

# PHASED

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WHAT'S YOUR NEW NORMAL?



AN INTRODUCTION  
TO THE BOOK  
OF HAGGAI



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PHASED: An Introduction to the Book of Haggai

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# PURPOSE

The main purpose of Haggai's message was to get the post-exiled Israel to rebuild the Temple. But while this is the primary purpose, there are other secondary purposes as well. First, Haggai's message was a call to spiritual renewal. The Jews had been in exile for about 70 years, and there was not much appeal to returning back to their homeland. Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians a generation before, therefore the city and the surrounding countryside was a wasteland. This explains why the Jews who did return from exile focused their priorities on building their own homes (1:4). After being in exile for nearly 70 years, the Jewish people had grown comfortable in Babylon. Many did not like the prospect of establishing new roots in a land they did not grow up in. Their first call to order was to settle in and get comfortable. But the return to Jerusalem was supposed to be a response to God's covenant. Haggai's message was a call to renew covenant responsibilities, obligations, privileges and promises.

Second, Haggai's message emphasized the abiding presence of God's Spirit. Israel was a chosen nation, and God had made a covenant only with them. Part of this covenant was that God would dwell with his people in a Temple. Therefore, the Temple symbolized God's presence with his covenant people, and its rebuilding was a fulfillment of God's promise to return to Zion after the exile (see Ezekiel 37:27-28)

Third, Haggai's message promised material and spiritual blessings. But these blessings were not for the sake of Israel. Yes, Israel would benefit from these blessings, but they were not solely for Israel. These blessings were designed to restore Israel and to bring glory to God's Temple (2:7-9, 19), as well as to overthrow the nations (2:20-22). This theme ties into the eschatological aspect of Haggai's message which will be explored below. For now, what is important to note is that these blessings were conditioned on obedience (1:10-11). Israel had prioritized comfort over covenant, and Haggai's message reminded them that God had called them to obedience.<sup>1</sup>

# HISTORICAL CONTEXT

## AUTHOR

Haggai prophesied during the reign of King Darius of Persia. He was God's messenger to Zerubbabel, the Person appointed governor, and the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem. Being such a strong advocate for the rebuilding of the Temple, it is likely that Haggai was closely aligned with the tenants of the Israelite faith. It is also possible he may have had a priestly role among the Jews because of his prophecies concerning ritual purity in chapter 2.<sup>2</sup>

## DATE

The very first verse in book of Haggai reveals that Haggai prophesied "in the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month." This would have been approximately 520 BC. Haggai's prophecies span a period of about three to four months, with dates appearing throughout the book in association with his five distinct messages.

## HISTORY

After the Israelites had left Egypt for the Promised Land, God commanded Moses to build the tabernacle, or tent of meeting, a place where God would meet with the high priests and dwell with his people as they journeyed in the wilderness.

After arriving in and conquering the land of Canaan, Israel appointed its first monarch, King Saul, around 1051 BC, and he was succeeded by King David around 1011. After David came his son, King Solomon, around 962 BC. It had been many years since their people had wandered in the wilderness. Because of this the Israelites built the Temple as a more permanent place for God's presence to dwell and for the people to worship him in the 4th year of Solomon's reign (approximately 966 BC).<sup>3</sup>

In 586 BC, Jerusalem was under attack by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. The revered Temple of God was destroyed and the city was ransacked. Many of God's people were taken into captivity in Babylon, where they would remain for decades.

