

THE BOOK OF HAGGAI

A. ORIENTING DATA FOR HAGGAI

- Content: four oracles encouraging God's people to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem
- Prophet: Haggai, a postexilic prophet in Jerusalem and contemporary of Zechariah (see Ezra 5:1; 6:14)
- Date of prophetic activity: a four-month period during the second year of the reign of Darius of Persia (520 B.C.)
- Emphases: God's people need to rebuild the temple as the place of God's presence and of their worship; current hardships stem from failure in this matter; a glorious future awaits the people of God and Zerubbabel (thus David's kingly line)

OVERVIEW OF HAGGAI

Haggai, the tenth of the Book of the Twelve, consists of reports of four "words" addressed to Zerubbabel the governor, Joshua the priest, and the people in Jerusalem. His main concern is to encourage the people to get on with rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem.

Haggai's first "word" (1:1–11) announces that recent droughts and poor harvests (part of the curses for covenant disobedience; see Deut 28:20–48) are connected to the returned exiles' failure to build God's house (though they had already built their own houses), to which the people respond favorably (Hag 1:12–15). A month and a half later, the second "word" encourages them to continue the work, promising that the glory of the new temple would surpass that of the first (2:1–9). Priestly rulings on defilement serve as the basis for the third "word" (vv. 10–19), where God promises to bless them "from this day on." The final "word" (vv. 20–23) is addressed to Zerubbabel, assuring him that God will be with him.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING HAGGAI

It will help you in reading Haggai to also read Ezra 1–6, which serves as background for the words of Haggai recorded here. After a large group of exiles returned in 539 B.C. under the edict of Cyrus, they immediately rebuilt the altar and laid the foundations of the temple (Ezra 3). Then the work stopped as the people built their homes and worked their farms. Now, some nineteen years later, the work on the temple has gone no further; meanwhile they have regularly experienced drought and poor harvests. Through Haggai, Yahweh calls attention to the connection between these two realities and encourages them to return to the task of rebuilding the temple.

As you read, watch for several features that distinguish Haggai: (1) His oracles are not given in poetic form, but a kind of rhythmic prose; (2) they are most often carried on by way of questions (cf. Malachi), which lead to God's word to the people (Hag 1:4, 9; 2:3, 12–13, 19); (3) he also makes effective use of repetitions—"Give careful thought" occurs twice in the first and third oracles (1:5, 7; 2:15, 18); "I am with you" occurs in the first and second (1:13; 2:4); that God will "shake the heavens and the earth" occurs in the second and fourth (2:6, 21); and in language echoing Joshua 1:6–7, 9, 18, leaders and people are three times exhorted to "be

strong” (2:4). Note also that while there is obvious progression in the four “words,” there is also a clear correspondence between the first and third (the covenant curse is now to be overturned by covenant blessing) and between the second and fourth (encouraging Zerubbabel as leader).

Since the central issue of Haggai is the rebuilding of the temple, you will do well to recall the significant role the temple played in the life of Israel, which served as both the place of God’s special presence (marking off Israel from all other peoples) and the place of proper worship. See “Specific Advice for Reading Exodus” (pp. 35–37) and the notes on Exod 25–40 (pp. 40–42), and recall that God’s Spirit is the way God is present among them (hence Hag 2:5).

The specific days and dates given for these oracles are worth noting. The first (29 August 520) is given on the first day of the (lunar) month, thus in the setting of a New Moon festival (Num 10:10; 28:11) and at the time of the full maturing of the grain; the second (17 October 520) comes at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles (Israel’s harvest festival); and the third and fourth (18 December 520) during the growing season for spring harvest. All these were periods when people had no excuse that they were too busy to pay attention to the temple.

Here you also feel the frequent tension found in the prophetic tradition between present realities and the glorious future of God. As usual, the one (present hope) is spoken in light of the other (future glory). Note how this occurs regarding both the temple (2:1–5, 6–9) and Zerubbabel (2:20–22, 23), both being marked by God’s eschatological shaking of the heavens and the earth.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 252–254.