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*The NIV Application Commentary: Haggai, Zechariah*  
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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Boda, Mark J.

Haggai, Zechariah / Mark J. Boda.

p. cm.—(The NIV application commentary)

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and indexes.

ISBN: 0-310-20615-4 (hardcover)

1. Bible. O.T. Haggai—Commentaries. 2. Bible. O.T. Zechariah—Commentaries.

I. Title. II. Series.

BS 1655.53.B63 2004

224'.97077—dc22

2004005204

CIP

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This edition printed on acid-free paper.

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*Printed in the United States of America*

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# Introduction to Haggai and Zechariah

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IN HIS 1956 BOOK *Everyday Life in Old Testament Times*, E. W. Heaton provides an artistic illustration of the exiles of Judah marching under armed Babylonian guard through the famous Ishtar gate of Babylon.<sup>1</sup> Underneath the picture is the caption: "The Closing Scene of Old Testament Times: The Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar."<sup>2</sup> This title captures the sentiments of many readers of the Old Testament, that after the destruction of Jerusalem the story of redemption fades into the haze of exile only to reappear with the birth of Christ in the New Testament. There is no question that most of the events of Israel that are fixed in the cultural consciousness of the church happened prior to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.,<sup>3</sup> such as the call of Abraham, the rise of Joseph, the exploits of Samson, the victories of David, or the proclamations of Elijah.

The period in which Haggai and Zechariah lived and ministered, therefore, does not receive much attention in Christian circles. A preference for the earlier stories of Israel is apparent for several reasons. (1) With the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. the Israelites did not regain independence from foreign powers until the Maccabean revolt. Even the province in which part of the Jewish remnant lived was a mere fraction of its size under David and Solomon. This does not make for great storytelling, although Daniel and Esther enjoy some popularity.

(2) The New Testament accounts of Jesus and Paul portray the leadership of the Jews (the Sadducees, Pharisees, and teachers of the law) in a negative light. These various groups arose in the period between the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the birth of Christ, and thus the literature from this period is read through the lens of the New Testament critique of these groups. Books like Ezra and Nehemiah are disparaged for their close attention to the law.

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1. I am thankful to P. R. Ackroyd for drawing my attention to this book; P. R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration: A Study of Hebrew Thought of the Sixth Century B.C.* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 1.

2. E. W. Heaton, *Everyday Life in Old Testament Times* (New York: Scribner, 1956), 26.

3. For debate over whether Jerusalem fell in 587 or 586 B.C. see G. Galil, *The Chronology of the Kings of Israel and Judah* (SHANE 9; Leiden: Brill, 1996); G. Galil, "The Babylonian Calendar and the Chronology of the last Kings of Judah," *Bib* 72 (1991): 367–78; A. R. Green, "The Chronology of the Last Days of Judah: Two Apparent Discrepancies," *JBL* 101 (1982): 52–73.

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(3) The rebuilding of the temple and the city of Jerusalem is seen as odd in light of Christ's coming. Why rebuild the temple only to have it rejected by Christ in his ministry?

These factors introduce us to some of the major hurdles for preaching and teaching on Haggai and Zechariah. In order to appropriate the rich theology of these books for contemporary audiences, we need to overcome these challenges. The purpose of this introduction is to provide historical-literary, biblical-theological, and contemporary orientation for the interpreter of Haggai and Zechariah. We will begin with a basic orientation to the history and literature of these books, ending with a summary of the basic theological message to their ancient audience (Original Meaning). Then we will offer a biblical-theological orientation so that Christian readers can appropriate the truth of Haggai and Zechariah for their lives today (Bridging Contexts). Finally, we will survey key implications of the theology of Haggai and Zechariah for church and society today (Contemporary Significance). In this way my desire is to strike a balance between history and theology, always sensitive to the fact that the theological truth of the Scriptures has been delivered within particular historical contexts through particular literary forms.

### Original Meaning

BECAUSE THE PREVAILING historical approach to the Scriptures in the modern era has often turned the Bible into a museum piece, theologians are increasingly abandoning historical context in their search for theological truth. This shift is challenged in Tom Wright's parody of the prodigal son, in which the prodigal is the historical study of the Bible. Wright attacks theologians who have taken "off their historical sandals lest they tread on holy ground" and reminds us that "stripped of its arrogance, its desire to make off with half of the patrimony and never be seen again, history belongs at the family table. If theology, the older brother, pretends not to need or notice him it will be a sign that he has forgotten, after all, who his father is."<sup>4</sup> It will become evident throughout the commentary that I utilize a three-dimensional hermeneutic, one that seeks to interpret these texts in their ancient context (historical dimension) with sensitivity to their message encased in literary form (literary dimension), but also as texts with a relevant message appropriated by contemporary readers seeking to interpret and live faithfully as Christians (contemporary dimension). In this

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4. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 2, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 661.

way my desire is to strike a balance between history and theology, always sensitive to the fact that the theological truth of the Scriptures has been delivered within particular historical contexts through particular literary forms

