

Notes for Sunday 29th August 2021

Haggai 2:20-23 I have chosen you

Haggai's final message

Another precise date (2:20). That's 18 December 520BC in our calendar.

It's the same day as the message Gavin preached on last week (2:10). That was given to the priests and people about God's blessing. There was a promise - mark this date in your diaries and see that from now on I will bless you, now that you've turned around and restarted work on the temple (2:15).

We assume today's passage is connected, and is given to one man, Zerubbabel the governor (2:21). But, who on earth was he and what does the message mean?

Tools for digging deeper in the Bible

There are two useful tools for finding out more about a Bible passage or character, if you want to dig a bit deeper. These are:

- Commentaries: books which explain (usually verse by verse) what a particular Bible book is about (for example, that's how I got the dates of Haggai's prophecies in our calendar – you didn't think I worked them out myself, did you?).
- A Concordance: which is a bit like a dictionary. You look up a word, and it tells you every verse in the Bible that uses it. I've been using the 'Zondervan NIV Exhaustive concordance', which is, perhaps, overly detailed (for example, did you know the number 67 is only used once in the bible!)

To follow up a character name like Zerubbabel, a concordance is the ideal tool (but remember one important point – use one that's made for the particular Bible version you use, otherwise the words might be translated differently). And we discover that mentions of Zerubbabel do turn up in a few other places.

What can we find out about Zerubbabel?

From Haggai we know that his name was Zerubbabel (which means 'seed of Babel' – meaning 'born in Babylon'), that he was the son of Shealtiel (1:1) and that he was governor of Judah, appointed by the Persians (1:1). From that information, we can't actually tell if he was an Israelite or a Persian, although his name indicates an Israelite.

So, using our concordance, what else can we find:

- 1 Chronicles 3:17-19 names Shealtiel and Zerubbabel – but, wait a minute, it says Shealtiel's brother Pedaiah was Zerubbabel's father. What's going on? To explain it, think of a question Jesus was asked (Matthew 22:23-28) about seven brothers who each married the same widow because the law said that if one died without children another should marry the widow to preserve the dead brother's family line. That was a real thing and was called Levirate marriage. It looks like Shealtiel (probably the oldest since named first) had died and his younger brother Pedaiah had married the widow, treating his son Zerubbabel as Shealtiel's heir.

- In the same passage we see that Zerubbabel had a (probably younger) brother Shimei. But the important point is who his grandfather was. Look at v17 and the title of the section. Zerubbabel was the oldest surviving grandson of Jehoiachin – who was the last king of Judah before the Babylonians deposed him. Zerubbabel was royalty! More than that, he was the heir and first in line to the throne, tracing his ancestry back to king David (3:1).
- Remember what his name means? He was probably born in exile in Babylon, and so escaped the taint of being brought up in the palace of the wicked final kings of Judah.
- None of this would have been a secret, so the Persians obviously trusted him enough to appoint him governor.
- In Ezra 2:2 we read that Zerubbabel was one of the first exiles to return to Jerusalem (probably around 538BC). Soon after they arrived, he was one of the leaders of starting work on the temple (3:2, 3:8). That work met with opposition (4:2-3) which eventually led to that first attempt to rebuild the temple being stopped for several years (5:23-24). The book of Haggai tells how the work was finally restarted after that long delay (Ezra 5:1-2). There are parallel versions of the story in Nehemiah 7:7, 12:1, 12:47.
- The prophet Zechariah also has some personal messages to Zerubbabel, much like Haggai's we're looking at today (Zechariah 4:6-9).
- There is one more mention of Zerubbabel in the Bible, but I'll come back to that later.

So, do you see how much (hopefully interesting) information you can dig out with the right tools!

Why David's family matters

David, despite his many failings, was always considered the ideal king of Israel, described as a 'man after God's own heart' (Acts 13:22). You can sense some of his passion for God in psalms like Psalm 42.

God made a covenant with David (2 Samuel 7:11-16) that his royal house would endure forever (v16). This covenant was renewed to his son Solomon (1 Kings 9:1-9) when he built the first temple.

