

CHAPTER 1

Prophets to a Remnant

Tucked in at the very end of the prophetic books, at the very end of the Christian Old Testament, the Books of Haggai and Zechariah are two of the more neglected texts of the Old Testament. The relative obscurity of their message to most readers of the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) parallels the relative obscurity of the original audience of these two books to their Persian overlords, the people residing in the small district of Yehud, a small portion of the previously larger state of Judah, at the southernmost reach of the empire. Yet, these two books are at great pains to convince their audiences that these people, their capital city Jerusalem, their Temple, and their god, YHWH, have a significance on the world stage all out of proportion to their role within the empire.¹

¹ The practice in previous volumes of the Old Testament Theology series is to translate the divine name, Y-H-W-H, also known as the Tetragrammaton, as “Yahweh.” However, there is another convention in scholarship, which I follow here, to leave out the vowels and use only the consonants, YHWH, as here. This originates with a variety of Jewish scholars in their attempt to show respect for the divine name, which is imitated by some Christian scholars as well. I will use this shorter convention because I see my own work in conversation with a variety of scholars, including Jewish scholars and, out of respect for them and for the divine name, I utilize only the consonants.

2 THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOKS OF HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH

PROPHETS AND PEOPLE IN THE “MIDDLE TERRITORY”

The Books of Haggai and Zechariah each begin by invoking the Achaemenid Dynasty and perhaps its best-known ruler, Darius I. The editors who crafted these prophetic materials into coherent books wanted their audiences to see the activities of YHWH and the people of YHWH in light of, and sometimes in contrast to, Persian rule. Both prophetic books continuously use the phrase “YHWH Sabaoth,” often translated as “LORD of hosts” in English, which communicates in part that YHWH reigns over the hosts of heaven. However, the emphasis of this title for both the Books of Haggai and Zechariah is that YHWH, who brought the “hosts” of Israel out of Egypt (e.g. Exod 6:26; 7:4; 12:17, 41, 51), reigns over Persia just as YHWH ruled over Egypt. And just as YHWH settled the Exodus people in the land of Canaan, YHWH has returned the exiles to their land, and one day soon the nations of the Persian Empire will bring their wealth to honor YHWH at Zion (Hag 2:4–9, 20–23; Zech 2:6–12; 8:20–23; 14:12–19), just as Israel’s “plunder” of the Egyptians helped them honor YHWH in building the Tabernacle. The prophetic proclamation of YHWH Sabaoth intends to evoke from the original audiences that the God who delivered them out of Egypt has now come to the aid of the descendants of Israel in the Persian period.

In contrast to the strong claims about YHWH Sabaoth ruling the nations and the promise that the wealth of the nations will come to Zion, the great Persian kings Darius I and Xerxes I seem not even to know of the small province of Yehud, the geographical descendant of the much larger, preexilic territory of Judah. In the published lists of the nations that Darius and Xerxes claim to have conquered or ruled, neither king mentions Yehud, though their lists of nations run from Greece in the West to Egypt in the South

to the Indus Valley in the East and modern Southern Uzbekistan/Western Tajikistan in the North.² Yehud is simply one of ten districts that make up the larger Persian satrapy, Ahar-nahara, “Beyond the River,” with Yehud not even among the most important districts given the prominence of the central ruling site, Damascus, as well as the coastal city of Sidon and the inland province of Samaria.

Egyptologist Steven Ruzicka offers some insight into the world-view of Yehud’s Persian overlords, observing the competition for control of the Levant between the Persians and the Egyptians, a struggle replicating earlier struggles between Egypt and Assyria, and then Babylon. This ongoing struggle leads Ruzicka to observe that the region of Syro-Palestine, in which one finds Yehud, is, as he calls it, “middle territory,” land that served as both a buffer from direct action of Persia against Egypt or vice versa, and land that each kingdom desired to subject for exploitation of its resources.³ Yehud certainly experienced exploitation of its resources by the Persians as part of the satrapy, “Beyond the River,” a subject of explicit concern in Zechariah 9–14. These same chapters also reflect the fears of Yehudites during the Egyptian revolts against Persia and Persia’s efforts to subdue Egypt, as Yehud served as a launching pad for the Persian assault on Egypt. Yehud also had a role to play on the world stage in the

² Xerxes I apparently did not conquer any nations per se, though he subdued a few rebellions at the change of the throne. Though Xerxes repeats formulas from the inscriptions of Darius I in his *daivā* inscription, Xerxes does not claim to conquer the nations he lists but calls them “the countries of which I became king” (Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, trans. Peter T. Daniels [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002], 553).

