Strife Amongst Brothers:
The Shiites and Sunnis

"I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms, and I will destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the heathen; and I will overthrow the chariots, and those that ride in them; and the horses and their riders shall come down, every one by the sword of his brother."
—Haggai 2:22

ONE OF THE FIRST SCRIP-tural accounts of man's earliest history records the murder of Abel. This occurred when the hand of Cain—the jealous elder son of our first parents, Adam and Eve—was raised up against his younger brother Abel to slay him. This terribly violent and unmerciful act was committed because of pent-up jealousy that arose when Cain's offering of the fruit of the soil was less acceptable to God than was his brother Abel's offering. Abel had given God the firstfruits from his flock of sheep, which involved the shedding of blood, and was thus a more valuable sacrifice.—Gen. 4:3-8

This tragic scene was a result of sin and disobedience to the laws of God when they were violated by Adam and Eve, and the sentence of death being pronounced against them. The whole human family has thus inherited this penalty. Death became a reality because of sin when it was played out in the heart of Cain. "Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame."—Song of Sol. 8:6

Since that time more than six thousand years ago, the downward spiral and terrible consequences of Adam's, and then Cain's, actions have resulted in the human creation's history having been written in blood. Many times over has the hand of one brother been raised up against another with mortal consequences.

HAGGAI'S PROPHECY

In our featured text, Haggai's prophetic words reveal the sobering fact that the end of the present Gospel Age will culminate in a violent struggle with sin and evil when every man's sword will be raised against his brother. The prophet began to record his prophecy soon after the Israelite nation returned from their seventy years of captivity and exile in Babylon. He was the first of the prophets to whom God spoke at that time in connection with Israel's restoration, and he began to write on the first day of the sixth month, in the second year of King Darius' reign. (Hag. 1:1) Our text was written on the twenty-fourth day of the month (Hag. 2:20), which was the ninth month.—vs. 10

It is also noted that Zechariah, another of God's Old Testament prophets, began to write his prophecy in the eighth month of the second year of Darius, which was about two months later than Haggai. (Zech. 1:1) These two contemporary prophets of God thus spoke of the same momentous period of Israel's history, their restoration period and Israel's hope for rebuilding their Temple, which represented the very center of their religious life and observance.

ZERUBBABEL

One of the principal characters in Haggai's prophecy relates to Zerubbabel, to whom the prophetic words of our text were addressed. He was a direct descendant of David, and one of the ancestral links in the genealogy of our Lord Jesus. (Luke 3:27,31) He also became Israel's first governor of the repatriated Jews when they returned from Babylon. We read, "Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I will shake the heavens and the earth."—Hag. 2:21

The prophet further reveals the eternal purpose of God concerning the overthrow of the kingdoms of this world, and the armies that would be gathered together to support them. This, he writes, will culminate in the hand of everyone being raised up against his brother.—vs. 22

Addressing the one to whom God would select to carry out this great work, the prophet writes, "In that day, saith the LORD of hosts, will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, my servant, the son of Shealtiel, saith the LORD, and will make thee as a signet: for I have chosen thee, saith the LORD of hosts."

(vs. 23) Thus was a special sign, a 'signet,' given to Zerubbabel, who was especially chosen to be a servant of God.

A SECOND WITNESS

Concerning this servant of God, the Prophet Zechariah serves as a second witness to the Divine purpose and arrangements. He wrote, "This is the word of the LORD unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might [army, *Marginal Translation*], nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts." (Zech. 4:6) This great work would not be accomplished by the worldly wisdom of men, nor by their superior military might, but by the power of the Holy Spirit of God.

