

THE BACKGROUND OF HAGGAI (Eugene Merrill)

The precise, chronological information provided in the book makes possible a clear identification of the times, in which the prophet Haggai ministers to his community. In general, the setting is Jerusalem in the post exilic period, the time, when the struggling returnees are preoccupied with the reestablishment of their homeland within the larger context of the Persian empire. More specifically, the principal task at hand is the building of a Jewish temple on the ruins of the glorious house of worship, erected by Solomon 430 years earlier, and raised to the ground by the Babylonians to 66 years prior to Haggai's time.

The Babylonian Empire, mighty as it was, enjoyed only a brief period of Near Eastern hegemony. Initiated by its crushing of the Neo-Assyrian state in 605 BC, its first and only truly great ruler, Nebuchadnezzar II, moved quickly not only to incorporate the Assyrian domains but also to add to them. A target of importance to readers of the OT was the tiny state of Judah, a nation which, though under at least some Assyrian control from time to time, had remained relatively independent. Nebuchadnezzar changed all that. At first content to take some choice Jewish captives (including Daniel; Da 1:1-7) in 605, he followed up with a major deportation in 598 in which young King Jehoiachin was taken prisoner; then, following rebellion against Babylon by Jehoiachin's successor, Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar sent his armies against Jerusalem in 586, this time leveling the city, destroying the temple, and carrying off the cream of Judean society.

Meanwhile, another powerful force was emerging to the east of Babylon, namely, the nascent elements of what would become the Persian Empire. Its founder, Cyrus I (the Great), by sheer will and brilliant strategy had by 550 BC merged the Medes and Persians into a fearsome political and military machine bent on the conquest of the whole region. Nezer's death in 562 had greatly weakened the Babylonian empire, and the rulers who succeeded him could do little or nothing to prevent the slide to certain doom.

Following the ephemeral reigns of Evil-Merodach (562-560 BC), Neriglissar (560-556), and Labashi-Marduk (556), Nabonidus (555-539) came to power—the last ruler before Babylonia was defeated by the Persians. Nabonidus was not a native Babylonian nor was he a devotee of Marduk and the other Babylonian deities. Needless to say, these traits gained him no popularity, so for much of his reign he ruled in absentia through his son Belshazzar. It was this unfortunate surrogate who saw the handwriting on the wall and lost his life on the very night of the Persian sacking of his city (Da 5).

Cyrus, having conquered Babylon and thus the Neo-Babylonian (or Chaldean) Empire in 539 BC, continued his reign until 530. His most important act from a biblical standpoint was his decree in 538 that the Jews of Babylon could return to their homeland, a region by then known as Yehud, part of the vast province of Abar Nahara ("across the [Euphrates] river"). His successors were Cambyses I (530-522), Gaumata (522), Darius Hystaspes (522-486), Xerxes (486-465), Artaxerxes I (464-424), Darius II (423-404), and Artaxerxes I (404-358). Hystaspes is the



Darius referred to in Haggai and Zechariah. Xerxes was the husband of Queen Esther, his OT name appearing as Ahasuerus. Ezra and Nehemiah led returns from Persia under the auspices of Artaxerxes I, a ruler who, like Cyrus, granted unusual favors to the Jewish Diaspora.

Little can be known about the nonexiled Jews who remained in their homeland. For them life went on, but almost certainly with no sense of national or even religious cohesion, at best in conditions of economic ruin, and with little, if any, political leadership worthy to be called such. The absence of any literature from the period between 586 and 539 BC, biblical or otherwise, attests to the social and cultural vacuum left in the wake of the catastrophic demolition of the Jewish state at Babylonian hands.

Ironically, much more is known of the Jews of the Diaspora, largely because of biblical texts. Ezekiel, himself a captive, speaks of Jewish communities in Persia that appear to have had some measure of independence. Daniel, among the earliest of the deportees, provides glimpses into Jewish life in and around Babylon during both the Babylonian and Persian periods. On the whole, life there was bearable except for intermittent times of persecution occasioned by the Jews' refusal to submit to pagan idolatry.

The same spirit pervades Ezra's recapitulation of Jewish history in the decades between Cyrus's liberation decree and his own time (ca. 540-440 BC). Again and again the rulers of Persia unbegrudgingly acceded to the requests of the Jews to return to their homeland. Frequently their permission was accompanied by promises of protection as well as generous outlays of material provision. Such beneficence continued through the remainder of the biblical period (ca. 400 BC). At the same time, of course, the Persians were attending to their own self-interest, for a strong Jewish state would provide a buffer between them and the hostile and increasingly powerful nations of Greece and Egypt.

As for the immediate setting of Haggai, the book reflects the brief time from Cyrus's decree to 520 BC—only eighteen years. The initial contingent, under the leadership of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, commenced its return in 538 with the full blessing and support of the Persian government (Ez: 1-2). Among the objectives was rebuilding the temple, a goal endorsed by Cyrus himself (2Ch 36:22-23; Ezr 1:1-4). Having gathered materials for the project, Zerubbabel (by now the governor of the jurisdiction) and Jeshua (the chief priest) oversaw the laying of the temple's foundations, a project of profound joy (Ezr 3:8-13).

By this time, however, resistance began to set in—resistance led by certain unnamed adversaries who no doubt were jealous of the favors being shown to the Jewish newcomers (Ezr 4:1-2). Despite their claim to be worshiping the same God as the Jews did, their demands to participate in the building had been soundly rebuffed (v.3). They therefore attempted to turn the Persian kings against the Jews but apparently without success (vv.4-5). At the same time, the project ground to a halt, not to be resumed until the second year of King Darius Hystaspes, that is, 520 BC. It was under the aegis of this good king that Haggai and Zechariah took heart and initiated their ministry of temple completion (Ezr 4:5; Hag 1:1; Zec 1:1). There may indeed have been external forces that dampened the initial enthusiasm for the project, but the overall impression left by Haggai is that the work lagged because of the torpid indifference of the Jews themselves. It is this indifference that the prophet confronts and that provides the centerpiece of his message.