³ Steven Ruzicka, *Trouble in the West: Egypt and the Persian Empire, 525–332 BCE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

4 THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOKS OF HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH

Persian economy. But it was a bit part while the major players on the stage, the Persian rulers, did not even mention Yehud in any known record.

By contrast, various biblical authors of the Persian period saw the hand of YHWH in the machinations of empire in ways out of proportion to the imperial (lack of) interest in Yehud. In 539 BCE the first Persian king, Cyrus II, produced the famous Cyrus Cylinder. The Cylinder declares that Marduk instructed Cyrus to repatriate Mesopotamian peoples to their homelands and to restore their sanctuaries, resettling their gods in their rebuilt temples. The author of the Book of Ezra apparently appropriated their knowledge of this conventional Persian policy and, failing to mention that Cyrus acted in this way toward other nations and their gods, declared that Cyrus' provision for the exiled people to return to their homeland and to restore their Temple came at YHWH's behest (Ezra 1:2–4).⁴

The Book of Ezra and the Books of Haggai and Zechariah, all view Jerusalem and the Temple devoted to YHWH Sabaoth as the key site for YHWH's future activities, which will make Jerusalem central, not marginal, in their known world. Yet, this emphasis on the centrality of Jerusalem and YHWH's Temple is not only dissonant with the perspective of the Persian rulers, it also does not reflect the experience of the audience of these books. Archaeological evidence indicates that, though Jerusalem remained stable from the time of the city's destruction at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BCE until the time of Nehemiah's

⁴ See Amélie Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy," *JOT* 25 (1983): 83–97; Bob Becking, "'We All Returned as One!': Critical Notes on the Myth of the Mass Return," in *Judah and Judeans in the Persian Period* (ed. Oded Lipschitz and Manfred Oeming; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 3–18.

return to the city in 445 BCE, the city was sparsely inhabited, a fact reflected in Neh 7:4, “the city was large and spacious; there were few people in it and no houses being built.”⁵ Charles Carter, basing his work on the data previously collected by Kenneth Hoglund, argues that the number of returnees to Persia was much smaller than the numbers claimed in Nehemiah.⁶ Though the city would still have been viewed as an important cultic center, the place with the remains of the foundation of Solomon’s Temple, Jerusalem was not the central administrative site in Yehud until after the return of Nehemiah, who rebuilt the city’s walls as part of the Persian effort to fortify its southern boundary in response to the strengthening rebellions of the nation of Egypt.⁷

In other words, during the times reflected in the Books of Haggai and Zechariah, including those portions of the Book of Zechariah that belong to dates later than Darius I but predating the arrival of Nehemiah (Zech 9–14), Jerusalem remained sparsely populated and regionally insignificant. As suggested in the work of Oded Lipschits and his colleagues, the prominence of the lion seal impressions at Ramat Rahel during the middle Persian period (late 6th to mid-5th century BCE), indicate that Ramat Rahel, not Jerusalem, served as the administrative center for Yehud for over a century.⁸

⁵ David Ussishkin, “The Borders and Size of Jerusalem in the Persian Period,” in *Judah and Judeans in the Persian Period* (ed. Lipschitz and Oeming), 147–166.

⁶ Charles E. Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period: A Social and Demographic Study* (LHBOTS 294; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

⁷ John W. Betlyon, “A People Transformed: Palestine in the Persian Period,” *NEA* 68:1–2 (2005): 7.

⁸ Oded Lipschits, “Persian Period Judah: A New Perspective,” in *Texts, Contexts, and Reading in Postexilic Literature* (ed. Louis Jonker; FAT 2/53; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 187–211.

