



Haggai and Advent Expectations: The Context of Haggai

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When the Judean exiles returned to Jerusalem after the fall of the Babylonian Empire in the sixth century BCE, they began to rebuild their nation based largely on the restoration of their city and the temple. This assumption is based on a variety of sources ranging from archaeology to Mesopotamian records to biblical texts, as well as from later traditions and storytelling. Their first glimpse of Jerusalem probably was of a city depopulated and demoralized and of a once-glorious temple now in ruins. This grim picture serves as background for the book of Haggai as we have it.

Haggai is a spokesperson for that generation of pioneers who returned to the Persian province known as *Yehud*, or Judea. We have almost no biographical information for him. He appears without fanfare or lineage in his short collection of prophecies, and he is simply known as “the prophet” in other biblical literature (the books of Ezra and Nehemiah) describing his generation. Yet the record of his words—brief and bracing utterances—certainly hit a nerve in later Christian and Jewish interpretive traditions.

His book is only two chapters, thirty-eight verses, five prophecies. The first prophecy (1:1–10) simply urges the exiles to prioritize the temple restoration over their own home-building projects. When they invest in the temple, Haggai says,

During the season of Advent, the biblical readings often depend on the Hebrew prophets and their vivid expectations of the coming Day of the Lord in the midst of the traumas experienced by the people of Israel. The prophet Haggai provides dramatic prophecies that have been used over the centuries for Christian hope and that still promise contemporary meaning.

they will see blessing upon their own homes. The second one (1:13) recognizes that the people actually did what the Lord required—almost unheard of in the narratives of the prophetic literature—and consists of only two Hebrew words: “I am with you.”

The third revelation (2:2–8) from Haggai intends to bolster their pioneering efforts, as pitiful as they must have seemed to that generation: “Take courage, . . . work, for I am with you. . . . My spirit abides among you. Do not fear” (2:4–5).¹ Thus, Haggai repeats his second prophecy (“I am with you”), but he amplifies it just a bit to encourage the people. Then he adds what must have been puzzling words, the meaning of which is interpreted later in the essay:

For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts. (Hag 2:6–9)

The fourth prophecy (2:11–19) reads something like a Socratic dialogue between Haggai and the reconstituted priests, reinforcing the idea that their work in the temple was necessary for the divine blessing to come upon the nation-building process. Curiously, however, it raises the question about how a dead body (the compromised priesthood? the dilapidated building? the polluted cult?) could bring sanctity to the temple and, by extension, to the people. While the issue of the temple’s holiness was a huge one for Haggai’s generation, if we carefully read the prophecies of Zechariah or the history of Ezra-Nehemiah, this paper will not interpret the significance of Haggai’s question, but only point later to its possible use in Jewish liturgy.

The fifth and final prophecy (2:21–23) to the Jerusalem governor Zerubbabel concludes the book:

Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders; and the horses and their riders shall fall, every one by the sword of a comrade. On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts.

While all Haggai’s words are worth considering for their impact on his generation, the third and the last prophecies arouse much attention in later interpretive

¹ Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations come from the NRSV.

traditions because they break away from the immediate historical context. What does Haggai mean by the shaking of the created order? The former prophecy (2:6–9) envisions the Lord’s shaking of things so “that the treasure of all nations shall come, and . . . fill this house” (the temple); but the latter prophecy (2:21–22) describes a process of disrupting the political order to establish Jerusalem and its ruler (Zerubbabel). Is the shaking for the sake of the temple or the ruler? Or are there two shakings?

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HAGGAI IN LATER INTERPRETIVE TRADITIONS

For the New Testament and medieval church and synagogue, Haggai’s message fueled an imaginative vein of interpretation involving an apocalyptic process. In the letter of the Hebrews (12:22–29), for example, the repeated prediction of a cosmic shake-down meant that things on earth would be displaced by truer and heavenly realities. This disruptive process would ultimately show that the earthly Jerusalem and its temple were types that fell short of the heavenly Jerusalem and its temple. The writer merged the objects of Haggai’s third and fifth prophecies about the temple and Zerubbabel by describing a “Mount Zion,” “heavenly Jerusalem,” where angelic and “firstborn” subjects would participate in a brilliant and bustling commonwealth under a divine king:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give

thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

In the mind of this New Testament writer, the synthesis of Haggai's rebuilt city and temple is the starting place of a process that would end the created order and bring in the final reign of God.

