

# **POSTEXILIC PROPHETS**

**HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH & MALACHI**

**(A Primer For Small Group Facilitators)**

**COVENANT<sup>EFC</sup>**

## Introduction

The books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are often overlooked, but are vital for understanding the Bible's story. They are the final voices of prophecy in the Old Testament, speaking to a community that had returned from exile, but was struggling to see God's promises fulfilled.

We trust that studying these books in 2026 will help us grow towards authentic discipleship and intentional disciple-making – following Jesus and helping others to follow Him. This brief primer aims to equip small group facilitators with some background knowledge of the context and theology of these books and give you some practical tips (see pg.6) so that you are better able to lead studies and discussions.

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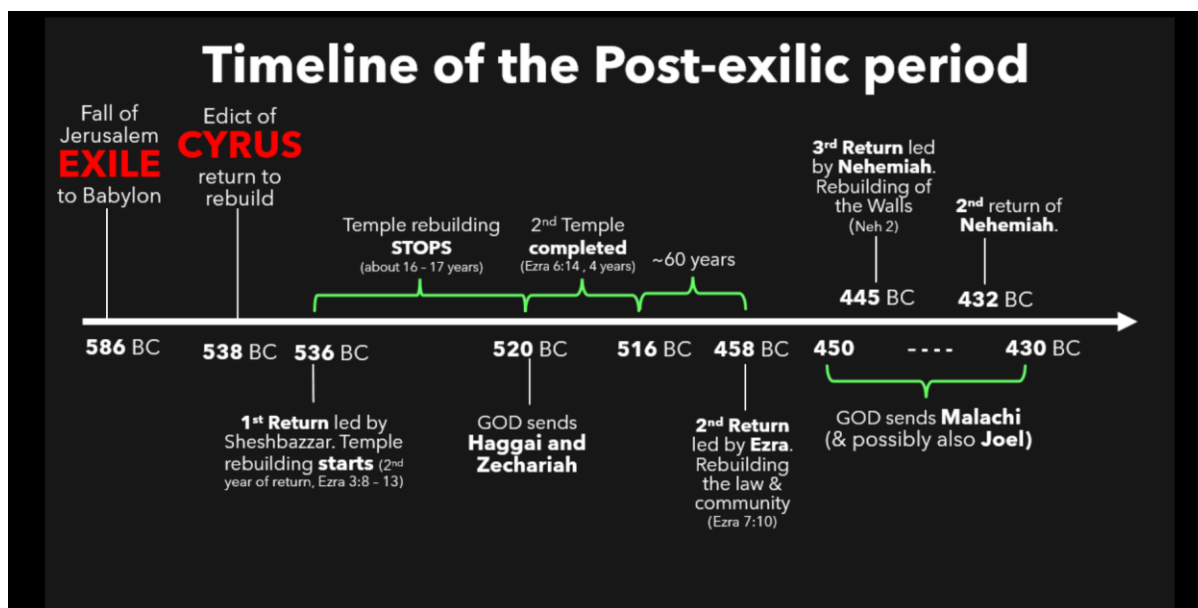
### A. The Minor Prophets have a major message

The books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi belong to a unified collection known as the **Minor Prophets**, or what some refer to as the **"The Book of the Twelve."** The term "Minor" does not imply lesser importance. It simply means that these twelve books are much shorter than the "Major Prophets" (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel).

The Minor Prophets span a vast period of Israel's history, from the 8th century B.C. (e.g., Hosea, Amos) to the 5th century B.C. (Malachi). They convey a significant part of the story of God's covenant relationship with Israel. Centuries before, God had chosen Israel to be set apart to Himself, His special possession (Exodus 19:5-6). But the chosen ones rejected the LORD and rebelled! As a result, the LORD promised through His prophets:

1. **Judgment on Israel and Judah** (read Hosea, Amos, and Micah)
2. **Judgment on the nations** (read Obadiah and Nahum). God justly judges all peoples!
3. **The coming Day of the Lord** – a future time of both judgment and ultimate restoration. This theme is woven throughout the twelve.
4. **Restoration and hope** for the remnant preserved in the midst of judgment (read Joel, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi).

