

I Will Make You Like My Signet Ring

A Sermon on Haggai 2:20-23

On the 18 December, 520 BC, the prophet Haggai was having a busy day. He and the rest of the Jewish community in Jerusalem had participated in a foundation stone ceremony, which had been accompanied by a purification of the altar that would henceforth be used in all sacrificial worship at the Temple site. God had then commanded Haggai to confront the priests with a dramatic sign-act, which, while laying bare his thoughts on what had been unsatisfactory about the makeshift altar erected by the first group of Jewish returnees nearly twenty years earlier, also looked forward with confidence to the blessing to follow now that ‘stone had been laid upon stone,’ and the site purified. But just as Haggai might have been tempted to put his feet up, God’s word came to him for a second time. The first message of the day had been for Judah’s priests; the second is for her governor, Zerubbabel.

I’ve been referring to Zerubbabel throughout this series simply as Judah’s governor, a post to which he would have been appointed by the Persians. But in order to appreciate what Haggai tells him in vv. 21 to 23, we need to know a little more about his family tree, which, conveniently for us, appears in the genealogy of Jesus included by Matthew in the first chapter of his Gospel. Here we learn that Zerubbabel was the son of a man called Shealtiel, which we already knew from the first verse of Haggai. Shealtiel’s father, however, was Jeconiah, or Jehoiachin, the Judean king carted off to exile in Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in 597, and Jehoiachin was the son (actually, grandson) of Josiah, the boy-king and Temple-restorer commemorated in 2 Kings 22 and 23.

So it turns out that Zerubbabel is actually a descendant of David. And what, you may be asking yourself, were the Persians doing making a member of David’s house governor of Judea? The thing to remember here is the speed with which Cyrus had acquired the Babylonian Empire. Cyrus was a soldier, not an administrator, so in order to run his new empire he would be obliged to employ officials acceptable to the various nations of which it was composed.

Another question you may have is this: Given that the Book of Haggai is focussed so narrowly on the construction of the Second Temple, why does the book end by making a series of promises to Zerubbabel? The key thing to keep in mind here is that in the Old Testament, kingship and Temple go together. Most famously we see this in Nathan’s prophecy to King David, in which David’s intention to build for the LORD a ‘house’ (that is, a temple) is rebuffed,

and God promises instead to build for David a 'house' (that is, a dynasty). But it also surfaces in the remarkable prominence given to Solomon at the dedication of the first Temple, and the repairs made to the Temple and attendant purification of the cult are regarded as one of the great achievements of Jehoiachin's grandfather, Josiah.

Zerubbabel's role as temple-builder is celebrated in the oracle inserted into Zechariah 4, which we had read out for us earlier. Here the prophet – most likely Zechariah himself – deals, much as his contemporary, Haggai, had been obliged to, with the despondency of the returnees and their scepticism about whether this latest attempt to rebuild the Temple would actually manage to get off the ground. 'Do not despise the day of small things!' Zechariah tells the returnees. And – 'Just as Zerubbabel has laid the foundation stone of this temple, so will he bring out its capstone to mark its completion.' Zechariah 4 ties Zerubbabel's significance closely to the construction of the Temple. Can the same be said of Haggai 2?

Read with me, then, from v. 21 of Haggai 2:

'Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judea that I am going to shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother.'

How might Zerubbabel have been expected to interpret this message through the prophet?

The first thing to say is that, in contrast to Zechariah 4, this oracle has nothing obviously to do with Zerubbabel's role as the temporal authority responsible for driving forward the Temple project. Rather, it tells Zerubbabel of God's imminent plan 'to shake the heavens and the earth,' which is then, presumably, specified in the next verse as the violent overthrow of foreign kingdoms. Predicting the rise and fall of neighbouring powers was, of course, a highly traditional feature of prophecy in Ancient Israel, and highly traditional, too, is the language in which this particular prophecy is couched. God promises to overturn chariots and their drivers, much as Miriam had praised God by the shore of the Red Sea for having 'hurled both horse and driver into the sea' back in Exodus 15; the picture of soldiers falling 'each by the sword of his brother' takes up one of the themes from Israel's tradition of holy war, in which the LORD would send a panic into the enemy camp, causing the enemy's troops to attack one another. In the midst of regional turmoil, however, God promises to 'take' Zerubbabel and make him 'like his signet ring.' What is it that Haggai is trying to tell Zerubbabel here?

