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Before the rebuilding started

When we come to study Haggai the first problem we face is to find it in our Bibles. It is not one of those books to which we turn regularly, nor is it a large book and therefore easy to find. Apart from Obadiah, it is the smallest book in the Old Testament. It comprises only two chapters, which total a mere thirty-eight verses. While it borrows ideas from Deuteronomy (compare Haggai 1:6 with Deuteronomy 28:38–40 and 2:17 with Deuteronomy 28:22) only one verse (2:6) is quoted in the New Testament (Hebrews 12:26).

Haggai himself is only mentioned in one other biblical book, the book of Ezra. In Ezra 5:1 and 6:14 we read about the work of Haggai in encouraging the Jews to rebuild the temple of the Lord, but these references do not throw any extra light on him and they refer to the same period of time as that covered in his prophecy.

No one ever argues about the date of the book. Each of the four brief prophecies it contains is clearly dated. They took place

during the second year of the reign of King Darius Hystaspes of Babylon, which corresponds to the year 520 BC.

The prophet

No mention is made of Haggai's parents or any of his ancestors. He came on to the scene without any prior announcement, gave his brief messages from God and then, less than four months later, disappeared from off the pages of history as suddenly as he came.

What can we learn about this man? Perhaps he came from a lowly family. This may explain why his father is not mentioned. While Jewish tradition says he was a young priest when he returned from the Babylonian exile, we have nothing in Scripture to substantiate or deny this. He could equally have been a very old man who had seen, with his own eyes, the glories of Solomon's temple before it had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar some sixty-six years earlier. Some scholars believe this to be the case because of his reference in chapter 2:3 to the former glory of the temple. Either way it matters little. God has not told us whether he was young or old, tall or short, fat or thin. If they were important to our understanding of God's Word or stimulating to our spiritual life then God would have made these things crystal clear. Let us always be content with God's Word as it stands and not spend our time in idle speculation like the philosophers of Paul's day on the Areopagus (Acts 17:21).

Although we know nothing about Haggai's family, we can perhaps gain a clue about him from his name. Names were often given to describe the baby, commemorate some event or express a wish for the child's future. Many scholars believe that the name 'Haggai' is derived from *Hag*, which means 'festival' (see Genesis 46:16; Numbers 26:15; 2 Samuel 3:4; 1 Chronicles 6:30 for other names derived from the same root). It seems likely

that he was born on a feast day and therefore named 'my feast'. Joyce Baldwin suggests that 'Haggai' may have been a nickname¹ and Robert Hawker says that the name comes from the Hebrew word, '*chagag*', 'to dance,' meaning a season of joy.²

What we do know is that he was one of a dying breed. There had been many 'spoken' and 'written' prophets in Israel and Judah in the preceding centuries but by the time of Haggai the number of those who held the office of prophet was diminishing.³

Haggai was a contemporary of Zechariah (compare Haggai 1:1 with Zechariah 1:1). They both urged the leaders of the Jews, Zerubbabel and Joshua, as well as the people, to resume the work of rebuilding the temple. Together with Malachi (and possibly Joel) they comprise what are called 'the Post-Exilic Prophets'. Because they were concerned about rebuilding the temple and restoring the worship of God's house, they are often called by a name which is currently in vogue, 'the Restorationists'.

Apart from the central message to awake out of lethargy and build the Lord's house, Zechariah and Haggai are of great value as sources of information regarding a sparsely documented period of history, the years between the return to Palestine and the work of Ezra and Nehemiah.⁴

Haggai's prophetic life may have been brief but it was certainly successful. Together with Zechariah he was one of the few prophets who lived to see the fulfilment of his words. Haggai's message is expressly stated to have greatly helped the work forward (Ezra 5:1).⁵

The prophecy of Haggai is part of God's Word. It has a vital bearing on Christian life today and it repays careful and prayerful study. Do not just dip into it to meditate on a

few favourite verses, but spend a little time examining what God is saying to you and God's people through this small but challenging prophecy.

