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An Introduction to Haggai

Haggai 1:1; 2:4-5 In our Survey of the Prophets, we've examined thirteen prophetic books. And we now come to another important prophetic witness which God gave to His people, the book of Haggai!

Years ago, I remember struggling to understand the many theological controversies plaguing the church:

- The sufficiency of Christ.
- Continuing Revelation.

Prophetic Overview

1. Joel to Judah ~845 BC
2. Jonah on account of Nineveh ~780 BC
3. Amos to Israel ~765 BC
4. Hosea to Israel ~750 BC
5. Isaiah to Judah ~740 BC
6. Micah to Judah ~735 BC
7. Nahum to Judah ~650 BC
8. Jeremiah to Judah ~627 BC
9. Zephaniah to Judah ~622 BC
10. Habakkuk to Judah ~605 BC
11. Daniel to Judah ~605 BC
12. Ezekiel to Judah ~593 BC
13. Obadiah to Edom ~ 586 BC

- The worship wars.
- The controversy surrounding the charismatic gifts: tongues, miracles, and prophecy.
- And much, much more.

I remember wishing that God would speak into the darkness just one more time and bring clarity to all the conflict. But then in my study of the word, I stumbled upon the Old Testament Prophetic books. In studying them I realized that most of the questions that I was asking were addressed in these very books! It is sad that many, if very few read, study, much less appreciate the Old Testament Prophetic works.

The goal of studying the Old Testament Prophetic works is threefold.

1. I want to introduce you to this fantastic section of the Bible in the hopes that each book becomes less intimidating and much more useable in your life.
2. I want you to have enough of a familiarity with each book that you will NOT hesitate to dive into a study of your own.
3. I want you to feed from the prophetic corpus and so come to know the delight that has been mine throughout the years in studying them.

Toward that end, I am introducing you to a fourteenth prophetic book, Haggai. Notice, the background to this book: The prophet, date, and setting.

Haggai 1:1, “In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest saying.”

The book of Haggai was written in the latter part of the sixth century BC. Now if we are going to understand this prophesy, we need to be familiar with the history of God’s people up to this time. Accordingly, consider with me the back story of Haggai.

When God created the world, He established it to be a Kingdom over which to rule along with His image bearers (Genesis 1:27-31). By way of note: the end will be as the beginning when Christ returns and reclaims this world as His Kingdom (cf. Revelation 11:15). Yet man rebelled, thinking that freedom from God meant freedom to do whatever they wanted (cf. Genesis 3:4-5). Yet far from freedom, mankind became enslaved to Satan (2 Timothy 2:26)! But God in His kindness and grace chose NOT to destroy man. RATHER, He deigned to become a man Himself, to be born under the very law which now condemned man, uphold that law, and then die the death which was due us on account of Adam’s sin (cf. Romans 5:12, 18)! This was promised as far back as Genesis 3:15! Thus, from Genesis 3:15 onward, the Bible contains the ongoing story of the redeeming work of God.

In this brief survey, I am going to begin in Genesis 12 where God approached a man named Abram by and through whom the Lord would bring the good news of Christ to the world (Genesis 22:18). At this time the gospel — the same gospel by which you and I are saved —

was preached to this man (Galatians 3:8).

Now as God's original plan was to co-reign with us over a Kingdom, in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of Christ, the Lord organized His people into a Theocracy under Moses which eventually gave way to a Theocratic nation with Saul. At this point, God's people now had a dual relationship with God.

- As individuals they enjoyed a salvific relationship with the Lord on account of His grace which could never be annulled or pass away! Salvation in Christ is permanent!
- But as a national entity — a body politic — their longevity was tied to their national faithfulness- what they did and did not do as a people (cf. Deuteronomy 28:15-19; Leviticus 26:14-33)!

It is important that you understand that this facet of God's redemptive plan — the Theocracy — was never intended by God to be eternal. The political entity we call Israel was established to teach God's people what life looked under a king, specifically King Jesus (which was and is God's eternal plan from the beginning). As such, skipping ahead in God's redemptive program well after the nation of Israel split into two separate kingdoms (921 BC), the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell in 722 BC and the Southern Kingdom of Judah fell in 586 BC. Both ended because of their national rebellion!