The post-exilic prophets – Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi – speak to the generation that returned from the Babylonian Exile (586–538 B.C.). The Exile was the ultimate fulfilment of the prophets' warnings of judgment, while their return, initiated by the Persian King Cyrus's decree in 538 B.C., was the initial fulfilment of the prophets' promises of restoration.



These three books urged the returnees to live as the restored people of God. Their message is sombre; it may surprise you that the last word in the book of Malachi is “ban” or “curse.” God solemnly warns His people to repent and return to God or He will come and smite the land with a ban.<sup>1</sup> As New Testament believers under God’s New Covenant, this serious message is still relevant to us. Therefore, as we lead our small groups to study the post-exilic prophets, may we not merely convey **information**, but also God’s burden for our spiritual **transformation**! May we take God and His commands seriously!

## B. The post-exilic books conclude the Minor Prophets

Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are strategically placed as the final three books in the canonical order of the Minor Prophets. They reinforce and conclude the overarching message of the entire collection.

| Book             | Historical Context                         | How its message echoes the other Minor Prophets                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Haggai</b>    | 520 B.C. (18 years after the return)       | <b>The Priority of God's House:</b> Rebukes the people for neglecting the rebuilding of the Temple while focusing on their own lives. This echoes the earlier prophets' condemnation of misplaced priorities and idolatry (e.g., Amos's critique of luxury).                                          |
| <b>Zechariah</b> | 520-518 B.C. (Contemporaneous with Haggai) | <b>The Glory of the Future:</b> Offers a grand vision of the future Messianic King and the glorious, rebuilt Jerusalem. This provides the <i>hope</i> that undergirds the calls to obedience in all the Minor Prophets (e.g., Joel's promise of the Spirit, Micah's prophecy of the Bethlehem ruler). |

<sup>1</sup> Ralph L. Smith, *Micah–Malachi*, vol. 32, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1984), xvi.

| Book           | Historical Context                                                    | How its message echoes the other Minor Prophets                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Malachi</b> | Mid-5th Century B.C.<br>(About 100 years after the return from Exile) | <b>Covenant Faithfulness:</b> Confronts the people's apathy, corrupt worship, and social injustice. It is an urgent call to repentance before the "Day of the Lord," echoing the core covenantal demands found in Hosea and the Law itself. |

Together, these books teach that the physical return from exile was only the **beginning** of restoration. True restoration requires spiritual renewal and covenant faithfulness. They serve as a bridge, concluding the Old Testament narrative and simultaneously pointing forward to the coming of the Messiah and the New Covenant. As we facilitate discussions on the post-exilic prophets, it is good for us to remind ourselves (and the people we lead) of how they fit into God's grand story of salvation, revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

### C. How to read the post-exilic prophets: interpretive challenges

Who were these prophets in the first place? We learn from Ezra that Haggai and Zechariah were **contemporary** prophets of the early post-exilic period (Ezra 5:1). The date formulas in the two books indicate that Zechariah began preaching in Jerusalem about two months (Zech. 1:1) after Haggai's brief four-month ministry (Hag. 1:1; 2:20). Haggai and Zechariah were also **complementary** prophets. Haggai exhorted the people to rebuild the Jerusalem temple while Zechariah summoned the community to repentance and spiritual renewal.<sup>2</sup> Much less is known about Malachi, however. The Hebrew word "Malachi" literally means "my messenger". We do not have date formulas or biographical data about Malachi, and a prophet named "Malachi" is not spoken of anywhere else in the Old Testament. According to Anthony Petterson, this is probably due to the lateness of the book.<sup>3</sup>

The post-exilic prophets are challenging for us modern readers to interpret, especially when we encounter **visionary** and **apocalyptic** language. The good news is that Haggai and Malachi are easier to understand than Zechariah.

### Haggai and Malachi: Prophetic Discourse and Disputations

Haggai is straightforward **prophetic discourse** – direct sermons and oracles. Malachi employs the **disputation** genre, a question-and-answer format that makes the dialogue between God and His people clear and engaging.

In reading these books, what we need to grapple with is the historical context, and how that connects with our current context. This will help us to understand the implications and applications of the text for our lives today.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew E. Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 28, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), 106.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony R. Petterson, *Haggai, Zechariah & Malachi*, ed. David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham, vol. 25, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Nottingham, England; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos; InterVarsity Press, 2015), 306.

