

The Book of Haggai

Introduction

Between Zephaniah and Haggai is the period of the captivity of the house of Judah in Babylon. Haggai is the first of the three post-Exilic prophets, though not the most prominent one, which is Zechariah.

Haggai means "my feast," or perhaps "the Festal one." Nothing is known of his personal history. He is mentioned in Ezra, chapter 5:1 and 6:14. The first verse of the book which bears his name gives us the date of his prophecy. It was in the second year of Darius the king. The king is Darius Hystaspes, and the year is 520 B.C. Two months later young Zechariah began to lift up his voice likewise. It seems that Haggai's prophetic office extended over four months only. Some have concluded from chapter 2:3 that he must have known the first temple. If he saw that temple he must have been at least 80 years old, if not older, when he prophesied. But the passage upon which this supposition rests does not necessarily imply this. He was probably born in the captivity, and a young man like his greater associate Zechariah.

The Times of Haggai and Zechariah

In order to understand the prophecies of Haggai as well as Zechariah, the history contained in the book of Ezra must be carefully studied. The reader will consult the introduction to the book of Ezra and the annotations on the different chapters.

We mention here but a few of the leading historical facts of this period. After the remnant had returned from Babylon the feasts commanded by the law were first of all reinstituted. Then in the second year, 535 B.C., the foundations of the new temple were laid. It was a time of rejoicing and a time of sorrow. What was this second temple in comparison with the first house? (See Ezra 3:12, 13.) There were tears of joy and tears of sorrow. Then the building of the temple was neglected for a time. There were three causes. The indifference, the faintheartedness of the people, and the oppositions from the enemy. The Samaritans, a mongrel race (Ezra 4:1, 9, 10) offered, after the foundation of the temple had been laid, to form an alliance with the Jewish remnant, and to assist them with it. When the proposal was nobly rejected they employed political means to dwarf the rebuilding of the house of the Lord, by misrepresentations at the Persian court. Their schemes, after some time, seemed to be quite successful, when in reply to their petition to Artaxerxes, 522 B.C., they were told that the building of the temple must be stopped. Artaxerxes was a pretender, known in history as Pseudo-Smerdis. During the remainder of his reign the building was completely stopped; but it lasted about a year only. His successor, Darius Hystaspes (521 B.C.) was more favorable to his Jewish subjects. It was then that Haggai and Zechariah urged the continuation of the building of the temple in their prophetic messages. But the slow progress in the building of the temple was altogether chargeable to the intrigues of the Samaritans. The remnant was negligent in this matter to a great extent. During the time when the house was unfinished many Jews had used their means in erecting fine dwellings and beautifying them; they acted in a selfish, indifferent manner.

The harvest also had turned out very poor, the blessing of the Lord was lacking in all that they did, therefore the prophet spoke then and told them that all was an expression of the displeasure of the Lord in neglecting His house. "Ye have sown much and bring in little; ye eat but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink, ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages, earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes" (1:6).

These were outward circumstances which led the Spirit of God to call Haggai to the prophetic office.

The Message of Haggai

The purpose of his message has been stated in the preceding paragraph. But the message goes far beyond his time, and like the former prophets, leads up to the time of glory. He speaks of the Messiah, our Lord, as the desire of all nations, and of the times when all nations shall be shaken; when another house is to be filled with the Lord's glory. This passage is quoted in Hebrews 12:26, 27, and will be more closely examined in the annotations. Our postmillennial brethren in their expositions have explained all these promises as being realized in the Church. The second temple is, according to their views, a prophecy concerning the Church. In the language of one: "He announces that the time is not far off when the privileges of Jehovah's worship shall be extended over all the earth, and that the treasures of all nations will then be brought to adorn this temple, and exalt its glory above the departed splendor of the former house, while peace and prosperity shall reign among the unnumbered worshippers." But inasmuch as none of the prophets knew anything whatever about the body of Christ, the Church, in which there is neither Jew nor Gentile, this interpretation is incorrect. The Church is the mystery which was not made known in former ages (Eph. 3). Hence Haggai did not describe the Church under the term of the temple, but his prophecy reaches beyond the church-age to the day of the Lord, when all nations will be shaken, and the Lord will return and bring with Him the promised glory.

The message of Haggai is written in a very simple style, quite different from the style of the pre-exilic prophets. He makes frequent use of interrogatives.

