

Ezra 1-6 & Haggai Notes:

[SLIDE] The book of Haggai – Haggai was one of the 12 minor prophets who had very specific prophecies concerning the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem. The book was written around 515-520BC. Looking at the text, we can find four laid out prophecies:

1. **[SLIDE]** Haggai 1:1-15 The command to rebuild the temple.
 2. Haggai 2:1-9 The coming glory of the temple.
 3. Haggai 2:10-19 Blessing coming to God's people.
 4. Haggai 2:20-23 Zerubbabel to be like God's signet.
- The book of Ezra – believed to have been written between 440 BCE. The book is written in both Hebrew and Aramaic which *could* evidence that parts were written at different times and compiled at the conclusion.
 - Ezra is a historical narrative which has context and details for how the prophecies of Haggai were fulfilled, as well as details concerning what happened afterwards.
 - We know that Ezra was a Jewish scribe (Sofer) and priest during the early Second Temple Period. Being a Sofer was important due to the discipline and procedure required to earn the title.
 - Some interactions between the books:

Haggai's first prophecy [Haggai 1:1-15] The command to rebuild the temple.

- Haggai says, "In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month." That would have been 520 BCE, on the first day of the month of Elul on the Jewish (and Babylonian) calendar. The month of Elul is the last month of the year, and kicks off a time of repentance leading up to the high holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.
- Ezra 1:1 – *Paraphrased*: In the first year of the reign of King Cyrus (of Persia) sent a proclamation throughout the kingdom verbally and in writing.
- **[SLIDE]** This is confirmed in the Cyrus Cylinder (see image attached).
 - Line 32 says (talking about some other specific peoples), "I returned the images of the gods, who had resided there, to their places and I let them dwell in eternal abodes. I gathered all their inhabitants and returned to them their dwellings."
- This is a fulfillment of the promise from the Lord found in Jeremiah 25:11
- **[READ Ezra 1:2-4]** – [The content of the proclamation and written notice from King Cyrus]
 - *Paraphrased*: God gave me all of the lands of Earth and I'm going to build Him a house in Jerusalem. Any of the people of the land who belong to God, go to the land of Judah, to Jerusalem and build it! People of your towns will give you supplies and money along with a freewill offering.
- So what is happening? The Jewish people were in exile, forcibly removed from the land of Israel by the Babylonians, and until Cyrus and the Persian took over, were forbidden from re-assembling in their land as distinct people or rebuilding their temple.
- King Cyrus has just given them permission to go home. Not just that though, he also decreed that the people of the towns the Jewish people are going to leave from will be funding them. The Jewish people will get gold and silver (money), goods and cattle (food and necessities), along with a freewill offering (anything else the people want to give).
- King Cyrus himself brought out the articles of the house of God that had been previously been stolen by King Nebuchadnezzar when Jerusalem was sacked.

- The Jewish people are being restored to a bit of freedom, getting access to their homeland and religion, and all the physical resources needed to reestablish the city of Jerusalem and the Temple which had previously been reduced to rubble by King Nebuchadnezzar.
- Ultimately, this provides the Jewish people the ability to recommit to their covenant with God and obedience to His commands.
- **Note:** Haggai prophesied 20 years after the Cyrus Proclamation, and at the end of 10 years of delay. Haggai is telling the people in front of him that they are too reluctant. That they aren't in a zealous hurry to reestablish God's house.
 - **[READ Haggai 1:4]** While the Jewish people had returned home and lived in 'paneled houses' God's house remained desolate.
 - The remnant had returned, but rebuilding had been paused. The people had money, resources, houses, 'stuff', and seem to have gotten comfortable forgetting or devaluing God's position.
 - Not hard to see how that could happen, our very society leans into this exact scenario. The more comfortable we get, the less we tend to prioritize and obey God.

Haggai's second prophecy [Haggai 2:1-9] the coming glory to the temple.

- **[SLIDE]**
- **[READ Ezra 3:10-13]** *Paraphrased:* The temple foundation was laid and priests in full garb with trumpets and the Levites with cymbals offering praise to God. The people rejoiced, but the older generation who had known the glory of the first temple wept and wailed. The two sounds mixed and it was impossible to distinguish the two.
- **Note:** The text says they ALL praised, but those who had wept at the difference in quality and appearance did so when the volume was high so that the sounds were indistinguishable. They did not want to detract from the significance of the moment, but they did express grief at the difference. The wailing wasn't about them making a public statement, they were genuinely sad.
- **[READ Haggai 2:9]** Haggai prophesied though, that this second temple would "... be greater than the former... and in this place I will give peace..."
- God is fully aware of the difference in temple appearance, and He encourages the current leaders Zerubbabel and Joshua to keep going. God will ultimately bring the glory back by His power.
- He wanted obedience and relationship with His people. How could anything built by human hands ever compare to the glory God brings just by being Himself and inhabiting a place?
- What is the difference between gold and pewter to God? Its all dust anyhow. Its not about the 'stuff,' its always about obedience and relationship.
- Understand the correct posturing and reverence between the two.

Haggai's third prophecy [Haggai 2:10-19] Blessing coming to God's people.

- **[READ Haggai 2:10-19]**
- Haggai 1:6-7 has this similar warning. Remember from earlier notes that God is spelling out the consequences for disobedience and mis-prioritization.
- What seems to be happening here is a reiteration of warning almost three months later **[SEE THE SLIDE]**. Work being made more difficult or less fruitful, halved productivity, destruction of the work of their hands, etc. Haggai says from God, "Every work of their hands and what they offer there is unclean." [Haggai 2:14]
 - **Note:** Being in an unclean state was normal, not specifically bad. It requires a specific effort to become ritualistically 'clean.'

