

**August 9, 2009**

## **Haggai: Rebuilding for the Future**

**Purpose:** To challenge us to accept God's priorities as we build for the future

Key Bible reference: Haggai 1-2.5

Key Verse: Haggai 2.4

### **Biblical Interpretation**

As Second Isaiah had prophesied, the Exile came to an end. In 539 B.C., Cyrus the Great conquered Babylonia. Soon thereafter, he gave permission for the various exiled peoples who had been victimized by the Babylonians to return to their homelands. Further, he gave instructions that stolen religious objects were to be returned to rebuilt temples.

The exiles from Judah were among those permitted to return home and to rebuild (Ezra 1:2-4 relates Cyrus's command concerning them.). Cyrus directed that the returnees should rebuild their Temple, assisted by contributions from their neighbors. Cyrus further directed that the gold and silver vessels stolen from the Jerusalem Temple were to be handed over to Sheshbazzar [shesh-BAZ-uhr], the prince of Judah and leader of the returnees (Ezra 1:5-11). Sheshbazzar would then return these sacred objects to the rebuilt Temple.

However, the Temple was not rebuilt immediately. Doubtless, there were many reasons for this delay. First, resources were probably scarce. While Cyrus had directed that the Temple be built, he evidently had not provided funding for this construction. Also, laborers were few. Many exiles decided not to return to the land—in fact, only a few were willing to leave Babylonia, the only home they had ever known, for an uncertain life in Judah. Further, the returnees apparently were

unwilling to accept help that the people in the land, who had not been taken off into exile, offered. The returnees regarded these people, who had intermarried with neighboring peoples, as unclean (Ezra 4:3). Finally, and decisively, the returnees did not rebuild the Temple because they lost heart. The return did not seem to them to live up to Second Isaiah's beautiful pictures. Instead of the trees clapping their hands and the mountains breaking into song (Isaiah 55:12-13), the returnees faced a long, difficult journey, with utter disappointment at the end of it.

Jerusalem was an abandoned ruin. Its walls and palaces were in a total state of disrepair. Faced with such desolation, it is no wonder that the returnees gave up on their grandiose optimistic plans for rebuilding the Temple, deciding just to do the best they could for themselves and their own families.

Meanwhile, in the Persian Empire, great changes were afoot. Cyrus the Great died and was followed on the throne by his son Cambyses. Preoccupied with the conquest of Egypt, Cambyses paid little attention to insignificant Jerusalem and its ruined shrine to a God he did not acknowledge. Matters would be different with the next Persian emperor, Darius [Duh-RI-uhs], however, who, as we will see, was quite involved with the rebuilding of the Temple.

With the death of Cambyses in 522 B.C., the succession was thrown into question. Bardiya, the brother of Cambyses, claimed the throne. However, Darius, then a popular general in the field, declared that the real Bardiya was dead and the man who had claimed Persia's throne was an impostor. The Egyptians and the Babylonians took advantage of the confusion and rebelled against the Persian Empire. Two years passed before Darius (later known as Darius the Great) finally managed to subdue all the rebel provinces and to consolidate his own claim to the throne. It is against this backdrop of confusion, conflict, and disillusionment that the prophecy of Haggai must be read.

The prophet Haggai, together with his coworker Zechariah, is also mentioned in Ezra 5:1 and 6:13-15, in connection with the rebuilding of the Temple. The rebuilding of the Temple and the reestablishment of Judah as a nation are the themes of Haggai's prophecy. These themes are expressed in four brief, pointed oracles (Haggai 1:1-11, 1:15b-2:9, 10-19, and 20-23) and a short narrative (1:12-15a). The Book of Haggai is closely connected to the first eight chapters of the Book of Zechariah. Probably, these books were edited together and preserved by the same group.

