

Haggai

“ ‘Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified’ says the Lord.” (Mal 1:8)

The temple was crucial to Yahweh’s self-manifestation. When the exiles returned from captivity, their first order of business was to reestablish the sanctuary. When interest waned, Haggai was sent to confront the people and to put their work into proper perspective. Though much less impressive than Solomon’s house that had been destroyed, this later version of the temple would actually come to have a greater glory than the former. However, that was an issue of faith in God’s promises, which is what Haggai’s prophecy was intended to instill.

Authorship

Besides the repeated reference in this book to Haggai receiving the word of Yahweh, he is mentioned by Ezra as one of two who prophesied to the Jews in Jerusalem and Judah (the other being Zechariah—Ezra 5:1; 6:14). His name means “festal” or “my feast.” The fact that his second message (2:1–9) was delivered on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles suggests that the message of his prophecy is bound up with the eschatological symbolism of that feast for Israel. If 2:3 is taken as indicating that Haggai had seen the former temple, then he would have been in his seventies or eighties at the time of his ministry. However, this is not at all certain.

Date

Each message of Haggai’s prophecy is dated as occurring in the second year of King Darius, that is, 520 B.C. It is unlikely that its recording took place much, if at all, later.

Historical Setting

In 538 B.C. Cyrus decreed the release of Israel from its captivity in Babylon. Tens of thousands of Jews returned to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the temple. Work began in 537 B.C. but then came to a halt under external opposition and disillusionment. For sixteen years the temple foundation was ignored until the prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged leaders and people to resume the task (Ezra 5:1). This encouragement included a glance into the future as a key ingredient of motivation to build.

Original Readers

The recipients of Haggai's messages are given as Zerubbabel the governor of Judah (1:1; 2:2, 21), Joshua the high priest (1:1; 2:2), and the remnant of the people (2:2). Once the prophecy had been recorded, the Jewish community would have a record of Yahweh's glorious intentions for the temple that had been built by the captivity returnees.

Occasion

Cessation of work on the post-exilic temple prompted God's sending of two prophets to encourage its resumption. Leaders were in need of exhortation and support as well as the people.

Special Issues

Messianic Images. The regular occurrence of messianic images and motifs in the prophets alerts the interpreter to be sensitive to subtleties and unexpected shifts in the text. Two such items in Haggai concern the meaning of the phrase "desire of all nations" (2:7) and the implications of addressing Zerubbabel as "My servant" and making him as a signet ring (2:23). Both of these have received messianic interpretations. Since Haggai's

presentation of the temple clearly has implications for the distant future, such messianic images should not be discounted without good reason.

Message

The importance of a reconstructed temple lies not in any immediate magnificence but in its future glory derived from Messiah's presence who will also reward every god-honoring effort to build it.

Outline

- I. Messages concerning the Act of Building the Temple: Yahweh's house must be build because He will give it a greater glory than Solomon's. 1:1—2:9
 - A. Message One: Building the temple must take priority over private houses. 1:1–15
 1. Yahweh's word to Zerubbabel and Joshua. 1:1
 2. Yahweh's rebuke for failure to build His house. 1:2–11
 - a. The people are blamed for their refusal to build the temple. 1:2
 - b. The people have been impoverished for putting their own building first. 1:3–6
 - c. The land has been afflicted because the temple had not been rebuilt. 1:7–11
 3. The people's response and work on Yahweh's house. 1:12–15
 - a. The leaders and people obeyed in the fear of the Lord. 1:12
 - b. Yahweh's promises His presence. 1:13
 - c. The leaders and people worked on Yahweh's house. 1:14–15
 - B. Message Two: The glory of this temple will be greater than Solomon's. 2:1–9
 1. Yahweh's word to Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the remnant. 2:1–2
 2. Yahweh commands work on the temple even though it is less glorious than the former one. 2:3–5
 3. Yahweh promises that the glory of the latter temple will be greater than the former once He shakes all nations. 2:6–9
- II. Messages concerning the Manner of Building the Temple: Building must be done in purity so that Yahweh can honor His servants in the future. 2:10–23
 - A. Message Three: The people's efforts at building have been unacceptable because of uncleanness. 2:10–19
 1. Yahweh's word concerning the people. (2:14)
 2. The work of the people has been unclean. 2:10–14
 3. Whereas the people's defiled work had caused a lack, Yahweh purposes to bless them in the future. 2:15–19

