

## THE BACKGROUND OF ZECHARIAH (Eugene Merrill)

Zechariah commenced his ministry, so far as his own account is concerned, in the eighth month of the second year of the Persian king Darius Hystaspes (Zech. 1:1). He does not specify the day, but the eighth month (Julian calendar) would be between late October and late November, 520 B.C. The final two oracles of Haggai were delivered on the twenty-fourth day of that same month and year (or December 18, 520), so Zechariah's public ministry overlapped that of Haggai by approximately one month.

Before the implications of that fact are explored, it is necessary to examine other chronological data of the book of Zechariah. Like Haggai, Zechariah is concerned to pinpoint the major turning points of his ministry by attaching them to a sequential, chronological framework. Thus, after the general introduction, dated in the eighth month of Darius's second year (Zech. 1:1-6), Zechariah assigns the night visions (1:7-6:15) to the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month (1:7), February 15, 519 B.C. His final chronological reference is to the fourth year of Darius and the fourth day of the ninth month (7:1). This is December 7, 518. If one accepts the unity of the whole book (a position accepted here and defended), this last date presumably marks the occasion for all the oracles and other messages of chapters 7-14.

It is difficult to determine what role Zechariah may have played in connection with the public ministry of Haggai, a ministry that commenced only two months before his own (Hag. 1:1). When they are mentioned together (Ezra 5:1; 6:14), Haggai's name is always first, suggesting either his leadership or his prophetic and canonical priority. In any case, the two men of God together encouraged the resumption of Temple construction after it had lain dormant for 18 years (from 536 to 520 B.C.; cf. Ezra 3:8-10; 5:1-2). With Haggai, Zechariah provided the leadership to enable their compatriots to bring the building task successfully to completion by about March 13, 515 B.C. (Ezra 6:14-15).

An integration of the chronological data of Haggai and Zechariah might yield further clues as to their relationship, though admittedly such clues would be deduced with some measure of speculation. The most critical part of Haggai's appeal seems to occur in Hag. 2:1-9, for there he addresses the profound pessimism that had begun to envelop the people a few weeks after Temple reconstruction began. They saw the new building as nothing compared to the glorious Temple of Solomon, so they needed the assurance that YHWH was with them (2:4) and that eventually the glory of the second Temple would exceed that of the first (2:7-9). Within weeks (or even days) Zechariah followed this up with a reminder of God's displeasure with their fathers' attitudes and actions in the past (Zech. 1:2) and assured them that, if they turned to YHWH, He would turn to them (1:3). Both prophets thus contrast the past with the present and future, with Haggai stressing the rebuilt Temple as a sign and source of God's blessing and Zechariah emphasizing the role of repentance and renewal in achieving that end. The two prophets worked hand in glove, complementing each other's



message.

The general historical background of these early years of Darius has been reviewed in the Introduction to Haggai (pp. 3-10), so there is no need to do more here than to consider briefly the two years of Zechariah's ministry that post-dated Haggai's. Unfortunately, little can be said, for both biblical and extra-biblical sources are virtually silent. The OT witness is limited to the book of Ezra, which, though composed some 60 or 70 years after the last date in Zechariah, must be considered reliable. As just suggested, Ezra recounts the leadership of Haggai and Zechariah in the Temple project (Ezra 5:1-2) and relates in some detail the opposition to the work from Tattenai, governor of the satrapy *eber-nāri*, and his allies (Ezra 5:13-17). Once Darius the king settled the matter of the legitimacy of the operation and authorized the work to continue (6:1-12), the Jews, under Haggai and Zechariah, brought it to an end (6:13). Apparently Darius's edict forestalled any further interdiction of the work and allowed it to be finished. For Ezra is clear, in reviewing the whole history of the restoration, that the antagonism of the Jews' enemies continued only until the reign of Darius, that is, until 520 B.C. (Ezra 4:5). Not until Xerxes came to power (486) did serious opposition begin again (Ezra 4:6). It is safe to assume, therefore, that the work went on unimpeded in the two years of Zechariah's ministry (520-518).

Persian texts record a western campaign by Darius in the winter of 519-518 B.C., an itinerary that included Palestine. Many scholars propose that Zerubbabel, governor of Yehud (i.e., Judah), was deposed by Darius at that time, allegedly for rebellion or for having the misfortune of having been designated by Haggai (2:23) as successor to the Davidic throne. The only basis for such a view is the disappearance from the biblical record of any reference to Zerubbabel after 520. This *argumentum e silentio* is hardly conclusive of the deposition hypothesis, however.

What is clear is that Darius continued on to Egypt where he put down incipient rebellions by the end of November 518 B.C. and then returned home. The last date of Zechariah, December 7, follows or perhaps even generally coincides with Darius's return trip through Judah. What effect this contact of the Persian king had on the message of Zechariah in chapters 7 through 14 cannot be determined. The commentary to follow offers some suggestions.

Kenneth Barker and other scholars account for some of the differences between Zechariah 1-8 and 9-14 by suggesting that the prophet may have lived well into the fifth century, possibly into the reign of the Persian king Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.). This can be supported by the reference to Zechariah in the genealogy of Neh. 12:10-16. The passing of at least 30 or 40 years from the time of Zechariah's earlier oracles can easily explain the allegedly later historical references (such as to Greece in 9:13) and the clearly more eschatological perspective of the last six chapters.