The Division of Haggai

The two chapters contain five addresses. The first address in chapter 1:1-11 is one of reproof and warning, to arouse the remnant from the apathy into which they had drifted in the building of the temple. The second address in chapter 1:12-15 was made when the people responded to his appeal, assuring them of the presence of the Lord in their obedience. The third address in chapter 2:1-9 contrasts the glory of the first house with the greater glory of the second house and introduces the distinctively Messianic glory. The fourth address in chapter 2:10-19 contains moral instructions and the assurance of blessing. The last address, the conclusion of the message of Haggai, points still more prominently to the day of the Lord, when heaven and earth is to be shaken and the kingdoms of the nations will be overthrown. In the last verse, Zerubbabel, the servant of Jehovah, is a prophetic type of our Lord.

Analysis and Annotations

CHAPTER 1:1-11 Haggai's First Address

1. The introduction (1:1)
2. The reproof (1:2-6)
3. Consider your ways (1:7-11)

Verse 1. Darius Hystaspes had been king one year and had entered upon the second year, 520 B.C., when, in the sixth month, in the first day of the month, the word of the Lord was given by Haggai. It was addressed to Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Josedech, the high-priest. Zerubbabel and Joshua were the prominent civic and religious leaders of that day. Zerubbabel was the son of Shealtiel (which means asking of God in prayer). Zerubbabel (sown in Babylon) was of royal seed, in direct line of descent from David. In Ezra this princely leader is called by his Persian name Sheshbazzar. In the genealogy of Luke 3:27 he is called a son of Neri, a descendant of David through his son Nathan; he is also called a son of Pedaiiah. These divergent statements have been satisfactorily explained by the law of the Levirate marriage (Deut. 25:10).

Joshua is mentioned several times in Zechariah. He was the first high-priest after the captivity, and is called in Ezra and Nehemiah Jeshua, the name Joshua transcribed into Greek. He and Zerubbabel are prophetic types of our Lord as the King-Priest. Joshua was the son of Josedech (Jehozadak) the high-priest who was taken by the Babylonians into captivity (1 Chron. 6:15), and was the grandson of Seraiah, who was put to death by Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah, after the capture of Jerusalem.

Verses 2-6. His message starts with the excuse which the people offered for the apathy in the things of God. "This people say, The time is not come, the time that the LORD'S house should be built." The Lord does not address them as "My people," but in a way which is deprecatory. It was an empty excuse, that His time had not yet come; in reality they were cold towards the cause of the Lord, and sought their own things in place of it. In their indifferent spirit they probably took the relation to Persia, produced by the Samaritan interference, as the ground of their opinion, that it was not the time to come and finish the task. They were an ungrateful people and should have known better. The Lord, who had announced through Isaiah that Cyrus should be born and say, "Let Jerusalem be built," who raised up Cyrus, whom the prophet had named so many years before he was born; the Lord who had brought them back to the land and prospered them, would certainly give them the victory over all their enemies and make the building of the house possible. They hid behind the unreasonable excuse, it is not the time. How often the same excuse has been used by the professing people of God in our age!

Then the Lord answers them. "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your ceiled houses, while this house lieth waste?" They had begun well, as we read in Ezra 3, when they set the altar upon its bases. But now they had departed from their endeavor; the interest in the one thing had waned, and selfish aims were substituted. They were living in luxurious houses, while His house was completely neglected, it was in a waste condition. The insincerity of their vain excuse was therefore exposed.

Then comes the exhortation to consider their ways (literally: set your heart upon your ways). Had it been profitable for them? No. Ever since they left off building His house bitter disappointment had been their lot. All their self-seeking brought them no gain, but steady loss. The Lord's blessing, given to His earthly people concerning earthly things, had been withholden. They had sown much seed; there was a scanty return. They had not been satisfied in eating or drinking. Their clothing was insufficient. The wages they earned may have been good wages, but it was as if they put them in a bag with holes; the great part of them was lost. While all this must be considered on the ground of the Jew, the principle nevertheless holds good for us as well. "But seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33), also refers primarily to the believing Jew, yet it has its application for us. The heart of the believer must always seek Him first. The life of a child of God must always be devoted to Him and the things of God. Our business is to care for His things; His gracious business is to care for us in all things. Neglect of the things of God always brings the same bitter disappointment.

Verses 7-11. Consider your ways; the Lord spoke again. And now He commands them to go to the mountains and fetch wood and to build the house. He declares that He will take pleasure in it and that He will be glorified. How graciously He craves the whole-heartedness of His people and their full devotion to Himself. It is in worship, indicated by the building of the house, that we glorify Him. It is worshippers the Father seeketh, worshippers in spirit and in truth (John 4).

On account of their neglect, neglect of Himself and the honor of His Name, as centered in the house, He could not give the blessing He is so willing to bestow upon His people. He withheld the dew and the rain; He prevented the fruitfulness of the fields, and all else was stunted, on account of their attitude toward Him.