Some necessary history

T. V. Moore argues that 'Prophecy, in some form, must co-exist with all history, that God's will may be known and performed by man.'⁶ Some of us were taught in Sunday School that 'History is his [God's] story.' When we examine the tone and contents of any Old Testament prophecy we realize that it is impossible to understand its general drift without considering what was happening in the world at that time.

First of all we need to go back in time a little way. In the year 722 BC the ten northern tribes (Israel or Ephraim) had been taken captive by the Assyrians. They were cruelly treated and never returned to their homeland. For the next 136 years the southern kingdom of Judah plodded on through a few good times (under Hezekiah and Josiah) and very many bad ones (under Manasseh, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin).

Then in about the year 586 BC Jerusalem was invaded by Nebuchadnezzar, who took most of its inhabitants away captive to Babylon. Only the poorest people of the land were left behind to work the vineyards and fields (2 Kings 25:11-12). In 2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 52 we read the horrifying details of the destruction of Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar 'set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace and all the buildings of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down ... The Babylonians broke up the bronze pillars, the movable stands and the bronze Sea that were at the temple of the Lord and they carried the bronze to Babylon. They also took away the pots, shovels, wick trimmers, ladles and all the bronze articles used in the temple service' (2 Kings 25:9, 13-14).

For about fifty years the Jews remained in captivity. While some settled down to make a good living in their exile many longed to return to their homeland. Their lament is recorded in Psalm 137:

‘By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept
When we remembered Zion.

There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.

May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth

if I do not remember you,

if I do not consider Jerusalem

my highest joy.’

(Psalm 137:1-6).

Then God miraculously intervened. A Persian invader captured Babylon. Isaiah had foretold that this man, Cyrus, would be raised up. ‘He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; [said the Lord] he will say of Jerusalem, “Let it be rebuilt,” and of the temple, “Let its foundations be laid” (Isaiah 44:28). This foreign ruler was the means by which the Jews returned to their homeland.

It would be most helpful if you would now put down this book, turn to your Bible and read Ezra chapters 1 to 4. You may skip the names in chapter 2, but just notice how many of these people who returned to Judah were connected with the worship of God. There were priests, Levites, gatekeepers of the temple,

singers and temple servants—a total of nearly 5,700 out of 42,360, a proportion of 1 in 7½.⁷

When you reach the end of Ezra 4 in verse 24 you will read, 'Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.' This brings us to 29 August 520 BC.⁸

The temple at Jerusalem

For many years after the children of Israel had settled in the promised land the ark of the covenant rested in a mere tent. King David had long wanted to build a house for God's glory but God did not permit him to do so because he was stained with the blood of his enemies. However, he was allowed to collect materials, gather treasure and buy the site from Araunah (1 Chronicles 22:3–4, 8; 2 Samuel 24:18–25). His son Solomon then spent seven years building this wonderful 'house of God's presence'. 1 Kings 6–7 and 2 Chronicles 3–4 give us details of this temple. It was a glorious building with much lavish golden decoration. In its centre was a perfect cube of twenty cubits. This was the Holy of Holies. It was in this most sacred place that the ark of the covenant stood.

During the exile in Babylon the Jews longed to be able to worship in this temple which was at Jerusalem (the only place where God had given instructions for a temple). How shattered they must have been when they heard that it had been completely destroyed! They must have felt that they were forever cut off from God. But while they were in captivity Ezekiel, speaking the Word of God, declared, 'I will make a covenant of peace with them [i.e. the Jews in captivity]; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them for ever. My dwelling-place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people' (Ezekiel 37:26–27).

The fact that God had made a covenant with them made it imperative for the Jews to rebuild the Jerusalem temple as soon as they returned to their homeland. 'The Lord overruled international events (Zechariah 1:18-21) and stirred up enthusiasm through Haggai and Zechariah. The completion of the temple was to be the proof that Zechariah had been [God's] instrument (Zechariah 4:9) and therefore a sign that the covenant had been renewed.'⁹

Zerubbabel's temple, which is what the prophecy of Haggai is all about, stood for nearly 500 years. It was enlarged by King Herod the Great in an effort to impress the Jews and make his rule more acceptable to them; and then, before it was barely finished, it was utterly destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. Jesus had predicted that this would happen: 'The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another' (Luke 19:42-44).