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| B. | Message Four: Yahweh's servant shall be honored as one having authority to rule. | 2:20–23 |
| 1. | Yahweh's word to Zerubbabel. | 2:20–21 |
| 2. | The Gentile kingdoms will be destroyed. | 2:22 |
| 3. | Zerubbabel the servant will be exalted to rule. | 2:23 |

Argument

Haggai's four messages are marked off by date indicators (at 1:1; 2:1, 10, 14), and addressees (1:1; 2:2, (14), 21). In addition the messages are grouped in pairs by the inclusion of King Darius' name in the first and third addresses (1:1; 2:10). These larger sections emphasize the act of building with respect to the temple's significance (1:1—2:9) and the manner in which the people build with respect to their own personal exaltation in the future (2:10–23).

I. Messages concerning the Act of Building the Temple: Yahweh's house must be build because He will give it a greater glory than Solomon's (1:1—2:9).

A. Message One: Building the temple must take priority over private houses (1:1–15).

Haggai's immediate task is to turn the people from concern over their personal residences to involvement in building Yahweh's house. The leaders are addressed as the key to such a shift in focus (1:1). The prophet informs the people that the reason they have not seen results equal to the efforts of their work is because they have been working for themselves to the neglect of Yahweh's concern, the temple (1:3–11). This first message produces a sense of Yahweh's (frightening) presence (1:12), a stirring of the spirits of the leadership (1:13) and a willingness on the part of the remnant to work (1:14).

B. Message Two: The glory of this temple will be greater than Solomon's (2:1–9).

Less than two months later Haggai follows up with a message about the discouraging results of the building efforts. It is obvious that the magnificence of Solomon's temple will never be reproduced by the remnant (2:1–3). Yet, they are still to strengthen themselves for the task and stay at it since Yahweh is present with them (2:4–5). They must adopt the attitude of faith in Yahweh's assurance that the house they were building was going to have a greater glory than even Solomon's, since this would happen only in the unspecified future when He should shake the nations (2:6–9). The Day of the Lord is envisioned in this promise, which will end in the presence of Messiah (whether or not the "desire of all nations" refers to Him directly).

II. Messages concerning the Manner of Building the Temple: Building must be done in purity so that Yahweh can honor His servants in the future (2:10–23).

A. Message Three: The people's efforts at building have been unacceptable because of uncleanness (2:10–19).

By questioning the priests, Haggai establishes that an unclean thing can defile a clean thing (2:11–13). The application is that since the people were defiled in their persons, their work on the temple was causing its defilement (1:14). That is why they had experienced insufficient materials for its construction as well as destructive conditions (2:15–19). If they cleanse themselves then Yahweh will bless them with everything needed to accomplish the work (2:19).

B. Message Four: Yahweh's servant shall be honored as one having authority to rule (2:20–23).

The final message is to Zerubbabel alone (2:20–21). Once more the distant future is envisioned, when heaven and earth will be shaken and the Gentile nations destroyed (2:22). This will be the time of Messiah’s advent and many feel that He is directly referred to by the title “Zerubbabel My Servant” (2:23). At a minimum Haggai’s promise to the governor envisions restoration of the Davidic dynasty.¹ Though ultimately fulfilled in Messiah, the present reference to Zerubbabel confirmed the fact that faithful service to the temple would result in divine approval and appropriate honor.

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¹ Chisholm develops the imagery in this way: “Haggai also envisioned a future restoration of the Davidic dynasty By calling Zerubbabel His “servant” and “chosen” one God gave him the same status David had enjoyed The comparison to a ‘signet ring’ indicates a position of authority and reverses the judgment pronounced on Zerubbabel’s grandfather Jehoiachin 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.” (Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “A Theology of the Minor Prophets,” *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, Roy B. Zuck, ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 422.