In church history the medieval hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," based on seven even older antiphons, carried on further speculation about what Haggai meant by the shaking of the religious and political order. Christians traditionally recite these antiphons and chant the accompanying song in Advent, anticipating the coming of Christmas through the appearance of a Messiah. Each of its seven "O" verses collects and aggregates dimensions of the messianic reign of God as recounted in various Old Testament texts. The origins of either the prayer or the plainsong are dim, but most likely vestiges of both go back before the turn of the first millennium.

Its vein of liturgical practices involves not merely a mournful tune with scriptural lyrics. It brings Haggai's prophecy front and center as the theme of a public performance where participants enter into a timeless drama. Liturgy is never wholly "make-believe," because it clings to some real event acted out on special occasions. Rather, liturgy claims that participants can activate the event's existential ingredients to determine real and current outcomes. Like Scripture itself, it is something that is both already and not yet, something that has happened and something that will come to pass. Another way to look at liturgy is to view it as "what-if" history—that is, the re-presentation of facts, time, and space that allows actors to decide or conduct things differently.

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and its O antiphons oddly do not even mention the nativity, the story of Jesus's birth. They set the tone for the season, when Advent focuses on the supernatural visitation of God as the dynamic that drives history more than the nativity narratives (found in the Gospels). Even though the romance of the Christmas story charms everyone on December 25, Advent shows the bigger picture of what began in the distant past and rolls into a cataclysmic future. The song has its work cut out for it as it borrows extensively from the Old Testament prophets, and it is much harder to grasp their allusive images ("Rod of Jesse," "Key of David," "Dayspring," "Desire of Nations," and so on) than to take in a rather more coherent story narrated about the Christ-Child in Bethlehem.

Haggai's text is the staging ground for much of its liturgical imagination. The very title in stanza 1, Emmanuel (= God is with us), brings to mind Haggai's repeated promise to the pioneers returning from abroad to rebuild the city and temple: "I am with you, says the Lord of hosts" (Hag 1:13; 2:4—see above prophecies two and three). Other lines and phrases play upon various excerpts from the book of Haggai. For example, "Lord of might" (stanza 2) is in fact Haggai's title for God, twelve times used in the biblical text. "Rod of Jesse" (stanza 3) obliquely refers to Zerubbabel, descendant of King David, himself the son of Jesse who wears the signet ring (Hag 2:20–23). "Key of David" (stanza 4) says that believers in the Messiah have a heavenly "home," paralleling the Lord's "house" (Hag 1:4, 8–9, 14).

Certainly, the second prophecy of Haggai reassures his audience that the Lord would dwell among them (2:5) as they rebuilt the temple. The same stanza prays for “the way that leads on high” and against “the path to misery,” perhaps referring to Haggai’s twice-repeated phrase “Consider your ways” (Hag 1:5, 7 ESV).

HAGGAI IN THE O ANTIPHON “DESIRE OF NATIONS”

The song stanza that most features Haggai’s message is the climactic seventh, usually sung on the final day of Advent—as if it is the song’s last effort to reorient our vision from a charming nativity tale to a shattering political and religious event.

O come, Desire of Nations, bind
All peoples in heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease;
Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.

The phrasing, in fact, turns the *prima facie* reading of Haggai’s prophecy inside out. Instead of the treasures of the nations being loosed so that the Lord could fill the temple with their splendor (see above translation, 2:7), we have in the song “Desire of Nations.” Though commonly translated in the plural, “the treasures of all nations,” the Hebrew can easily be rendered singular with a slight diacritical-mark change (something like different punctuation, not spelling), as “the treasure” (so NRSV) or “the treasured one.” The latter phrasing is in accord with the Latin Bible (*Veniet desideratus cunctis gentibus*: “May he who is desired by all the nations come”) and means “that which the nations desire.”

It is therefore easy to see how the Gentile Christians of the Middle Ages interpreted this phrase as a reference to the theological role of Jesus in shaking them free from their tribal (“barbarian”) backgrounds. They were, after all, peoples who had no original connection to the biblical covenant with the Jews, and yet they had found their true home in Christ, as if meeting an old friend for the first time, perhaps through the agency of the Latin Bible. Thus, their conversion revealed a visceral longing for a treasure.

Haggai’s third prophecy (2:6–9), however, says that the things the “nations” hold as precious—silver, gold, whatever—would ultimately adorn the current humble temple (2:3) of Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people. Its future “splendor” (2:7), though, would outstrip what Solomon was able to muster from his own wealth. Even better than its outer material splendor, the prophecy concludes, this latter temple would be the source of “prosperity” (2:9). Haggai uses the well-known Hebrew word “shalom”—a profound peace and wholeness that comes from the eternal covenant.