"It was Jehovah who blighted their selfish efforts. He was dealing with them on account of their unbelief and neglect. It was not because He loved them not, but because He did. 'Whom the Lord

loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth.' When the Lord allows persons to go away without rebuke, it is the sure sign that all practical bond is broken--if any bond did exist--that He now disowns them, for a time at least. Hence these very chastenings of the Jewish remnant were the proof that His eyes were still over them, and that He felt their negligence of Him and resented--in divine faithfulness--the failure of His people in the care of His glory" (William Kelly).

CHAPTER 1:12-15 The Second Address

The spirit of God carried home the burning message of rebuke, and that happened which did not happen with the generation before the captivity. They considered their ways. They took it to heart. They knew the Lord had spoken, and that He was right, the rebuke well earned. Happy are all those who act always in this way, who humble themselves and are obedient to the Lord. It is a refreshing scene which the twelfth verse records. They all united, Zerubbabel, Joshua, and all the remnant of the people. There was not one dissenting voice. They all obeyed the Lord and the words of the prophet.

"Then Haggai, the LORD'S messenger, spoke again in the LORD'S message unto the people." It is striking how it is made prominent that he did not speak of himself, but was the Lord's messenger and brought the Lord's message. Would to God that all those who claim the dignity of a minister of the gospel were all the Lord's messengers, and spake nothing but the Lord's message. The greatest curse in Christendom today is the man who claims to be the Lord's servant, but has no message from the Lord, for the reason that he has lost faith in the Word of God.

Another has pointed out the fact that Haggai is the one prophet who is directly called Jehovah's messenger. He is the least of the post-exilic prophets, yet the Lord puts this honor upon him. In spite of his inferior style, according to the critics, the Lord owns him by this title of distinction.

And what was his message at this time? "I am with you, saith the LORD." That is the content of the second address; just one sentence. But what a sentence it is! What assurance it brings to the heart, and how it inspires faith to action. "I am with you, saith the LORD." Such is our blessed assurance. "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age." And as we look to Him and trust Him there is power.

The result was a mighty revival in the good work. The Lord stirred them up through His Word, the brief message He sent. Every true revival begins the same way. It has been well said, "I am with you, is the saving principle for faith in the weakest possible day, and let me add, what had they better in the brightest day?"

CHAPTER 2:1-9 The Third Address

Over a month later, after a good deal of work had been done, the prophet delivered his third message. He is commanded to speak to the same company, headed by Zerubbabel and Joshua; but here the remnant of the people, the exiles who had returned, is also included. If we consult Ezra 3:12 we find that many old men, who had seen the temple of Solomon, burst out in weeping when the small foundation was laid for the new temple. A similar feeling possessed the people when they resumed the temple work after Haggai's first message. In comparison with the former temple, so grand and glorious, the new temple was a feeble and insignificant affair. The prophet begins his message by asking, "Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory, and how do you see it now? Is it not in your eyes as nothing?" No doubt there was additional weeping when the prophet asked these questions.

Haggai then becomes the prophet of comfort and of hope. "Yet now be strong" is in literal translation, "And now be comforted, O Zerubbabel, saith Jehovah; be comforted all the people of the land, saith Jehovah; for I am with you saith the LORD of Hosts." They were discouraged on account of the smallness of their cause. It is then when the Lord delights to comfort and to cheer his trusting people. He was with His people, though now no longer a mighty host as of old, but only a

small remnant; yet He had not forgotten the Word which He covenanted with them, when He brought them out of Egypt with an outstretched arm. "My Spirit abideth among you; fear ye not." And that should be enough. His Spirit was dwelling with them to execute His work, and be their strength. The gift of the Spirit in New Testament times is something greater than this. After the finished work of our Lord and His glorification, the third Person of the Godhead came in person to indwell every member of the Body of Christ.

Verses 6-9 contain the great prophecy concerning the future. It takes us beyond the time of Haggai, past this present age, and puts before our hearts the same great and glorious day when Christ comes again, when there shall be greater glory and peace. The question is, who is the desire of all nations? It merits a closer examination, for the critics have labored to explain away the Messianic meaning of this sentence and rob it of its true meaning. For instance, Canon Driver, in The New Century Bible makes the following comment: "The desirable things of all nations shall come, i.e., their costly treasures will be brought to beautify the temple." The Hebrew is a peculiar phrase; the subject is a noun, feminine, singular; the predicate is a plural masculine. The word "chemdath"--desire, is the same as used in Daniel 11:37, the desire of women. If literally translated it would read thus: "And the desire of all nations, they shall come." The Septuagint therefore translates it, "the choice things of all nations shall come;" others have rendered it in the following ways: "The things desired by all nations shall come," with the interpretation that it is the gospel; "all the Gentiles shall come with their delightful things;" "the beauty of all the heathen;" "they shall come to the desire of all nations;" "with the desire of all nations;" the "choicest of all nations (that is the best of them) will come," etc. With all these suggested renderings of the difficult phrase there can be no question that it points to Christ, and must be interpreted as a great Messianic prophecy. The most ancient comments are on this line altogether. Christ is the object of the desire of all nations. This does not necessarily mean that He is subjectively the desire of the nations, but He is objectively, for through Him alone the nations can be blest and receive the righteousness and peace which they need.