Since AD 70 the temple site has been bereft of a building dedicated to Jehovah; although many efforts, encouraged by some fundamentalist groups, especially in the U.S.A., have been made to make plans for the rebuilding of the temple prior to the second coming of our Lord.

Why has the temple at Jerusalem never been rebuilt? Firstly, since AD 691 a Muslim mosque, the Dome of the Rock, has stood on the site of the temple. This prominent edifice dominates the skyline of the Israeli capital and is firmly protected as the third most holy spot in Islam. It was said that from this place the prophet Muhammad ascended into heaven. Today no religious Jew will set foot upon this site for fear that he might tread upon the spot where the Holy of Holies once stood.

The second reason why there is no temple now is far more important: today we have no need of an earthly temple building. Do you recall what happened when Jesus died on the cross? The veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple was rent from top to bottom. This showed that God had acted. It was a sign from heaven. The way had been opened for ordinary men and women to come directly to the Lord God Almighty. No longer are God's people dependent upon the high priest entering into the Most Holy Place once a year for their sins. Now a new and living way has been opened up for all of God's blood-bought people through Christ's sacrifice at Calvary (Hebrews 10:19-20). Jesus said, 'I am the way' (John 14:6). Through his death, true Christians can come to God and he can come to them. The once-for-all sacrifice has been made to purchase access to God. Now the Lord dwells with his people. Christ has opened up the way to God.

The temple now

So where is the temple now? The Bible tells us that Jesus is the Temple of God. In John 2:19-21 the Jews were challenging the authority of Jesus, so he answered, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. The Jews had a tabernacle in the wilderness. This was a kind of tent used for religious purposes. John tells us in his Gospel that the Word of God (Jesus) has pitched his tent among us (John 1:14, literal translation). It is when we come to the Lord Jesus Christ in simple faith that we can come to God. How can that be possible? Because he dwells among us by his Spirit.

Then we read that the called-out people of God (the church) are now the temple of God. 'God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be

my people' (2 Corinthians 6:16). It was the death of Christ that resulted in the 'supersession of the temple of Jerusalem, and his resurrection put another in its place'.¹⁰

The new temple is the body of Christ. The Christian community is now the temple of God, with Christ himself as the chosen and precious cornerstone (1 Peter 2:4-6). Each member of the church (i.e. the body of Christ) is, by virtue of being part of Christ's body, a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Therefore all Christian believers have a solemn responsibility to live God-honouring lives because they, like the temple at Jerusalem in the time of Haggai, are the dwelling-place of the Lord Almighty.

There was only one temple, although it was rebuilt several times, and there is only one true church. Jesus Christ is the only foundation upon which the church can be built (see 1 Corinthians 3:9-17). And Jesus Christ is the only head of the church. He is called the chief cornerstone in Ephesians 2:20. It is Christ who holds the whole structure together. The church is not a temple made with hands (Acts 17:24), but it is a spiritual building still under construction. As people are being saved they are being joined to this building and 'In [to] him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord' (Ephesians 2:21). Individual Christians must not live in isolation. They have a responsibility to this spiritual house of the Lord. 'And in him you too are being built together.' Why? 'To become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit' (Ephesians 2:22).

Peter takes the figure of the temple and shows how God's blood-bought people are brought into the house of God in order to be priests performing acts of worship. 'You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a

holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 2:5, 9).

The new Jerusalem

Finally, think about the new Jerusalem. In Revelation 21, the Scriptures state that this will come down out of heaven from God, after the first heaven and earth have passed away (vv. 1–2). But this new Jerusalem will have no temple in it (v. 22). Why will there be no temple in the heavenly Jerusalem? Listen to the loud voice which will cry out from the throne, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God' (v. 3). In verse 22 we also read that there will be no temple 'because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple'. 'In a city modelled on the Holy of Holies there is no need of a temple; all is holy and God is everywhere adored.'¹¹