

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR STUDY IN THE MINOR PROPHETS - PART TEN THE BOOK OF HAGGAI

Second in the last group of minor prophets is Haggai. Zephaniah had answered the question, 'when would Jesus come?' His answer was 'the day of the Lord'. Haggai now addresses the question of 'what are we to be doing in the meantime?'

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND is more precise in this book than any of the other minor prophets. Haggai gave the exact day, month and year of each part of his message. Time had moved on since Zephaniah wrote around 620BC and much had happened. King Josiah, who loved the Lord, had died and 3 of his sons and one grandson had each ruled briefly. None of them cared about the God of Israel so they had reigned over a period of decay and disaster in which successive Babylonian kings had captured Jerusalem and taken different groups captive to Babylon, beginning in 605BC with Daniel and his friends, and culminating in 586BC with the final destruction of the city and the temple. During the 70 years of captivity from 605-536BC first Daniel and then Ezekiel had been God's messengers to His people. In this period they had finally learned their lesson about the terrible consequences of idolatry. Other gods would never again be a problem for the Jews. Zechariah and Ezra wrote at the same time as Haggai.

Then a miracle happened; in 536BC, Cyrus, a new king, gave orders to allow the Jews to return to their own country. What was so remarkable was that Isaiah had named him 200 years before as the one who would be God's instrument in their salvation from captivity.(Isa.45:1) Jeremiah had even put a year on it; 70 years from the first group being taken away.(Jer.25:12) Ezra described the fulfilment of all God had promised as excited Jews returned to their own country which only the oldest would even have seen. Among this group were Zerubbabel and Joshua.(Ezra 2:2)

Their first priorities as soon as they had somewhere to live were to rebuild the city walls, the security system of those days, and to rebuild the temple of God which had lain in ruins since 586BC. Very soon they faced discouragement. Some non-Jewish settlers reminded the Babylonian king of how rebellious the Jews used to be. The king had the records checked and ordered work to stop.(Ezra 4) For 14 years nothing happened; the city walls and the temple remained half built, and morale was just as low. Then came God's message to Haggai to rebuild the temple. Again trouble makers questioned their authority to do this but this time the Jewish elders responded wisely and asked the new king, Darius, to check on the orders of Cyrus which had not only given them instructions to rebuild but promised that his government would pay the bill. He agreed to fulfil Cyrus' plan and they were free to resume.(Ezra 5,6) If we follow Isaiah's picture of Cyrus as the Messiah who would come to free His people there is a lovely reminder that there are two ways to answer the Devil's accusations against us. We can either stand on our record and be condemned, or refer him back to the work of our Messiah, Jesus Christ, who set us free, gave us a task to do and the authority to do it.(Matt.28:18-20)

OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES are really only two. When Israel were redeemed out of Egypt, God promised His presence in the form of the pillar of cloud and fire.(2:5;

Exod.13:21,22) To illustrate the principle that sin is catching but holiness is not, Haggai(2:11-14) referred to the law on how to know what was clean, in Deut.17:8-11 and Lev.22:4-6.

The two characters in the book have names which tell a story. Zerubbabel means 'shoot out of Babylon' and so pictures resurrection life. He was the governor of Judah. Joshua, equivalent to Jesus in the New Testament, means 'the Lord saves'. He was the high priest. The work of building the church is based on Jesus saving us by His death and governing us by His resurrection life in us.

NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES to the book of Haggai are hard to find, but there are two things in Haggai which have great significance in the New Testament and therefore cast light on the message of the book. First Jesus used the temple as a picture of His own body which would be destroyed on the cross but rebuilt in resurrection.(Jn.2:19-21) Later Paul described the temple of God as being our bodies, collectively,(I Cor.3:16) and individually.(I Cor.6:19) In each case the message was that first Jesus on earth, and then we, became the buildings in which God lives. The priority of the Christian church should be the building of God's house on earth, not a building of bricks, but of people in whom He lives.

The other picture is that of the signet ring,(Hag.2:23) which was used to make a seal, a distinctive mark in wax, on goods or documents, indicating protection, ownership and genuineness. Paul used the seal to describe the work of the Holy Spirit who by entering the life of the believer, God's temple, puts His promise of ownership and protection into our hearts and shows the world we genuinely belong to Him.(Eph.1:13)

AN OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

1:1-11 Haggai's first message - get on with the job of building God's temple. Every other priority in life is futile and unsatisfying.

1:12-15 Led by Zerubbabel and Joshua and encouraged by the promise of the Lord's presence, the people showed reverence for God and resumed the task of building the temple.

2:1-9 Haggai's second message - God promises to remain among us, protect us, provide every need and complete the work.

2:10-19 Haggai's third message - remember that sin is catching but holiness is not. It is only the work of God which can restore us to God's original purpose of fruitfulness.

2:20-23 Haggai's fourth message - God's signet ring is the guarantee of the task being finished and of victory to God's people.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What were the background circumstances to the book of Haggai, drawn from the rest of the Old Testament? Who else was prophesying at the same time?
2. What do the names Joshua and Zerubbabel mean? What were their jobs? Where else are they mentioned in the Bible? In what ways could they remind us of Christ?

3. How many messages does Haggai give? Over what period of time? Give a title to each one.
4. What was his chief concern? How is the same priority expressed in the New Testament? How had the book of Ezekiel prepared the Jews for Haggai's message?
5. Why had the Jews not rebuilt the temple? How have we failed in the same way? How does Haggai convince them of what was wrong and inspire them to put things right?
6. What do 1:12-15 show us about how the word of God has its effect on apathetic Christians? What difference would knowing 'I am with you'(v.13) make?
7. Building had started. What was the problem now?(2:1-9) How did Haggai deal with the new situation? How can we help those who have started in God's work but seem overwhelmed by the enormity of their task?
8. The work was going well. What was the next danger they faced?(2:10-19) How did Haggai bring them to realise this? What is his message for those who are being successful in Christian work today?
9. All three messages had had their effect. Now Haggai looked to the future.(2:20-23) What did he promise the Jews then and us now?
10. Where is the signet ring referred to in the New Testament?(2:23) How does this give us a key to the whole book of Haggai?