## Zechariah: Visions and Oracles

Zechariah is divided into two main sections:

1. **Chapters 1-8 (Visions):** This section is dominated by Zechariah's "book of visions" (1:7-6:15) which contains eight revelations from God, proclaiming a coming age of salvation and restoration for the Hebrew community in post-exilic Judah.<sup>4</sup> It is full of symbolic imagery: horses, horns, craftsmen, a flying scroll, and a golden lampstand.
2. **Chapters 9-14 (Oracles):** This section is much more complex, and covers two oracles. Andrew Hill says: "the literary genre of Zechariah 9-14 is more distinctively apocalyptic in character, combining cryptic historical allusions with futuristic visions."<sup>5</sup> John Collins thinks that "these chapters are among the most difficult passages to understand in the entire Hebrew Bible!"<sup>6</sup>

We must therefore not underestimate the challenge of understanding Zechariah properly. It is hard (but also fun!) to interpret because of the following issues:

- **Symbolism:** The visions require careful interpretation. As far as possible, let the text interpret itself. For instance, an angelic interpreter often explains the symbols (e.g. in Zech 1:18-21 the four horns are the nations that scattered Judah).
- **Fulfilment of Prophecy:** Old Testament prophecy is often complex, and the fulfilment of prophecy can be multi-layered. One layer of fulfilment is *historical*, such as the crowning of Joshua the High Priest, Zech 6:11). Another layer is *Messianic* or *Christological* fulfilment (i.e. Jesus Christ is our true high priest, Hebrews 4:14-16).<sup>7</sup> When reading Zechariah, let's do our best to understand the different layers of fulfilment.
- **The "Day of the Lord":** The final chapters describe a future day of war, divine intervention, and the establishment of God's Kingdom. These passages are interpreted differently across various scholarly and denominational traditions. While this bible study series does not include a study that focuses on eschatology (we're sparing you, because it would be too difficult), it is good for facilitators to know that the main point of the eschatological passages in Zechariah is (a) the certainty of God's final victory and (b) the holiness He requires of us as we prepare for His return.

As you read Zechariah, **ask this interpretive question:** *What is the main point of comfort or challenge this vision/oracle offered to the discouraged, post-exilic community?* This question will help to ground your interpretation in historical context and enable you to grasp the significance of the theological truths preached

<sup>4</sup> Andrew E. Hill, [\*Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), ed. David G. Firth, vol. 28, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), 131.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>6</sup> John J. Collins, *Joel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2016) (Kindle Locations 769-770). Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup> There are two further layers of fulfilment: ecclesiastical (fulfilled in the Church) and eschatological (fulfilled only at the end of time when Christ returns). This four-layer framework of prophetic fulfilment was taught by Rev Dr Maggie Low in her Old Testament class in Trinity Theological College in 2020.

to God's people in those times. That makes it possible to correctly appropriate these truths in our times.

## D. Reading the post-exilic prophets: prophetic and pastoral burdens

The post-exilic prophets spoke to a **disillusioned** community. They had returned to a land that was poor, politically subservient, and without the glorious Temple of Solomon – the marker of their identity. That disillusionment in many ways led to **disobedience**. Many of us can identify with that feeling today. Therefore, we need to hear the searching questions of the prophets:

**Haggai** asks: will we **consider our ways** (Haggai 1:5.7) and commit to building the house of the LORD? Will we allow God to strengthen us in our weakness (Haggai 2:4)? Will we look forward to the future glory of God's house (Haggai 2:9), a promise fulfilled not in any physical structure but in Christ our true Temple (John 2:19-21)?

**Zechariah** asks: will we **return to the LORD** (Zechariah 1:3)? Will we turn away from the sin that ruptures our relationship with God and with one another (Zechariah 7:9-10)? Will we look to the Messiah, the one whom we have pierced (Zechariah 12:10)?

**Malachi** asks: will we confront our **cynicism** and **spiritual apathy** (Malachi 1:2)? Will we choose to worship the LORD wholeheartedly, instead of giving Him leftovers (Malachi 1:6-7)? Will we recognise the supreme value of walking in God's ways (Malachi 3:14)?