First, the announcement is made, "I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land." Have these convulsions been? While there have been shakings of kingdoms in the political sense, and the earth has often been shaken physically and otherwise, this prophecy is yet to be fulfilled. The Holy Spirit bears witness to it in the New Testament, for we read in Hebrews 12:26-28, "Whose voice then (at Sinai in a physical manifestation) shook the earth; but now He hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only but also heaven. And the word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Wherefore, we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved (the coming kingdom and not the church) let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear." This settles the question as to the futurity of this prophecy. Critics have objected to this interpretation on account of the statement that this universal shaking is to be in "a little while." They apply it therefore to the nearer political events of that period. But the future in prophecy is often fore-shortened, and besides this, the little while is not man's little while, but God's; with Him a thousand years is as a day. Furthermore, in the political events of the times which followed the restoration of the Jews from Babylon not all nations were involved. The prophecy before us declares, "I will shake all nations;" this, too, is future. The Messiah, spoken of next as "the desire of all nations," came the first time, but His coming did not bring the blessing and glory to nations as predicted here, nor did the promised peace come. He made peace in His sacrificial death; the foundation for "peace on earth" was then laid, as well as for the great future blessing of all the nations. But the Jews delivered Him into the hands of the Gentiles, and the Gentiles treated Him as did the Jews. In anticipation of His rejection He said, "Think not that I am come to bring peace, but the sword." Then followed the present age, unknown with its mystery, the church, to the prophets. It will close with the shaking of all nations, when the King-Messiah will appear again and bring the promised blessing to all nations. The silver and gold, which belong to the Lord, will then be brought by the nations. (Isa. 60:5).

It is important to read the ninth verse in the right way, as our Authorized Version is incorrect. It does not say in the Hebrew, "The glory of this latter house shall be greater than the former," but the Hebrew is, "The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, saith the LORD of hosts; and in this place will I give peace, saith the LORD of hosts." The house of course is the temple. The visible glory dwelt once in the former house; the day is coming when there will be greater glory, the day of His glorious manifestation; then in connection with His coming and that coming restoration, He will give peace.

CHAPTER 2:10-19 The Fourth Address

A few months later Haggai delivered another address of moral instruction and admonition. The question the prophet asks first is answered by the priests negatively. This is followed by a second question, "If one that is unclean by a dead body touch any of these, shall it be unclean?" This they answered affirmatively; for he that is defiled puts defilement upon everything he handles. When they had given the right answers, the prophet makes the moral application. "So is this people, and so is this nation before me, saith Jehovah; and so is every work of their hands; and that which they offer thereon is unclean." All their works and offerings were unclean, because they were in that condition. They had to be cleansed first. Separation from evil, from that which defiles, was therefore demanded. So it is today. The order is "cease to do evil" and then "learn to do well." We are, as Christians, no less exhorted to purge ourselves, to separate from evil, and then to become fit vessels for the Master's use.

And then the Lord challenges them to prove Him, to see if they separate from evil, are wholly for Him, how faithful He is going to be to them. "From this day," the day of a true return to the Lord followed by obedience and separation, "I will bless you."

CHAPTER 2:20-23 The Fifth Address

The final address of Jehovah's messenger is altogether prophetic. It is addressed exclusively to Zerubbabel, the governor, a son of David. He tells the princely leader that the heavens and the earth will be shaken; it is the same as in verse 6. When that comes the throne of the kingdoms will be overthrown; the power of the kingdoms of the nations (the ten kingdoms; Dan. 2) will be destroyed, for in that day, the falling stone, typifying the second coming of Christ, will make an end of Gentile dominion. The battle of Armageddon will take place and end the military power of these nations. Zerubbabel, the son of David, is the type of Christ, the Son of David. He will then receive the throne of His father David. He will be made a signet. The signet-ring was among those nations a mark of honor. It was given by monarchs to their prime-ministers, conferring all authority upon them. Thus the Lord Jesus Christ is pictured as receiving from God the rule and authority.