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When King Darius took power in 522 BC, he appointed Zerubbabel as Judea's governor, and Zerubbabel led some of the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild God's Temple after 70 years of captivity in Babylon. For two years they worked to rebuild the Temple, only to stop for fifteen years. Opposition as well as selfishness led them to rebuild their own homes instead of God's Temple. This is when Haggai begins to prophesy in order to rebuke God's people and refocus them on the house of God and on true worship.<sup>4</sup>

## LITERARY CONTEXT

### GENRE

As a rule, the books of the Old Testament prophets primarily communicate through the literary genre of poetry. While not the only example, the book of the Haggai presents itself as an exception to this general rule. Some passages within Haggai are structured and read like the customary poetry of the prophets (e.g., Haggai 1:5-10), but these passages are sparse.<sup>5</sup>

Biblical scholars have often noted the difficulty with categorizing the genre of Haggai. For example, the book's structure unites together four separate—yet chronologically arranged—oracles given by the prophet. When considered as a unified literary unit, these oracles seem to offer a cohesive narrative about the rebuilding of the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile.<sup>6</sup> However, when individually considered, none of the oracles themselves are written in traditional biblical narrative style.

All in all, the prophet Haggai seems to "employ a rhythmic prose style rather than the common poetic form often characteristic of the prophets."<sup>7</sup> Prose is simply language that is not metered like poetry. Each individual oracle of Haggai is written in the prose genre with this pattern being repeated four times. Hence, the "rhythmic prose" style.

### RELATIONSHIP TO THE REST OF THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE

In the Gospel accounts, when Jesus would reference the Old Testament as a whole (e.g., Luke 24:44), he would do so by alluding to its three-part

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composition: The Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. This three-part structure represents the traditional Jewish ordering and compilation of the Old Testament canon. Interestingly, this ordering differs a bit from the later-developed Christian arrangement of the Old Testament books that we see in our own Bibles today.

In keeping with the traditional Jewish ordering, the Prophets section (aka, the *Nevi'im*, which is the Jewish word for 'prophet') can be divided into the Former and Latter prophets. The Former prophets consist of the books of Joshua, Judges, and Samuel-Kings and are what Christians typically categorize as the 'historical books'. The Latter prophets can be further subdivided into what Christians commonly refer to as the Major and Minor prophets. The books of the Major prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel while the books of Minor prophets consist of Hosea, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Joel, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

If you were keeping count, the Minor prophets consist of twelve prophetic writings. Ancient Jewish scribes made a practice of preserving the works of the Minor prophets together by copying them onto a single scroll. Thus, the Book of the Twelve became a common designation in Jewish antiquity for referring to this collection.<sup>9</sup> While we can understand the practicality of preserving these twelve individual works on a single scroll, ancient Jewish scribes saw more going on! Despite their individual diversity in regard to style and themes, these twelve prophetic works collectively speak a unified message.

What is the unified message of the Book of the Twelve? It is one of judgment followed by confident hope.<sup>9</sup> The prophets spoke a message of judgment against Israel because they had miserably failed in their role to be a 'kingdom of priests' to the nations. As a result, their nation would be taken from them, their Temple would be destroyed, and they would be exiled to a foreign land. Unfortunately, all of these became a reality! However, the prophets also spoke about how the Lord would one day bring about the restoration of his covenant people on the other side of exile. This restoration would involve a righteous remnant living as God's new covenant people, in a rebuilt Jerusalem with a new Temple, under the universal rule of Israel's future messianic king!

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As the message of the Book of the Twelve moves beyond judgment toward the promised hope of restoration, the book of Haggai is ideally positioned to offer its unique contributions to the Book of the Twelve. Haggai is the tenth book of the Book of the Twelve and the first of three post-exilic books (i.e., Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi).<sup>10</sup> That last part is key to understanding Haggai as it relates to the rest of the Book of the Twelve. The prophet Haggai is the first to speak to the Jewish people after their exile in Babylon has ended.