This did NOT mean God had rejected His people. To the contrary! As individuals they continued to relate to the Lord on the basis of the Gospel Jesus Christ! And so, while the nation failed and came to an end, God's love and relationship with the clan/individual did not (cf. Leviticus 26:42-45)!

Accordingly, God's Redemptive Program was far from being complete. God promised in Jeremiah that He would restore His people to the Promised Land after seventy years in exile (25:11). This came to pass in 538 BC. Joyce Baldwin gave this excellent description both of God's people at this time as well as the focus of His redemptive program which would culminate in a Davidic King whom we know ultimately is Christ.

The best part of a lifetime separated the deportations of 597 and the first return in 538 BC. The common feeling among the exiles was that they might as well be dead. Their bones were dried up and their hope gone (Ezekiel 37:11). From a human standpoint they were right. It would have been hard to find any reasonable ground for hope, but to Ezekiel came a vision of resurrection. God would recreate his people, reunite the two kingdoms under a Davidic head [which ultimately is Christ] and set his sanctuary among them once and for all (Ezekiel 37). The encouragements of Isaiah chapters 40-48 laid new stress on election and covenant. The great Creator still counted Israel his servant and Jacob his chosen (41:8) and therefore they need not fear. He had blotted out their transgressions 'for his own sake' (43:25) and planned their return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (44:28). Cyrus was designated as the anointed of the Lord to fulfil his purpose. Suddenly there was a glorious future ahead because they had an incomparable God who saw fit to forgive the past and

plan redemption. The very heavens and earth would witness the declaration, 'The Lord loves him' (48:14). (Baldwin, 1972, p. 16)

And so, Jewish history began a new chapter in 539 BC. Babylon as a nation fell as its last monarch, Belshazzar, was slain by the Persian king, Cyrus (cf. Dan. 5:30). And this resulted in incredible blessing for God's people. Recall that prior to Cyrus, societal order was maintained by conquering rulers by transporting the recently conquered indigenous people to other parts of the empire. The thinking was that you wouldn't die for a land that was not your own. Yet Cyrus had a more pressing issue at hand when he assumed command over what formally was the Babylonian empire. As a master ruler — and he was known for this — Cyrus sought to unify his very disunified nation. As such, he issued decrees and rulings which supported the various religions of his empire — one of which was Judaism!¹ And so, in 538 BC Cyrus issued a decree restoring the Jews to their homeland (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4).²

Now, one would have expected that the entirety of the nation would have returned — hundreds and hundreds of thousands!! Yet Ezra tells us that only 42,360 returned (Ezra 2:64)- which, when you think of the number of Jews in Babylon at this time, is incredibly small! Why so few? MacArthur describing the Israel's response to Cyrus' decree said:

The people didn't go back. They were comfortable. They were sufficiently paganized. They were enmeshed in the society in which they lived. They were prosperous. They were absorbed. They were too involved to care about the Promised Land, too involved to care about the rebuilding of Jerusalem, too involved to care about restoring the temple. (MacArthur, 1980)

That means that those who went back typically were more vested in God's redemptive program for His people. No doubt there were some whose lives were a dead-end in Babylon and so had nothing to lose. But the vast majority were men and women who had a zeal and passion for the Lord — like Ezra, Nehemiah, Zerubbabel, Joshua the priest, the prophet Haggai, and many more! It is as God promised in Zephaniah speaking of those in exile.

Zephaniah 3:18, "I will gather those who grieve about the appointed feasts- they came from you, O Zion; *the reproach of exile* is a burden on them."

Yet it didn't take long for this zeal to waver and wane when once the remnant returned. This serves as the background to the prophecy before us which was written in 520 BC to exhort God's people to finish the rebuilding of the temple (cf. Haggai 1:2-8)! With that, consider Haggai the prophet.

