

# The Prophets

## Lesson #51

### Introduction To Haggai

#### I. **Structure Of Haggai**

- A. The two short chapters of Haggai contain four important messages from the prophet to the people. He called on the people to rebuild the temple, to remain faithful to God's promises, to be holy and enjoy God's great provisions and to keep their hope set on the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of His kingdom.
- B. The writing of Haggai is unlike that of his predecessors. Lacking in his work is the rhythm and rolling grandeur of Nahum, the poetry and charm of Habakkuk or the fire of Amos. In comparison, his work seems subdued and prosaic, but he was completely successful. Within three weeks and a few days after his first address to the people they began work on the project.

#### II. **Authorship And Date**

- A. This book was written by the prophet Haggai, whose name means "festive." In Hebrew, the name is from a root descriptive of excited or rapid movement such as dancing. The name could have been a shortened form of Haggiah, meaning "festival of Jehovah." Our knowledge of the man himself is limited to Ezra (5:1-2; 6:14-16) and to the short book which bears his name. Like those whom he encouraged, he probably spent many years in captivity in Babylon before returning to his native land. A contemporary of the prophet Zechariah, he must have worked constantly as a prophetic voice among his countrymen in Jerusalem.
- B. He delivered these messages of encouragement "in the second year of King Darius" (1:1), a Persian ruler. This dates his book precisely in 520 B.C. Although the book furnishes us with the time of prophecy, the book of Ezra furnishes most of the details of the history of his period and work.

#### III. **Historical Setting**

- A. Judah had been carried into Babylonian captivity by Nebuchadnezzar when Jerusalem and the temple was destroyed (586 B.C.). Daniel, who was carried into Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar after his first invasion of Judah (605 B.C.), spanned the entire period of the captivity. Ezekiel was taken to Babylon by the Chaldean king in 597 B.C. He prophesied until 572 or 570 B.C. In these two men God provided spiritual hope and guidance to the exiles.

- B. Following Nebuchadnezzar's death (562 B.C.), Babylon had a series of weak rulers; there was not one who could continue the work of the great founder of the empire or who could hold it together. By 549 B.C. Cyrus, a Persian, had defeated the Median king and united the Medes and Persians under his own rule. In 539 B.C., while Nabonidas, king of Chaldea, was away and his son, Belshazzar, acted in his stead, Cyrus entered and took the city of Babylon. To rule over the city he appointed a "phantom king," known in the Bible as Darius the Mede. This man is not to be confused with Darius Hystaspes of Haggai's book. Darius the Mede was probably Gubaru (or Gabryas) of secular history.
- C. Cyrus demonstrated an unusually benevolent spirit and attitude toward those he conquered. His disposition was to reverse the practice of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquerors who transplanted conquered peoples from their homeland into distant places and transported others from their land into the conquered land. Soon after his conquest of Babylonia, Cyrus issued a decree that the various exiled peoples could return to their own lands, rebuild the temples to their deities and call on their gods to act favorably toward him and his house. The account of the decree concerning the Jews is found in 2 Chronicles 36 and Ezra 1. The decree was issued some time in 538 B.C.; the first group of exiles returned under Zerubbabel in 536 B.C. Over 150 years before, Isaiah had prophesied that Jehovah would raise up one named Cyrus, whom He designated as His servant, who would allow a remnant to return (44:24-45:7). From this some have concluded that Cyrus was a monotheist, but this is incorrect; he sought the favor of all the gods. There is no evidence that he was a worshiper of Ahura Mazda, the Persian lord of light and goodness, whose attributes are said to have been life, truth and righteousness. However, Ahura Mazda was the god of Darius I. In the Cyrus Cylinder, discovered in 1880, Cyrus claims that Marduk, god of the Chaldeans, looked through all the lands for one to lead the troops in delivering Babylon, selected him, and accompanied the great general in his conquests.
- D. Cyrus was succeeded by his son, Cambyses (529-522 B.C.), who had none of the greatness of heart of his father. Cambyses invaded Egypt with carefully laid plans for its conquest, but was called home by a rebellion in which the schemer Gomates posed as the brother of Cambyses. Secretly Cambyses had already put that brother to death. Unable to face the humiliation of having slain his own brother, there is strong evidence that Cambyses took his life while en route to Babylon.
- E. The empire was thrown into a state of upheaval, convulsed by a series of revolts, especially in the east. Darius I, Hystaspes (522-486 B.C.), with the aid of his father, Hystaspes, an able general, and one or two others on whom he could depend, put down these revolts one by one.

In his record he lists nine specific major revolts; there are others not listed. He is described as "an able administrator as well as a successful general" (Sayce). To him is ascribed the credit for organizing the empire into a consistent whole.

- F. Upon their return to Jerusalem, 536 B.C., the Jews erected or restored the altar of sacrifices to Jehovah and laid the foundation of the temple. At this point they ceased work on the temple until the second year of Darius I, when Haggai and Zechariah were called to the work of arousing their fellow Jews to complete the work begun sixteen years earlier. The condition of the Jews seems to have been wretched and miserable. Circumstances in Judea had not been as they had anticipated. The cities and houses lay in rubble, the walls were torn down and the land had been neglected for fifty years. Food was scarce and the land had not produced as they had expected. Neighboring peoples were unfriendly and at times antagonistic to them. As a whole, the picture was quite discouraging.

#### IV. ***Scriptural Contribution***

- A. Perhaps the most striking feature in Haggai's message is the repeated appeal to Jehovah as the source of his word. In some form he uses the appeal "saith the Lord," "the word of the Lord of hosts," and similar expressions twenty-six times in the four short addresses of thirty-eight verses. This appeal to the divine origin of what he said stirred the people, moved their hearts and produced results.
- B. Haggai urged the people to put rebuilding the temple at the top of their list of priorities. This shows that authentic worship is a very important matter and this is why he is known as the "prophet of the temple." The rebuilt temple in Jerusalem was important as a place of worship and sacrifice. Centuries later, at the death of Jesus "the veil of the temple was rent in the midst" (Luke 23:45), demonstrating that He had given Himself as the eternal sacrifice on our behalf and that Christ had laid the old system of worship aside.

#### V. ***Special Considerations***

- A. The book of Haggai ends with a beautiful promise of the coming of the Messiah. Meanwhile, God's special servant, Zerubbabel, was to serve as a "signet" (2:23), a sign or promise of the glorious days to come. As the Jewish governor of Jerusalem under appointment by the Persians, Zerubbabel showed there was hope for the full restoration of God's covenant people in their native land.
- B. The book of Haggai supplies us with several permanent lessons. First, there is the divine origin of all successful preaching. Haggai was deeply committed to his message because it was God's message. Second, the

sin of procrastination is contagious. The people's sixteen year postponement of rebuilding God's house had rendered them unclean in God's sight and had brought them mildew and hail instead of bountiful harvests. Third, the church is the center of religion. The prophet attaches an almost sacramental significance to the temple (2:7-8). This conception can only be fulfilled in a spiritual sense (Hebrews 12:26-28). Fourth, Zerubbabel and the temple points forward to the Christian dispensation. In Zerubbabel and the temple, we have a harbinger of Jesus Christ and the church.