

HAGGAI

Post-exilic Prophecy.

JEWISH tradition confined recorded post-exilic prophecy to the contents of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, and this is the view adopted by us. Modern scholarship for the most part would add "Trito-Isaiah," Isa. 24-27, Joel and the moral tale of Jonah, as well as considerable additions in other prophets. Even were we to accept this, it would not materially alter our picture of post-exilic prophecy.

It seems to be clear that prophecy died out very largely because prophets were not really wanted. In Zech. 13: 2-6 we have the last miserable end of the professional prophets. Nehemiah was troubled by them (Neh. 6: 10-14), but it is striking that he reveals no sense of loss at the lack of genuine prophets. We can discover at least four reasons for the rapidly diminishing regard for the prophet.

(1) The religious Jew, apart from an exceptional crisis that might occur once in a life-time, had outgrown the need for some almost mechanical means for the discovery of God's will, whether through the priest with Urim and Thummim or the prophet through his dreams or clairvoyance. He had in large measure learnt that we can know God's will now through His self-revelation in the past. This was intensified by the post-exilic community's being a religious rather than a national community, as was the case before the exile. This was emphasized by the failure to obtain national independence until 142 B.C. The Jew who was not interested in his religion normally just did not return from Babylonia.

(2) The returning exiles contained an altogether disproportionate number of priests, Levites and ecclesiastical persons, a total of nearly 5,700 out of 42,360 (Ezra 2), a proportion of about 1 in $7\frac{1}{2}$. Ezra is not so explicit about the numbers that returned with him, but we may be fairly sure that they were not strikingly dissimilar. The priest always tended to be suspicious of the prophet and to think himself his superior. It is therefore typical that when doubts arose as to the eligibility of some of the priests that had returned, the Tirshatha deferred the matter until "there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim" (Ezra 2: 62f). There is no

suggestion that a prophetic opinion, if offered, would have been acceptable. Quite consistently with this whole attitude we find that Zechariah was a priest, and Haggai and Malachi probably came from ecclesiastical circles. It is true that in I Macc. 4: 46; 14: 41 we have certain matters kept for prophetic decision in the future, but the context creates the impression that the prophet was not expected until Mal. 4: 5 was fulfilled. That the priest can be called the angel of Jehovah in Mal. 2: 7 (the English misleadingly, though accurately, for angel=messenger, renders "the messenger of the LORD") shows how the priesthood was now exalted.

(3) Ezra and to a less extent Nehemiah stamped on the post-exilic community the awareness that they were a people under the divine law; at the same time the story clearly suggests that Ezra was no innovator; he was merely giving expression to a principle already generally accepted. His underlying assumption, one that was bound to lead in due time to Pharisaism and Rabbinic Judaism, was that in the Law as interpreted by the prophets of the past all that man needed to know of God had been given. All that was needed was a mind filled with wisdom derived from the fear of the Lord. In such a society a prophet was an anachronism.

(4) Even if conditions had not been unpropitious for the prophets, it is likely that they would gradually have faded out, for their main work was done. God had said all through them in sundry ways and divers manners that could be said. Now the community had to learn and absorb what had been given them in the Law and the Prophets, that they might be prepared for Him who was the fulfilment of both the Law and the Prophets. Modern scholarship has done much to fill the gap between the Testaments, but the gap has its place in our Bibles; it was a time not of revelation but of learning and discipline.

The Historical Background of Haggai and Zechariah.

Though Cyrus was a man of most enlightened character, it was as a world conqueror that he impressed himself on the history of his time, and his conquest of Babylon in 539 B.C. was only an incident in continuous fighting that did not end until his death in the field in 530 B.C. Most of the short reign of Cambyses, his son (530-522 B.C.) was spent in the conquest and breaking of Egypt. So it was not until the reign of Darius I (522-486 B.C.) that the Persian empire was really organized.

It is easy then to see how the much stronger neighbours of the Jews found it easy to frustrate the decree of Cyrus about the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 4: 4f), especially in the

matter of covering the expenses (Ezra 6: 4). This worked in with the very real material difficulties the returned exiles had to face, and so they acquiesced saying, "It is not yet the time for the building of the house of Jehovah" (Hag. 1: 2). It is quite typical that the priestly Chronicler should mention only the outside opposition, the prophet Haggai only the inner unwillingness. The truth is a combination of both.

