

CHAPTER 5

THE WORK OF HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH

One reason why the returned exiles were prepared to postpone the building of the Temple to an apparently more suitable time was undoubtedly their feeling that it was not strictly necessary. The ground was holy whether there was a building on it or not. Since the altar had been re-erected, sacrifices were being held as normal. It should not be forgotten that the ritual *inside* the sanctuary was a very small part of the total. There was no image of Jehovah to be placed in it, and the Ark had vanished; Jeremiah had commanded that it should not be remade (3:16). So the question was doubtless asked why there should be a temple building at all. Quite apart from the fact that they had been allowed to return from Babylonia for the express purpose of rebuilding it, their attitude was bound to be interpreted as lack of respect for their God by all who saw the ruins of the former temple.

It is hard to know how long this situation might have continued, had not the international situation suddenly exploded. Cyrus had died in battle in Central Asia in 529 B.C. and was succeeded by his son Cambyses. He promptly prepared for the invasion of Egypt, which his father had already planned. His victory was complete and in 525 he was crowned as Pharaoh. Instead of returning to Persia at once, his task completed, he tried to extend his conquests westward and southward. The loss of two armies coincided with the news of rebellion at home (522 B.C.).

According to the amiable way of ancient kings Cambyses had had his brother Smerdis secretly murdered before he invaded Egypt. Encouraged by the bad news coming from there the chief minister, the Patizeites, who had been left in charge in Persia, took advantage of the strong physical resemblance of his brother Gautama to the murdered Smerdis and placed him on the throne as son of Cyrus. Cambyses died on the way back from Egypt, and it did not take Darius, a cousin of the dead king, long to dispose of the usurper. But almost the whole of the Persian empire took the opportunity to revolt, and Darius needed three years of fighting to establish his claim to be king.

There is no evidence that the province Beyond-the-River, i.e. Syria, was caught up in the revolt, but everywhere there must have been widespread uncertainty as to what the future might hold. We may be certain that in Judea there were those who saw in Persia's difficulties the beginnings of the fulfilment of their own national hopes.

In the second year of Darius (520 B.C.), when the internal struggle in the Persian empire was at its height, two authentic prophetic voices were heard in Jerusalem; Haggai began his ministry in late August (Hag. 1:1) and Zechariah

two months later (Zech. 1:1).

Superficially there is little to link Amos with Haggai. The former was a shepherd, a small-town dweller, living much of his life in the open. The latter probably lived in Jerusalem and was almost certainly a Levite—an argument like that of Hag. 2:11–14 comes from one familiar with the minutiae of the Temple ritual. But both were able in outstanding measure to apply spiritual logic to the events of the day. So much is this true of Haggai, that for most of his message he apparently rejects the title of prophet. Only in 2:20 do we find the regular phrase, “The word of the Lord came to Haggai”; elsewhere (1:1, 3; 2:1, 10) we have the exceptional expression “The word of the Lord came by Haggai”, which could have been interpreted by his readers only as a virtual denial that he was a prophet.

He knew that the people had been sent back from Babylonia by God, and that He had done it for the express purpose that the Temple might be rebuilt. Hence they could not expect political freedom and prosperity until God had seen their willingness to carry out their primary task. His reading of their position was confirmed by their economic plight. From the first, cf. Deut. 11:11–17, it had been stressed that rainfall and agricultural prosperity would depend on God and the people’s attitude towards Him. So the drought that had plagued the people (1:6–11) could have been caused only by their sins, and of these the most obvious was the failure to rebuild the Temple. It must be remembered that drought was always regarded as a manifest sign of God’s anger.

The date of his first message, the beginning of the sixth month, is significant. The seventh month, Tishri, is the climax of the Jewish religious year. The Feast of Trumpets, the civil New Year (*rosh ha-shanah*), was followed by the Day of Atonement (*yom kippur*), though this had still to develop the outstanding importance it had in the time of Christ, and even more later; this in turn was followed by the Feast of Tabernacles. In addition, the ancient hope that this month would usher in the Day of the Lord had certainly not lost its vitality, cf. Hag. 2:6f., 21f. So the prophet’s call to build was virtually a challenge. How could his hearers expect God to come to them, if He had no house to come to? He was giving them a month to respond.

We may infer from Ezr. 5:1 that Zechariah actively supported Haggai’s efforts. In his recorded messages in chs. 1–8,* however, he seems to take for granted that the Temple would be completed and goes on from there.

God or Walls

When we look at Zech. 1–8 from the vantage ground of the New Testament and of nearly two thousand years of waiting for Christ’s return, it is easy enough to see that they look to the future as well as to the prophet’s own time, and indeed that some of his visions could not have found their fulfilment then. They range from the vision of Jerusalem as the centre of God’s rule (1:7–17) to one of God’s angelic armies patrolling the whole world (6:1–8). It is to be

* Quite apart from questions of authorship, chs. 9–14 throw very little light on the history and conditions of this time.

noted that in the first vision Zechariah made explicit what was implicit in Haggai's message. The angel of Jehovah is seen in the glen (the valley of Kedron?) outside the ruined city walls, obviously because the Temple itself was not ready for Him to enter.