- Being unclean did mean that one couldn't enter the temple though. They had the altar built and were sacrificing, but God appears to be using the clean/unclean distinction to talk about the people's state of repentance, not their actual state of ritual purity.
- That's a common method used throughout the scriptures: Using this physical practice of ritual purity that everyone knows about as a metaphor for having a clean heart before God.
- **[READ end of Haggai 2:17]** God concludes with, "... and yet you did not come back to me."
- Then, we get this beautiful reminder. **[READ Haggai 2:19]** "Is the seed still in the barn? Even including the vine, the fig tree, and pomegranate, and the olive tree, it has not borne fruit. **Yet**, from this day on **I** will bless you."
- The Jewish people came back to Jerusalem in Judah. They started to obey the commands properly again, began rebuilding God's temple (the foundation was laid), and began giving praise and worship rightly before even putting one stone onto another to rebuild God's house... and God blessed the undeserving people.

Haggai's fourth prophecy [Haggai 2:20-23] Zerubbabel to become like God's signet.

- **[READ Haggai 2:20-23]**
- Ezra 4, 5:3-17, and 6:1-13 are contextual scriptures
- Ezra lays out that there were many challenges. Enemies and bureaucratic red tape!
- God will set them aside.
 - Overthrowing enemies, kingdoms of the nations, and armies [Haggai 2:21].
 - God will do all of that because he has chosen a leader for His people. One who will be like a signet to Him.
- Who were their enemies?
 - The Samaritans – **[Explain]**
 - They did not want to see the temple get built.
 - So they wrote to the king of Persia to ask him to stop the building.
- **[SLIDE - Timeline]** Note that Cyrus was the king when the work stopped, or it possibly happened as a result of the new king Cambyses II coming on the throne. Despite the text saying Ahasuerus (Xerxes -- Ezra 4:6) and Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:7). Those two names are spurious in the text, possibly added by a later copyist trying to clarify the timeline.
- However, if you look at chapters 5 and 6, you can see that Darius is the one who allowed the rebuilding of the temple to continue. He was the king after Cyrus Cambyses II, and before both Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes.
 - Rabbi Meir Weiser (known as Malbim) puts forth the following explanation of how the whole situation was able to happen (translated from the Hebrew by ChatGPT).
 - And now, before we explain the following matter, I will present one introduction, for it is very puzzling. Firstly, after Cyrus himself issued a decree to build it, saying that the Lord had commanded him to build a house for Him, how did he, in a few days, retract the decree and halt the construction? And we know that according to the laws of Persia and Media, any decree written in the king's name cannot be revoked by the king in any way, as explained in the case of Daniel [in Daniel 6] and in the case of Ahasuerus, who could not revoke the written decree even though it was written in error, as we explained in the commentary on the Book of Esther. Secondly, they wrote that the Jews were building and fortifying the walls of Jerusalem, which was a complete lie, for they were only building the house, and the wall was not built until the days of Artaxerxes, who gave special permission for this. And what rebellion could arise from the construction of the house, since they had no fortified city to take refuge in, and the house was built of wood and stone that could easily

be burned if they disobeyed his command, as will be explained in chapter 6? How then did he lend his ear to false words, and how did they dare to speak falsehoods?

- ... For they [the enemies] knew that canceling the construction of the house was impossible according to the laws of Persia and Media, as any decree written in the king's name could not be revoked. And they could not slander this, for in building the house of God, there was no fear of rebellion since the wall of Jerusalem was breached. Moreover, writing lies to the king, claiming that the Jews had violated his command and were building the city's walls instead of the house, was risky. If the king found out that they lied, they would be severely punished.
- Their strategy was this: since the Persian kingdom was vast and comprised various peoples, each speaking its language, it was customary for anyone wishing to write to the king to do so in their language and script, as it is written [in Esther], 'that every man should be ruler in his own house and speak in the language of his own people.' In every province, there were two officials appointed by the king to receive the letters written in the language of the province, translate them into Persian, and send them to the king. The king's response would also arrive in Persian, which these officials would then translate back into the provincial language and deliver to the writers.
- In the province of Syria, these officials were Rehum the commander, who translated from language to language, and Shimshai the scribe, who translated the script into Persian. In Syria, their script and language were Aramaic. Therefore, the accusers..., wrote to Artaxerxes, king of Persia. The accusation, which had to be translated and made to match the original, was written in Aramaic and translated into Persian. They handed this prepared document to Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe, who would translate it into Persian script and language." (commentary on Ezra 4:7)
- In other words they used the translation process to make it sound like the Jews were building walls, not the temple.

Signet

What is a signet and why is that important? Signet is the specific mark of a King or Ruler. It represents that Ruler's authority. A message would be sealed in was bearing a signet imprint thus validating its authenticity. A person who physically carried a signet right or stamp would be imbued with that Ruler's specific authority. So while Rulers of men carried typically a ring, God chose a person to be as His signet. Cool sneak peek [Zechariah 4:9]

"The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it. Then you will know the Lord has sent me to you."

Zechariah references Zerubbabel as the person who will validate that he (Zechariah) is from God; like his signet granting authority to his message.

This is the verification to Zerubbabel that the messianic promise given to David (Zerubbabel was of the lineage of David) would be passed along through Zerubbabel's line. See the lineage of Messiah Yeshua in Matthew.

Chapter 6:

The temple was finally completed and dedicated in 516 BCE, marking the end of the Exile after 70 years (586-516 BCE). The exile was not just of the Jewish people, it was of Hashem himself, as well.

Notice what they did after they returned (Ezra 6:19-22): They celebrated Passover, the celebration of the exodus from Egypt. This is also what Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 30:1) and Josiah (2 Kings 23:21) did when they instituted religious reforms