The entire seventh stanza of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” tries to address these ideas. It holds that the messiah of the Old Testament is the one who brings about the reconciliation of international conflict and ethnic division. “Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace” is certainly based on Haggai 2:9. For Christians, the connection to this peace is Jesus as Emmanuel.

A related theme and perhaps its most interesting twist for scholars is that this final stanza and its O antiphon counterpart pray that the Messiah would reconcile Jew and Gentile. This is found in the O antiphon especially:

O King of the nations and their desired One,
cornerstone, who make both [Jew and Gentile] one,
Come and save humanity, whom you formed out of dust.²

The prayer speaks to one who is given messianic titles. The Messiah's role is to rule the nations, much like Haggai's fifth prophecy asserts, and he is instrumental in the building of the temple that Haggai's third prophecy predicts. The reference of "Cornerstone" (not in Haggai's vocabulary, but in line with his message to rebuild the temple) is directly from Ephesians 2:19–21:

You are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

Thus the lyrics of the hymn and antiphon bridge Haggai's prophecies to the combined message of the New and Old Testaments, Jew and Gentile, prophet and apostle, church and temple. Medieval liturgy turned Haggai into an ongoing process, one that demands that Advent be lived out in a timeless and dynamic fashion.

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HAGGAI IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH TRADITION

Roughly at the same time that the rudiments of the O antiphons were coming together for devotees in the Western Empire—eventually sung with the lyrics of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel"—there is some evidence that Jews in the Eastern Empire were wrestling with how the book of Haggai applied to their own context.

Heraclius and his Byzantine forces marched into Jerusalem in 630 CE, claiming they had recovered the "true cross" of Jesus from the Sassanids, and would restore the holy city to Christian hands. All this was to the great dismay of its Jewish residents, who had enjoyed relative liberty under the more relaxed Persian

² Author's translation from the Latin.

regime. Now it seemed to them that hostile world powers would thwart any Jewish hopes for temple and sovereignty.

How would they respond to this new threat? Memories of past invasions—the Babylonians, Seleucids, Romans—equipped them to deal with such national catastrophes not only through collective lamentation (see, for example, the book of Lamentations), but through fanciful and even subversive storytelling (see, for example, various apocalyptic traditions). In generations past, such writings like the last dozen chapters of Ezekiel (during the time of the Babylonians), the book of Daniel (the Persian and early Seleucid periods), the heroic tales of Maccabean literature (the middle and late Seleucid period), and the Apocalypse of Second Baruch (the Roman period) braced Judaism for adversity at the hands of invaders.

For this current crisis of the seventh century, their response was to provide a counternarrative that involved Haggai's prophecies and one of Haggai's characters, the Persian-appointed governor Zerubbabel. The story, called *The Apocalypse of Zerubbabel*, envisioned a messiah who lay as a beggar at the gates of Constantinople, the capital of their Byzantine oppressors. We know from other, somewhat later rabbinic sources this same story of a disguised messiah ignored or scorned by the dominant authorities (see Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 31 and Eccles. Rab. 1:2). His name was Menachem, which in Hebrew means "consolation." Even though he was now helpless, derided, and maltreated, in due time he would emerge to play the role of Jewish messiah. Menachem's mother also played a role in Israel's deliverance. Her name was Hephzibah, the title that Isaiah (Isa 62:4) gave to the city of Jerusalem because it means "my [the Lord's] desire is for her."

How do elements encapsulated in *The Apocalypse of Zerubbabel* express a different view to the O antiphons' interpretations circulating about Haggai's prophecies? Here is a list of some intriguing counternarrative parallels:

- The narrator, whose name is Zerubbabel, contemplates a "dead" Jerusalem by reciting the ending of the Amidah prayer, "Blessed are you, O Lord, the One who resuscitates the dead." The astute reader of Haggai should remember that Haggai's third prophecy relates to the impossibility for a dead body to bring sanctity. It is noteworthy that the current version of the ancient Amidah prioritizes Jerusalem, the Davidic kingdom, and the Messiah in its liturgy. Somehow the deliverance is connected to the need for a dead or near-dead body.
- Zerubbabel asks the divine messenger bringing the apocalyptic vision how the Jerusalem temple would come back to life, given its oblivion. Again, Zerubbabel raises the same issues as Haggai (and the Amidah)—the temple, the city, the government for Israel—and relates to them as if they are moribund issues, things that might be compared to corpses.
- The messiah's name, Menachem, means consolation—the same reassurance that the O antiphons (and especially their accompanying hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel") voice in relation to the prophecies of

Haggai. Needless to add, the themes of consolation and comfort are frequent in the Christian celebration of Advent.