The Prophet

Haggai 1:1a, "In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai..."

Clearly Haggai needed no introduction to the people of God for both here and in Ezra 5:1; 6:14 he is simply referred to as “the prophet”. His name is one of several in the Old Testament derived from חַג (chag), meaning “festival”³. Most likely he was born on a feast day and therefore named “my feast”- חַגַּי (Chaggay).

Nearly nothing is known about him. According to Jewish tradition he lived the greater part of his life in Babylon. As such, it was believed that he was rather old when he gave this prophecy. And the text bears that out. Haggai asked his brethren:

Haggai 2:3, “Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Does it not seem to you like nothing in comparison?”

Haggai spoke this as if he himself had seen the Temple in its glory. If that were the case, then at the writing of this prophecy, he would have been in his 60s to early 70s!⁴ And that brings us to the book.

The Book

From the precise dates given in the text Haggai’s ministry spanned all of fifteen weeks during the second year of Darius I.

Haggai Preached within the Span of 15 Weeks

Text	Year of Darius	Month	Date of New Moon	Day	Equivalent Date
Hag. 1:1	2nd	6th	Aug. 29	1st	Aug. 29, 520 BC
Hag. 1:15	2nd	6th	Aug. 29	24th	Sept. 21, 520 BC
Hag. 2:1	2nd	7th	Sept. 27	21st	Oct. 17, 520 BC
Hag. 2:10, 20	2nd	9th	Nov. 25	24th	Dec. 18, 520 BC

The Prophecy consists of four messages⁵ each of which is precisely dated as you can see from the table.

- The first message — Haggai 1:1-11 — dealt with the fruitlessness that comes with a lack of vigor for the Lord.
- The second message — Haggai 1:12-15 — detailed the zealous response of the people of God, all on account of the stirring of the Lord in the hearts of His people.
- The third message — Haggai 2:1-9 — dealt with the discouragement that came from trying to rebuild the temple.
- The fourth message came in two parts — Haggai 2:10-19 & Haggai 2:20-23.

The first spoke of the true nature of the work of God’s people. They were NOT just rebuilding a physical temple BUT acting to establish THE temple which God eventually would erect in Christ.

The second message described the significance that Zerubbabel held in God’s redemptive program. Though this is the second smallest prophetic discourse (Obadiah being the shortest), nevertheless the message of Haggai was used by God to inspire His people unto the service of their Lord during a time of great opposition. Toward that end, if there was a “dedication page” to this message, it would read: “This book is dedicated to the genuine servant of Christ who is in

love with His Lord and yet has lost their zeal!” Now the basis for this is one of its key themes.

A key theme is that kingdom zeal arises when we see that a sovereign Lord holds His people in His hands.

Haggai 2:4-5, “‘But now take courage, Zerubbabel,’ declares the Lord, ‘take courage also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land take courage,’ declares the Lord, ‘and work; for I am with you,’ says the Lord of hosts. ‘As for the promise which I made you when you came out of Egypt⁶, My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!’”

This exhortation serves as a fitting theme of this book. Consider in more detail the context of this exhortation, it is one of discouragement and a waning zeal. The excitement of the returning remnant was brought to a halt as the desolate city came into view! You can just image the shock that came upon them when they beheld what used to be the temple, the palace, the market, and their homes!

Don’t under-estimate this! It took them seven months just to clear the rubble off the temple mount to say nothing of the city! And then as they began efforts to rebuild the temple, they were opposed, harassed, mocked, and scorned by the local inhabitants who moved in after Judah was taken into exile.

Ezra 4:1-5, “Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the Lord God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers’ *households*, and said to them, ‘Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here.’ [These were the Samaritans] But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers’ *households* of Israel said to them, ‘You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us.’ Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.”⁷

This resulted in the work being completely halted for close to eighteen years (Ezra 4:5, 24)! In fact, it wouldn’t start up again until 520 BC with the temple being completed in 515 BC!

Now if that wasn’t bad enough, to this persecution was added an eighteen-year drought in which God’s people suffered immensely.