As promised, out of their Babylonian exile, a faithful remnant of God's people had returned to the land (Ezra 1–2). In time, the Lord raised up the prophet Haggai to redirect this remnant's attention to His post-exilic promises. For starters, the people were to finish their work on the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. As the people and their leaders respond to the Lord in fearful obedience, the book of Haggai leaves us with a sense of joyful optimism surrounding Israel's future. Could it be that this generation will be the one to experience the promises of the 'New Jerusalem'? Could Zerubbabel turn out to be the prophesied messianic king? Will this new Temple structure become the place where all nations will one day flock to worship the Lord? The Book of the Twelve would answer these questions by simply telling us to keep reading the story.<sup>11</sup>

## HOW HAGGAI FITS WITH THE NEW TESTAMENT

If we follow the advice of the Book of Twelve to keep reading beyond the book of Haggai, we find that the post-exilic generations of Israelites returning from Babylon replay Israel's long history of rebellion. Thus, many of the hopes and promises of the book of Haggai (and the rest of the prophets) go largely unfulfilled. That is, until we get to the person of Jesus in the New Testament!

### TEMPLE

Central to the words of the prophet Haggai is the Temple of the Lord. In the biblical imagination, the Temple was the meeting place of both heaven and earth. In the Temple, God's presence would dwell and live amongst his people, allowing them access (albeit extremely restricted) to his life-giving presence. For Israel, it was also a visible symbol to the nations regarding the intimacy they shared with their God.



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John's Gospel introduces us to Jesus by saying that he took on humanity and 'tabernacled' (or dwelt) amongst his people (John 1:14). Jesus himself affirmed that he was a 'greater Temple' coming to supersede the old (John 2:19–20). In this way, the Temple of the Lord (both Solomon's and the Second Temple) foreshadow Jesus, who became the true meeting place of heaven and earth where people could freely (and without restrictions) access God's life-giving presence.

This Temple imagery doesn't end with Jesus in the New Testament. It also extends to his followers and his church. Those who trust in Jesus not only have been cleansed from their sins, but they also have been inhabited by God's own life-giving Spirit. In other words, Christians are little 'Temples' that house the Holy Spirit. This explains why the apostles Peter and Paul (1 Peter 2:4–5, 1 Corinthians 3:10–17, 6:12–19) would apply this Temple imagery directly onto the church and its partners.<sup>12</sup>

## ZERUBBABEL

Another clear link between Haggai and the New Testament is Zerubbabel. For starters, the Lord promised that from King David's royal line would one day come the messianic king who would establish God's universal kingdom rule on earth (2 Samuel 7). God renews this promise through Zerubbabel, a direct descendent of King David and the rightful heir to Israel's throne. From the David–Zerubbabel line ultimately comes Jesus, the long-awaited messianic king (Matthew 1:1–17).<sup>13</sup> Zerubbabel is also a Christ-like figure in that he foreshadows Jesus' faithful zeal to build God's house (John 2:17).

## GREAT COMMISSION

Noted parallels can be drawn between the church's call to participate in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16–20) and the commissioning of the faithful remnant of Haggai's day to rebuild God's Temple. Like Haggai's audience, Christians have been commissioned to participate in the building of God's kingdom. Like Haggai's audience, we go forth not in our own authority, but rather under the authority of the king of the land (Ezra 1). And, like the remnant of Haggai's day, we have been promised God's own personal presence to guide us and empower us during the work.

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### HEBREWS 12:26 REFERENCE

This is the only direct quotation of the prophet Haggai in the New Testament. It comes near the end of the book of Hebrews, which was written to strengthen and encourage early Jewish followers of Jesus to not 'slide backwards' into Judaism. In Hebrews 12:18–29, the author of Hebrews is comparing both the old (i.e., the Mosaic) and new covenants. In verse 26, the author of Hebrews quotes Haggai 2:6 showing this specific prophecy of Haggai to be eschatological in nature (i.e., meaning dealing with the end times).<sup>14</sup> When the Lord Jesus returns one day to set the world to rights, he will 'shake' both the heavens and earth. And on that day, after this cosmic 'shaking', only the eternal kingdom of Jesus will remain!

## THEOLOGICAL THEMES

The book of Haggai is a collection of four messages (1:1–11; 2:1–9; 2:10–19; and 2:20–23). While one could glean several theological themes from these messages, three stand out: God, God's presence, and God's purposes.