The third vision (2:1-5) presented a message, the reaction to which was later to provide a turning point in Jewry's development. It was solemnly declared that Jerusalem no longer needed a city wall for safety. The ancient Near-East, as we know it in the Bible, was a land of fortified settlements, large and small. Archaeology has shown us that these city walls go back almost to the beginnings of identifiable civilization, cf. Gen. 4:17. The oldest wall of Jericho has been dated about 7000 B.C. In many cases "fortress" would give the sense better, and often the Old Testament "cities" were no more than walled villages. There were, of course, many villages and hamlets without any form of protection, but their inhabitants expected to be able to take refuge in the nearest fortified settlement in case of need. In the Old Testament such villages are called the daughters of the fortified towns on which they depended. This pattern remained unchanged right down to the fall of the Babylonian empire. The Assyrian and Babylonian kings knew that a fortified town was a potential centre of rebellion; they had to tolerate them, for they could not guarantee speedy protection for their vassals.

With the rise of Persia to world power the position changed radically. For the first time there existed a state without any enemy that could effectively challenge it. Once Cambyses had rounded out its frontiers by the capture of Egypt, the only question was how much further it could extend its lines of communication. It was this far more than Greek gallantry that checked Persia's westward march. Under these conditions city walls ceased to be a necessity and became mainly a matter of prestige. Where they existed they were allowed to remain, but the re-erecting of what had been destroyed or the building of new fortifications was regarded as denying the value of Persian protection and an indication that revolt was intended. Zechariah assured the Jews that they needed neither protection nor prestige, for both would be amply provided by God's presence. The moment for spiritual decision lay the best part of a century ahead, but the very fact of the prophecy shows that there were those in Jerusalem who yearned for the protection and prestige of the past.

Tattenai

Fortunately Haggai and Zechariah were able to persuade the people to concentrate on the building of the Temple. Whatever the Samaritans may have thought about it, they had neither the power nor authority to interfere, nor would there be ears at court willing to listen to charges against the Jews in a time of war and upheaval, cf. Ezr. 4:5. But as peace began to be established, Tattenai, the satrap of Beyond-the-River, began to hear rumours of illegal acts in Jerusalem and decided that he had better look into them. Probably a year or a little more had elapsed—"at the same time" (Ezr. 5:3) is a vague term—and he seems to have combined his investigation with his first official tour of inspection, for he apparently had his sub-governors with him (Ezr. 5:6; 6:6).

There is no suggestion that the governor of Samaria was able to play any special part; Shethar-bozenai was probably Tattenai's official secretary.

There is no sign of hostility in Tattenai's question (Ezr. 5:3); indeed its form suggested that he expected that there was some legal justification for what was happening. Three years of administrative chaos would make a satrap cautious of jumping to conclusions. Hence he saw no reason for interfering until Darius should confirm that such a decree existed and what his royal will might be (Ezr. 5:17).

This time the Samaritans, or whoever had lodged the complaint, had seriously overreached themselves. First of all the decree was found (Ezr. 6:3-5), and secondly it so agreed with Darius' Zoroastrian religious policy that he positively wished its implementation. Hence the Jews suddenly discovered that work begun in poverty now had the full financial backing of the Persian authorities, without any possibility of spiteful enemies whispering into the satrap's ears. Haggai had promised God's physical blessing on the people, if they would get to work. It is not likely that he foresaw that the bulk of the heavy expenditure would be carried by the authorities. There was, in addition, for the time being at least, even financial support for the Temple cultus. The Persian concept was that such worship and sacrifice rightly carried on would be for the benefit of the empire as a whole. So in 515 B.C. the building was finished. It might be humble compared with what had been, but it was to serve until Herod the Great gradually rebuilt it in the closing years of the first century B.C.

Zerubbabel

Both Haggai and Zechariah gave Zerubbabel great and precious promises. The former virtually assured him that he was God's Messiah (2:21ff.); if the term was not used, it was probably a precaution lest the oracle should be reported by spies to the Persian authorities. For the same reason the latter obscured his message by linking it with the high priest (3:8; 6:12f.). It would not have been misunderstood by his Jewish hearers, for steeped in the past as they were, they must have understood that only a descendant of David could be intended. The very much later idea—we meet it first late in the second century B.C.—that there might be a Messiah from "the house of Levi" was a product of the fact that the high priests had been for so long the heads of the Jewish community, until under the Hasmoneans they became for a short time priest-kings.

In one way the message found its justification in the fact that Zerubbabel was the leader of a new Israel, of a new beginning, just as when Jesus the true Messiah came He was to make a new covenant with His people. Then too Zerubbabel is one of the few names that appears in both the genealogies of our Lord (Matt. 1:12, 13; Luke 3:27). From him indeed the Messiah was to spring, and so all the other contemporary descendants of David were eliminated from the hope.

However we interpret the prophecies, something happened. From this time on the descendants of David, so to speak, go underground. They play no further part in the history of their people. We find that the leadership of the

Judean community is virtually entirely in the hands of the high priests. It is not unreasonable to think that Zerubbabel could not wait God's time. If that is so, what he did is shrouded in silence and we have no information about his fate. Only on the assumption of drastic action by the Persian authorities can we explain the later obscurity of David's descendants, even when Judea became independent. We have already noted that by the time of Ezra priestly exiles returning from Babylonia took precedence over the descendants of David (Ezr. 8: 1f.). In 140 B.C., when he had at last made Judea independent, Simon the Hasmonean was recognized as civil head of the state as well as high priest without anyone apparently suggesting that such a position should be reserved for the heir of the house of David. It is true that the Pharisees broke with his son John Hyrcanus, because he adopted the royal title, but it was the title, not the authority, they objected to.

All this showed that Jewry had apparently acquiesced in becoming a religious community instead of an independent nation. For centuries there were few signs that a real national consciousness still lived on beneath the surface.