

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 51

Minor Prophets – Part Five

HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, and MALACHI

I. BACKGROUND

Why examine these three books together?

Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are most likely the last three minor prophet books time wise. The prophecies in each book occur AFTER the Israelites returned from the Babylonian captivity.

After Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C., the Jews remained in captivity while Jerusalem lay in ruins until the decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C. allowed for the Jews return and the reconstruction of Jerusalem. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others prophesied this return. The return and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the temple are written about and were covered in our classes on Ezra and Nehemiah.

Haggai contains four short oracles connected with the restoration of the temple in 520 B.C. The dates the oracles were given are precise down to month and date (as related to the reign of Darius I). Haggai delivered the oracles over a span of about three months. We know little about Haggai beyond his involvement in this rebuilding chore. Haggai's historical activity is noted in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14.

Zechariah delivered his prophetic oracles over a two-year span. Zechariah began prophesying just two months after the last oracle of Haggai. We know from Nehemiah 12:4,16 that Zechariah's ancestor, Iddo, was among the priestly families that returned from exile. Therefore, in all probability, Zechariah was also a priest.

Malachi (if that is the prophet's name¹) consists of six oracles that have no clear date attached. Internal to the book are data points that help us understand when the book was composed. 1:7-10 and 3:8 indicate that the temple has been rebuilt to a point where sacrifices can be offered (we know

¹ Malachi is a common Hebrew noun that means "my messenger." The Hebrew text treats it as a proper name. The Septuagint takes the reference to Malachi's prophecies as the prophecies of an unnamed messenger from God.

this occurs in the rebuilt temple as opposed to a pre-captivity temple because of the reference in 1:8 to the Persian Governor). Additionally, the prophecy refers to abuses that Nehemiah sought to correct which logically leads to a date of around 450 B.C., prior to Nehemiah's reforms of 444 B.C. (Neh. 13:23ff).

II. HAGGAI

In his first oracle (Chapter One), Haggai summons the governor, Zerubbabel, and Joshua, the High Priest, to rebuild the Temple. The people are faulted for regarding their personal comfort as a higher priority than rebuilding the house of God. God was punishing people for putting themselves first and God second. Haggai then gives a 24-day interlude for the people to decide their reaction to the oracle. The people arise and begin in earnest to construct the temple.

The second oracle (2:1-9) was words of encouragement for those who thought the foundations of the rebuilt temple were shabby compared to those of Solomon's temple. Haggai declares the words of Yahweh about the new temple that "in a little while...I will fill this house with glory" and "the glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house."

This prophecy is stout with special words being used. "Glory" was a special word used to refer to the presence of God. It was God's "glory" that passed before Moses. It was God's "glory" that rested upon the Ark of the Covenant. It was God's "glory" that filled the tabernacle and the temple. Of course, never was the "glory" of God more fully revealed than when Jesus Christ, God himself came down and inhabited the earth, walking and teaching in the Temple.

The third oracle (2:10-19) is an example of the law to teach a spiritual lesson about how obedience before the Lord is the key to holiness.

The final oracle (2:20-23) concerns a personal message for Zerubbabel, the Governor of Judah. Haggai explains that Zerubbabel is a sign or guarantee that the Messiah would one day descend from David.

III. ZECHARIAH

This book naturally falls into two sections. The first (chapters 1-8) are dated prophecies. The second (chapters 9-14) are undated prophecies. The prophecies in Zechariah are what we would commonly call “apocalyptic” in style. Apocalyptic literature was a genre of writing found for several centuries in a number of different writings. Typical of this writing style was the use of various numbers and objects to symbolize people, times, and events.

So, in Zechariah, we have a vision of four horsemen with a promise of divine restoration (1:7-17). We also have a vision of four horns and four craftsmen who are affecting Judah (1:18-21). A vision of a man with a measuring line follows (Ch. 2).