As we facilitate, let's also discern the spiritual condition of our small groups and lead them to encounter God's life-changing truth. We must do so courageously and humbly. We cannot *merely* settle for academic accuracy and theoretical truth – though these are important. We must get to the heart of the matter – the matter of the heart!

## Conclusion

As we journey through Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi this year, let's fall in love with God and His Word. Let's devote our lives to His missional purpose, displaying to the world the sun of righteousness who rises with healing in His wings (Malachi 4:2). God alone can empower us to do all this. Let's *cry out* to Him in dependency and faith, and experience His work of restoration and renewal! This will happen – not by our power or might, but by the Spirit of the Lord (Zechariah 4:6).

## Helpful Resources:

Web resources:

[https://biblehub.com/topical/t/the\\_return\\_from\\_exile.htm](https://biblehub.com/topical/t/the_return_from_exile.htm)

[https://biblehub.com/topical/t/the\\_rebuilding\\_of\\_the\\_temple.htm](https://biblehub.com/topical/t/the_rebuilding_of_the_temple.htm)

### Easier:

Boda, Mark J. *Haggai, Zechariah*. Zondervan, 2004. (NIVAC series)

Gregory, Bryan R. *Longing for God in an age of discouragement: the Gospel according to Zechariah*. P & R Publ., 2010.

### Intermediate:

Hill, Andrew E. *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*. InterVarsity Press, 2012. (TOTC series)

Petterson, Anthony R. *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*. Vol. 25. CUP Archive, 2015. (AOTC series)

### More technical:

Boda, Mark J. *The Book of Zechariah*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2016. (NICOT series)

Collins, John J. *Joel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: Volume 17*. Vol. 17. Liturgical Press, 2016. (New Collegeville Bible Commentary)

Foster, Robert. *The theology of the books of Haggai and Zechariah*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Jacobs, Mignon R. *The books of Haggai and Malachi*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2017. (NICOT series)

## How to use the CEFC Bible Study Materials: 4 tips

1. **Don't be stressed.** The materials have been designed to give you as much help as possible. The CG studies are disseminated in Powerpoint format so there is **no need to create your own slides**. The studies contain hyperlinks to suggested worship songs (on the theme) and to videos (e.g. from the Bible Project). Hence, having access to a screen that CG members can view together will help. Each slide comes with facilitator notes in the slide notes section which provide guidance. It also provides a rough timing allocation.

- a. For instance, in the slide titled "video activity" in Study 1 on Haggai, the slide itself contains the following:

- This [short Bible Project video](#) summarises the context, structure and message of the book of Haggai. [Note: the hyperlink is provided]
- After you view it, discuss question 1:
  1. What was the situation that God's people in Judah were facing at the time of Haggai's message?

- b. The facilitator notes for this slide are as follows:

### Facilitator Notes

- Time allocated: **10min**
- This is meant to be a question to encourage participants to view the video attentively. It is not meant to get CG members to comprehensively describe the historical and cultural context of the remnant who had returned to Judah. They don't need to remember every detail!

2. **Try to get members to interact with the text and think for themselves.**

Discussion notes are provided to all the questions, which you can go through with your CG if needed. This is meant to relieve your stress by giving you less homework to do! But be clear of the purpose: the discussion notes are a resource you can use if the group is "stuck"; they are not "model answers" to be read out verbatim (if you did that without allowing for discussion, the session would not be engaging)! Try to encourage all members of the CG to participate in the discussion and understand God's Word for themselves. We will disseminate to you "participant" versions of the slides, in PDF format, that **do not** contain the discussion notes which are the suggested answers 😊 - these can be shared with CG members.

3. **Be flexible and discerning.** For one, you are not beholden to use the suggested worship songs. Feel free to choose and lead your own. Suggested timings are only indicative - if the CG needs to spend longer discussing a particular question because it is particularly relevant to members of the group, please do so.

- 4. Prayer (and worship) are as important as studying the Bible.** In prayer, people encounter God, internalise God's Word for their lives, and are inspired by the Spirit of God for His missional purpose. The studies all contain at least 1-2 slides on reflection and praying for one another. Don't skip this step! Our CG meetings are not just a place where we are *educated* on God's Word, but where we *encounter* the God who gives us His Word.