### GOD

The message of Haggai is characterized by its God-centeredness.<sup>15</sup> In this tiny book of only two chapters, a Hebrew formula expresses that the Lord spoke to Haggai over 29 times (e.g., "The Word of the Lord came," The Lord spoke, etc). This formula indicates that the message did not originate from the mind of Haggai—Haggai's message comes directly from the Lord. According to the apostle Peter "no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). Theologically, what this means for us is that what Scripture says, God says. At the reading or hearing of his Word, we should listen because God is speaking directly to us.

In Haggai's first message, we learn that God controls all things. Because of Israel's negligence in rebuilding the Temple, God was directly responsible for the land's inability to produce, and the sky's inability to rain. As the judge of his people, God had control over the weather and the crops (1:2–11; 2:15–17). This meant that Israel needed to trust the Lord to

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provide for their material needs. Moreover, God is the source of all power. In 2:6–8 we learn that God will ‘shake the nations,’ and in 2:20–23 God says he will overthrow all thrones and their armies. This ties into a theme we will explore shortly, but in short, God’s power should cause us to stand in awe of God and to obey him when he speaks. God’s power also means that we should put our hope in him. In Haggai, we learn that history is going somewhere; history ends with God’s victory and God’s glory, which is why we can have hope for the future.<sup>16</sup>

## GOD'S PRESENCE

The main reason Haggai prophesied was to command the post-exilic Jews to rebuild the Temple. Why was the Temple so significant? As mentioned above, the Temple symbolized the presence of God. The Temple, however, was no mere symbol—his presence was really in the Temple. Therefore the Temple was a sign of God’s self-disclosure to his people, and a sign of his communion with his people.

That God’s real presence was in the Temple didn’t mean God was confined to the Temple. This much is made clear in 1 Kings 8:27—the whole earth itself cannot contain God, and the Jewish people knew that. And yet God dwelt in the Temple in a very real way without being confined to it. Moreover, just because God chose to dwell with his people, the Temple was no guarantee of God’s presence. Right before the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple, the Jews were taking advantage of God’s gracious presence by practicing idolatry, thinking the Temple would protect them from God’s judgment. Despite the warning that God would send Babylon to judge them, the Jews falsely believed that God would not send judgment on his own Temple. The prophet Jeremiah warned them that the Temple was not a magic talisman (Jeremiah 7:4, 26:6).<sup>17</sup>

Which brings us to the point about covenant: the Temple presupposed covenant. A covenant requires two parties to uphold their end of the covenant. Throughout Israel’s history, they broke their end of the deal. But despite their failures, God promised that one day he would change the hearts of the people and restore the covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–34). So while it may seem petty that God was upset with Israel for not rebuilding the Temple, it’s important to understand what the Temple represented. While the Temple was in disrepair, the Israelites were creating luxurious

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homes (1:4). By prioritizing their comfort, they were neglecting the reality that was symbolized by the Temple. Just imagine what your spouse might think if you took off your wedding ring every time you left the home. While the ring is a symbol, it is no mere symbol. By neglecting the Temple, Israel was in danger of spiritualizing their religion and treating the terms of the covenant with contempt.<sup>18</sup>

So what does all this mean for us today? According to Scripture, the terms of God's covenant are fulfilled in Jesus. According to the apostle John, the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). The Greek word for dwelt here is the same word used for the place God dwelt in the Old Testament. In Jesus the fullness of God dwells in a body (Colossians 1:19). And in fulfillment of Old Testament Prophecy, Jesus restores and brings glory to his people (Luke 2:29–32). Jesus is the greater Temple (Matthew 12:6; John 2:21)), and as such is the one who brings all people to himself (compare Haggai 2:7 and John 12:32). In summary, Jesus Christ fulfills the prophecies of Haggai by becoming “God with us.”

