**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**HAGGAI-002. BRAVE ENCOURAGEMENTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. In the seventh month, in the one and twentieth day of the month, came the word of the Lord by the prophet Haggai, saying, 2. Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Josedech, the high priest, and to the residue of the people, saying, 3. Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing? 4. Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, saith the Lord; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedech, the high priest; and be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work: for I am with you, saith the Lord of Hosts: 5. According to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remaineth among you: fear ye not. 6. For thus saith the Lord of Hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; 7. And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come; and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of Hosts. 8. The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine, saith the Lord of Hosts. 9. The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of Hosts."*

*Haggai 2:1-9*

The second year of Darius, in which Haggai prophesied, was 520 B.C. Political intrigues had stopped the rebuilding of the Temple, and the enthusiasm of the first return had died away in the face of prolonged difficulties. The two brave leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua, still survived, and kept alive their own zeal; but the mass of the people were more concerned about their comforts than about the restoration of the house of Jehovah. They had built for themselves ceiled houses, and were engrossed with their farms.

The Book of Ezra dwells on the external hindrances to the rebuilding. Haggai goes straight at the selfishness and worldliness of the people as the great hindrance. We know nothing about him beyond the fact that he was a prophet working in conjunction with Zechariah. He has been thought to have been one of the original company who came back with Zerubbabel, and it has been suggested, though without any certainty, that he may have been one of the old men who remembered the former house. But these conjectures are profitless, and all that we know is that God sent him to rouse the slackened earnestness of the people, and that his words exercised a powerful influence in setting forward the work of rebuilding. This passage is the second of his four short prophecies. We may call it a vision of the glory of the future house of Jehovah.

The prophecy begins with fully admitting the depressing facts which were chilling the popular enthusiasm. Compared with the former Temple, this which they had begun to build could not but be as nothing. So the murmurers said, and Haggai allows that they are quite right. Note the turn of his words: Who is left ... that saw this house in its former glory? There had been many eighteen years ago; but the old eyes that had filled with tears then had been mostly closed by death in the interval, and now but few survived. Perhaps if the eyes had not been so dim with age, the rising house would not have looked so contemptible. The pessimism of the aged is not always clear-sighted, nor their comparisons of what was, and what is beginning to be, just. But it is always wise to be frank in admitting the full strength of the opinions that we oppose; and encouragements to work will never tell if they blink difficulties or seek to deny plain facts. Haggai was wise when he began with echoing the old men's disparagements, and in full view of them, pealed out his brave incitements to the work.

The repetition of the one exhortation, Be strong, be strong, be strong, is very impressive. The very monotony has power. In the face of the difficulties which beset every good work the cardinal virtue is strength. To be weak is to be miserable, and is the parent of failures. One hears in the exhortation an echo of that to Joshua, to whom and to his people the command Be strong and of good courage was given with like repetition (Joshua 1.).

But there is nothing more futile than telling feeble men to be strong, and trembling ones to be very courageous. Unless the exhorter can give some means of strength and some reason for courage, his word is idle wind. So Haggai bases his exhortation upon its sufficient ground, For I am with you, saith Jehovah of hosts. Strength is a duty, but only if we have a source of strength available. The one basis of it is the presence of God. His name reveals the immensity of His power, who commands all the armies of heaven, angels, or stars, and to whom the forces of the universe are as the ordered ranks of His disciplined army; and who is, moreover, the Captain of earthly hosts, ever giving victory to those who are His willing soldiers in the day of His power. It is not vain to bid a man be strong, if you can assure him that God is with him. Unless you can, you may save your breath.

Here is the temper for all Christian workers. Let them realise the duty of strength; let them have recourse to the Fountain of strength; let them mark the purpose of strength, which is work, as Haggai puts it so emphatically. We have nothing to do with the magnitude of what we may be able to build. It may be very poor beside the great houses that greater ages or men have been able to rear. But whether it be a temple brave with gold and cedar, or a log, it is our business to put all our strength into the task, and to draw that strength from the assurance that God is with us.

