



## The Book of the Twelve Haggai and Zechariah

From the 8<sup>th</sup> Century to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century

With Haggai and Zechariah, we move from the 8<sup>th</sup>-century BCE prophets such as Amos and Hosea into the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and the post-exilic period. The Book of Haggai opens with a reference to King Darius, a Persian ruler of the Achaemenid dynasty, a far cry from the Assyrian empire that so dominates the imagination of the earlier prophetic texts. At this time, the descendants of those who had been taken into exile under the Babylonian deportation in the late 590-580s are now back in Judah, facing a completely different political and social landscape, with a completely different set of concerns. In the 8<sup>th</sup>-century BCE prophetic material, there is a central focus on social justice, and the threat of failing to correct those ills is exile and the day of wrath; in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, however, the exile has already happened. With the monarchy now dissolved, the temple destroyed, and the economic prospects of the nation severely stunted, the community is left to ask: what is next? They have not only gone through the worst scenario as prophesied by the earlier prophets, but they have survived and returned at last. It is no surprise that we begin to see messages of hope and restoration, and a focus on what is to come next.

Prophecy in the post-Exilic Period

The great problem of Haggai, however, is that the restoration promised by exilic prophetic texts such as Second Isaiah is not as glorious or complete as those works suggest it will be (as we see also in Isaiah 56–66, what is sometimes known as "Third Isaiah"). Haggai, and its contemporary community, is faced with the reality of coming back to a ruined city, severely underdeveloped for nearly a century. The people are unhappy with the situation; it is the work of prophets like Haggai and Zechariah to respond to the complaints of the people and offer solutions on how to fix the circumstances they find themselves in.

The moment of restoration is, itself, a time of great contentiousness: there are a multitude of different groups within both the returnees (those descended from the people who had been deported by the Babylonians) and those who had never left, mostly those too poor to rise to the notice of the Babylonians in the first place. Each group has its own idea of what to do, and what to focus on, and those competing priorities were often in tension with one another. The main topic of concern appears to have been the temple – indeed, this is a whole part of Israel's history known as the "Second Temple Period." The temple had previously been destroyed by the Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II in 587 BCE as part of the final destruction of Jerusalem. Now, the community

argued about when to rebuild the temple, and how they could even afford to do so given their state of disrepair.

### The temple in Haggai and Zechariah

For Haggai, the message is clear. Undeniably, the people have gone through an unthinkable period of turmoil; but instead of focusing on their own affairs, their own houses and families, they must think about God. In Amos and Micah, we saw that the performance of the temple and sacrificial cult were seen as an excuse that distracted the wealthy and elite from actual acts of social justice in the community. Now, however, Haggai takes a different approach: the community *must* focus on the temple if their own lot is to improve. This is a clear departure from the thematic threads of older prophetic material found in the Book of the Twelve and elsewhere. In fact, all the post-exilic prophets that have been preserved for us, namely Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, read as very priestly. Some scholars suggest that this is due to the lack of an Israelite monarchy – culturally, the seat of power was now the temple. It is unsurprising that, of all the texts that could have been preserved from this period, it is texts that demonstrate that the establishment is now firmly the temple complex and the priestly leaders. Similarly to Haggai, Zechariah also shows a heavy emphasis on the temple and when it will be restored and depicts the high priest as a major figure of power alongside the Persian-installed political leadership.

### The rise of eschatology

All of this contemplation and wrestling with the expectations of restoration begins to lead prophetic authors towards a heightened concept of eschatology. No simple visions of the future proclaimed in order to change the present, but instead, a shift towards envisioning the whole world to be different, and changed. In the Second Temple period, we begin to see messianic figures in prophetic texts and beyond. We get visions of thrones, and ultimate victories – we begin to enter into the world of apocalyptic. In the post-exilic period, the voices preserved in the texts we receive have all internalized the message of the Deuteronomic story: the idea that Israel had messed up, exile was the resulting punishment, and that they are now left to figure out what to do. The communities never forgot the visions of glorious restoration, but as actual restoration continued to be messy and incomplete people began to lose hope in the idea that it could still happen via political means.

There starts to feature a sense of something more ultimate, more cosmic; an overthrowing not merely of present political structures, but of everything they know. The shift becomes apocalyptic – it features a new world order. As a genre of ancient literature, apocalypse asks questions of theodicy, the justice of God; how and why did these bad things happen, and how long will they last for? What is the end or answer to the sequence that hasn't led to where they think it should?

### The problem with prophecy

The theme found throughout the Book of the Twelve, and throughout prophetic texts in general, is always “what is the next thing to look towards?” What is the next disaster, or restoration, or event, that will prove effective in motivating the community towards change? As geopolitical events happen, as empires rise and fall, it becomes hard over the long course of history to stick to purely normal or mundane outcomes. All that is left to prophetic authors is something that cannot actually

happen, or that at least if it does happen means that the end has truly come. Even at this point, however, the expected cosmic upheaval is considered imminent, not a far away future. Prophets in this later period still care about questions that are relevant for their own communities; their primary concern is still for the present. What changes, however, is the horizon they look toward: it continues to expand farther and farther outward. Likewise, the question of God's dominion expands: from first Israel to the other nations of the Earth and, finally, to all of time and space itself.