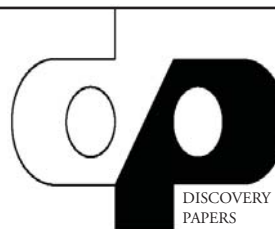


BEFORE HAGGAI: A NARRATIVE BACKGROUND

SERIES: A REALLY REAL GOD



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The whole thing started with Adam. Well, it started with God, but God started with Adam. After forming the earth and declaring it good, God breathed life into Adam and his wife, Eve. For some time, they lived in perfection. They chatted with God on cool morning walks. Their task of tending and caring for the Garden fulfilled them completely. And they saw each other naked without shame: a perfect human relationship. But then things turned sour. Together, they disobeyed the one command that God had given them, failing him and failing each other. As a result, perfection on earth was destroyed. God banished his children from the garden, never to hear his footsteps on the morning grass again. Weeds and thorns plagued their work in the land, making it painful and frustrating. And their relationship with one another deteriorated as blame, guilt, and fear exploded between them.

But God's work continued. Adam and Eve had children, and the earth began to fill. Some of their children followed close in the footsteps of sin, while others kept alive their intended relationship with God. As generations followed Adam and Eve, the world darkened with their sin. Finally, God declared that his original intention was so tarnished beyond recognition that he would start afresh. He chose one man, Noah, to begin anew his creation. Promising to save Noah and his family, God destroyed the rest of the world. But the effects of the fresh start didn't last long. It too ripened into disobedience. Noah celebrated his deliverance in a drunken stupor and was found naked, full of shame.

But God's work continued. Once again, the world filled with people. And once again, God chose one through whom he would work. This time it was Abram, whom God would rename Abraham. Instead of starting fresh with the whole world this time, God promised Abram that he and his descendants would be his chosen people. A special group, they were destined to show God's mercy and blessing to the entire world. God called Abram out of his homeland to a new land, promising to go with him. So Abram, full of faith, set out in obedience.

And God's work continued. Abram's tryst with a concubine resulted in an illegitimate son who threatened the promise. But then came Isaac, born of Abraham's wife Sarah. He received the reiteration of God's promise to make him into a special people. Of Isaac's two sons, God chose the younger, Jacob, to continue his promise. Jacob

became Israel and the people of God began. Twelve sons founded twelve tribes. One son, hated by the others, was chosen by God to save them. Joseph's brothers mocked him, plotted to kill him, and finally sold him into slavery in Egypt. At first it wasn't so bad, but when his boss's wife showed up with his clothes, his innocence didn't matter. He ended up in jail.

But God's work continued. Joseph went from prison life to palace life. Through him, God spoke to the king of Egypt, landing Joseph a job as his right-hand man. And when the drought that Joseph predicted hit the land, the kingdom was ready. Joseph didn't just save Egypt, he saved his family as well. The burgeoning twelve tribes came to Egypt, and the people of God ate. They settled there and became a great nation. But Joseph's fame and power waned after his death, and the Egyptians oppressed God's people. As Joseph had once been, they became slaves. Hated and misused, Israel suffered in Egypt.

But God's work continued. Once again, he chose someone to deliver them: a baby, discovered in a basket floating in a river and dubbed Moses. As Moses was rescued from the river, God rescued his people from Egypt. Stripping their slave masters of their riches and pride, Moses led the people of God out of bondage. God had promised a nation to Abraham, had repeated the promise to Isaac, had given the twelve tribes to Jacob, and had multiplied them in Egypt, but this was the moment that the people of God later called their birth. Israel became a nation, not by her own doing, but by the deliverance of God. The people of God tasted freedom like cool water. Israel was born.

And God's work continued. In punishment for a lack of faith, the people spent forty years wandering in the wilderness, until at last, they stepped on the edge of their promised land. But although he led the people out of Egypt, Moses wouldn't lead them into their land. For that responsibility, God chose a young man named Joshua. With trumpet shouts, Joshua conquered the land God had given to his people. Finally, Israel lived in her land—the very land that God promised to Abraham. If the nation was born on the outskirts of Egypt, then it learned to walk in the land of Canaan which had quickly become its own.

And God's work continued. Israel was chosen by God to be his people: to receive God's favor, and ultimately to

extend that favor to the world. And so they were peculiar. Instead of a king, they had judges who ruled them. After all, God was their King, and they served him directly. Judges were appointed to take care of the logistics of being a nation, but Israel pledged loyalty to God only. Sometimes this arrangement worked well—other times it didn't—but the people grew dissatisfied nonetheless. Everyone around them had a king, and they wanted one, too. So they asked their King to send them a king in their own likeness in hopes of living like their neighbors.