The difficulties connected with the translation of verse 5 need not concern us here. For my purpose, the general sense resulting from any translation is clear enough. The covenant made of old, when Israel came from an earlier captivity, is fresh as ever, and God's Spirit is with the people; therefore they need not fear. Fear ye not is another of the well-meant exhortations which often produce the opposite effect from the intended one. One can fancy some of the people saying, It is all very well to talk about not being afraid; but look at our feebleness, our defencelessness, our enemies; we cannot but fear, if we open our eyes. Quite true; and there is only one antidote to fear, and that is the assurance that God's covenant binds Him to take care of me. Unless one believes that, he must be strangely blind to the facts of life if he has not a cold dread coiled round his heart and ever ready to sting.

The Prophet rises into grand predictions of the glory of the poor house which the weak hands were raising. Verses 6-9 set things invisible over against the visible. In general terms the Prophet announces a speedy convulsion, partly symbolical and partly real, in which all nations shall be revolutionised, and as a consequence, shall become Jehovah's worshippers, bringing their treasures to the Temple, and so filling the house with glory. This shall be because Jehovah is the true Possessor of all their wealth. But the scope of verse 9 seems to transcend these promises, and to point to an undescribed glory, still greater than that of the universal flocking of the nations with their gifts, and to reach a climax in the wide promise of peace given in the Temple, and thence, as is implied, flowing out like a river through a tranquillised world.

Yet once, it is a little while. How long did the little while last? There were, possibly, some feeble incipient fulfilments of the prophecy in the immediate future; for, after the exile, there were convulsions in the political world which resulted in security to the Jews, and the religion of Israel began to draw some scattered proselytes. But the prophecy is not completely fulfilled even now, and it covers the entire development of the kingdom that cannot be moved until the end of time. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews thus understands the prophecy (Hebrews 12:26, 27), and there are echoes of it in Revelation xxi., which describes the final form of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. So the chronology of prophecy is not altogether that of history; and while the events stand clear, their perspective is foreshortened. All the ages are but a little while in the calendar of heaven. In regard to the whole of the prophetic utterances, we have often to say with the disciples, What is this that he saith, a little while? Eighteen centuries have rolled away since the seer heard, Behold, I come quickly, and the vision still tarries.

The old interpretation of the desire of all nations as meaning Jesus Christ gave a literal fulfilment of the prophecy by His presence in the Temple; but that meaning of the phrase is untenable, both because the verb is in the plural, which would be impossible if a person were meant, and because the only interpretation which gives relevancy to verse 8 is that the expression means the silver and gold, there declared to be Jehovah's. That venerable explanation, then, cannot stand. There were offerings from heathen kings, such as those from Darius recorded in Ezra vi. 6-10, and the gifts of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:15), which may be regarded as incipient accomplishments; but such facts as these cannot exhaust the prophecy.

It must be admitted that nothing happened during the history of that Temple to answer to the full meaning of this prophecy. But was it therefore a delusion that God spoke by Haggai? We must distinguish between form and substance. The Temple was the centre point of the kingdom of God on earth, the place of meeting between God and men, the place of sacrifice. The fulfilment of the prophecy is not to be found in any house made with hands, but in the true Temple which Jesus Christ has builded. He in His own humanity was all that the Temple shadowed and foretold. It is in Him, and in the spiritual Temple which He has reared, that Haggai's vision will find its full realisation, which is yet future. The powers that issue from Him shattered the Roman empire, have ever since been casting earth's kingdoms into new moulds, and have still destructive work to do. The once more began when Jesus came, but the final shaking lies in front still. Every smaller revolution in thought or sweeping away of institutions is a prelude to that great shaking when everything will go except the kingdom that cannot be moved. Its result shall be that the treasures of the nations shall be poured at His feet who is worthy to receive riches, even as other prophecies have foretold that men shall bring unto Thee the wealth of the nations (Isaiah 60:11; Revelation 21:24, 26).

In that true Temple the glory of the Shechinah, which was wanting in the second, for ever abides, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father; and in it dwells for ever the dove of peace, ready to glide into every heart that enters to worship at the shrine. Jesus Christ is not the desire of all nations which shall come to the Temple, but is the Temple to which the wealth of all nations shall be brought, in whom the true glory of a manifested God abides, and from whom the peace of God which passeth all understanding, and is His own peace too, shall enter reconciled souls, and calm turbulent passions, and reconcile contending peoples, and diffuse its calm through all the nations of the saved who there walk in the light of the Lord.