isaiah chapter 17, verses 10 to 11. And have not remembered the rock of your refuge. The people are experiencing futility in every area of their lives.

In their labour on the land, in their eating and drinking, in their clothing, and in their earning. We should recognise the judgement of futility as a sort of intensification of the original curse, in which the land would yield thorns and thistles as man laboured upon it in the sweat of his brow. The inverse of the curses of futility is of course the blessing upon faithfulness that we see in places like Deuteronomy chapter 11 verses 13-15.

And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil, and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full. The answer to their present plight is straightforward. If they devote themselves to restoring the house of the Lord, they will find that the Lord will bless them in their other activities.

The futility that they have been experiencing has been brought about by the Lord himself. However, once they mend their relationship with the Lord and put him first and his glory above their own comfort, ease and security, they will discover that the blessing

that follows will touch areas of their lives where they have been experiencing frustration, unrewarded toil, futility and loss. As Deuteronomy chapter 11 discusses, the land of Israel depended heavily upon the seasonal rains, which contrasted with the manner in which the land of Egypt, where they had formerly been, was irrigated.

A key judgment of the covenant was the withholding of rain, as we see in Leviticus chapter 26 verses 18-20. And if in spite of this you will not listen to me, then I will discipline you again sevenfold for your sins, and I will break the pride of your power, and I will make your heavens like iron, and your earth like bronze, and your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land shall not yield its increase, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit. Perhaps the most notable drought, of course, came upon Israel during the reign of Ahab, according to the prayer of the prophet Elijah.

However, the returned exiles in Haggai's day had also suffered a drought. One aspect of the Feast of Tabernacles was prayer for rains, and considering that this message was delivered just a month before that feast, we might perhaps see this as preparing the people for that feast, at the end of which feast the prophetic message that opens chapter 2 was delivered. The people responded positively to the message of the Lord by Haggai, fearing the Lord and heeding his rebuke.

As the people responded to the message, the Lord also gave them assurance through Haggai of his blessing and presence with them in their labors. As at the beginning of the Book of Ezra, verse 14 underlines the Lord's involvement in stirring up people to action, through the work of his prophetic word and by his spirit, within 23 days of the Lord's first delivery of the message to Haggai, they were devoted once more to the rebuilding work. A question to consider, what are some of the different ways in which we see the Lord bringing people to action in this chapter? The Lord had rebuked the people through Haggai for their neglect of the rebuilding work on the temple, declaring that they had been suffering the consequences of their failure, in the futility of their efforts in many other areas of their lives.

At the end of the sixth month, they had committed themselves once more to the task of rebuilding. The ministry of Haggai and Zechariah would be important throughout the rebuilding project, and in this chapter we find some of the messages of divine encouragement given to the people as they worked on the temple. The dating of the first verse, presumably still in the second year of Darius, places the prophecy on the seventh day of the Feast of Tabernacles or Bouds, on the 21st day of the seventh month.

The seventh month was, perhaps unsurprisingly, the primary festal month in Israel's religious calendar. Throughout Israel's festal calendar, the number seven was prominent, as we see in Leviticus chapter 23. The two most prominent feasts, Unleavened Bread and Tabernacles, were both seven days in length, with an extra day tagged on.

The Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, the other pilgrimage feast, was dated as seven sevens

after the Feast of Firstfruits. There were seven festivals and seven days of rest. The seventh month was especially dense with feasts, having the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, Tabernacles, and the day after Tabernacles.

The festal calendar was a reminder and extension of the principle of the Sabbath, which was the key sign of the covenant that was established at Sinai. The Feast of Tabernacles, which ended the festal year of Leviticus, mirrored the feast with which the year began, Passover and Unleavened Bread. Both Unleavened Bread and Tabernacles related to the very first days of Israel's departure from Egypt, the former to the cutting off of the old food of Egypt in the leaven, and leaving behind the former dwellings for temporary dwellings in the wilderness in the case of the latter.