- The messiah's mother, Hephzibah ("My Desire Is in Her"), might directly refer to Isaiah's name for Jerusalem and indirectly propose a counter-narrative to the role the mother of Jesus played in the Christian use of messianic traditions. This point is commonly noted in other scholarly treatments of *The Apocalypse of Zerubbabel*. In fact, in later versions of the church hymn there is a tribute to the mother of the Messiah—though there is no evidence that this verse goes back as far as the rest of the song. In addition, Hephzibah is in semantic parallel to the O antiphon (and the song's stanza) about the "Desired One" (Hag 2:7) being the Messiah.
- *The Apocalypse of Zerubbabel's* messiah Menachem himself lies in the open square as something like the corpse that Haggai proposed as the image of the priest's inability to sanctify the temple, and thus Israel, without divine intervention. The O antiphon's proponents, on the other hand, presumably would have their own dead Messiah (Jesus) as a solution to the problem of sin and holiness.
- The fulfillment of Menachem's mission would come when there would be a shaking and quaking of the world, both natural and political. He would emerge from his moribund condition and, together with his mother Hephzibah and a second messiah figure representing the unity of Judah and Ephraim, defeat the world powers of Rome. This final upheaval, one might infer, was the shaking of things both natural (Hag 2:6–7) and political (Hag 2:21–22) that Haggai predicted. The O antiphon, on the other hand, broadens the unity to Jew and Gentile and incorporates elements of the New Testament to supplement its Old Testament images.

In addition to these textual parallels within the Jewish apocalypse, Zerubbabel himself seems to find favor in biblical and medieval traditions as a messianic model to contemplate. In the biblical era, besides Haggai there is Zechariah (4:8), then 1 Esdras (chaps. 3–5, esp. 5:5), Josephus (*Ant.* 11:73), and *Lives of the Prophets* (15:3). Early in the Syriac Church, Ephrem of Edessa associates Zerubbabel with the star that Balaam sees arising from Jacob (Num 24:17), thus connecting him to messianic expectations arising in Jewish lore. Thus, seventh-century Jews found themselves experiencing what must have seemed like their own centuries-long Advent season until there would be a shaking of history as Haggai predicted.

HAGGAI FOR US

Aside from the interesting parallel that *The Apocalypse of Zerubbabel* presents to later interpretations of the book of Haggai, what can we learn from the traditions of the book Christianity has bequeathed to us? Certainly, one implication of this interpretive tradition is that we are to pray that there be reconciliation, understanding, and unity between Jew and Gentile. The conflict between the two groups

is manifest in the pages of history, even if their relations in modern America have been relatively amicable. The Gentile church needs to lead the way in repentance for the holocausts and pogroms that have been carried out especially since the Crusades, and they need to pray for the openness among the Jews to hear the good news of the Messiah. This is part of their own heritage as found in the Advent prayers and songs they sing.

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Another implication of the final O antiphon and stanza of the song is that the Messiah ought to be “desired” more than gold and silver, as in the song’s line: “Bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease.” Instead of seeking worldly goods—perhaps the paneling of our own houses as in Haggai 1:4—the Messiah should be our passion and treasure.

This interpretation fits in with the temple and the city that Zerubbabel and Joshua are rebuilding, one that so far falls short of their hopes (Hag 2:3; cf. Zech 4:10a; Ezra 3:12–13). They yearn for a temple and city that outstrip the old ones in glory. What is the temple and city for Christians? It is none other than what the letter of Hebrews says is Mount Zion, heavenly Jerusalem with its temple—into which we enter through Christ. By such admission, we have unity between Jew and Gentile, and peace among ourselves.

If we reflect on the book of Haggai in light of a merged interpretive tradition (at least incorporating *The Apocalypse of Zerubbabel* along with the Christian cases above), we see a future event that will force the world’s wealth to accumulate for the benefit of the heavenly temple. We also see the emergence and the ascendancy of a despised and hidden Messiah who will put to shame the rulers of this age and will rule over the heavenly city. All of what we consider important will be placed at the disposal of this temple and its city’s ruler.

We who follow Jesus put everything at his feet before the final “shakedown”: he is our treasure in the field and pearl of great price (Matt 13:44–46). Like Paul, whatever gain we had, we count as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus (Phil 3:7). Nevertheless, together both Jew and Christian admit that this vision has not been fulfilled, that even now believers are involved in what seems to be an agonizingly long process of salvation history still unfolding. Advent is a season that addresses us all.

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