

HAGGAI – Background

Some dates are disputed so use the dates as a general timeline for the historical background of Haggai.

Date	Event	Ruler
612 BC	Destruction of Nineveh.	
586 BC	Deportation to Babylon. Destruction of temple.	Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon (605-562)
539 BC October 12/13	Fall of Babylon.	Cyrus II King of Persia (559-531)
538 BC 1st year of Cyrus	Decree of Cyrus: (Ezra 1:3) "Whoever is among you of all His people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel-He is the God who is in Jerusalem".	
537 BC	First exiles return to Judah under leadership of Sheshbazzar. Ezra 1:11	
537 BC 1st Year of Return 7th Month	Sons of Israel were in the towns and they gathered as one man to Jerusalem. Altar of the God of Israel was built. Foundation of the temple was not laid. Money was given to masons and carpenters and food, drink, and oil to Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon. Ezra 3:1-7	
536 BC 2nd Year of Return 2nd Month	A beginning was made. Levites, 20 years and up, were appointed to oversee the work of the house of the Lord. The foundation of the temple was laid. Ezra 3:8-13	
	The people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build. Counselors were hired to frustrate their purpose. Ezra 4:1-5	Cambyses II (530-522)
	Work on the house of God stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius. Ezra 4:24	Darius I (522-486)
520 BC	Prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo. Zerubbabel and Jeshua began to rebuild the house of God and the prophets of God were with them, helping them. The work on the temple had bogged down and stopped for about 16 years. Ezra 5:1-2	

Date	Event	Ruler
2nd Year of Darius 6th Month 1st Day	First prophecy of Haggai – GET MOVING!	Darius I (522-486)
2nd Year of Darius 6th Month 24th Day	The people came and worked on the house of the Lord.	
2nd Year of Darius 7th Month 21st Day	Haggai spoke words of encouragement.	
2nd Year of Darius 9th Month 24th Day	Last recorded messages of Haggai – rebuke and reassurance.	
	Letter sent to Darius to stop construction of the temple, but the plot backfired and Darius made a strong decree to aid the finish of the temple's construction. Ezra 5:3-6:14.	
516 BC 6th Year of Darius Month of Adar 3rd Day	Temple is completed about 22 years after decree of Cyrus and 1st exiles return to Judah. Dedication service is conducted with many sacrifices offered. Returned exiles celebrated the dedication with joy. Ezra 6:14-18	
	Letter written to Artaxerxes to stop rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Ezra 4:6-23	Artaxerxes I (465-424)
458/457 BC	Return of exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem with Ezra. Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel. Ezra 7:1-10	
	Many spiritual reforms are made by Ezra. Marriages to foreign wives dealt with. Ezra 9:1-10:44	
444 BC	Nehemiah is cup-bearer for Artaxerxes. He is catalyst for the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Book of Nehemiah	

Haggai 1:1-6 – Is it Time Yet?

God, by the mouth of Jeremiah the prophet, told the people of Judah that they would be exiled to Babylon and that Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed. Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC. In time, Babylon was also judged and overthrown by the Medes and Persians as God predicted by the prophet Jeremiah. In about 538 BC, Cyrus the Great decreed that the Jewish exiles should return to Judah and Jerusalem and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel. Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest led a group of about 50,000 people back to Judah. Within two years of returning to Judah, they had rebuilt the altar in Jerusalem and had laid the foundation for the temple. Opposition arose and they stopped rebuilding the temple. For about 16 years, no work was done on the temple. God was not pleased with this building delay. God chose Haggai to deliver his message which was “build my house!”

Read Haggai 1:1-6.

Who was Darius the king? Who was Haggai? Who was Zerubbabel? Who was Joshua? (1:1)

The sixth month of the Jewish calendar covered late August and early September. This was the beginning of the harvest season. How do you think the people would react to a message of “stop what you are doing”? (1:1)

What were the people saying about rebuilding God’s house? What excuses do you think the people gave for not rebuilding the temple? What was a key part of Cyrus’ decree? What did the temple symbolize? After the exodus, why did God want the people of Israel to build the tabernacle? See Exodus 25:8. (1:2)

If today was not the right time to rebuild the temple, when was the right time to rebuild the temple? How do you think the people would have answered this question?

Who had primary responsibility for rebuilding the temple?

How did God communicate his message to the people of Judah? Notice that God chose a prophet to deliver his message as opposed to choosing the governor or the high priest. What was the role of the prophet? (1:3)

What question did God have for the people of Judah? Where did the people get the wood to panel their houses? See Ezra 3:1-7 for a possible answer. (1:4)

What principle did the people of Judah violate by working on their own houses before working on God's house? How did Jesus state this principle? See Matthew 6:33.

God wanted the people of Judah to restart the work of rebuilding the temple. In verse 5, what did God tell them to do?

