

THE DAYS OF HAGGAI

Haggai is the first of the post-exilic prophets. His name means “my feast” which likely means that he was born on or near a prominent Jewish festival. He is mentioned twice in the book of Ezra (5:1; 6:14). He is a contemporary of Zechariah, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Ezekiel. Haggai’s ministry focused on the remnant return of Jews of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin from their Babylonian captivity for the purpose of resettling their homeland of Judea. His prophecy specifically concerns their efforts to rebuild the temple of God.

Date

Unlike the previous prophets, Haggai, throughout the book, precisely dates his prophecy to the day, month, and year—based upon the Babylonian calendar. The first date he mentions is the first day of the sixth month of the second year of the Persian king Darius who reigned in 522-486 B.C. (Translated to our calendar this would have made it August 29, 520.) Haggai continues to date then the different events referenced in his book. This attention to chronology (also present in Zechariah’s and Ezekiel’s prophecy) is reflective of the culture in which they lived. The Babylonians were renowned for their precise documentation of events and achievements to the month and day (as evidenced in the famous “Babylonian Chronicles”). Since there were no longer Jewish kings, Haggai (as well as his contemporaries) date their books based on the Persian kings. This also indicates how so much had changed for the Jewish community and how they recognized that they were a part of an international community and therefore, that their fortunes were inextricably linked to powers greater than themselves.

Historical Context

Haggai lived in quite different times than the previous prophets. Much had changed since Babylon had overrun Judah and emerged as the world power. Actually in less than four decades after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 the balance of world power began to shift, ultimately leading to the rise of the Persian Empire. After a series of various political alliances and military engagements, it was the final defeat of Belshazzar (as foretold by God in the form of writing on the wall, which caused Belshazzar to be so afraid that his knees knocked together- Daniel 5:1-31) by Persian king Cyrus in 539 that sealed Babylon’s doom and finalized Persia’s dominance.

King Cyrus is a major historical figure and the central person in allowing the Jews to return to their homeland. According to a remarkably specific prophecy by Isaiah (44:24-45:7) God raised up Cyrus to become king for the express purpose of setting the Jews free from their captivity and allowing them to return to Judea. This truth is reiterated both in Ezra 1:1-4 and in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23.

So it was in 538 that Cyrus issued his decree that the Jews and all other captive peoples could return to their respective homelands. This was all a part of the organization of his empire, which he successfully accomplished—which also brought stability to these regions during Cyrus’s lifetime.

The Jewish remnant return was at first led by “Sheshbazzar” (Ezra 1:5-11: 5:14) who was recognized as a “governor” in the Persian system. He was most likely the same as Shenezzar who was a son of Jehoiachin, the last surviving king of Judah (1 Chronicles 3:18), which would have preserved the royal lineage. Sheshbazzar apparently served only for a brief period and was followed by Zerubbabel (Ezra 3:2, 8; Haggai 1:1). From the biblical accounts, Zerubbabel appears to be the nephew of Sheshbazzar and a grandson to Jehoiachin (1 Chronicles 3:19; Ezra 3:2,8; Nehemiah 12:1; Haggia 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 23; Matthew 1:12). This genealogy gives evidence that Zerubbabel was a legitimate royal heir and therefore would be recognized by the Jewish community as such in his role of governor. In was in his role of governor that he and the priest, Joshua, began the efforts to reestablish worship in Jerusalem (Ezra 3:1-7) and lay the foundations for the new temple (Ezra 3:8-10). Then world events changed around them again.

After the death of King Cyrus, his son, Cambyses ascended to the Persian throne. His reign was marked by mismanagement, which left the empire in shambles (caused by a rebellion in Babylon, which was mainly due to his extended absence as he led the Persian military victory over Egypt). This led to a period after Cambyses death of political unrest and chaos within the Persian Empire that was quieted only by the ascension of Darius as King in 522.

It was during the chaotic reign of Cambyses and the uncertain times afterward that contributed to the challenges the Jews faced from their surrounding enemies as they attempted to rebuild the temple. All of this ended when Darius became king. He put down the various rebellions across his kingdom and instituted policies which brought peace throughout his empire (except in Egypt). Darius also reinforced the Jewish right (against claims made by their enemies) to be in Jerusalem working to rebuild their city and their temple (Ezra 5:6-17).

This then, is the setting both for Haggai and Zechariah. Living during eventful world events but also during more peaceful times brought on by the reforms (and enforcement thereof) of Darius, they set out to rebuild the temple. They did so with a restoration community that was small and likely demoralized. Ezra numbers this community at 42,260 with 7337 slaves and 200 singers (Ezra 2:64-65). It all sounds exciting, but in reality, Judea, at this point in history was not more than a little, backwater Persian province, which was highly unstable—at the mercy of the competing world powers.

