

Haggai

With the Babylonian exile now history and a newly returned group of Jews back in the land, the work of rebuilding the temple can begin. But sixteen years after the process is begun, the people have yet to finish the project, for their personal affairs have interfered with God's business. Haggai preaches a fiery series of sermonettes designed to stir up the nation to finish the temple. He calls the builders to renewed courage in the Lord, renewed holiness in life, and renewed faith in God who controls the future.

INTRODUCTION

Haggai's basic theme is clear: the Remnant must reorder its priorities and complete the temple before they can expect the blessing of God upon their efforts. Because of spiritual indifference they failed to respond to God's attempts to get their attention. In their despondency, they did not realize that their hardships were divinely given symptoms of their spiritual disease. Haggai brought them to an understanding that circumstances become difficult when people place their own selfish interests before God's. When they put God first and seek to do His will, He will bring His people joy and prosperity.

The etymology and meaning of *haggai* is uncertain, but it is probably derived from the Hebrew word *hag*, "festival." It may also be an abbreviated form of *haggiah*, "festival of Yahweh." Thus, Haggai's name means "Festive," possibly because he was born on the day of a major feast, such as Tabernacles (Haggai's second message takes place during that feast, 2:1).

AUTHOR

Haggai's name is mentioned nine times (1:1, 3, 12-13; 2:1, 10, 13-14, 20). He is known only from this book and from two references to him in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14. There he is seen working alongside the younger prophet Zechariah in the ministry of encouraging the rebuilding of the temple. Haggai returned from Babylon with the Remnant under Zerubbabel and evidently lived in Jerusalem. Some think chapter 2, verse 3, may mean that he was born in Judah before the 586 b.c. captivity and was one of the small company who could remember the former temple before its destruction. This would mean Haggai was about seventy-five when he prophesied in 520 b.c. It is equally likely, however, that he was born in Babylon during the Captivity.

DATE & SETTING

In 538 b.c. Cyrus of Persia issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple. The first return was led by Zerubbabel, and in 536 b.c. work on the temple began. Ezra 4-6 gives the background to the Book of Haggai and describes how the Samaritans hindered the building of the temple and wrote a letter to the Persian king. This opposition only added to the growing discouragement of the Jewish remnant. Their initial optimism upon returning to their homeland was dampened by the desolation of the land, crop failure, hard work, hostility, and other hardships. They gave up the relative comfort of Babylonian culture to pioneer in a land that seemed unproductive and full of enemies. Finding it easier to stop building than to fight their neighbors, the work on the temple ceased in 534 b.c. The pessimism of the people led to spiritual lethargy, and they became preoccupied with their own building projects. They used political opposition and a theory that the temple was not to be rebuilt until some later time (perhaps after Jerusalem was rebuilt) as excuses for neglecting the house of the Lord.

It was in this context that God called His prophets Haggai and Zechariah to the same task of urging the people to complete the temple. Both books are precisely dated: Haggai 1:1, September 1, 520 b.c.; Haggai 1:15, September 24, 520 b.c.; Haggai 2:1, October 21, 520 b.c.; Zechariah 1:1, November, 520 b.c.; Haggai 2:10, 20, December 24, 520 b.c.; Zechariah 1:7, February 24, 519 b.c.; Zechariah 7:1, December 4, 518 b.c. Zechariah's prophecy commenced between Haggai's second and third messages. Thus, after fourteen years of neglect, work on the temple was resumed in 520 b.c. and was completed in 516 b.c. (Ezra 6:15).