Haggai's prophecy was directed to the leaders of the community of returnees—the governor Zerubbabel [zuh-RUHB-uh-buhl] and the high priest Joshua (Haggai 1:1). The earliest prophets had spoken to individuals, particularly to kings (as Nathan spoke to David [2 Samuel 11:27b-12:15] and Elijah to Ahab [1 Kings 18:1]). However, from the time of Amos (3) and Hosea (5:1-7), prophets had addressed their oracles to the entire people. Haggai's focus on Zerubbabel and Joshua shows a conservative tendency, in keeping with Haggai's message. Haggai was not

a revolutionary or even a reformer. His message is one of maintenance and support, calling the people back to their ancient traditions. In contrast to prophets such as Jeremiah (11:18-12:6), who called from the fringe of society for radical change, Haggai's voice came from within the establishment and called for preservation and restoration.

Haggai 1:2-9. The problem Haggai faced is expressed clearly and simply: "These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house" (1:2). As is observed above, it is little wonder they had come to this conclusion. With Jerusalem in ruins and resources scarce, we can easily understand how the returnees could have decided to do their best for themselves and their families first and to think about a place to worship God later.

However, Haggai challenged this apparently reasonable course. Take a good look, he said, at the life you have made for yourselves. "Consider how you have fared" (1:5). By any standard, the community was not doing well. No one had enough; no one seemed able to do anything more than just get by. The people were dissatisfied and unfulfilled. How had this come about?

Haggai declared that the problem lay in the misplaced priorities of the community. They had placed themselves first and God last. Yet, this way of living had not brought the satisfaction and fulfillment the people sought. Only by obeying God's command to rebuild the Temple, thereby placing God first, could the community find the joy that had eluded them.

Haggai reminds us of a surprising truth: A life of self-seeking is not in our own best interests. This paradox appears in Jesus' teaching as well. Jesus said, "Those who want to save their life

will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:35). We cannot attain happiness by trying to be happy or self-satisfaction by focusing solely on our own needs. Only by surrendering our lives to God's will and direction can we become the people we were created to be and so find the happiness and fulfillment we so desperately crave.

Verses 10-11. The failure to rebuild the Temple, Haggai declared, meant disaster not only for the human community but also for the land itself. Without the Temple, the land suffered the curse of infertility and drought.

The belief regarding the Temple expressed in Haggai's prophecy is found elsewhere throughout the ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible. The Temple, as the place of God's presence, was believed to be the source of life and fertility in all the land. In his marvelous vision of the glorified Temple, Ezekiel described a river of paradise flowing out of the Temple into all the land, bringing life, healing, and abundance (Ezekiel 47:1-12; compare Psalm 46:4). Haggai described the flip side of this vision. Just as the presence of God, honored and celebrated in the Temple, brings life and blessing, the absence of God's Temple brings death and drought.

A brief narrative section, Haggai 1:12-15a, relates the success of Haggai's initial message. The leadership and the community were mobilized to set about rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple. However, it was not long before discouragement set in again.

Haggai 1:15b-2:5. Reality usually falls short of our dreams. But for the already-disillusioned community of returnees from the Exile, disappointment was a particular problem. They

had heard grand stories of the wonders of Solomon's Temple; and, indeed, in its surviving foundation lines and ruined walls, they could doubtless sense at firsthand some of the departed glory. Now, as their own modest structure began to take shape, the contrast between what was and what had once been became, for some, overwhelming.

Haggai responded to this disillusionment with straightforward honesty. He asked, "Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?" (2:3). Haggai did not deny the glories of the past or the apparent insignificance of the present. However, he also refused to succumb to despair. To the leaders of the community and to the people themselves, Haggai issued a renewed call to "take courage...work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts" (2:4). This promise of divine presence recalls the promise God gave to Moses. When Moses was faced with the seemingly impossible task of delivering the people out of the hand of Pharaoh, God said, "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12). God's promise proved true; the people were delivered and were assured that God would lead them into the land of promise. Now, God assured the returnees that the promise remained sure. God would be with them, and they would become a great people once more.