Despite many of the later kings of Judah being bad, God still preserved David's royal line for the sake of his covenant (for example 2 Kings 8:16-19).

When the time came for God to judge Judah for their sins, the prophet Jeremiah pronounced the judgement on king Jehoiachin (Jeremiah 22:24-30). The 'signet ring' was the sign of a king's authority (it was used to put the royal seal on documents). God said that Jehoiachin and his children would lose that authority.

Zerubbabel was a generation removed from that judgement, Jehoiachin's grandson, born in Babylon and refined by the experience of exile. Haggai's mention of the 'signet ring' (Haggai 2:23) is significant in that it restored the broken royal line and promise.

In that same verse, Haggai deliberately moves away from Zerubbabel's Persian title (governor of Judah) and evokes themes with much more royal promise in Judah:

- Son of Shealtiel (the royal line)
- My signet ring (the sign of royal authority)
- My servant (the 'servant of the Lord' in Isaiah 49-53 was the title given to God's promised Messiah).

So, being in David's family mattered because this was where the hope of God's promised Messiah was centred – the one who would rescue Israel and restore her independence under the rule of the good and just king.

The message to Zerubbabel (and us)

In Haggai 2:21-23 the message is that God will 'shake the heavens' (a standard phrase meaning God's intervention in human affairs) and 'overthrow royal thrones and shatter the power of foreign kingdoms'. The type of language is called 'apocalyptic', and usually refers to the future, possibly the distant future. It promised that the existing order would be overthrown and something new from God brought in.

Was it a suggestion that Zerubbabel should consider himself the Messiah and seize power, rebelling against the Persian empire and re-establishing the royal line of David in the kingdom of Judah? There is no evidence that Zerubbabel ever saw it that way. He remained loyal to Persia as governor. As explained above, the form of language tends to indicate the distant future rather than the immediate, and this was a promise for a future descendant of Zerubbabel.

It's an example of how we live when we don't have the final say in how society is run. We live in a society that makes laws on its own terms and is not particularly concerned with what Christians think about it. How do we live in those circumstances?

The answer is to be faithful to God and keep serving. Zerubbabel was an example. Another might be Obadiah (1 Kings 18:1-15) who was in charge of the palace of king Ahab, a candidate for the worst ever king of Israel. Yet he stuck to his job, doing it faithfully, whilst taking whatever opportunities came his way to protect God's prophets (v4). What do their examples have to say to us, as we live in a society where our views are very much on the margins?

The promised shaking

In Haggai 2:22 God promises to shake the heavens and overturn royal thrones. And that's what happened, although we may not be familiar with it as there's a gap of a few hundred years between the end of the Old Testament and start of the New. Here's a very quick summary:

- The Persian empire went to war with the Greeks (you may have seen films like 300 about one of those battles). Eventually Alexander the Great led the Greeks and Macedonians to conquer the Persian empire (around 330BC)
- When Alexander died, his empire split up among his generals. This included Judah, which became ruled by the Seleucids in Syria. This was a time when the Jews experienced severe persecution.

- Eventually Judah won a measure of independence, but that was all lost when two brothers were rivals for the throne and one of them decided to invite the new rising power of Rome to intervene on his side. They came with their army in 63BC and never left. That's why, when the gospel story starts, the country was ruled by the Romans.

That brings us to the final time Zerubbabel is mentioned in the Bible, in Matthew 1:12. It links backward to King David (v6) and forward to Jesus (v16). Thus, Zerubbabel is an ancestor of Jesus, placing him in the royal line of king David. And it's in Jesus that the promise is fulfilled, that God shakes the world and does a new thing, through his chosen one, his Son. The one who came as a king born in a stable and was enthroned on a cross, yet now reigns over heaven and earth.

Questions to consider

Readings: Haggai 2:20-23

- Think of Zerubbabel and also Obadiah (1 Kings 18:1-15). They both lived in times when God's law was not the ultimate authority in the country. One had relatively benign foreign rulers, the other a wicked Israelite king. What problems might that have caused them. How did they cope? What lessons are there for us, living in our society?