It was during the seventh month and the Feast of Tabernacles that Solomon's temple had been dedicated. The Feast of Tabernacles was also significant for Zerubbabel and Joshua. After the initial return to Jerusalem, they had re-established the altar and started the rebuilding of the temple, celebrating a joyful Feast of Tabernacles.

In Ezra chapter 3 verses 1-8 we read of their earlier efforts. And they offered burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands.

And they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, burnt offerings morning and evening. And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required. And after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon, and at all the appointed feasts of the Lord, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the Lord.

From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord. For the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not yet laid. So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Sheol-Tiel and Jeshua the son of Jarsadach made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites, and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites from twenty years old and upward to supervise the work of the house of the Lord. Hearing this account we might be forgiven for thinking that two different events have been conflated together, so similar are the situations.

However this is perhaps the point. The Lord is returning the people to that earlier point, helping them to pick up the dropped threads of the narrative and to continue the abandoned work. After a decade and a half on, the Lord is encouraging Joshua and

Zerubbabel with his word through Haggai.

Joshua and Zerubbabel had perhaps become disheartened, disillusioned, and even cynical after the failure of their earlier endeavors, but now they are reinvigorated and recover something of the joy of that first feast of tabernacles. Haggai is instructed to address the company of the people who would all have gathered together for the feast, asking them some key questions. In Ezra chapter 3 verses 11 to 13 we read of the people's response to the laying of the foundation of the temple shortly after the first return.

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping. For the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.

The Solomonic temple had been destroyed in 586 BC, and the rebuilding of the temple began about 50 years later. Many of the older generation among the returned exiles, most over 60 years of age, would have remembered the former temple in some way or other and its glories. And seeing the small foundations of the new temple in relation to the greatness of Solomon's temple, it would have been too much for many of them to bear, and so they wept.

One can imagine that witnessing such reactions to their efforts would have been initially rather dispiriting for Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people. However, as troubles and opposition accumulated, and the shouts of joy that had accompanied that weeping at first had been silenced, the older generation's sorrow over unrecoverable former glories would have weighed increasingly heavy upon them too. The Lord speaks directly to these sentiments through Haggai.

Even at that later time, there would have been some among the people who still remembered Solomon's temple, although many of them would have died since the time of their return. Looking at the new temple taking shape, they would naturally have felt quite keenly how diminished its structure was from the former edifice, and not merely just in idealising its past majesty. So the Lord addresses these perceptions.

The Lord begins to address the unfavourable comparison between the past and the present temple by drawing the people's attention to the continuity of the covenant bond that was first established at Sinai. However the current temple might compare with Solomon's. The Lord who dwells in their midst is the same God who brought them out of Egypt.

His presence remains with them, irrespective of the size and the splendour or lack thereof of the temple. The building never contained him, and its proportions are not the measure of his presence with them. His covenant commitment is where they should look for assurance, not to a building in Jerusalem.

We should also consider some of the other concerns that the people might have had. After the sin with the golden calf at Sinai, Moses had interceded with the Lord so that he would not remove his presence from his people. One could imagine some of the people wondering whether the presence of the Lord had departed from Israel after the temple was destroyed and Judah exiled.

The prophet Ezekiel had described the departure of the Lord's glory from the temple in Jerusalem prior to its destruction, and perhaps some might have believed that the Lord's glory had not and would not return, that they were doomed to continued fruitlessness, having been abandoned by the Lord. Haggai's message directly challenges this impression. The spirit of the Lord remains in their midst, much as the spirit had been in their midst in leading them out of Egypt.

Indeed, not only does the Lord continue to dwell in their midst, the new temple, despite its far more modest proportions, would be a site of greater works of God and a fuller manifestation of his glory. The temple is a symbol of the Lord's sovereignty in the midst of his people and in the midst of the nations. The Lord is enthroned above the cherubim, and the Ark of the Covenant represents his footstool.