The Book

The purpose of Haggai’s prophetic work is urging this small remnant community to complete the rebuilding of the temple. He was single-minded in this specific objective. And he had to be, since the community itself lacked urgency over accomplishing this goal and were, instead, more concerned about rebuilding their homes and structures. Even with all they had been through, Haggai sees his countrymen return home and promptly put their own personal concerns above God’s. Throughout the book he emphasizes God’s continuing love for his people as a love associated with his will that they rebuild his temple, thus demonstrating their faithfulness. He ties their poverty to their failure of completing the temple work and connects their future promises to its completion. The book itself consists of four oracles (1:1-15; 2:1-9; 2:10-19; 2:20-23). These oracles seem to coincide with a

Jewish feast (or holiday)—giving Haggai the best opportunity to speak to the entire congregation of Jews.

To reassure his people for their task, Haggai shares a different vision of world events. His favorite name for God is “Yahweh of Hosts” (used 14 times). Yahweh has his own armies and he commands the cosmic armies that rule the earth as the messengers of Yahweh. The Persian king may think he reigns over the earth, but the Haggai knows it is actually Yahweh who does.

A Call to Build (1:1-11)

Haggai’s first oracle corresponds with the monthly New Moon festival—which was a holy day in Israel’s calendar (Numbers 28:11-15). With each new moon Israel was to provide a burnt offering to God as well as a sin offering along with a grain and drink offering. It was an assembly day in Israel

Not only did this provide Haggai with the largest possible audience, it also vividly illustrated the plight of the Jewish remnant- a day of sacrifices, but no temple in which to offer them. Haggai addresses this while also speaking to Judah’s two covenantal representatives- Zerubbabel, the governor and Joshua, the priest. While they (and others) are living in paneled houses, God has no dwelling among them. So Haggai urges them to “give considerable thought to your ways.”

As long as the temple lays in ruin, so does the land. The two are connected (no dew present, which created a draught). This is not a tenable situation. “These people” (noticed God does not call them “my people” here- voicing his displeasure over them) need to heed the call to build!

“I am with you!” (1:12-15)

Next Haggai records the congregation’s response to his call. They hear, heed and obey. Led by Zerubbabel and Joshua they embrace the call to build. God assures them, therefore, that he is with them. His divine presence will strengthen and empower them for the task. The rebuilding of the temple was not an ego stroke for God. Rather he delights in the communion, fellowship, and presence of his people- in the temple; now in the church.

Be strong (2:1-9)

Haggai’s second oracle comes on the seventh day of the Feast of Tabernacles (October 17. 520). The seventh month of the Jewish calendar is a particularly busy time—including both the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles. The temple—had it been rebuilt—would have been the center of the activities on these holidays. But it was not rebuilt and Haggai’s timing is no accident. Even though (according to Ezra 3:1-6) they had already begun to celebrate these holy days on the newly rebuilt alter—there was work to do.

So Haggai encourages them to do it, first by challenging them to be strong and fearless because God was with them; and secondly, to be assured that God will shake the nations to glorify his house (2:6-

9). He tells them to be strong three times. The regional opposition and internal disappointment (over the inferior building materials—compared to Solomon’s temple) that they faced was nothing in light of God’s power and assurances. God is going to “move heaven and earth” to provide the splendor and the materials, which will even surpass the glory of the old temple. This was a test of faith. Would this small and impoverished congregation believe? World powers continued to shift around them, but God was more powerful than them all. Haggai used this kind of language and image to encourage his people to continue the task.

Give Careful Thought (2:10-19)

Once again Haggai dates his third oracle precisely (December 20, 520). It is delivered not just on a New Moon festival but exactly three months after construction on the temple began. That day—three months earlier- when foundation stones were laid was a significant turning point for the remnant (see Ezra 3:10-13 and Zechariah 4:6-10). It was a day when their lament turned into celebration. His message becomes future oriented (“I will bless you” 2:19). He also encourages them to give careful consideration to what this all represents.

Without the temple, they were deprived- of land, of divine presence, and of a future. With a temple Judah is blessed and hope-filled. Laying the foundation changes everything. So Haggai urges them to consider this carefully. He uses the fall harvest to illustrate the need for the fruit of repentance among the people. Before they were defiled, now through God’s presence they can become holy. This oracle is an exhortation. He uses the moment to call for repentance and discipline, and hope.

God is at work (2:20-23)

Haggai concludes his prophesy by reminding Judah- specifically Zerubbabel that God is at work among the nations. God confirms the royal standing of Zerubbabel (authenticating him to his people) and promises to shake up the nations by creating an atmosphere, in which they will battle each other, undermining their military might. God will overthrow them all and then on “that day” the Davidic line (of which lineage was Zerubbabel) would sit on the throne of God and reign. Haggai therefore ends with the promise of a coming Messiah (see Jeremiah 22:24-30 for commentary on the signet ring and its meaning). Zerubbabel receives the promise but even more he symbolizes the reign of the coming Christ- who continues to reign in God’s kingdom.

Haggai and the remnant were participants in “that day” as they worked to rebuild the temple of God in their day.

Contemporary Haggai

The message of God at work among the nations, which is prominent in all the prophets, is evident in Haggai. Their need to put kingdom matters above their own continues to speak to us. God’s delight in the assembly certainly should lead us to think carefully about our own assemblies. Finally, we should realize that we also remain a part of “that day” when Jesus returns again as we face the challenges of our daily calendars.