

HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, MALACHI

St. Matthew Parish Bible Study

Haggai

The prophecies of Haggai began the last period of Old Testament prophecy, i.e., the restoration of Israel following the seventy years of Babylonian exile (today's Iraq). At this time—beginning around 520 B.C.—Haggai's preaching is notably different from the other prophets. Instead of threatening punishment for their idolatry, or offering words of consolation for their having suffered exile, Haggai's preaching is a mixture of rebuke and encouragement, with promises of their eventual restoration.

And the people are encouraged because earlier Cyrus the Great (King of Babylon) permitted them to return home to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. However when the people do return, they are at first more concerned with rebuilding their fine "paneled houses," for which Haggai indeed rebukes them: **"Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin" (1:4)?** Moreover, Haggai tells them they can blame their poor harvests on their neglect of the Temple (1:1-11). So when finally stirred to action by Haggai and their governor, Zerubbabel (a descendant of King David who grew up in Babylon), the people start to rebuild the Temple. Yet as soon as they begin, they have to stop. Why? The answer lies with those who seventy years earlier were left behind.

In fact when the people of the southern kingdom of Judah were exiled, not everyone was taken to Babylon. There was a remnant, the very poor, who stayed. Over time other people from neighboring areas drifted into the region (Jeremiah 39:10); these people were related to the Samaritans, who themselves already occupied the former northern kingdom of Israel after its fall to the Assyrians (733 B.C.). In all, the people who remained behind for more than two generations were a hodgepodge of people who grew up with and intermarried one another. Collectively this people—from the north and south—came to be known as the Samaritans, that is, people who considered themselves Jews, but whom the exiled Jews derisively consider foreigners or worse, "half-breeds" and therefore "enemies."

News travels quickly, and so when the Samaritans heard about the rebuilding of the Temple, they readily offered to help.

"When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here" (Ezra 4:1-2).

At first the offer to help appears innocent enough, but it was likely also political; for cooperation in Temple-rebuilding would bestow legitimacy upon the Samaritans' claim to be just as Jewish as the Jews who had returned. And if by helping to rebuild the Temple the Samaritans were then counted as Jews, they would in fact outnumber the exiled Jews; and this the exiled Jews would never permit. In fact, the exiled Jews numbered only 42,000 of a total population of approximately 600,000.

Therefore the Jews who returned wanted no part of the Samaritans' offer to help. Not only because they dismissed the Samaritans' claim to legitimacy, but also because they knew the Samaritans had a history of worshipping other gods besides Yahweh. On this point the Jews also viewed the Samaritans' offer to help as a grave danger, because they themselves had suffered exile for their own idolatry. Therefore,

“Zerubbabel, Joshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, ‘You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us.’ Then the peoples around them (Samaritans) set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia” (Ezra 4:3).

Thus began a thirty-year period of persistent opposition to the rebuilding from the Samaritans. And as if this were not enough, there were poor harvests to discourage and distract the Jews from their efforts. The net effect was that the initial enthusiasm for rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple that began with their freedom from exile, began to wane before stalling altogether.

Such was the overall condition of Israel's efforts at “restoration” upon her return from Babylonian exile. And even when in March, 515 B.C., the completed Temple was finally dedicated, it is said that old men who remembered the magnificence of the First or Solomon's Temple, wept openly before the decidedly more modest Second Temple.

In the end Haggai's preaching was always *seek first the will of God*. Haggai's criticism was that the people of Judah prioritized their own wealth and comfort over their religious obligation to worship God *in His Temple*, and honor Yahweh accordingly with their sacrifices. When they failed to do this, they lost God's blessing and their hoped-for prosperity. But if they returned to God, they would be assured of God's favor.

Indeed at other times in their history, Israel had made the opposite error: they sought to “guarantee” their material prosperity by paying assiduous attention to ritual worship, even to the neglect of the moral requirements of the law (Isaiah 1:10-20). Thus, on the one hand, prioritizing the worship of God can be a means of returning to God's favor and receiving His blessings; on the other hand, dutiful attention to formal worship does not compensate for a neglect of the moral law.