The prophet describes earth's present kingdoms as a symbolic great mountain, and that the ultimate purpose of God is to destroy this man-made institution, which will be brought down even as a level "plain." "Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain: and he shall bring forth the headstone thereof with shoutings, crying, Grace, grace unto it." (vs. 7) In the words of Zechariah's prophecy, we read that the hands of God's servant would also lay the foundation of a great house of God, and we are also told that his hands would finish it.—vss. 8,9

Zechariah's concluding remarks speak of a far grander and future time, "Who hath despised the day of small things? for they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven; they are the eyes of the LORD, which run to and fro through the whole earth."—vs. 10

FOLLOWERS OF MOHAMMED

Many years after the prophets Haggai and Zechariah recorded the visions that had been revealed to them, Islam's prophet Mohammed was born in Mecca, which was in the province of Hagaz, Saudi Arabia, in the year A.D. 571. Although he was brought up under humble circumstances, his life changed abruptly when he relates having received revelations that he claimed were dictated to him by the angel Gabriel around the year A.D. 612. It is also claimed that Gabriel became very important to him, and was the authority for the whole Koran as further revelations were abundantly poured out to him.

Mohammed's followers believed that the archangel Gabriel had also taken a black stone from space and presented it to the patriarch Abraham, and that it was preserved at Mecca. Later, Mecca became the scene of annual pilgrimages where the 'Holy Stone' was kept. The stone was located in a specially prepared building in a holy square where the pilgrims would gather to circle around.

MOHAMMED DIES

Upon the death of Mohammed in A.D. 632, a major split gradually developed between his Muslim followers to select a successor—a caliph who would carry on with his religious beliefs. He had ruled as the temporal and spiritual head of the Muslims and during the years following his death various attempts were made to find a successor. Some of these caliphs were selected with much opposition, and in some cases even ending in violence.

A line was beginning to be firmly drawn between two groups of believers over the issue of selecting

successors. This split resulted in an official division between the two factions in the year A.D. 680. One group of Mohammed's followers, the Shiites, insisted upon their belief that succeeding caliphs should only be selected from the genealogical line of the prophet Mohammed himself. The Sunni division, on the other hand, wanted to follow the tribal tradition of having a council of elders select the successor. They believed that successive leaders to Mohammed could be chosen by a consensus vote of general agreement.

SHIITE AND SUNNI HOSTILITY

Although modern Islam continues to be divided between Shiites and Sunnis, these two groups of believers agree that Allah is the only true god, and that Mohammed was their last prophet. They also agree that Allah will, at some future time, resurrect all dead humans to question their beliefs and actions. However, there are other points of difference concerning religious beliefs, practices, and observances between the two factions of Islam, in addition to the general disagreement involving the selection of successors.

Until recent years, many Americans had paid little attention to middle-eastern religious practices. But today it must be acknowledged that Islam is the second largest religion in the world with over one billion followers and growing rapidly. The two major branches of Islam continue to divide Mohammed's followers more than thirteen hundred years after his death. At the present time, the Shiites have approximately 120 million believers, while the Sunnis have about 940 million. Each of

these two sects also have separate divisions within their own ranks, but the Wahhabi branch of the Sunnis is one of the largest and better known.

If history had taken a different turn, and all Muslims were firmly united under one central cause, they would have been much more powerful to deal with today than they already are, and there would doubtless be many more problems to settle. With the American-led invasion of Iraq, and several years of war and increased violence that has followed, a most profound impact is now being felt throughout the Middle East. This has been especially true in Iraq where the Shiite population stands at about 50%, while the Sunnis have approximately 40%. Non-Muslims and others make up the balance.

PERSIAN IRAN

The situation in Iran is much different than in Iraq which has an almost evenly divided population. Iran is a Persian nation, and not Arabic, and in recent decades it has reemerged with a new sense of national pride which is fostered by its 93% majority Shiite population. Until 1979, Mohammad Reza Shah had controlled the country with a strong hand which included the Savak, his secret police, while Ayatollah Khomeini had been living in exile in Iraq, and then later in France.

Growing opposition to the Shah's reign ended in a landslide victory in which a national referendum had been held on April 1,1979. There was only one choice offered to the people at that time for an either Yes or No vote to install a Shiite-controlled Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Khomeini became the supreme spiritual leader of the country and declared

Iran an Islamic Republic with a new constitution that reflected his ideals. With the fall of the Shah, and the Islamic revolution which followed, a Shiite government was thus installed in Tehran.