Haggai 1:10-11, “Therefore, because of you the sky has withheld its dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands.”

The result? The passion and zeal of the people of God melted as they took their eyes off the Lord. As a result, they naturally became preoccupied with those things that were safe — like themselves, their homes, their living, and the like. Of this time, Isaiah prophesied. Recall that Isaiah 56-66 was written to the people who would return to Jerusalem. Listen to how Isaiah described this time.

Isaiah 59:9b-10, "...We hope for light, but behold, darkness; for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope along the wall like blind men, we grope like those who have no eyes; we stumble at midday as in the twilight, among those who are vigorous we are like dead men."

Yet as redemptive history goes, God's people were at a pivotal time in God's program! God hadn't forgotten them! God was about to begin something that would NOT enter into its fulness until the advent of Christ! And all of this, because "God was with them!"

Haggai 2:4b, 5b, "...'I am with you,' says the Lord of hosts... My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!"

If you are at all familiar with redemptive history, you know this is one of its major themes.

- This was the promise God gave to Abraham which enabled him to live as an alien and stranger in a foreign land. (Genesis 12:1-3)
- This was the promise God gave to Isaac as he returned to face his brother, Esau, who the last time he saw him threatened to kill him. (Genesis 26:3)
- This is the promise God gave to Joshua when the young leader found himself in charge after Moses died, "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:9)
- This is the promise David took to heart as he was being pursued by Saul! (Psalm 23:4)
- This was the promise David then gave to his son, Solomon when the baton was passed to him. (1 Chronicles 28:9)
- This was the essence of the message given to Joseph just prior to Christ's birth, "'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which translated means, 'God with us.'" (Matthew 1:23)
- This is the promise Christ gave to the church after commissioning it, "...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20b).
- It is this promise that will be realized in the New Heavens and Earth on the Last day, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them.'" (Revelation 21:3)

Yet in the text before us, the referent is to another time in redemptive history when God's people, just as in Haggai's day, left the comforts of civilization with the anticipation of glory,

only to be discouraged and disappointed by the pursuing army of the Egyptians, the Red Sea which held them captive, the waterless and barren desert, the long nights and harsh days of the wilderness wandering. What God gave a promise to His people at this time... what was that promise?

Exodus 29:45-46, "And I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them; I am the Lord their God."

Amazingly, we read a promise like this and find it worthless. For in our modern Americana living, life is easy, we expect it to be nothing less, for "God is with us." Did you get that? We tend to take the promise of God's presence in our lives to mean that life will be easy, that no bad thing will happen, and that we will live a long, wonderful life on this earth.

Christian, this world is a hostile, sin infested realm which will eat you up if you are not careful (cf. John 16:33). Sickness, illness, disease, tragedy and the like occurs in both the believer and unbeliever's lives irrespective of their faith. The difference between the two therefore is NOT what happens to them, BUT who is the one who goes with them!

That God is with us means a good God walks beside us, before us, within us protecting, upholding, and defending! That is why God repeated this promise numerous times to the people of God in the wilderness! And so, not surprisingly, it was this promise that was brought before the discouraged people of God in Haggai's day.

Haggai 2:5, "As for the promise which I made you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!"

What is it that would enable God's people "to work" and so complete the rebuilding of the Temple? What is it that enlivens the courage and boldness of you and me His servants? The knowledge that God has NOT forgotten us NOR forsaken us, BUT "is with us" (v. 4); that "My Spirit is abiding in your midst!" (v. 5)

Now if the limited view that God's people had of this glorious truth translated into zeal and vigor amongst the people of God in Haggai's day, how much more ought it to wake us up and enliven us who have an intimate relationship with Immanuel?!

In fact, consider what was meant by the expression "My Spirit". It represents the essence of the God who was with His people during the Exodus who:

- Fought for His people while they kept silent, Exodus 14:14!
- Demonstrated His glory and greatness over the most notable false gods of Egypt, Exodus 12:12!
- Destroyed the army of Pharaoh without his people lifting a finger, Exodus 14:26-31!
- Parted the Red Sea, Exodus 14:21!