By the second year of Darius the main rebellions that threatened to rend the Persian empire asunder had been crushed, and it was clear that strong rule might be expected. The excuse of external opposition had now collapsed, and so the prophets Haggai and Zechariah arose to deal with the real spiritual reasons that had held up the rebuilding of the Temple. How right they were in ignoring the excuse of external opposition is seen by the fact that as soon as the rebuilding of the Temple was officially challenged (Ezra 5: 3), the central government reaffirmed and strengthened the original edict of Cyrus (Ezra 6: 6-12), which was then obeyed by the local authorities (Ezra 6: 13).¹

The Prophet Haggai and His Message.

Though it is not explicitly stated, it is fairly universally assumed that Haggai was one of those that had returned from Babylonia. The section 2: 10-14 is so technical in its outlook that it is generally agreed that Haggai must either have been a priest or have belonged at least to the Temple circles. It may be that the non-mention of the name of his father points to the latter as shewing his family not to be of great importance.

It has been suggested by some that Haggai is rather pedestrian and that his message appeals to self-interest. Certainly his language cannot be compared with some of his predecessors; it is rhythmic prose not poetry, but it seems well wedded to the message.

As we showed above Haggai was speaking to men who had made great sacrifices for God, whose chief purpose was to serve God more perfectly. When God did not respond to the sanguine hopes with which they had returned, when they found themselves faced with great material problems and hampered in rebuilding by being refused the promised government aid, they naturally tended to ask whether they had misunderstood the will of Jehovah, and to suggest that the time

¹ The above picture of events is seriously challenged by a leading group of Old Testament scholars. As the subject is hardly relevant to the purpose of this book, and since the latest scholarly commentary on Ezr.-Neh. by Rudolph (in German) seems completely to support the main outline of the view given above, we see no point in discussing the matter. Those interested are referred to Oesterley & Robinson: *A History of Israel*, Vol. II, chs. VII, VIII. Bright, *A History of Israel* supports the view in the text.

for rebuilding had not yet come. Lack of faith and self-interest combined to create a plausible mask for their motives which deceived the majority.

Haggai pointed out first of all that their material distress had not been as great as they had persuaded themselves, for they had been able to "ciel," *i.e.* line with wood, their own houses (1: 4). In the hills of Judæa stone is cheap, wood is a luxury. Then with the same simple, stern logic shown by Amos, he pointed out (1: 5f) that they had not received even the minimum they might have expected, if they had been doing God's will. There could be only one logical reason—the neglect of the Temple (1: 9ff).

The promise of immediate material blessing (2: 15–19) is in no sense a bribe. It is part of Haggai's spiritual logic. Once a God-fearing people was doing God's will there could be only one result.

It may very well be this sense of spiritual logic rather than of revelation, though there are passages of prophetic revelation in the book, that caused Haggai to use the phrase "the word of Jehovah came by Haggai the prophet" (1: 1, 3; 2: 1, 10) instead of *to* Haggai as one would expect (*cf.* Jer. 1: 2; Ezek. 1: 3; Hos. 1: 1; Jonah 1: 1; Mic. 1: 1; Zeph. 1: 1; Zech. 1: 1, etc.). When it is a matter purely of revelation (2: 20–23) then the usual formula is used (2: 20).

The book is divided into four dated messages covering a period of little more than three months.

The First Message and the People's Response (Ch. 1).

To what extent the Temple had actually been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar must remain an open question, but II Kings 25: 9 suggests little more than damage by fire, which would have left most of the stone-work in place. It is entirely consistent with this that while it took a wealthy king with all the resources of his kingdom at his disposal seven and a half years to build the original sanctuary (I Kings 6: 37f), the small body of impoverished people who had returned from Babylonia were able to do the bulk of the rebuilding in under four years (Ezra 6: 15; Hag. 1: 1). That is surely also the reason why Haggai lays chief stress on the timber needed (1: 8, *cf.* 1: 4).

The response of the people headed by Zerubbabel seems to have been quick. The interpretation of 1: 15 is not easy, for as it stands it seems to contradict 2: 18. The Hebrew separates it from the preceding, linking it with what follows, but this does not seem to make sense. The simplest explanation is that 1: 15 marks the date when the people began to collect material for building, 2: 18 the actual beginning of the work.