A persistent minority of commentators have seen in this oracle Haggai's attempt to goad Zerubbabel into rebellion. On this view, Haggai is encouraging Zerubbabel to take advantage of the international upheaval that accompanied Cambyses' death and Darius' eventual rise to power, and to act decisively to restore Judean independence while Darius is engaged in putting down more serious revolts in other, more important parts of his empire. 'Declare yourself king! Throw off the Persian yoke! God will be with you!' would be Haggai's message on this, minority view. For these commentators, Haggai has made a shrewd estimate of Zerubbabel's frustration with the nature of his authority. His grandfather had sat upon the throne of Judah; he serves merely as the Persians' lackey, his appointment not so much a salve to wounded Judean pride as an insult, rubbing salt into the wound of the nation's lost independence.

Most commentators, however, are wary of this interpretation. They note that the LORD is in fact promising to overturn thrones and kingdoms: could this not refer to the national independence movements springing up all over the Empire, most notably in Babylon and Egypt? Indeed, it's possible to imagine a scenario in which deputies from Egypt are encouraging Zerubbabel to revolt as a way of furthering their own plans for independence, much as Judah had found herself caught up in Egyptian foreign policy in the years accompanying Nebuchadnezzar's rise to power at the beginning of the sixth century. In this interpretation, Haggai would be saying to Zerubbabel: 'Don't allow your head to be turned by the turmoil you see around you in the wider empire. These thrones and kingdoms will be short-lived. More importantly, your authority isn't simply a product of Persian whim: behind it stands *my* choice, for *I* have chosen you.'

God's promise to make Zerubbabel like his signet ring is often read against the backdrop of Jeremiah 22:24-30, which was another of our readings this morning. Jeremiah's oracle is addressed to a young King Jehoiachin, Zerubbabel's grandfather, and makes a very bleak assessment of his future prospects:

'As surely as I live,' declares the LORD, 'even if you, Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a signet ring on my right hand, I would still pull you off!'

What is a signet ring? It is a ring inscribed with the king's seal. The seal is plunged into the wet clay tablet of an official document in order to give it the king's stamp of approval. The seal is the means by which the king conducts his business. In this oracle from the Book of Jeremiah, God is saying that he no longer wishes to conduct business by means of the kings of Judah. The royal line is coming to an end. Jehoiachin and his mother will be taken off to Babylon, and they will not be coming back. What is more, in v. 30 Jeremiah declares:

This is what the LORD says:
‘Record this man as if childless,
a man who will not prosper in his lifetime,
for none of his offspring will prosper,
none will sit on the throne of David
or rule anymore in Judah.’

The meaning of these verses is clear: The people of Judah are not to hope that somehow this time their king will be able to lift the nation out of its predicament. David’s line has come to an end.

What then does it mean for the LORD to make Zerubbabel, Jehoiachin’s grandson, born in exile in Babylon, and now employed by the Persians as governor in Jerusalem, ‘like his signet ring’? If both Haggai and Zerubbabel could be assumed to be familiar with Jeremiah’s oracle against Jehoiachin, then perhaps we could see in this a flat contradiction and straightforward repeal of the earlier, harsh judgement upon David’s house as expressed by Jeremiah’s Jehoiachin oracle. This, in turn, would give us confidence to say that, for Haggai, God was about to restore David’s house to the throne of Judah. But familiarity with Jeremiah is probably not something we can assume for both Haggai and Zerubbabel, and it’s likely that the language of signet ring meant rather: ‘Zerubbabel is my chosen agent to effect the important business of Temple building. He has begun it under my auspices, and he can be trusted to bring the work on the Temple to completion.’

This is clearly a more minimalist interpretation of the Zerubbabel Oracle in Haggai 2, and, let’s be honest, not nearly as sexy as the one that views Haggai as fomenting rebellion by using Jehoiachin’s grandson as a figurehead and catalyst for Jewish nationalist aspirations. But it’s nonetheless the interpretation that is likely to be closer to the truth. Haggai 2:23 *does* turn out to mean much the same as the oracle inserted into the vision of the two lampstands in Zechariah 4.