6 THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOKS OF HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH

Jerusalem, formerly the prominent city of the region, languishing in secondary status to the formerly less prominent city, Ramat Rahel, has a parallel in the relationship between Sidon and Tyre during the Achaemenid Period. During Babylon's onslaught of the Levant, Nebuchadnezzar engaged in a protracted siege eventuating in the capitulation of the Tyrians and the deportation of its elite to Babylon, with the result that Tyre lost its significance in the region even before Alexander the Great destroyed the city. Sidon, on the other hand, was not besieged by the Babylonians and so took on a more prominent role in Phoenicia, a role previously played by Tyre.⁹ The relationship between Ramat Rahel and Jerusalem appears much the same as with Tyre and Sidon. Jerusalem was destroyed and its elite deported by Nebuchadnezzar while life in Ramat Rahel went along fairly undisturbed. And thus, Jerusalem, like Tyre, found itself in a secondary role in the district of Yehud, rising to greater prominence only in the latter period of the Achaemenid rule and more so during the Seleucid era.

With the prophetic rhetoric about Yehud and Jerusalem's significance in the eyes of YHWH Sabaoth – in spite of their struggles and relative insignificance under Persian rule – it comes as no surprise that the visions of the Jerusalem Temple in the Books of Haggai and Zechariah disproportionately amplify the significance of the house of YHWH on the world stage. Although the opening of the Book of Ezra claims that a mass of people returned to Jerusalem during the days of Cyrus with the specific

⁹ Vadim S. Jigoulov, *The Social History of Achaemenid Phoenicia* (London: Equinox, 2010), 166; cf. J. Brian Peckham, who thinks that the elite returned to Tyre after Nebuchadnezzar's death (*Phoenicia: Episodes and Anecdotes from the Ancient Mediterranean* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014], 370).

aim of rebuilding the sanctuary in Jerusalem, the Books of Ezra, Haggai, and Zechariah agree that some twenty years later the temple site had been cleared but the work of rebuilding remained largely unfinished. Nevertheless, the Books of Haggai and Zechariah envision a future where the Temple becomes the concern of peoples far away from Jerusalem (Zech 6:12–15), with a splendor even greater than Solomon's Temple (Hag 2:6–9), while YHWH provides special protection for the Temple against future enemies (Zech 9:5–8). The dearth of evidence from the biblical text about the exact date of the completion of the Second Temple indicates, in fact, that the Temple did not achieve a glorious state in either its structure or in the eyes of the audiences of the Books of Haggai and Zechariah. The Temple would only achieve such great status centuries later with the coming of Herod I in the 1st century BCE.

In other words, the theology of the Books of Haggai and Zechariah addresses the apparent insignificance of Yehud, Jerusalem, and the Second Temple on the world stage based in the belief that YHWH Sabaoth exercises power over the nations, beginning with YHWH returning the Jewish exiles to their homeland and to Jerusalem for the express purpose of rebuilding the Temple. The assurances of God's authority over the nations and YHWH's deep concern for those living in Yehud and Jerusalem were meant to strengthen the people to pursue the aims of the prophetic discourse: to trust in YHWH for their future, to rebuild the sanctuary of YHWH, and to pursue the moral demands made by YHWH in the Torah and the former prophets. The fact that the divine order of the world proclaimed by the prophets remains an unknown secret outside of Yehudite circles was a problem that the prophets who followed in the Zechariah tradition (i.e., those who produced

8 THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOKS OF HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH

Zech 9–14)¹⁰ would continue to deal with, especially at the intersection of the grandiose visions of Haggai and Zechariah and the continued struggles of the community before the time of Nehemiah.¹¹

Ehud Ben Zvi argues that the people in the province of Yehud did not experience the land as one of existential risk in the way that previous generations did during the era of Assyrian and Babylonian dominance with their devastating military campaigns that destroyed cities in Northern Israel and Southern Judah and sent thousands of exiles from their homeland. Zvi bases this claim in part on this very point, that the province of Yehud was marginal to the Persian Empire, unable to pose a legitimate threat to the Persians, and so unlikely to draw the sustained military attention of the armies of Persia.¹² While Yehud may not have experienced any profound sense of threat during the reigns of

¹⁰ Many biblical scholars divide the text of the Book of Zechariah into two sections, First Zechariah (chs. 1–8) and Second Zechariah (chs. 9–14), though some further divide the book into Second Zechariah (chs. 9–11) and Third Zechariah (chs. 12–14). Because of my own emphasis on the final form of the book (see below), I will avoid using these terms, though, as the language indicates here, I believe the last portion of the book developed in the hands of disciples of the original prophet, Zechariah.

