Synopsis of the Books of the Bible

Haggai

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)

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Summary

Prophecy after the Babylonian captivity

The last three prophets prophesied after the Babylonish captivity. God, as we have seen in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, brought back a small remnant of His people, who were re-established in Jerusalem and in the land; but the throne of God was not again set up there, neither was the royalty of the house of David reinstated in its original authority. The empire of the Gentile head had been in a certain sense judged as not having fulfilled its duty to God, who had given it its authority. But another empire, raised up among the Gentiles, had taken the place of the first; and, while under the overruling hand of God (who disposes of the hearts of all) favourable to the Jews, still held the people of God in subjection to its yoke — the yoke of those who were not in covenant with God, but still aliens to His promises. God recognised the power of the empire which He had established. Israel was therefore dependent on the favour of those who ruled over them because of their sins, and had to wait upon God to render them favourable, worshipping Him according to His merciful appointments, until the Messiah should come, who would be their Redeemer and Deliverer.

Deprived of almost everything, Israel were not deprived of the lovingkindness of their God, on which they should have reckoned, and of which they had received a striking testimony, in the return of the remnant from the lands in which they had been captive. If all else were lost, the fear of God and His law in their hearts remained to them; and godliness might now be exercised in the manner which He had prescribed (compare Deut. 30).

Encouragements to faithfulness and testimony against unfaithfulness

The three prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, set before us the encouragements which God gave the people, that they might be faithful in their new position; and the testimony against their unfaithfulness, called for by the decay of their piety, and the total want of reverence for Jehovah into which the people had fallen. The temple was necessarily the centre of this imperfect and intermediate state of the people. It was there, if God allowed the re-establishment of their worship, that the hearts of the people should centre. That was the outward form in which their piety as a people should be expressed. It was thus that the return of their heart to God should be manifested. Whatever deficiencies there might be in the restored Levitical service, still, it was the house of God, to which was attached all that could be re-established, and was the centre of its exercise.

Unbelief and discouragements

But the faith of the Jews was quickly enfeebled, and they ceased to build. There were difficulties, no doubt. It was not now as in the days of Solomon, when everything was at the disposal of the king whose power extended over all the neighbouring countries. But God had shewn His goodness towards His people by inclining the heart of the king of Persia to favour them; and Israel should have had confidence in the kindness of God, and have expected its fruits; but, full of unbelief, they were speedily

discouraged.

God's dealings before sending His prophets

God chastised His people, but He did so at the fitting time. He employs the means which His sovereign grace so often used in the history we have been considering. He raises up a prophet, and even two, to revive their courage and stimulate them to the work. In the dealings of God, two things aid in deciding the right time for His intervention, namely, moral considerations and God's arrangement of events. In this case God had sufficiently chastised His people, to make manifest His governmental dealings in the relations of grace, which He now established with them by means of the prophets; and He had raised up a prince who was disposed — if the people acted in faith — to acknowledge the will of God and the decrees of Cyrus.

Having thus prepared all both morally and providentially (for He makes everything work together for our good), He sends His prophets to animate their courage and their faith, so as to lead them to accomplish that which had always been their duty.

Real difficulty not an obstacle for faith if in the path of God's will

They should always have leaned directly upon God, and have gone on with the work, unless hindered by force.* Now, also, they are called to proceed with it, resting on God, without knowing the king's mind. Their confidence must be in God, Himself. Moreover, without this, there would have been neither piety nor faith in their labours. The king's support had been prepared by God for the moment in which their faith should have been manifested. In fact, the difficulty did not fail to arise; but, faith being in exercise, they continued to build in spite of their enemies, being directed in their reply to these enemies by the wisdom of God, and the king gives it his sanction. A difficulty may be a real one, but it is only for the unbelief of hearts that it is an obstacle , if on the path of God's will; for faith reckons upon God, and performs that which He wills, and difficulties are as nothing before Him. Unbelief can always find excuses, and excuses too that are apparently well founded: they have only this capital defect, that they leave God out. {* This actually happened (see Ezra 4:24): but it is evident that, in consequence of the spirit of unbelief working in them, its effect was to discourage them entirely, so that they made no effort to recommence their work, saying, "The time is not come that Jehovah's house should be built." It was only the testimony of the Spirit by the prophet that aroused them from their moral torpor.}

Haggai's subject: the temple of God

The subject of Haggai is the temple. God having brought back the captives, they immediately seek their own ease without seeking to rebuild the house of Jehovah. Was it then a time to rebuild their own? There was tranquillity enough for the latter — it required no faith — the world made no opposition. The prophet exhibits the practical effect of this, the sensible chastisements of God even as to their temporal interests. And why these chastisements? They neglected God in neglecting His house. In truth, if they had thought of God, His house would have been their first object.