The temple building may be greatly diminished, but the Lord's throne will be elevated. The Lord is about to shake the earth and the sea and the dry land. This theophanic imagery is about unsettling the existing world order and its structures and powers, presumably in order to establish a new one in its place.

While the temple had formerly had its riches stripped from it by the nations, the general shaking of the world that the Lord would bring about would have the effect of bringing the riches of the nations to the temple, something that had already occurred to some degree with the return of temple items and other treasures by Cyrus. Similar statements can be found elsewhere in the Prophets, for instance in Zechariah 14, 14, And the wealth of all the surrounding nations shall be collected, gold, silver, and garments in great abundance. Or in Isaiah 60, 3-7, And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

Lift up your eyes all around and see. They all gather together, they come to you. Your son shall come from afar, and your daughter shall be carried on the hip.

Then you shall see and be radiant. Your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you. The wealth of the nations shall come to you.



A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah. All those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord.

All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you. The rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you. They shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house.

As Minyon Jacobs mentions, the entry of the riches of the nations into the house of the Lord might represent plunder taken from defeated enemies, or tribute from vassals, or the return of what was once stolen, or perhaps offerings that they are bringing as worshippers. However, as she notes, the image of filling the house with glory in verse 7 is broader than any of these one themes by themselves, even though they might be elements of a larger picture. While Christians might be inclined to jump straight to thinking about Christ when reading about such prophecies, we ought to consider ways in which this was already being fulfilled prior to the arrival of Christ.

Solomon's temple had been a glorious building at the heart of the land of Israel, the site where people gathered from all of its corners. The restoration temple, while initially much less glorious, would represent the Lord's throne as His rule was extended more fully over many other regions, not least as the diaspora of the Jews prospered in many lands beyond Israel, to the extent that there were many more Jews living outside of the land than there were within it by the time of Jesus. The wealth of the temple is not primarily to be measured in gold or silver or other treasures all of the gold and silver belongs to the Lord already, but in the Lord's presence within it and His rule from it.

The Lord's encouragement of His people here is that, regardless of the limits of their capacity to build Him a glorious building, their humble efforts would become the stage on which He would display a much more exceeding glory than ever was achieved in the more glorious building that preceded it. In particular, the temple would be a site from which the Lord will establish peace. There are similar promises in places like Isaiah 60, verses 17-18.

And your gates, praise. The Lord addresses the people again through Haggai a couple of months later, a month after Zechariah seems to have begun his ministry, as we see in Zechariah 1, verse 1. The Lord instructs Haggai to ask the priests a question. Haggai is not asking the priests the question because he does not know the answer, but because asking the question serves a didactic purpose.

It seems that some of the people might have had a notion of sacralisation through association with the priesthood, yet Haggai's questions serve to puncture that notion. Holiness is not the same contagious principle that uncleanness is. While the people might think that their works become holy by connection with the priesthood, the Lord teaches that it is rather their moral uncleanness that proves contagious, defiling their

sacrifices.

Rather than their sacrifices being made acceptable to God through some magical, sacralising priestcraft, it is their impurity that is threatening to invalidate their offerings. The result of this was the futility of their efforts in so many areas of their life. Verse 17 alludes back to Amos chapter 4, verse 9. Now, however, as they have turned to do the work of the Lord in rebuilding the temple with a full heart, they will be blessed in all that they do.

This prophecy would have been delivered around the time of sowing, and considering the problems that they seem to have had with former harvests, this would be a cause of great encouragement. The final word of the chapter, and of the book, is another prophecy that was delivered on that same day, this time to Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel was the heir of David and also the governor of Judah.

The Lord declares once again that he is about to shake the nations, as he had done in verses 6 and 7. He is going to overthrow the war machines of great powers, their chariots and riders. However, even as the world order is thrown into some degree of tumult, the Lord will establish Zerubbabel as a symbol of his authority, like a signet ring. He has been chosen by the Lord, and he will be made strong.

We might perhaps see this as a reaffirmation of the promises of the Davidic covenant. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which the prophecies of this chapter could be seen as looking forward to the time of Christ?