This situation exists in marked contrast to the ruling powers in the Arab Islamic nations where the Sunnis exert control, although there are in some cases large and often impoverished Shiite populations in these areas. Iranian-based mullahs, the religious clerics who perform duties in Islam that are comparable to other faiths—such as ministers, priests, and rabbis—have stirred up Shiite communities throughout the Middle East and have encouraged them to take control of their respective governments.

GROWING DILEMMA

In the meantime, radical terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Al Qaeda continue to exert their powerful influences as the age-old rivalry continues between the Sunnis and the Shiites. For the past few years, the battle between radical Islam and the West has been dominated by Al Qaeda and its leaders—including the notorious Osama Bin Laden—who are members of strict Sunni sects, including the Wahhabi group. Afghanistan's Taliban are also adherents of the Sunni sect.

Some of the insurgent groups operating in Iraq—most notably Al Qaeda—are Sunni, while the Mahadi Army, also operating in Iraq, is a Shiite militia group. Hezbollah is a Shiite group backed by Iran which battled against the powerful Israeli Army in the summer of 2006 with greater effectivness than has any other group in recent times. The group's

struggle is often expressly linked to the Shiite cause.

Failure to properly understand the historical background of this conflict has led to devastating effects for the administration of the United States government, especially in connection with its Middle-East policy in general, and more particularly its war in Iraq. Some critics say that senior policymakers have been too slow to recognize the extent and complexity of the lingering animosity that exists between the two major groups of Muslims. Some Iraqi people are once again embracing the Shiite form of Islam that Hussein's Sunni regime suppressed for over three decades.

The lack of a cohesive postwar political and economic strategy for Iraq threatens the chances for the development of a workable, secular democratic government in the country. Iraq has instead developed into a battleground between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, who both seek to fill the leadership void created by the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime.

WIDENING STRUGGLE

Iran, which is predominately Shiite, is now challenging what was once the traditional Sunni dominance in the area, and intensifying violence between the two groups that has raised awareness of a widening conflict across the entire Middle East. The stakes are very high in this conflict, including the control of oil which is the very lifeblood of the American, as well as the European, democracies.

The problem has carried over into Lebanon, where the continuing conflict between Sunnis and Shiites is at the very heart of the present dilemma,

and threatens the outbreak of civil war. The Shiites, led by Iranian controlled Hezbollah militia, have made war on the democratically elected government of Lebanon; and, during the recent war with Israel, they virtually became the government of the Lebanese nation.

Among the ruling monarchy in Saudi Arabia, governed by a conservative Sunni regime, there is fear that the large Shiite minority will assert its political rights in the country. The situation is dangerous because the Shiites inhabit the oil-rich eastern district of the kingdom. Also, in oil-rich Bahrain the Shiites comprise a majority of the population, and are attempting to gain control from the Sunnis who have governed the country for decades.

PERILOUS TIMES

The words 'perilous times,' and other ominous expressions, are often heard in our day when describing the chaotic situation that exists in the turbulent Middle East and other places in our increasingly violent world.

When writing to Timothy, whom he addressed as his "dearly beloved son" (II Tim. 1:2), the Apostle Paul spoke of the time in which we are now living, and referred to it as the "last days"—the closing years of this present Gospel Age. He said, "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come."—chap. 3:1

The apostle used the word 'perilous' to identify our day as one in which there would be many evidences of violence, lawlessness, and unrighteousness associated with it. He enumerates some of the various characteristic signs that would prevail at

that time in the verses immediately following.—chap. 3:2-5

The word perilous has been defined as something that is very difficult or dangerous to deal with. It also carries the thought of being fierce or furious, and has thus been variously translated in our modern-day Bibles. The Greek word that Paul used when writing to Timothy is only found in one other instance in the New Testament where the translators used the combination of words "exceeding fierce" to describe the Gadarene demoniacs that Jesus once encountered. Of this account we read, "When he [Jesus] was come to the other side into the country of the Gergesenes, there met him two possessed with devils, coming out of the tombs, exceeding fierce, so that no man might pass by that way."—Matt. 8:28