The first glory of the house: the effect of the people's fall and the captivity

The people, moved by the fear of Jehovah, hearkened to the words of His servant the prophet. But another difficulty stands in the way of faith; the painful inferiority of all that can be accomplished by the remnant of His people, when God brings them back from captivity. They can do nothing in comparison with the former manifestation of His glory in the midst of His people. The effect of the people's fall and of the captivity they had suffered is felt in everything. God cannot identify His glory with an authority different from His own, exercised over His people (and which must needs be so) as the result of His righteous judgment, of His government on earth. He may lift them up — may restore them, because He loves them; but it is no longer the same thing. He cannot re-establish that direct connection which brings with it the manifestation of His power and glory. That relationship had ended in the judgment. The consciousness of this inferiority tends to weaken faith.

The grace of God in Israel's ruin

The grace of God meets this difficulty by the testimony of the prophet. It is a very sorrowful thing to see the ruin of that which God established in blessing, and the weakness and imperfection of that which is raised upon those ruins, although even this is the fruit of His precious grace.

The prophet, without troubling himself as to the king's intentions, encourages the people by turning their thoughts to Jehovah Himself, and shewing them that, after all, Jehovah reigned, cared for them, and would have them act in view of what He was for them, and seek His glory. For, weak as they were, He would thus be in relationship with them.

God Himself with His feeble people in His glory to fill the house

But the testimony of God graciously takes into account also, the natural effects of the mean appearance of that which they could do for Him, for God thinks of everything that concerns His people. He was as faithfully their God now as at the best period of their history. The proof of it was indeed stronger. He was with them. The word that went forth from His mouth when He brought them up from Egypt He would maintain. His Spirit should remain among them. They were not to fear. But, while sustaining the faith of this feeble remnant by His tender mercy, He goes much farther. If He could not manifest Himself among them, on account of their fall and of the establishment of another order of things, the time would come for His own intervention by His own power. He would shake all things, because the creature could not sustain the weight of His glory, and would establish this glory by His power, and would fill His earthly dwelling-place with His glory.

Not only should the earth be shaken — this had often happened; but the enemy who exercised the power of darkness had always led men to corrupt everything afresh, and to degrade all that God had established in blessing. But now, the heavens and the earth, the sea — authority on high, and all that was organised below, all established order, and all that floated unorganised in the world — and all the nations, should be shaken; and the object of desire to all nations should come; and the house which they were now rebuilding with so much trouble, which was so contemptible in comparison with its former

glory, should be filled with glory by the Lord.

The true glory of the house

The expression which I have rendered by "the object of desire shall come" is very difficult to translate. It appears to me that, looking at the context, I have given the sense,* and that the Spirit of God designedly expressed Himself in vague terms, which, when the mind apprehended the true glory of the house, would embrace the Messiah. The object of the passage is to certify that the house shall be filled with glory. Meanwhile outward glory should be granted it. The silver and the gold were Jehovah's. But the nations, overthrown, oppressed, and oppressing one another, not knowing where to look for happiness, strength, and peace, shall find in that One who alone should establish the glory of Jehovah and bestow true peace — in a word, shall find in Christ alone blessing and deliverance; and He shall be the glory of the house which the poor remnant were building. {* Diodati's Italian version, which is considered very accurate, agrees with the English. De Wette renders it, "The precious things." But it is not what is very generally used for mere costly things, though the same root. This is Chemdath, that Chamudoth. The difficulty is that "shall come" is in the plural. Perhaps this is De Wette's motive for saying "things," taking Chemdath, as "vahu" comes first, as a description of the things that come. The Italian has la scelta verra, the chosen object (the choice one) of the nations shall come. If not, and the sense is to be governed by the following verse, it would refer to the desirable things of the Gentiles, which would glorify the house; but I prefer what is in the text.}