Chapter Three contains an interesting vision showing Israel to be cleansed and restored as a priestly nation. In the vision, the high priest and Satan are standing before God, with Satan standing in accusation of the High Priest. The High Priest is noted to be wearing filthy garments. God instructs an angel to take off the filthy garments as God has “taken away your sin,” and God puts “rich garments” on the Priest. The Lord then says that a day is coming when God will “remove the sin of this land in a single day” (3:9). These words are echoed in the teachings of Paul and others as Christians are referenced to being “clothed in Christ” in Galatians and in teachings about Christ removing the sins of the world on Calvary.

The fifth vision has a gold lamp stand and two olive trees (Ch. 4). As Zechariah struggles to understand the meaning of the vision, God explains the meaning as “not by might nor by power, but by my spirit” (4:6).

The sixth vision (5:1-4) is a flying scroll thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide.² This vision is an explanation that God will curse those that walk in deceit and untruth.

The seventh vision (5:5-11) had a wicked woman in a covered basket being flown to Babylonia. This vision set forward the sinful system of Judah as unfit for God’s land and suitable only for shipping off to a land of idolatry and sin.

² These numbers lose their meaning when they are put into American measurements. In the Hebrew, the scroll is 20 cubits long and 10 cubits wide. The numbers 20 and 10 are symbolic in apocalyptic writing for fullness and completeness. The point is not an actual measurement of the scroll, but an explanation that the scroll (which stands here for a curse) is a full and complete curse covering the whole land.

The final vision (6:1-8) has four horse-drawn chariots traversing the earth. These horses and chariots carried God's judgment far beyond the borders of Israel. The judgments were carried throughout the whole earth.

Zechariah is not just visions. Chapter 6:9-15 has historical information setting out Joshua as symbolic of the Messiah. Fasting is the issue explored in chapters 7 and 8. The undated prophecies that follow include a judgment on the enemies of Judah as well as a coming Prince of Peace (9); a gathering in of the chosen flock by the divine leader (10); and oracles about the end times (12-13:6).

The final part of Zechariah contains some beautiful explanations about the purifying judgment of Israel and the blessings of the divine kingdom. God explains his purification in a poetic comparison to mining:

I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, "They are my people," and they will say, "Yahweh is our God." (13:9)

Yahweh will come and reign over his people, and all will be made holy before him (14).

IV. MALACHI

Malachi has six clear oracles. In the first (1:2-5), God's divine love for Israel is set out. Like noted in Hosea, Judah survives before the Lord even though Edom would not.

The second oracle is in 1:6-2:9. Here, Malachi denounces the priests for failing to lead the people morally and spiritually. Priests were sacrificing second-rate animals – obvious even to the Gentiles.

The third oracle (2:10-16) dealt with mixed marriages and divorce. Neither got a favorable review!

The fourth oracle (2:17-3:5) prophesied God's coming in judgment. God was coming in response to the people's rationalization of their sin as well as the people's complaints about the lack of justice in the world.

The fifth oracle (3:6-12) concerned the social and economic distress present at the time. The distress, according to Malachi, stemmed from the people's indifference about their tithing.

The last oracle (3:13-4:3) is a bit more philosophical in its issue. There were those people who sought piety but had doubts about whether obedience was important. These folks noticed that the unrighteous were living as well, if not better, than the righteous. The explanation was basically “it ain’t over till its over.” In other words, the good works of the faithful would be remembered before God while the wicked would be destroyed.

Malachi, and indeed the Old Testament, ends with a warning for Israel to be obedient to the law and a promise that Elijah would come to prepare God’s people and turn their hearts before the “day of the Lord comes.”³

V. POINTS FOR HOME

1. God takes away sin and gives clean clothes.
2. Holiness is important and not to be ignored.
3. Jesus was never an afterthought.
4. God cleans us up, though sometimes it hurts.

³ John the Baptist will be noted in the New Testament as one who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah. See Lk 1:17; Mat 11:13-14; 17:12-13; Mk 9:11-13.