But, reading Jeremiah 22 alongside Haggai 2, rather than simply as its possible source, still leaves us as modern readers of the Bible with a contradiction on our hands. Has David’s line failed, or hasn’t it? Before trying to resolve the problem, it’s worth recalling that the apparent failure of David’s line, viewed as the failure of God’s promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 that he would never fail to have a descendent sitting upon his throne, was, arguably, *the* great theological problem posed by the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. It certainly seemed that way for the author of Psalm 89, in which the whole poem is structured around the juxtaposition of God’s inviolable promise to

David on the one hand and the apparent failure of David's line in the Psalmist's day on the other.

The problem is eased somewhat by attending to the rhetorical aims of Jeremiah and Haggai, respectively. Jeremiah's ministry was shaped by his fundamental disagreement with the 'prophets of salvation'. These prophets sought to encourage Judah's kings to resist Nebuchadnezzar and were confident that God would never let Jerusalem fall into the hands of her enemies. Jeremiah had no such confidence. Resisting Nebuchadnezzar was futile, in his eyes, because Nebuchadnezzar was God's agent to punish Judah for her sinfulness. At its heart, Jeremiah's problem with the message being preached by the prophets of salvation was that they had fundamentally underestimated the seriousness of Judah's sin and the judgement that was hanging over her. 'They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious,' he complains of them in Jeremiah 6:14. When Jeremiah describes Jehoiachin as a signet ring that the LORD is about to pluck from his finger, he is refusing to let the Judeans put their hope in the young king as a way of avoiding reckoning with the seriousness of the judgement that is shortly to overtake them.

Haggai's listeners suffered from the opposite misapprehension. They saw in Zerubbabel only a puppet figure shoring up Persian power in Judea. They needed to see that behind Zerubbabel stood not merely the political *nous* of the Achaemenids, but the electing faithfulness of God. And perhaps Zerubbabel needed to know this, too.

Zerubbabel is one of the more mysterious figures in Israel's history. He disappears as mysteriously from the Bible as he entered it, although we know from Ezra 6 that the Temple was indeed completed in the sixth year of Darius. The next we hear of him is in the genealogy of Matthew 1, as one of Jesus' ancestors.

In Jesus' age, mainstream Judaism awaited a Messiah: a man from David's line through whom God's justice and righteousness would find full expression, a man 'after God's own heart'. The Messianic expectation of Jews in Jesus' day drew on a whole series of different strands of the Hebrew Bible. Now, none of the New Testament authors, to my knowledge, drew explicitly on the imagery of the signet ring in explaining Jesus' significance to the Christians of their day, but it is well worth asking, nevertheless: If Jehoiachin and his father's generation had failed to act as God's signet ring, and if Zerubbabel had acted as God's signet ring in restarting work on a Second Temple, in what sense is it legitimate to see in Jesus God's 'signet ring'?

We have seen that for Jeremiah and Haggai, to compare a ‘Son of David’ to the LORD’s signet ring was to say something about the role of Israel’s leader in carrying out God’s heavenly will on earth, for the blessing of his people. For Paul, Jesus as ‘*the* Son’ was, as we saw in our reading from Paul’s Letter to the Colossians, God’s agent in creation and redemption: ‘all things have been created through him and for him’; and ‘through him’ was God pleased to reconcile all things to himself. Jesus carries out the business of the Heavenly King. God is of course able to use anyone and anything to effect his purposes, but in no one else does he dwell so fully that they may properly be said to reflect all the contours and beauty of his character and purposes, to be, as it says in Colossians, ‘the image of the invisible God,’ and to have all the ‘fullness’ of God dwelling in them. Jesus is not merely the means by which God did something in the past: he is God’s normal or proper way of carrying out all his business, even what may be said to be God’s most characteristic business – the business of creation and of reconciliation. Jesus is the LORD’s signet ring.

Let’s pray:—

Father in Heaven,

Your purposes never fail. Your faithfulness is bigger than our sin. You see things through to completion. You never give up. Where can we see this more clearly than in your Son? Please help us to fix our eyes on him, particularly whenever we’re afraid or despondent. Help us to live for you with hope and confidence as we await his return.

In Jesus’ name,

Amen.