- Brought water from a rock, Numbers 20:11.
- Produced out of thin air the most glorious food ever to have been consumed- Manna, Exodus 16:14-15.
- Protected, provisioned, guarded, encouraged, and led His people for 40 years by a pillar of smoke and fire!

That is the Being who was dwelling amongst the people of God as they faced the harsh realities of rebuilding a temple amidst people who wanted them dead, in the midst of a famine.

And yet, “My Spirit” also reflects the heart and character of God as pictured in this book as a sovereign (He is the “Lord of Hosts”⁸), caring, loving, good God whose will is our best, unto His glory, at all times! In light the One who walks with us in the fire, we can’t fail! For truly, the Lord is “a shield about us, our glory, and the lifter of our head” (Psalms 3:3)!⁹

References

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End Note(s)

¹ Joyce Baldwin wrote, “First of all Cyrus is quoted as saying that the Lord, the God of heaven, had charged him to build him a house at Jerusalem (Ezra 1:2). The ‘Cyrus Cylinder’ sheds light on this statement, for the king records how, after his victorious entry into Babylon, he rebuilt temples and restored gods to their places. His prayer ‘May all the gods whom I have placed within their sanctuaries address a daily prayer in my favour ...’, reveals his motive and his syncretistic outlook. By honouring all the gods he hoped to be able to count on the help of all.” (Baldwin, 1972, p. 17)

² It is no surprise therefore to discover that Cyrus II was the most celebrated secular king of OT history. He is called by the prophet Isaiah “My shepherd” (Isaiah 44:28). In another passage he is referred to as “His [the Lord’s] Anointed” (Isaiah 45:1), a term used in the Old Testament of the Messiah.

³ Cf. Haggi (Genesis 46:16; Numbers 26:15), Haggith (2 Sam. 3:4), Haggiah (1 Chronicles 6:30).

⁴ According to early Christian tradition Haggai was a priest and was buried with honor near the “Sepulchers of the Priests.” The fact that some of the Psalms in the LXX are attributed to him add support to this (cf. Psalms. 138, 146-149).

⁵ Haggai may have put his prophetic oracles into poetic form to make them as vivid and memorable as possible. The uncertainty arises because Hebrew poetry did not rhyme, and just as much modern English poetry would pass as prose if it were not written in verse lines, so it is not always possible to identify Hebrew poetry with certainty. Parallelism (the same or contrasting ideas set alongside in parallel clauses) is clearly seen in verse 6, and a distinct rhythm is felt even in the translation of 1:9–11.

⁶ Pieter Verhoef wrote of this, “The consensus of scholarly opinion is that this phrase must be considered a gloss, because (1) it is wanting in the LXX, Vetus Latina, and Peshitta; (2) no attempt to construe this phrase with the surrounding context has proven satisfactory; and (3) it

breaks the connection between two clauses in vv. 4 and 5 that were evidently meant to be parallel, viz., 'I am with you' (v. 4) and 'my Spirit will always remain among you.'" (Verhoef, 1987, p. 99)

⁷ Joyce Baldwin wrote, "The right of the Jews to rebuild was challenged by the pro-Persian governors of Trans-Euphrates, who applied to Darius in writing for confirmation that Cyrus had authorized the project. An official memorandum was discovered at Ecbatana, whereupon Darius not only forbade interference with the work but also ordered material help to be given (Ezra 5:6–6:12)." (Baldwin, 1972, p. 19)

⁸ This title for God occurs nearly 300 times in the Old Testament, predominantly in the prophetic books (247 times), and is particularly frequent in Haggai (14 times), Zechariah (53 times) and Malachi (24 times).

⁹ There is strong allusion here to Isaiah 63:11-14, "Where is He who put in the midst of them His holy Spirit, who caused His glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses.... Like cattle that go down into the valley, the Spirit of the Lord gave them rest.... So, thou didst lead Thy people, to make for Thy self a glorious name."