

INTRODUCTION TO THE POSTEXILIC PROPHETS

(Danny Hays in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook*)

After the death of King Solomon, a civil war divides the nation into two countries: Israel (in the north) and Judah (in the south). The northern kingdom, Israel, falls into idol worship immediately, never again to return to a true worship of God. The southern kingdom, Judah, soon follows suit and slides into idolatry and social injustice. A few kings struggle against this slide, but without success. The preexilic prophets like Isaiah, Amos, and Jeremiah preach and preach, but to no avail; no one really listens to them. By the time of Jeremiah and Zephaniah, both the leaders and the people have completely abandoned God. Even though God pleads with them through his prophets, the people remain rebellious and hostile, refusing to repent and to return to God. Thus the judgment comes. The Assyrians destroy the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, and the Babylonians later destroy the southern kingdom of Judah in 587/586 BC. The Presence of God departs from Jerusalem (Ezekiel 10–11), and the Babylonians raze Jerusalem to the ground, carrying most of the population into exile; thus the Israelites lose the Promised Land.

But then the Lord begins to unfold his plan of restoration. Cyrus, king of Persia, overruns the Babylonians, and in 538 BC he decrees that exiled people like the Israelites can return home. In several waves over the next one hundred years or so, the shattered Israelite exiles return back to the Promised Land. This is the context in which the postexilic prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) write.

With Israel back in the land, some people might have thought that the great time of restoration predicted so often by the preexilic prophets had begun. Numerous things, however, point out that the great deliverance remained in the future. Yes, Israel is back in the land, but there is no Davidic king on the throne, and the Persians continue to dominate Israel politically (a fact stressed throughout the postexilic literature). Also important is that even after the Israelites rebuild the destroyed temple, the Presence of God does not return to the temple. In contrast to the spectacular entry of God's Presence into the Solomonian temple described in 1 Kings 8:10–11, nothing at all is mentioned about the

Presence of God in the rebuilt temple during the time of the postexilic prophets. Indeed, the post exilic prophets proclaim that the situation created by the struggling group of Israelites back in the land does not represent the great time of restoration and deliverance predicted by the preexilic prophets, or a return to "the way things were" under the blessings of Deuteronomy. They also underscore that the terrible sins of their forefathers should be seen as lessons, exhorting the current community to follow God in serious obedience. Yet the postexilic prophets do proclaim that the time of restoration has "begun" to a limited extent. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi tell the ragtag nation of Israelites who have returned to the land that they live in between the beginning of the restoration and the ultimate consummation, which is still future. These prophets announce that the postexilic community is living in an interim time, and they should worship and serve the Lord faithfully as they await the coming of the Messiah who will actually bring about the glorious restoration prophesied by the preexilic prophets.