What were the consequences for the people of Judah when they put their own interests before the work of God? (1:6)

What are the economic implications? Many assume that through hard work and sound economic principles, the economy will thrive. Is this always the case? Based on 1:6, what can cause the economy to be depressed? On the other hand, does obedience and strong faith in God guarantee a good economy?

Does this mean that we should ignore our own households and give all our money and time to the church? What is the balance? What does God expect of us?

Food for Thought

- Did the people of Judah learn their lesson from the exile?
- What is the symbolism of having an altar without a temple?
- How do we neglect the building of God's church?
- Be on the lookout for "Lord" in small caps (LORD) or "God" in small caps (GOD). For reasons we don't need to get into, this is the convention of many Bibles to refer to the covenant name of God, Yahweh (or Jehovah). This is the unique name that God used to reveal himself in Exodus 6.
- Some translations have "temple" instead of "house". The word used for God's house and the people's houses is the same word. The difference in translation depends on who lives in the house.

Haggai 1:7-15 – Build My House!

The remnant of the people who had returned to Judah had lost focus on why they had returned to Judah. Cyrus' decree to return to Judah and Jerusalem focused on rebuilding the temple. The people started rebuilding the temple but when opposition arose, they left the temple in ruins and turned their attention to their own houses. What a horrible message was sent by the temple lying in ruins for 15 years while all the surrounding houses had already been rebuilt. The message was that the people didn't want God living among them. In Exodus 25:8 God said "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst." Were they afraid to have God dwelling among them? The exiles had lived the wrath of God against Judah's disobedience. The people hadn't said they wouldn't rebuild the temple but that it wasn't yet time to rebuild the temple. Their timetable did not align with God's timetable. God said in no uncertain terms, "The time is now!" No more procrastinating!

Read Haggai 1:7-11.

Verse 7 is a repeat of verse 5 so it must be important. What should the people consider? This is the first command in a series of four commands (1:7)

What are the three commands in verse 8? Did God specify the hills / mountain where they should get the wood? Where did they get the wood for Solomon's temple? See 1 Kings 5:6, 10; 2 Chronicles 2:16 (1:8)

Ezra 3:1-7 talks about provisions made to acquire cedar trees from Lebanon for rebuilding the temple. What happened to that cedar wood? Would local trees be as good as cedar trees from Lebanon?

What two reasons did God give the people to rebuild the temple? (1:8)

In verse 6, God told the people what the consequences were for not rebuilding? What consequence did God recount in verse 9? God reiterated the reason why the people were disappointed in the fruit of their toils. Why did God frustrate the efforts of the people?

What other consequences were there for the people's self-centered vs God-centered behavior? (1:10-11)

Read Haggai 1:12-15.

When God called the people to action, how did they respond? Who was involved in the response? What does it mean that they feared the LORD? (1:12)

After God's call to repentance and action, what promise did God give to the people? Was God's promise dependent on the people's response? (1:13)

In verse 14, the people came and began work on the temple. What happened before they came and worked on the temple?

When did the people begin work on the temple? How long had it been since the first message of Haggai? (1:15)

What else would have been happening during this time of year? It is helpful to look at a Jewish calendar. This time of year corresponds to our mid-September. Was this a good time to start building the temple? When do people normally start a building project?

It would be easy to be jealous of Haggai. When Haggai spoke, people listened. They listened because they believed that he was speaking the words of God. Jeremiah spoke God's word for decades and the people didn't listen to him. They preferred to listen to the many false prophets who were speaking a message of peace and prosperity. How would the world rate the success of Haggai and Jeremiah? How did God rate their success?

A number of churches and Christian organizations get caught up in the numbers game. They judge their success by the size of their buildings or the number of their programs or the number of their members or by "how many souls they have won". Is this God's measure of success? Why or why not?

Haggai 2:1-9 – Encouragement to Keep Working!

The people listened to God and began rebuilding the temple on the 24th day of the sixth month in 520 B. C. The people had started the rebuilding project once before. The big question now was whether or not they would keep working and complete the rebuilding without any further delays. Zerubbabel and Joshua were the two leaders who led the first rebuilding effort but had let the project fail. What would be different this time? God stirred up their spirits to begin the work and God encouraged them to continue the work. God promised them that their work would be very significant. We like to know that our labors are not in vain.

Read Haggai 2:1-5.

The twenty first day of the seventh month was the seventh day of the Feast of Booths / Tabernacles. This feast was one of the three feasts in which all male adults were required to go up to Jerusalem. The date was October 17, 520 B. C. This was the time of year when Solomon's Temple had been dedicated about 440 years earlier. The rebuilding of the temple had been going on for almost a month. What was the significance of the Feast of Booths / Tabernacles? (2:1)

God spoke to Zerubbabel, Joshua and the remnant through Haggai. God asked three questions? What were the questions? Why did God ask these questions? What happened when the foundation was laid during the first rebuilding attempt? See Ezra 3:10-13. Who was most likely to think that the rebuilding effort was "nothing"? (2:2-3)

What three commands did God give to the people in verses 4 and 5?