## GOD'S PROMISES

The final theme we will explore is God's promises, which are intimately connected to the restored Temple in the book of Haggai. This theme is most pronounced in Haggai 2:20–23 where he speaks of Zerubbabel as a “signet ring.” What does this mean? A signet ring was a symbol of authority and all official documents were authorized by this ring.<sup>19</sup> A document would be sealed with wax and then the signet ring would be stamped into the wax to show that the document has been authorized by the king himself. In Haggai's prophecy, this imagery of a signet ring stands for the renewed election of the Davidic line, represented by Zerubbabel himself. Because Zerubbabel was from the royal lineage of David, Zerubbabel would be the “signet ring”—the sign that God was restoring the fortunes of Israel. The reason why this is important in the context of a rebuilt Temple is that there is a link between the king of Israel and the Temple (see 2 Samuel 7:1–17; Psalms 2, 18, 20, 67–72, 78, 89, 132, as well as 46, 48, and 76). In summary, God's covenant required a king and a Temple.

Yet there appears to be a problem with Haggai's prophecy. It never materialized. Despite his prophecy, David's throne never was reestablished. Historically, the Temple was rebuilt, but there was never

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another king on the throne of David; Zerubbabel fades out of history. But we need to keep this in mind: Haggai's prophecy is inspired by hope for a future king. Obviously, Zerubbabel wasn't it. So who is this king that Haggai prophesied about? According to the New Testament, this king is Jesus (Psalm 2, 110; Matthew 28:18; Philippians 2:9-11; Hebrews 1.) In Haggai 2:6, 21-22, God will shake all the nations, and in Hebrews 12:26-28, the author quotes these verses directly, stating that Christ will receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken. According to Haggai 2:7-9, God says that he will gather the treasure of all nations into the Temple, and in Revelation 21:24, 26, John says that the Glory and honor of the nations will come into Christ's kingdom. Indeed, in Revelation 21:3 the essence of God's covenant promises in Haggai are fulfilled because God dwells with his people.<sup>20</sup>

## OUTLINE

- I. First Message: Haggai's Challenge to Covenant Renewal (Haggai 1:1-15)
  - A. Superscription (1:1)
  - B. The Call to Reconsider Priorities (1:2-6)
  - C. The Call to Rebuild the Temple (1:7-11)
  - D. The Response of the People (1:12-15)
  
- II. Second Message: The Promise of Restoration (Haggai 2:1-9)
  - A. Introduction (2:1-2)
  - B. Present Condition of the Temple (2:3-5)
  - C. Promise of Future glory for the Temple (2:6-9)
  
- III. Third Message: The Call to Holiness (Haggai 2:10-19)
  - A. Introduction (2:10)
  - B. Haggai Requests Torah Instructions from the Priests (2:11-14)
  - C. The Call to Reflect upon Current Conditions (2:15-19)
  
- IV. Fourth Message: Zerubbabal, David Servant and Signet Ring (Haggai 2:20-23)
  - A. Introduction (2:20)
  - B. Warning of Divine Judgment against the Nations (2:21-22)
  - C. God's Appointment of Zerubbabel as Leader (2:23)<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Pamela J. Scalise, "Haggai, Book of," *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Barry (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Carol Myers, "Haggai" *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 539.

<sup>6</sup>D.J. Wiseman, "Haggai," *The Eerdmans Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 782.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Barry A. Jones, "Book of the Twelve," *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 196.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Myers, "Haggai," 539.

<sup>11</sup>Tim Mackie, *Haggai*, Read Scripture: Illustrated Summaries of Biblical Books (Portland, OR: The Bible Project), 76.

<sup>12</sup>Wiseman, "Haggai," 783.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 784.

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<sup>14</sup>A. M. Stibbs, "Hebrews," *The Eerdmans Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 1215.

<sup>15</sup>Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 33.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 33–34.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 34–37.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>21</sup>Taken from Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, 57–58.