## A. History of the Early Persian Period

NABONIDUS, ONE of the last emperors of Babylon, records a dream in which he receives instruction from the god Marduk to go to his mother's temple in Haran (which was under the control of the Medes) and rebuild it:

In the beginning of my everlasting reign he made me to see a vision. Marduk, the great lord, and Sin, the light of heaven and earth, stood on either side. Marduk said to me: "Nabonidus, King of Babylon, haul bricks with your wagon-horses, rebuild E-hul-hul, and make Sin, the great lord, to take up his residence therein." Reverently I spoke to the lord of the gods, Marduk: "The Medes have encompassed that house, which you did command to rebuild, and their forces are mighty." But Marduk said to me: "The Medes of whom you have spoken—they, their country, and the kings who marched with them are no more." On the approach of the third year they instigated Cyrus, King of Anzan, his petty vassal, to attack them, and with his few troops he routed the numerous Medes. He seized Astyages, King of the Medes, and took him as a captive to his own country. (It was) the word of the great lord, Marduk, and Sin, the light of heaven and earth, whose command can not be annulled.<sup>5</sup>

This dream assembles a fascinating trio of leaders who rose to prominence in the final phase of the Neo-Babylonian empire in mid-sixth century B.C.: Nabonidus of Babylon, Astyages of Media, and Cyrus of Persia. To set the stage for this dream and the impact of these characters on the Jewish community, we need to return to the beginning of the sixth century and the reign of an earlier Babylonian emperor, Nebuchadnezzar.

Probably the ancient emperor most familiar to us is Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of the Neo-Babylonian empire from 605–562 B.C.<sup>6</sup> His father, Nabopolassar (626–605), in concert with Cyaxares of Media (625–585), wrested control of the ancient Near East from the Assyrians during an extended struggle that

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5. R. F. Harper, "Inscription of a Clay Cylinder of Nabonidus," in *ABL*, ed. R. F. Harper (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1901), 163–68, with slight revisions.

6. For details of this history see further H. W. F. Saggs, *The Might That Was Assyria*, rev. ed. (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1984); idem, *The Greatness That Was Babylon: A Survey of the Ancient Civilization of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley*, rev. ed. (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1988); P. A. Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon 556–539 B.C.* (Yale Near Eastern

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began in earnest with a three-month siege of Nineveh in 612. The following decade saw intense competition between the Babylonian-Median alliance and the Egypto-Assyrian coalition for supremacy in western Asia, with the Assyrians operating out of Haran, culminating in a famous battle at Carchemish in 609. The newly crowned Pharaoh Necho II had marched north to help the Assyrians retake Haran, but at Carchemish met the superior might of the Babylonian army.

The Babylonians, led by Nebuchadnezzar, routed the Egyptians first at Carchemish and soon after at Hamath. At that time Nebuchadnezzar received word that his father had died, so he returned to Babylon to secure the throne. Then he returned to his war along the Mediterranean coast, took the Philistine territory, and by the end of 601 B.C. pushed his way to the border of Egypt. A valiant Egyptian military force stopped him there.

The record of the reigns of the final kings of Judah reveals the impact of these larger movements on the ancient Near Eastern scene. King Josiah foolishly challenged Necho on his way to Carchemish in 609 B.C. and was killed in the battle (2 Kings 23:29–30). Necho's brief control of western Asia (609–605) is reflected in his punishment of Josiah's son Jehoahaz (23:32, 34) and the promotion of his brother Jehoiakim (Eliakim; 23:33, 35). Babylonian successes against Necho in 605 and the ensuing battles between the two world powers are reflected in Jehoiakim's vacillation in allegiance, beginning under Necho, then switching to Nebuchadnezzar (24:1a), back to the Egyptians (24:1b), before being bullied by Babylonian allies (24:2–6). After Nebuchadnezzar marched to the border of Egypt (24:7), Jehoiakim died, leaving his son Jehoiachin to face the fury of the Babylonian monarch, who besieged Jerusalem, deported its leadership, and placed Zedekiah on the throne in 598 (24:8–17). Zedekiah's disloyalty to Nebuchadnezzar, however, prompted his return in 587 to destroy the city (ch. 25).

These events had a devastating effect on the Jewish people. Many were killed, some fled to surrounding nations, some were exiled to Mesopotamia, while others remained in the land. Such disarray rendered doubtful any national hopes for the Jewish people.

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Researches 10; New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1989); J. Boardman et al., eds., *Persia, Greece and the Western Mediterranean c. 525 to 479 B.C.*, 2d ed. (CAH 4; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988); J. Boardman et al., eds., *The Assyrian and Babylonian Empires and Other States of the Near East, from the Eighth to the Sixth Centuries B.C.* (CAH 3/2; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991); I. Gershevitch, S. I. Grossman, and H. S. G. Darke, *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Median and Achaemenian Periods* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993); P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, trans. P. T. Daniels (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002).