In all, Haggai's exhortations inspired and encouraged the people to start working again on the Temple. And although when completed the new Temple was not as magnificent as Solomon's, it would, in the end, still surpass it because of its close connection with the Messiah, the descendent of David, who was to come. In fact, St. Paul would later use Haggai's prophecy to show the permanence of the New Covenant that was to replace the Old (Hebrews 12:26 etc.).

Zechariah

Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai, who began ministering among the Jews two months after Haggai began preaching. In the first part of his book, Zechariah describes God's plan for the restoration of the Temple and of Jerusalem, and God's promises to Israel. However the keeping of these promises requires the people to be morally upright, to be charitable, merciful and just—in other words, obedient to God's commandments. However the Jews placed more importance not on the *moral* law but on the observance of the *ritual* law. For example, they were more concerned with how they appeared to others when fasting than about the needs of their neighbors. Zechariah preaches that fasting born only of genuine piety is pleasing to God. Later in the New Testament Jesus repeatedly condemns the Pharisees for the same hypocrisy.

The second part of the Book of Zechariah (9-14) describes the re-establishment of the house of David; the coming of the Messiah; His passion and death, including the prophecy of His being pierced (12:10); His priesthood (13:9) and finally, the calling of the Gentiles (14:16).

Although Zechariah is grouped with the minor prophets, his influence upon the living tradition of the Church is anything but minor. All four Gospels record Jesus fulfilling the prophecy of His triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, when during Holy Week Jesus fulfills God's plan for salvation. Finally, just before He is arrested in Gethsemane, Jesus applies to himself Zechariah's prophecy of the "shepherd" who is "struck" and the sheep who are scattered (Matthew 26:31).

Malachi

Malachi's name in Hebrew means "my messenger." We know very little about Malachi other than he began his prophetic ministry after the Babylonian exile. As with Zechariah and Haggai, it was a time when Israel had grown lax in her morals, including intermarrying with foreigners.

In fact, during Malachi's time the spiritual renewal that eventually began under Haggai and Zechariah had come to a halt. The people neglected their faith. Although the Second Temple was finished, the people's heart was no longer in their worship, even to the point of dishonoring Yahweh by offering lame and sickly animals for sacrifice. The people were going through the motions of ritual sacrifice, but clearly found it boring and wearisome (1:13).

In light of this, Malachi said it would be better to close the doors of the Temple, for Yahweh deserves nothing but the best gifts and the most sincere worship. Malachi shamed the Jews by saying that even the Gentiles offered better worship to Yahweh,

while the Chosen People profaned God's name by inadequate, insincere worship (1:11). And as if this were not bad enough, the people complained that God did not "pay off," that is, they questioned God's justice in the face of the evils they suffered (2:17; 3:14-15). So Malachi exhorts them—particularly the Jewish priests—to practice their religion with purity of heart for the love of God.

Lastly, Malachi foretells the coming of the Messiah—an angel or messenger of the covenant he calls him—who himself will be preceded by another messenger, a precursor (3:1), which is clearly a prophecy about John the Baptist who will announce the messiah, Jesus. In that new era of salvation the moral order and proper worship will be re-established (3:4-5). Above all the Sacrifice of the New Covenant will be the perfect Sacrifice made to God on behalf of all men: **"For from the rising of the sun even to the going down, my name is great among the Gentiles, . . ."** (1:11). This sacrifice will be the perfect Sacrifice of Jesus' Body and Blood on the Cross, now echoed in Eucharistic Prayer II of the Mass: *"You are indeed Holy, O Lord, and all you have created rightly gives you praise, for through your Son our Lord Jesus Christ, by the power and working of the Holy Spirit, you give life to all things and make them holy, and you never cease to gather a people to yourself, so that from the rising of the sun to its setting a pure sacrifice may be offered to your name."*



Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, displays a plan for reconstructing Jerusalem to Cyrus the Great.



Rebuilding Jerusalem after Israel's return from Babylon