The greater latter glory of the house

The latter glory of the house should be even greater than the former. It is not "the glory of the latter house"; the house is always considered as the same house. God will fill it with more glory at the end than at the beginning, and the peace of Jehovah Himself shall have its seat there. This shall be accomplished in the last days. He who shall fill it with glory has indeed come; but, even while making eternal peace for our souls, the world was in such a state that He was obliged to say to the people, "Think not that I am come to bring peace, but a sword." Having shaken all nations, He will, coming in His glory, set peace in the earth.* {* It is remarkable that in Luke, when Christ rides into Jerusalem, it is said: "Peace in heaven" (Luke 19:38). For it is indeed, when Satan is cast down thence after the final war with the heavenly powers, that blessing upon earth can be really established. Up to then it has been always corrupted and spoiled by the power of evil, or spiritual wickedness in heavenly places. Then that will be for ever over. Satan may come up on earth if permitted, as an adversary, but his heavenly power as spiritual wickedness is for ever over. The prince of the power of the air is gone, his place was found no more in heaven.}

Holiness and belssing consequent on recognition of God's presence

Two other prophecies close the Book of Haggai, relating, like the rest of its contents, to the house. The people, who neglected Jehovah, had become, as it were, profane. That which is holy cannot sanctify profane things; but an unclean thing defiles that which is holy; for holiness is exclusive with respect to

evil. The presence of evil destroys holiness by the very fact of its presence, unless the holiness be of that nature which, by its own existence, excludes all that is contrary to it — such as the nature of God. But when God is admitted and acknowledged, He can bless by the power of His presence. Thus, from the day that the people even sought to recognise and to realise that presence among them, blessing proceeded from it.

All things to be shaken: the place of the true Seed of David in that day

The second prophecy returns to the shaking of all things. In that day, the governor of Judah, the heir of David, should be as a signet on the hand of Him by whom all things were shaken. While encouraging the people at the time of the prophecy — a time when they so greatly needed it — this prophecy, in naming Zerubbabel, has Him in view who, when God will shake the heavens and the earth, shall be the true seed of David and the heir of his crown according to God — the Christ of God, the Elect from among the people.

The judgment of the nations who will come up against Jerusalem

The judgment mentioned in verse 22 appears to me, not the judgment of the throne of the beast, but that of the nations who, at that day, will come up against Jerusalem. All that sets itself up against the rights of Jehovah established according to His counsels at Jerusalem (rights that were identified with the house they were building) should be overthrown. No doubt this is true, in general, of the kingdom of the beast: but the conditions of its existence are quite different. God had put Jerusalem under the power of the head of this empire. The crimes that draw down judgment upon him, are yet more audacious and intolerable than those of which the nations are guilty.

The object of Haggai's prophecy

In sum, the object of this prophecy is to connect blessing on the earth with the house; and to shew that, mean as it might be, its latter glory should be greater than the former. God, in establishing all in glory according to the counsels of His grace, would introduce something much more excellent than that which had been committed to man, and established by his means. This is connected with the shaking of all things by His mighty hand, and with the establishment of David's heir as the object of God's love, and the vessel of His power.

The Gentile empire's authority acknowledged as given by God

It will be observed that the Spirit of God, although He is present to bless His people, to encourage them, and to connect them with God in the worship that was to be offered Him in His house, yet acknowledges the authority of the Gentile empire. These prophecies are dated according to the years of the reign of the Gentile king. It is His will that the things of God be rendered to God, and the things of Caesar to him who then held the place of Caesar. It was God who had placed him there. We shall thus understand the perfect wisdom of the Lord in His reply (Mark 12:17), and the way in which the word is

its expression.

Malachi's pronouncement of judgment on the result in Israel of God's grace

Malachi neither places nor establishes anything as Haggai does, and Zechariah. He only pronounces judgment upon the result in Israel of that which God had done in grace, by re-establishing the remnant; shewing how little the worship, by which He had connected Israel with Himself, had been maintained in such a manner as to glorify Him.