Nebuchadnezzar ruled the ancient Near East until 562 B.C., but as is typical in the ancient world, greatness is followed by upheaval as three different kings reigned in the short space of 562–556: Nebuchadnezzar's son Amel-Marduk (Evil-Merodach, 2 Kings 25:27–30), followed by Neriglissar (Amel-Marduk's brother-in-law), and finally Neriglissar's son Labashi-Marduk.

Such upheaval threatened the integrity of the empire, setting the stage for a strong leader. That man would be Nabonidus, who arose from the military ranks of the Babylonian army and whose dream was recorded at the outset of our discussion. As the dream indicates, when Nabonidus assumed power in 556 B.C. Astyages ruled as king in Media with control over the lesser kingdom of his grandson Cyrus in Persia. By 553, however, Cyrus revolted against Astyages, an action celebrated by Nabonidus because it freed him to rebuild his mother's temple in Haran. During the next decade, Nabonidus installed his son Belshazzar as king in Babylon and moved his base of operations to the oasis of Teima in the Arabian desert. This action led to dissatisfaction among the populace in Babylon, especially among the priests of Marduk, whose New Year's festival could not be held without the emperor.

While Nabonidus was in Teima, Cyrus was busy acquiring territory on the fringes of the Babylonian empire. In 547/546 B.C. he extended the former Median territories to the west, crossed the Halys river, and took control of Lydia from King Croesus, who was in alliance with Nabonidus. Then he turned to the east and extended his control to the Jaxartes river.

These actions prompted Nabonidus's return to Babylon, but the situation was grave. In the final months of his rule the emperor transported many gods to Babylon, enraging the priests of the various shrines in southern Mesopotamia. Although he did participate in the New Year's festival upon his return, his relationship with the priests was irreparable. In 539 B.C. Cyrus moved across the Zagros mountains, forded the Tigris at Opis, and marched with little resistance into Babylonia (see Dan. 5, esp. v. 39). At least in his mind, if not in reality, Cyrus was welcomed into the city of Babylon more as a liberator than a conqueror and assumed the territories of the Babylonians. A new day had dawned in the ancient Near East.

A key record of Cyrus's triumph over Babylon is recorded on a clay barrel called the Cyrus Cylinder, found in an archaeological expedition in Mesopotamia. In it he claims that Marduk raised him up to conquer Babylon and that he did so to the delight of its citizens. This resulted in the submission of rulers throughout the Babylonian empire who came to Babylon to bow before Cyrus. Key to Israel's destiny was his immediate move to reconstruct sanctuaries for the gods of his conquered nations and along with this to return their former inhabitants to their lands:

## Introduction

... As to the region from as far as Ashur and Susa, Agade, Eshnunna, the towns of Zamban, Me-Turnu, Der as well as the region of the Gutians, I returned to these sanctuaries on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which had been ruins for a long time, the images which used to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned to them their habitations. Furthermore, I resettled upon the command of Marduk, the great lord, all the gods of Sumer and Akkad whom Nabonidus had brought into Babylon to the anger of the lord of the gods, unharmed, in their former chapels, the places which make them happy. May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me and may they recommend me to him; to Marduk, my lord, they may say this: "Cyrus, the king who worships you, and Cambyses, his son [*lacuna*]." All gods I settled in a peaceful place. . . . I endeavoured to fortify/repair their dwelling places.<sup>7</sup>

This text attests Cyrus's claim not only to a peaceful transition from Babylonian to Persian rule, but also highlights his shrewd politico-religious policies through which (he claims) he won the allegiance of the population.<sup>8</sup>

The mention of Cyrus in Isaiah 44:28; 45:1; 45:13 reveals the high expectations associated with him among the exilic Jewish community. Although the Cyrus Cylinder does not mention the exiled Jewish people in particular, it details the kind of policies reflected in Jewish writings of this period, especially in the proclamation of Cyrus in Ezra 1:1–4 (cf. 2 Chron. 36:22–23) and decree of Cyrus in Ezra 6:1–5.<sup>9</sup> Ezra 1 describes an early response to Cyrus's policies as a group of Jews returned to Palestine under the leadership of Sheshbazzar (539–537 B.C.). These Jews transported temple utensils that had been confiscated by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C. and had been stored in a temple in Babylon (Ezra 1:9–11; 5:13–14) and "laid the foundations of the house of God" (Ezra 5:15–16).

Cyrus did not rule for long over his expansive realm. He was killed in 530 B.C. on a military expedition on the eastern frontier of the empire and with his

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7. ANET, 315–16, with minor revisions.

8. On the veracity of this claim see M. J. Boda, "Terrifying the Horns: Persia and Babylon in Zechariah 1:7–6:15," *CBQ* 67 (2005): forthcoming.

9. The first is written in Hebrew, the second in Aramaic. The first is more like a modern press release, while the second is the legal memorandum in the Persian archives; H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985), 6–7; also more recently, idem, "Exile and After: Historical Study," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, ed. D. W. Baker and B. T. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 236–65.