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HAGGAI

1

Introduction to Haggai

Historical Background

WHEN THE BABYLONIAN ARMY completed its divinely appointed task of destroying Jerusalem with its sacred Temple in 586 BC, the Jewish people faced years in captivity that threatened to wipe out their nation and religion. Without the Temple, so central to their whole way of life, the Jews had no rallying point to bind them together. It was the Temple toward which they had prayed, and, indeed, Solomon had instructed them to direct their prayers to Jerusalem and the Temple even if they found themselves held captive in a foreign land (1 Kings 8:48; Jon 2:7). Thus it was with heartfelt joy that the Jews heard the decree of Cyrus, King of Persia, allowing the return to Palestine to rebuild the Temple in 538 BC. This Persian conqueror of Babylon, by reversing the deportation policies of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, paved the way for Zerubbabel to lead some 50,000 Jews back to Palestine.

Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, all efforts were directed toward the construction of the sacred shrine. Using Phoenician materials and workmen, even as Solomon had done, the people were able to lay the foundation of the Temple about two years after their return (Ezra 3:8-10). This important milestone led to rejoicing and praising God, because the Jews were well aware what a restored Temple would mean for the entire Dispersion.

Unfortunately, the Samaritans who had resided in Palestine

since the seventh century also sensed something of the political significance of that Temple. After an unsuccessful attempt to join ranks with the Jews, the rejected Samaritans used terrorist tactics to bring to a halt the building so auspiciously started. Their opposition included direct appeals to Cyrus and his successor, Cambyses, to warn of the “rebellious tendencies” of the Jews. Persian pressure was evidently brought to bear upon the returnees, which, coupled with Samaritan harassment, dashed the hopes of the Jews for a quick Temple completion. From 536 to 520 the work stalled, and the Jews seemed resigned to this sad state of affairs.

When Darius the Great assumed the throne in 521, the Jews themselves were more to blame for their inactivity than their angry opponents. Darius showed interest in religion throughout his empire, and the Jews should have sensed that the opportunity to resume their labors was at hand. Instead, they were strangely satisfied to exist without a center for worship. Spiritual paralysis had set in, and it was to arouse them from this lethargy that Haggai emerged with his powerful preaching.

The prophet. Apart from the book that bears his name, Haggai is mentioned only in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14. There, he is linked with Zechariah, son of Iddo, his much younger contemporary, who aided him in the task of proclaiming God’s message concerning the Temple. In Ezra 5:2 the prophets are credited with valuable support in the building project. Zechariah and Haggai are again joined together in the Septuagint, which attributes Psalms 145-148 to these prophets. Other versions also relate Haggai to the writing of a few psalms. The tradition may reflect the keen interest of the prophetic pair in the worship of the second Temple.

The name *Haggai* means “festal” and is derived from the word *hag*, “feast, festival,” which usually refers to the three pilgrimage feasts of the Jewish religious calendar. It may be that Haggai was born during one of these festal celebrations (Feast of Unleavened Bread, of Weeks, of Tabernacles). Since the name of his father

is not given, Haggai may have come from a family of humble origins.

Based on Haggai 2:3, several commentators have inferred that the prophet was one of those who had seen the splendor of Solomon's Temple prior to 587. If this is true, Haggai must have been about eighty years old when he prophesied, a factor that may account for his very brief ministry.

Date and style. This compact prophecy ranks next to Obadiah as the shortest book in the Old Testament. It was the first prophetic work of the postexilic period, and there is happily no quarrel between liberals and conservatives as to the date of writing. Haggai himself assigns a date to each of his four messages, ranging from the first day of the sixth month (August-September) to the twenty-fourth of the ninth month (November-December), all coming within the second year of Darius Hystaspes (520 BC). Thus, the entire book covers only a four-month span.

Not infrequently the style of Haggai has been disparaged for its lack of brilliance and poetic flair. Judging from the effectiveness of this brief book, however, one dare not criticize him too harshly. The concise message preached vigorously in the power of God was more successful than many a longer prophetic work.

The prophet spoke authoritatively, claiming five times that he was declaring the word of the Lord. In 1:1, 3, and in 2:1, the Lord's word came literally "by the hand of" or "through" Haggai, while the expression used in 2:10 and 20 states that the word came "to" Haggai. Further emphasis on the source of his message is found in 1:13, where the prophet speaks "by the commission of the LORD." His was a divine imperative.

Repetition of words and phrases is carefully interwoven into the book. Several times (1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 4) Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest, are linked with the people or the remnant of the people in the same verse or context. Yet in 2:21-23 Zerubbabel alone is addressed, and the contrast may be significant. Twice in Haggai the expression "Consider your

ways” (lit., “Set your heart upon your ways”) occurs (1:5, 7). An additional two times the same “Set your heart” appears in the clause “Consider from this day onward” (2:15, 18). Early in the book, the prophet also uses repetition to bemoan the fact that the Lord’s house lay desolate (1:4, 9). Then, in 2:6 and 21, we find the identical line, “I am going to shake the heavens and the earth.”

As mentioned in the preface, rhetorical questions are sprinkled throughout the book. Usually it is the Lord who asks the question either of the people in general (1:4, 9; 2:3, 19) or of the priests (2:12-13). The first two questions sound the harshest notes, as Haggai probes the souls of this people so slow to complete their divinely appointed task.

Another stylistic feature relates to allusions or quotations from other canonical books. Haggai effectively draws upon several verses found in Deuteronomy 28. Compare Haggai 1:6 with Deuteronomy 28:38-40 and especially 2:17 with Deuteronomy 28:22. In the latter pair, “blasting wind” and “mildew” are identical in each passage. The prophet is clearly reminding the people of the curses threatened by Moses, which had indeed brought distress to the returned exiles. In 2:4 the thrice repeated imperative, “Take courage,” reflects the same word found in Joshua 1:9. Directed toward another Joshua, the son of Jehozadak and the high priest, this exhortation is most appropriate.

Outline of Haggai

- I. First Message: The Challenge to Build the Temple (1:1-11)
 - A. Introduction (v. 1)
 - B. God Answers the People’s Excuse (vv. 2-4)
 - C. God Sums Up the Plight of the People (vv. 5-6)
 - D. God Gives Reasons for Their Distress (vv. 7-11)

- II. Positive Response of Zerubbabel and the People (1:12-15)
 - A. The Leaders and People Listen and Obey (v. 12)
 - B. The Lord Empowers the Workers (vv. 13-15)

- III. Second Message: The Glory of the New Temple Defined (2:1-9)
 - A. Comparison with Solomon's Temple (vv. 1-3)
 - B. Encouragement for the Builders (vv. 4-5)
 - C. God's Supply of Glory for the New Temple (vv. 6-9)

- IV. Third Message: The Building of the Temple Reverses Israel's Fortunes (2:10-19)
 - A. The Contagious Nature of Sin (vv. 10-13)
 - B. The Unclean Condition of Israel (v. 14)
 - C. Economic Disaster for Failure to Build the Temple (vv. 15-17)
 - D. Economic Blessing Accompanies Temple Building (vv. 18-19)

- V. Fourth Message: The Promise Concerning Zerubbabel (2:20-23)
 - A. The Overthrow of the Nations (vv. 20-22)
 - B. The Exaltation of Zerubbabel (v. 23)