

HAGGAI

Outlined Bible

Personal Background

The name *Haggai* means "festival, feast, festive." Some suggest it may be a shortened form of *Haggiah* which means "festival of Jehovah." This has led many to conjecture that he may have been born on one of the major festival or feast days of the Jews (Passover, for example). Although he is referred to as a "prophet" (Haggai 1:1; Ezra 5:1; 6:14), little else is known of this man. His father's name is never mentioned. It is assumed that he was born in Babylon during the time of the captivity.

It is very likely Haggai returned to Jerusalem with the first group of 50,000 persons led by Zerubbabel in 536 BC. It is also possible he did some writing of psalms during this time. The Septuagint (the Greek version of the OT, which was made around 250 BC) credits him as being the author/co-author of several psalms (Psalms 138, 146-149).

"In the Midrash and Talmud, legend makes Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi to be the founders of the 'Great Synagogue' (Aboth R. Nathan 1; Baba Bathra 15a), a body that is alleged to have played a great role in post-exilic times in preserving Scripture and handing on the traditional precepts and lore. It is further believed by the rabbis that after these three prophets died the Holy Spirit departed from Israel" (Jack P. Lewis).

"It is legitimate to suppose that Haggai was still a child when he returned to Judea with his parents in 536 BC" (*Zondervan's Pictorial Encyclopedia*). Haggai was a contemporary of Zechariah and also of Confucius (557-479 BC). Haggai was the first prophet in Jerusalem after the return from Babylonian captivity. The prophecy of Haggai is second only to that of Obadiah in brevity among OT books.

Date

The prophet dates his own work very precisely. Haggai 1:1 dates it in the "second year of Darius the king." This is Darius I, son of Hystaspes (522-486 BC). Thus, the prophecy is dated in the year 520 BC. This book consists of four brief oracles, each of which is precisely dated within this year. They were delivered "between August and the last of December in the year 520 BC" (Hester, *The Heart of Hebrew History*). Thus, the four oracles of this prophecy all occur within a four month period.

Haggai was the first to prophesy to the people who had returned, although Zechariah soon followed. Haggai's ministry was very brief, but Zechariah's lasted much longer. "Some have the honor to lead, others to last, in the work of God" (Matthew Henry).

Historical Background

In the year 586 BC the southern kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians and the city of Jerusalem was reduced to ruins, along with the Temple. The people were led away into captivity (those who weren't killed), although a few were allowed to remain behind to live in the ruins. During the next several decades these few who remained in their homeland began to intermarry with the men and women of the foreign nations around them (including some of the Assyrians who had fled the destruction of their own nation). This merging of peoples led to the group known as the *Samaritans*, who, when the Jews returned to their land after the captivity, would become one of their major opponents.

During the period of the captivity, the prophets Daniel and Ezekiel, who were also taken captive, provided spiritual hope and guidance to the exiles. In the year 562 BC King Nebuchadnezzar died and Babylon then had a series of weak rulers. There was no one really strong enough to hold the empire

together. In 549 BC Cyrus (who had become king of the Persians about ten years earlier) defeated the Median king and united the Medes and Persians.

In 539 BC (on October 13) Cyrus overthrew the city of Babylon and appointed a "phantom king" over the city. This king is known in the Bible as Darius the Mede, who is probably Gubaru (or Gabryas) of secular history (this is *not* the same Darius as the one mentioned in Haggai).

Cyrus was a very benevolent ruler and had a policy of allowing enslaved peoples to return to their homelands and rebuild their temples and reinstitute their religious practices. In 538 BC Cyrus issued a decree which allowed the Jews to return to their homeland (II Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). Over 150 years *before* this event, Isaiah had prophesied that God would use Cyrus to bring about this restoration (Isaiah 44:24 - 45:7).

This return of the Jews to their homeland took place in several stages. Not all the Jews in captivity wanted to return. Many had been born in Babylon and had, over the years, built up prosperous commercial enterprises. Also, "the prospect of a return to a desolate and impoverished land, and rebuilding the ruins of the past, had little practical appeal to those Jews who had managed to take advantage of the generous and rather naive Babylonians. Only those Jews who had caught a vision of service to God and man in the light of the promised covenant were seriously interested in the challenge" (*Zondervan's Pictorial Encyclopedia*). The various stages of this return were:

536 BC --- About 50,000 return under Zerubbabel. Joshua, the priest, served as the religious leader of the returned people. Haggai returned with this groupEzra 2.

457 BC --- A second group led by Ezra, consisting of about 2058 persons, returns. Several reforms are instituted, including the problem of inter-marriage with the nationsEzra 8-10.

445 BC --- A third group, led by Nehemiah, returns. Nehemiah serves as the governor of Jerusalem. The walls are rebuiltNehemiah 2.

Upon the return of the first group (536 BC) work began on the Temple. The altar of sacrifice was restored and the foundation for the new Temple was laid. However, at this point the people ceased their work. The city and houses and wall were all in ruins, the land had been neglected for 50 years and food was scarce. The Jews who had remained in the land and intermarried with the nations offered to help rebuild, but their offer was declined --- this led to hard feelings and opposition. As a result, the people became discouraged. They turned their full attention upon surviving. Then, once they had met the basic necessities of life, they began looking toward the luxuries, and in the process became apathetic toward the rebuilding of the Temple.

Cyrus was succeeded by his son Cambyses (529-522 BC). After this king came Darius I (522-486 BC). Two years into his reign (520 BC), and 16 years after work had ceased on the Temple, God raised up the prophet Haggai "to combat apathy and depression by giving inspired leadership" for the reconstruction of the Temple (*Zondervan's Pictorial Encyclopedia*).

The Message of Haggai Haggai "was a man of one paramount idea --- build the Temple!" (Homer Hailey). His desire was to see the Temple reconstructed and their worship of God reinstated. The people had become discouraged and, as a result, forgetful of God. Their priorities were all wrong; they were thinking of themselves and not of God; building their own houses, but not His! Haggai was sent as a motivator and edifier --- Get your priorities right! Put God first, and He'll take care of your other needs (Matthew 6:33).

The message of Haggai was extremely well-received and effective. "Within three weeks and a few days after his first address to the people they began work on the Temple again" (Hailey). One of the reasons for his success was his dependence on the Word of the Lord! Twenty-six times (in a book of only 38 verses!) he appeals to God as the authority and source of his message. Such expressions as "saith Jehovah,"

"declares the Lord of hosts," and the like are very common. "This appeal to the Divine origin of what he said stirred the people, moved their hearts, and got results" (Hailey). "No prophet ever appeared at a more critical juncture in the history of a people, and it may be added, no prophet was more successful" (Marcus Dods).

The Temple was completed in 516 BC, twenty years after it was started and seventy years after it was destroyed in 586 BC (Ezra 6:15). This new Temple was desecrated in the time of Antiochus Epiphanies (168 BC), but later cleaned up. It was added on to by Herod the Great. It was essentially this same Temple that Jesus and the apostles entered time and again during their ministries.

Haggai teaches us that faithfulness and material blessings are directly connected; that "when a good work is awaiting its accomplishment, the time to do it is *now*" (Farrar); that "discouragement, however profound, is not an adequate reason for neglecting duties, even when they seem to be encompassed with difficulty. Be strong and work' is a glorious motto for human life" (Farrar); that "the basis of all successful preaching is 'saith Jehovah.' It got results then, and such preaching will get results today!" (Homer Hailey).