And God's work continued. He gave them their king, a handsome up-and-comer named Saul who seemed perfectly fit for the job. For a while, he did great. The people of God rallied under his leadership and grew strong. But Saul forgot that he was only an under-king and pushed aside God's leadership. So things began to fall apart. As Saul lost his mind, the nation lost her king and strife broke out everywhere. In the midst of this, God chose a new man to lead his people, an unlikely shepherd named David. Yet Saul continued sitting on the throne long after David's hair glistened with oil anointing him as king. The nation was a mess.

But God's work continued. Saul's madness finally became his downfall and David stepped up to lead God's people. Israel recognized her king: David, the shepherd-poet turned warrior-king, who ushered in the golden days. David was the kind of king that Israel always wanted and would always want for years to come. He led them in victory with humility. He cared for them while calling them into action. And he loved their God, his God, the God of Israel. With David, the nation matured past childhood: they were the chosen people of God; they lived in the land God promised them. But the riches of David's palace reminded him that God as yet had no home among them. And without his presence, his people were nothing. So David turned his eyes toward building a place suitable for God to inhabit—a place where God could walk among them as he had in the garden. But David learned that the temple wasn't his to build. Instead, God chose his son.

And God's work continued. Solomon followed his father David as king and ruled as the wisest man on earth. Riches, fame, success, wisdom—Solomon enjoyed them all. But his greatest accomplishment was completing the temple for Yahweh. What an amazing place! Built to communicate God's majesty, power, and glory, the temple hummed with beauty. What wasn't gold was silver, and what wasn't silver was bronze. Solomon's temple honored the God of Israel and invited him into their midst. And he came. His cloud of glory filled the temple, and the people of God experienced their God in new and wonderful ways. For a time, they seemed complete: a nation chosen by God, living in the land given by God, blessed with the very presence of God among them. This lasted until Solomon's death made room for a terrible decision by his son.

But God's work continued. Rehoboam shirked the wisdom of his father and through his arrogance broke the nation of Israel in two. Jeroboam led ten of the twelve tribes away as the northern kingdom, leaving two tribes loyal to the throne of David in Jerusalem. Circumstances continued as such for a while: two kings, two nations, but one people of God, split by hatred and pride. And though they always remained the people of God, they only sometimes acted like it. Too often they forgot everything but his name in their effort to be like their neighbors, worshipping their lumps of stone and wood. God's people tarnished his name and forgot their relationship with him.

But God's work continued. All of this leaving God behind eventually caught up with them—first with those in the north. The Assyrians overtook the northern kingdom of Israel, destroying her capital city of Samaria and dispersing the people of God. The southern kingdom of Judah narrowly missed the same fate as God miraculously saved her from the army that destroyed her counterpart. Thus Jerusalem remained for a time, but not for long. Finally, the Babylonians came in and conquered the city, shattering the nation of Israel once and for all. In a final crushing blow, the temple fell and the people were dispersed.

And God's work continued. But he was working in darkness now. The people lived in exile. The land God had given them had been taken by nations who didn't even know the names of Abraham and Isaac. Foreigners carried away the wealth of the temple that once celebrated the awesome presence of God. Israel remained the people of God, chosen by him to receive and proclaim his favor. But they had lost every tangible reminder of their identity.

But God's work continued. He sent his people prophets to remind them of their identity and give them the promise of salvation. Just as God had delivered Israel out of slavery in Egypt, he would deliver them from exile—all in due time. Finally, that time came. Again, God chose someone to save them, but this time it was totally different. God chose the Persian king Cyrus to release the Jews to return to their land. Some returned, but not as many as one would have hoped. Too many found exile more comfortable than the prospect of a new beginning. But a remnant returned and began to pick up the pieces of the nation of Israel.

And God's work continued. They didn't have a king, because they still reported to the Persians. They were in their land, but only part of it. But they had permission to rebuild the temple of their God, the God of Israel. And so they began. In the midst of borrowed land and foreign leadership, they set out to re-invite their God to live among them, and the walls of the temple grew from

the ground. But life in Persian-occupied Jerusalem wasn't easy and the Jews soon forgot their desire for God's presence amidst their scramble to survive. The temple work slowed and finally stopped, and the monument to God's presence remained halfway complete.

But God's work continued. God chose a man to deliver a message to his people, to remind them of the importance of his presence. God spoke through Haggai.

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