When Jesus confronted these 'exceeding fierce' demons they challenged him: "And, behold, they cried out, saying, What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art thou come hither to torment us before the time?" (vs. 29) It was at this point in Jesus' early ministry that we witness the tremendous power that he possessed over evil and evildoers, when he commanded the devils that had inhabited the two men to enter a herd of swine, which in turn ran violently down a steep hill into the sea where they perished. (vss. 30-32) We may be sure that our Lord has all things well in hand to deal with the rising tide of evil that prevails over the earth during the foretold end of this age.

THE GREATER ZERUBBABEL

Haggai and Zechariah, the two contemporary prophets of God who spoke of Israel's first governor

Zerubbabel, upon their return from Babylonian captivity, were unaware of the grander significance and spiritual meaning associated with their respective accounts. Haggai tells us that the heavens and the earth will be shaken by his powerful hand (Hag. 2:21), and that this shaking would culminate in the total destruction of the kingdoms of this earth and man's rule over them. (vs. 22) Zerubbabel, in turn, was given a "signet" or special mark in recognition of the authority that had thus been entrusted to him. This sign, however, pointed directly to our Lord Jesus who is the antitypical Zerubbabel, and to the administration of his future kingdom of peace and righteousness that will be established over all the earth. (vs. 23) The significance of the 'signet' is also brought to our attention by the Prophet Jeremiah.—Jer. 22:24

Zechariah provides even more pictorial detail concerning Zerubbabel. He writes that the "LORD of hosts" has promised that the power of the Holy Spirit from on high will accomplish this wonderful and most blessed work. (Zech. 4:6) By the hand of the antitypical Zerubbabel—our glorious Lord Jesus—the great mountain of Satan's present world empire will be brought down to its ultimate and inevitable destruction.—vs. 7

It was the hope of the returned Israelites to rebuild their Temple, and in due time the foundation of that house of God was laid by the hands of Zerubbabel. Furthermore, it was by his hands that the building of the house would be completed. (vss. 8,9) We see the grand and wonderful antitypical work accomplished by our Lord Jesus in laying the foundation of the spiritual temple of his body members

during the course of his earthly ministry.—John 2:18-21

In reference to this, the prophet was posed the question, "Who hath despised the day of small things" (vs. 10), that some would be unable to discern. It may appear to some that it has been an insignificant time, but unknown to the worldly-wise the entire Gospel Age has been a time for calling and selecting those who would share in the work of blessing all mankind as the bride of Christ during his future kingdom.

We see a deeper understanding in Paul's perspective on this question concerning 'the day of small things.' "Ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty." (I Cor. 1:26,27) In that he spoke of the spiritual temple of our Lord's body he added, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?"—I Cor. 3:16

The call to the footstep followers of our Lord Jesus is being accomplished throughout the nearly two thousand years since the building of the spiritual temple began. The people will ultimately rejoice when they see the plummet displayed in the hand of our Lord Jesus, the greater Zerubbabel. They will be glad when they come to understand the marvelous oversight of the seven eyes of our Lord God who will have then brought all things to their glorious fulfillment.—Zech. 4:10, *Marginal Translation*

A MIGHTY HAND

The powerful hand of Almighty God was manifest to Gideon and the small band of men that accompanied him during one of the most dramatic encounters recorded in the Bible. We read, "The three hundred blew the trumpets, and the LORD set every man's sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host." (Judg. 7:22) At the close of this age, we are now witnesses of a corrupt and violent society that is moving ever closer to the foretold anarchy which marks our time and place in earth's history. Although the level of violence will no doubt increase, we may rest in full confidence of faith that God's eternal purpose is soon to be accomplished. The hosts of sin and the powers of evil will fall upon one another, brother against brother, to bring about their inevitable destruction, and to prepare the world for the glorious reign of our Lord and Savior during his future kingdom of peace and righteousness. ■