¹¹ The language of “unknown secret” comes from Ehud Ben Zvi, “On Social Memory and Identity Formation in Late Persian Yehud,” in *Texts, Contexts and Reading* (ed. Jonker), 139–140.

¹² *Ibid.*, 106–107. Briant notes that the interest in Yehud ascribed to Cyrus is really just an “optical illusion” based on the imbalance of evidence, namely the textual evidence of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah versus a lack of similar, Persian texts. He goes so far as to claim that, even as Nehemiah fortified the walls of Jerusalem, “there is nothing to prove that Susa or Persepolis considered Judah a bulwark of Persian dominion against fickle and unruly Egypt” (*From Cyrus to Alexander*, 585–586). While I do not wish to overestimate the importance of Yehud even after the return of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls, I argue below that it seems safe to presume that the rebuilding of the walls functioned within the larger Persian

Darius and Xerxes, the latter chapters of the Book of Zechariah indicate that the people experienced some existential anxieties, including both internal divisions and also a complex of worrisome concerns about neighbors near and far: Damascus, Tyre, Sidon, Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, Ashdod, Greece (Javan),¹³ Assyria, and Egypt (chs. 9–10), with the threat of chariots and horses in Ephraim and Jerusalem (9:9–10). How might one account for the sense of threat expressed in these oracles?

The anxiety apparent in the texts of Zechariah 9–10 and the wide range of important cities and countries named in these chapters reflect the instability in the region during the first decade or so of the reign of Artaxerxes I. As Artaxerxes came to power in 464 amid political confusion due to the murder of Xerxes I, Inaros of Egypt declared himself king and invited the Athenians to join him in expelling the Persians from the Levant. Cities on the coast like Tyre, Sidon, Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ashdod were cities that Artaxerxes fortified and where he built a larger fleet to hold at bay the Athenian navy. Still, in the first major Persian campaign to put down the Egyptian revolt in 459/458, the Persians lost to the Egyptians, losing up to one-quarter of their army and suffering the death of Achaemenes, the satrap of Egypt, who was killed in the battle of Papremis. Only in 456/5 did the Persians, under Artabazus and Megabyzus, take the Egyptian capital Memphis and destroy most of the fifty Athenian ships meant to reinforce the Egyptian fleet.¹⁴ The anxieties expressed and addressed in Zechariah 9–14 make good sense in light of the regional uproar

strategy to shore up their southern boundary against the threat of Egyptian revolt and incursion.

¹³ On Javan as a reference to the Greeks as such, see *HALOT*, 1:402.

¹⁴ For an excellent summary of the Egyptian revolt and the Persian response, see Ruzicka, *Trouble in the West*, 29–32.

10 THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOKS OF HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH

and the likelihood that Persian armies marched through the Levant to Egypt, while reports swirled about the Persian defeat at sea.

In this light, it is likely that the mission of Nehemiah in the 440s to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem was part of a larger Persian strategy to maintain stricter control of Palestine and to mobilize conscripted armies from the area to battle Egypt, should the need again arise.¹⁵ Given that worries over internal strife and (potential) external onslaught against Jerusalem are intimated throughout the Book of Zechariah, it seems that Nehemiah's mission in the 440s is the *terminus ad quem* of the book. Certainly rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, representing more direct interest of the Persians in the goings-on of Yehud, along with the building of small fortifications at major crossroads in the Levant, at industrial installations, and in the middle of cities, towns, and villages, would have provided the people with a greater sense of security for their future.¹⁶

The long-term struggle of Yehud, Jerusalem, and the Temple in their subject status within the Persian Empire, along with the heightened anxieties about their future in the midst of an international conflict, thus serves as the backdrop to the unfolding theological response found in Zechariah 9–14. The disciples in the Zechariah tradition that edited the book knew the prophecies about the return of YHWH to the people (Zechariah 1–6) and the demands for justice made upon the people (Zechariah 7–8), and likely also knew the bold promises to Zerubbabel and his

¹⁵ See Betlyon, "A People Transformed," 7; I appreciate the private conversation with Baruch Halpern for the observation that building up fortifications would aid in the conscription of an army among local peoples.

¹⁶ See Betlyon, "A People Transformed," 7.