Background to the Book of Haggai

Who He Was, When He Spoke, and Why It Matters

Haggai is one of the shortest books in the Bible. It is only two chapters and 38 verses long, and you can read it in about ten minutes. It is also one of the easiest to skip, tucked near the very end of the Old Testament among a group of short books called the Minor Prophets. (“Minor” refers to their length, not their importance.) This guide explains who Haggai was, what was happening when he spoke, and why his short message still speaks so directly today.

Haggai at a Glance

Question	Answer
Who wrote it?	The prophet Haggai. A prophet was someone God sent to deliver His message to His people.
When?	520 BC, the second year of Darius, king of Persia. All four messages came within about four months.
Where?	Jerusalem, in the small Persian province of Judah.
Who was it for?	The Jewish people who had returned from exile in Babylon, and their two leaders, Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest.
What is it about?	God calls His people to stop putting off the rebuilding of His temple, and promises to be with them as they do the work.
Where is it in the Bible?	Near the end of the Old Testament, between Zephaniah and Zechariah.

The Story Behind the Book

To understand Haggai, it helps to know what happened in the seventy years before he spoke.

In 586 BC the armies of Babylon destroyed Jerusalem. They burned the temple that King Solomon had built nearly four hundred years earlier, and they carried many of the people away to Babylon. This is known as the exile. The temple was the center of Israel's worship and the place that represented God's presence among His people, so its loss was devastating.

In 539 BC the Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylon. The next year he issued a decree allowing the Jewish people to go home and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1-4). About fifty thousand people made the journey (Ezra 2:64-65). They rebuilt the altar, and by about 536 BC they had laid the foundation of a new temple (Ezra 3:8-11).

Then the work stopped. Their neighbors opposed it, the people grew discouraged, and the building site sat untouched (Ezra 4:4-5, 24). Months turned into years. The people built their own homes, planted their own fields, and told themselves it was not the right time. About sixteen years passed with nothing but a foundation.

That is the moment God sent Haggai. His message begins by quoting what the people had been saying: the time has not come to build the Lord's house (Haggai 1:2). God's answer is a question. “Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?” (Haggai 1:4).

A Timeline

Date	What happened
586 BC	Babylon destroys Jerusalem and Solomon's temple. The exile begins.
539 BC	Cyrus of Persia conquers Babylon.
538 BC	Cyrus allows the Jewish people to return home and rebuild (Ezra 1).
About 536 BC	The foundation of the new temple is laid (Ezra 3). Soon afterward the work stops.
520 BC	Haggai and Zechariah begin to prophesy. The work starts again (Ezra 5:1-2).
About 515 BC	The temple is finished in the sixth year of Darius (Ezra 6:15).

The People in the Book

Haggai. We know very little about him. His name is related to the Hebrew word for a festival, so he may have been born on a feast day. He is mentioned outside his own book only in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14, where he is credited, along with Zechariah, for getting the temple built. He never draws attention to himself. Again and again in two short chapters he makes clear that the words are the Lord's and not his own.

Zerubbabel. The governor of Judah, appointed under Persian rule. He was a grandson of Jehoiachin, one of the last kings of Judah, which made him a descendant of King David (1 Chronicles 3:17-19). There was no king in Jerusalem anymore, but David's family line was still alive in him.

Joshua the high priest. The spiritual leader of the people, and the son of Jehozadak, who had been carried into exile. In the book of Ezra his name is spelled Jeshua. He is not the same Joshua who led Israel into the promised land many centuries earlier.

Darius. Darius I, king of Persia from 522 to 486 BC. Haggai dates every message by the year of his reign, a quiet reminder that God's people were living under a foreign king.

Zechariah. A second prophet who began preaching in Jerusalem two months after Haggai (Zechariah 1:1). His book comes right after Haggai's in the Bible.

Four Messages in Four Months

Haggai gives the exact day of each message, which is unusual in the Bible. Converted to our calendar, they fall between late August and mid December of 520 BC.

Passage	When	The message
Haggai 1:1-15	Late August	Consider your ways. You have put your own houses ahead of God's house. Go up and build. About three weeks later, the people got to work.
Haggai 2:1-9	Mid October	Be strong and work, for I am with you. This temple looks small now, but its glory will be greater than the first.
Haggai 2:10-19	Mid December	Disobedience had spoiled everything they touched. But from this day forward, God will bless them.
Haggai 2:20-23	The same day	A personal promise to Zerubbabel: God has chosen him and will make him like a signet ring.

Words and Phrases Worth Knowing

“Consider your ways.” The Hebrew says, literally, “set your heart on your ways.” It means to stop and take an honest look at how you are living and where it is leading. Haggai uses the word “consider” five times (1:5, 1:7, 2:15, and twice in 2:18).

“The LORD of hosts.” Haggai's favorite name for God, used fourteen times in 38 verses. “Hosts” means armies. It describes God as the commander of all the powers of heaven. To a small, poor community with no army and no king, it was a reminder of who was really on their side.

“Paneled houses.” Homes finished with wood paneling, a luxury in that time and place. The point is not that nice houses are wrong. The point is that the people had time and money for their own comfort and none for the thing God had asked of them.

“A bag with holes.” Haggai's picture of life with the wrong priorities (1:6). The people worked hard, earned wages, ate and drank, and never had enough. It was like putting money into a bag with holes in it.

“Signet ring.” A ring engraved with its owner's seal and pressed into clay or wax to sign official documents. It stood for the owner's authority and was kept close and guarded.

How Haggai Points to Jesus

Haggai never names the Messiah, but his short book leans forward toward Him in at least three ways.

A greater glory. The rebuilt temple was plain compared with Solomon's. Some of the older people could still remember the first one, and the new one seemed like nothing in their eyes (Haggai 2:3; Ezra 3:12). God promised that the glory of this later temple would be greater than the first, and that in this place He would give peace (Haggai 2:9). Centuries later, Jesus Himself walked and taught in the courts of that temple. Christians have long seen in His coming the fullest answer to that promise.

A restored family line. God had once said that even if King Jehoiachin were the signet ring on His hand, He would pull him off (Jeremiah 22:24). Now He tells Jehoiachin's grandson Zerubbabel that He will make him like a signet ring (Haggai 2:23). The line of David was not finished. Zerubbabel appears in the family line of Jesus in both Matthew 1:12-13 and Luke 3:27.

A kingdom that cannot be shaken. God says He will once more shake the heavens and the earth (Haggai 2:6). The New Testament quotes those words in Hebrews 12:26-28 and applies them to the unshakable kingdom that believers receive through Christ.

Why Haggai Still Matters

- It asks an honest question about priorities. What have you been telling God it is not yet time for?
- It shows that delay is rarely loud. Nobody in Jerusalem decided to abandon the temple. They simply got busy with other things.
- It ties God's commands to God's presence. The command is “work.” The reason is “for I am with you” (Haggai 2:4).
- It speaks to discouragement. God is not embarrassed by small beginnings.
- It offers a fresh start. “From this day I will bless you” (Haggai 2:19).

Reading Haggai This Week

Read the whole book in one sitting first. It takes about ten minutes. Then read it again more slowly with Ezra chapters 1 through 6, which tell the same story from the historian's side. As you read, notice how often God says, “I am with you,” and ask where He may be saying it to you.

All Scripture references follow the New King James Version (NKJV) unless noted otherwise.