In verses 4 and 5, what reasons did God give the people to continue rebuilding the temple?

What covenant (or promise) did God make with the people of Israel after they came out of Egypt? (2:5)

After the people of Israel came out of Egypt, what sign did the people have that God was in their midst? See Exodus 13:21 and Exodus 25:8.

Read Haggai 2:6-9.

What will God shake? When will the shaking occur? What is the result of the shaking? What is this shaking referring to? (2:6-7)

You may be familiar with Handel's Messiah and the song, "Thus saith the Lord" which is based on Haggai 2:6-7 and Malachi 3:1. The song uses a translation which says "the desire of all nations shall come". The ESV and other versions have "the treasures of all nations shall come in." What is the difference in meaning? Which translation do you think is more accurate? How did the author of Hebrews understand this passage? See Hebrews 12:18-29. (2:7)

When the tabernacle was completed what filled the tabernacle? See Exodus 40:34-35. What happened when Solomon's temple was dedicated and the priests placed the ark of the covenant in the holy place? See 1 Kings 8:10-11. In Haggai 2:7, God said that he would fill this second temple with glory. Did a cloud of glory descend on the second temple? How did God fill the second temple with his glory? See John 1:14.

Was the second temple adorned with as much silver and gold as Solomon's temple? Why did God remind the people that the silver and gold is his? (2:8)

How was the later glory of the temple greater than the former glory? (2:9)

How did God give peace "in this place"? Was God referring to peace from wars or was he referring to another peace? (2:9)

What can make us weary in well doing? Is it good to compare current works to God's various works in the past? When can looking at the past inspire and instruct us? When can looking at the past discourage us? How do we keep from being discouraged while building God's kingdom on earth?

Haggai 2:10-23 – I Will Bless You!

The last recorded words of Haggai were on the 24th day of the ninth month of 520 B. C. It had been three months since the temple rebuilding effort had restarted. One month earlier, God raised up the prophet Zechariah to also encourage the temple rebuilding effort. The 24th day of the ninth month corresponds to our month of December. God spoke through Haggai one last time to exhort the people, to encourage the people and to give the people hope.

Read Haggai 2:10-19.

God told Haggai to ask the priests two questions and to have them answer according to the law. Haggai asked the priests if holy meat carried in a garment touches other food, does that food become holy. How did the priests answer? Did they answer correctly? Haggai then asked them if someone touched a dead body and became unclean and then that person touched food, did the food become unclean. How did the priests answer? Did they answer correctly? (2:10-13)

What are the principles found in verses 12 and 13? How did these principles apply to the people of Haggai's time? What were the people offering that was unclean? Why was their offering unclean? (2:14)

Within verses 15-18, God told the people three times to "consider". In verse 15 God asked them to consider how they fared while the temple laid in ruins. How did the people fare? Why did God make their life difficult? Hint: look at the end of verse 17. (2:15-17)

God told the people that this particular day would be a turning point for their welfare. What kind of yield did the people get from their agricultural efforts before that day? What did God promise them from that day on? (2:18-19)

If we are having financial problems, should we assume that God is punishing us for some sin? Can you think of examples in the Bible where people had financial problems that were not caused by disobedience?

I don't know what the people were thinking. Did they think that because they had returned to the promise land that God would now bless them no matter what? Did they think that they could put their interests before God's interests and still have God bless them? They were still under the Law of Moses. Obedience was rewarded. Disobedience was punished.

Read Haggai 2:20-23.

Haggai's last message was to Zerubbabel. Why is Zerubbabel an important person? See Matthew 1:12-13 and Luke 3:27.

In verse 21, what was God about to shake? What other passage in Haggai is similar to this passage?

In verse 22, what was God about to do? Who is being talked about? When will it happen?

In what way had God chosen Zerubbabel? What did God say he would do with Zerubbabel? Is this a Messianic prophecy? (2:23)

Consider the two leaders of the people who first returned to the Promised Land. Zerubbabel was the political leader. Zerubbabel was descended from King David and Jesus Christ was descended from Zerubbabel. Jesus is the one who sits on the throne of David. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom. The other leader was Joshua the high priest. "Joshua" (or Jeshua/Yeshua) is the Hebrew name that we know in the New Testament as "Jesus". So, the political leader is in the lineage of Jesus and the high priest is named "Jesus". Call me crazy, but that seems prophetic. Jesus said that the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms wrote of him (Luke 24:44). Jesus, the King of Kings and our Great High Priest, will lead us into the heavenly promised land.

What did you learn or relearn from the book of Haggai? How is the book of Haggai an encouragement to you? How is the book of Haggai a warning to us?

At the end of the book of Haggai, the temple rebuilding project was still in the initial phase. How did it turn out? To find out we must turn to Ezra 6:14-15. The temple was completed on the 3rd day of the 12th month in the 6th year of the reign of King Darius. That means that the people finished the temple in just under 4 and a half years. It was completed in time for them to celebrate the Passover a few weeks later.