



Type: Magazine Article

Haggai: Prophet to the Temple Builders

Author(s): Ellis T. Rasmussen

Source: *The Instructor*, Vol. 97, No. 10 (October 1962)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): center insert

Abstract: This article discusses the prophet Haggai.

HAGGAI

Prophet to the Temple Builders

Haggai had a job not unlike that of many a lay leader of the Church today. While everyone was aware that a house of the Lord was needed and was to be built as soon as possible, someone was needed, as always, to stir up their spirits to do the task and make the sacrifice. People were busy; there were pressures to do other things; making a living was problem enough; and they did have their own homes to rebuild. It was the same problem for them as for us: Should we leave part of our own work undone while we do our Church work? Some answer it one way; some another. The Lord had a recommendation for them — and for us— through the Prophet Haggai.

The task facing the people of Judah at the time was the difficult one of rebuilding ruined cities to make them habitable again. Haggai's city was Jerusalem. Seventy years had passed since the first Babylonian raids on it; fifty years it had lain utterly desolate since it had been totally sacked and burned by Nebuzar-adan, captain of the guard to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, in 586 B. C.¹ Since then, the Jews had spent the weary years in exile in Babylon, awaiting hopefully the fulfillment of the promised return.² At last the time came; the conquerors were conquered, as the prophets had foreseen. Within a year (ca. 538 B. C.) the new master of the empire, Cyrus the Persian — as foretold by Isaiah — issued the edict permitting the Jewish people to return to their land and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.³ According to the record of events of the times by Ezra and Nehemiah, several groups of exiles did return during the next two decades; although it appears in the *Book of Esther* that not all forsook their established homes in the chief cities of the empire to return to the hard life of building up again the homeland of their fathers. Building a city anew on the ruins of the old is in some respects more difficult than building a new city.

So it was that Haggai's compatriots had been busy raising and roofing their own homes while a decade passed and nearly another, and still the house of the Lord lay open to the sky.

Then came the word of the Lord to Haggai. In the second year of Darius the King, successor to Cyrus, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month of that same year (520 B. C.), the Lord spoke by the prophet to say:

. . . *This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built . . . Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled [paneled] houses, and this house lie waste? Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways.*⁴

Their ways, they would have to admit, were not right ways; the question He asked of them they could not in good conscience answer in the affirmative. But to further convince and convict them, the prophet went on to point out their failures to achieve success or security in their own work. In effect, he said, "You work in vain in all your physical efforts and material investments unless you at the same time qualify spiritually for God's blessings to prosper you!" Here are his words:

*Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes [How familiar this is in our time too!]. Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways . . . Ye looked for much, and lo, it came to little; . . . Why? saith the Lord of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house. Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit. And I called for a drought upon the land, and upon the mountains, and upon the corn, and upon the new wine, and upon the oil, and upon that which the ground bringeth forth, and upon men, and upon cattle, and upon all the labour of the hands.*⁵

Response to chastisement, unfortunately, is not always as good as it was in this case. The people reacted with sincere awe — they "did fear before the Lord."

Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Josedech, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him, and the people did fear the Lord.

And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel . . . and the spirit of Joshua . . . and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and did work in the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, in the four and twentieth day of the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king.⁶

Thus, about three weeks after the first revelation to them, and with a second to assure them that the Lord was with them,⁷ they set to the task of building the temple. Nearly a month later, on the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the project was far enough along that they could evaluate it and compare the new building with the former temple which the older folk among them could remember. Apparently the comparison was not favorable; and they needed further encouragement, which they received, along with a far look to things of the future.⁸

Meanwhile, during the ensuing four years, there were many problems to be met, according to the books by Ezra and Nehemiah, both internally and externally, as the little colony worked to rebuild its temple and its city and its wall. Haggai tells us no more of it. He does leave us one more practical lesson in principle.

Using as an illustration the well-known fact that the touch of something dirty will make the clean unclean, while the touch of something clean will not make the filthy pure, he taught the people that their hearts and hands were not yet pure, and their work for the Lord and their offerings to Him, therefore, were being defiled by themselves. Their work on the temple did not sanctify them unless they sanctified themselves. But if they would repent, from that very day, He would bless them; and they would prosper in their work on their farms and in their presses and their barns.⁹

Then like all the other prophets, Haggai told the vision of the future age of ultimate things, when the Lord shall "shake the heavens and the earth," and overthrow the thrones of kingdoms, and "the desire of all nations shall come."¹⁰ It is clearly a Messianic prophecy; what he speaks to Zerubbabel, he speaks by metonymy to his descendant in the royal line of David, whence the Christ indeed should come.¹¹ When the time comes for the final temple to be built, its glory shall be greater than that of the former temples, saith the Lord, "and in this place will I give peace."

This is "the manner of prophesying among the Jews,"¹² to relate their times and projects to ultimate ends and aims, and to teach ways that are forever right and true. This is Haggai, who left us only two pages, but in them a sampling of vital things for his people and for us.

— Ellis T. Rasmussen.

1 II Kings 25:12-18 tells the story of the siege.

2 Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10; cf. Zechariah 7:5-7.

3 See Isaiah 44:28; 45:1-4, 13, for prophetic predictions of Cyrus. See Ezra 1:2-7 and Nehemiah 1:2, for a picture of the return.

4 Excerpts from Haggai 1:2-5.

5 Excerpts from Haggai 1:6-11.

6 See Haggai 1:12, 14, 15.

7 Haggai 1:13. Note that Haggai's contemporary, Zechariah, was likewise urging them on the same project: Zechariah. 8:9-15.

8 Haggai 2:3, and verses following. See also Ezra 3:12; this second temple never did, of course, rival Solomon's in grandeur, nor did it

approach the glory of the temple to come in the latter days. See further reference to this at end of article.

9 Haggai 2:10-19.

10 Haggai 2:7-9, 20-23.

11 Note the genealogical identification of Christ in Revelations 22:16; Matthew 1:1; and Luke 3:23 and verses following. Compare with the Messianic prophecies of Isaiah 11:1; compare Doctrine and Covenants 113:1, 2, and 2 Nephi 30:7-18; also Ezekiel 34:23, 24, and 37:21-27; Zechariah 6:12-15.

12 As Nephi remarks when discussing the difficulties of interpreting the writings of the prophets, 2 Nephi 25:1; see his key to understanding them in verse 4 of the same chapter.



THE PICTURE

Several years after their return from captive exile back to Jerusalem, the Jews had still not rebuilt their temple. The Prophet Haggai's remarks on the contrast between their rebuilt houses and the still-ruined temple is portrayed here by artist Eugene Spiro. Haggai's questions and prophecies gave the people gentle reproof and encouragement, and stimulated greater efforts toward the construction of the Lord's house.

This principle applies today as we consider the rapid growth of the Church and the increasing need for meetinghouses and other structures. Do we prosper while the Lord's house suffers neglect?

— *Virgil B. Smith.*