It is probable that 1: 13 should be translated: Then spake

Haggai, The Angel of the LORD *is here* with a message of the LORD for the people, saying, I am with you, saith the LORD. For the Angel of Jehovah see p. 125.

The Second Message (2: 1-9).

The view expressed above that much of the stone-work of the Temple had been left standing seems confirmed by ver. 3, for a comparison would not have been possible, if nothing had been left to compare. Haggai encourages the people by telling them:

(a) The "shaking" which brought down Babylon was not, as the exiles had hoped, the final one. Soon this final "shaking" would come, and then the house they were building would be there to welcome Jehovah as He set up His kingdom.

(b) Promises like that of Isa 56: 7 would see their fulfilment there. 2: 7 is only Messianic in the wider sense. The A.V. rendering "the desire of all nations" is based on the Vulgate and is incompatible with the Hebrew. We must either render as in the R.V. or perhaps better "the desired of all nations shall come," *i.e.* all the nations which Jehovah desires and chooses. Obviously for his hearers this implied the coming of the Messiah as well.

(c) The outward beautifying of the Temple could await God's giving (ver. 8). From His people at the time He asked no more than they could give.

(d) The Temple was to see the fulfilment of God's purposes (ver. 9). Here the essential identity of the second temple with Solomon's is affirmed, thus confirming that extensive repair rather than a new building was needed. From the building of Solomon's temple to the destruction of Herod's in A.D. 70 it was essentially the same building.

The view that the rebuilding of the Temple only began in 521 B.C. and that it was done mainly by those that had never been taken into captivity, rather than by those that had returned from Babylonia, bases itself confidently on the expression "all you people of the land" (ver. 4). It is perfectly true that in Ezra "the people (or peoples) of the land" is a technical expression both for the other peoples living in Palestine and for those of Israelite origin who had never gone into captivity and were often semi-heathen. But since we cannot date Ezra before 400 B.C. at the earliest, it seems hardly scholarship to assume that the phrase must have had the same technical meaning more than a hundred years earlier, the more so as less than a century before that it meant simply the free farmers (II Kings 23: 30). The assumption is the more remarkable, because the term "the remnant of the people" otherwise used by Haggai (1: 12; 2: 2) is by

common consent a technical term meaning those that had returned from captivity. The use of "all you people of the land" may simply be an encouragement by reminding them that they once again possessed the land.

The Third Message (2: 10-19).

In the interval between Haggai's second and third message another prophet, Zechariah, had arisen to stress that not merely outward but also inward turning to God was necessary (Zech. 1: 2-6). Now on the very day that the work of repair started Haggai came with a further message of encouragement (cf. 2: 10 with 2: 18).

It is strongly urged that since the foundation was then laid (ver. 18) it could not have been laid sixteen years earlier (Ezra. 3: 10f). It has already been pointed out that in any case there was no need to lay foundations. Then the Hebrew is far less concrete than the English translation might suggest. The phrase could probably be legitimately translated "since the day that Jehovah's temple was begun," the reference being to the solemn inaugural ceremony which would have been held equally at the recommencement of the work. Ezra 5: 16 is no contradiction. Obviously the elders of Jerusalem would not have compromised their position with Tattenai by confessing that the work had ever come to an end, which officially it had not. They would have represented it as a slowing down.

Haggai's argument is based on a ceremonial technicality, *viz.* while holiness is not contagious, uncleanness is. Therefore the presence of uncleanness more than counteracts the presence of holiness, the dead body of the sanctuary nullifies the effect of the altar (cf. ver. 14). "From this day will I bless you" (ver. 19); some immediate sign is suggested. The prophet was speaking in December, when rain was absolutely necessary, if the seed was to be sown in time to be ready for harvest, so the sign was probably the beginning of the rains.

The Fourth Message (2: 20-23).

With the promise to the people came also a personal promise to Zerubbabel, who, once he had been stirred by Haggai's call, seems to have been the driving force behind the rebuilding. By doing this he jeopardized his official position (cf. Ezra 5: 4). So he received a special promise of protection. (Joshua, the high priest, had nothing to lose, everything to gain by the rebuilding, so he is not mentioned.) Apparently in the prophetic visions coming troubles amalgamate themselves with the final troubles of the Day of the Lord (cf. ver. 21 with 2: 6) and so Zerubbabel looks forward to Zerubbabel's greater descendant (cf. Matt. 1: 13).