

Prophecy from the Sidelines

BY PAUL L. REDDITT

After the exile, the prophets of Israel had limited access to the real political powers of the day. Governed by distant Persian kings, they could not directly address their rulers. As spectators on the sidelines, not players on the field, they could cheer and boo, but not influence decisions in the clubhouse or the owner's office.

Isaiah was a major player in his society, with access to the king of Judah and the temple. He could speak to other major players as one of them. Jeremiah was not so fortunate; he was a Northerner living in the Southern kingdom of Judah and a member of a disenfranchised priestly family (Jeremiah 1:1). Even so, he was able at times to interact with the king of Judah and other leaders, though often as their adversary. With Ezekiel, prophecy entered a new phase, for he was a captive in a foreign land. Yet even he could look to Jehoiachin, a descendant of David who had ruled in Jerusalem briefly, as a companion in exile, though Ezekiel's vision for the future included a monarch with markedly less power than in pre-exilic days (Ezekiel 45:7-9).

After the period of the exile (586-539 B.C.), however, the prophets in Judah functioned under a foreign king, usually with no Davidic ruler present, even as a puppet. Unlike their predecessors, post-exilic prophets could not directly address their king, now the ruler of the Persian Empire. Priests and other leaders probably collaborated with Persian officials in order to maintain their stations, but such low-level patronage is quite different from facing an indigenous ruler directly. (In the early years after the exile, Jerusalem probably answered to provincial rulers in Samaria. Perhaps not until the career of Nehemiah did Jerusalem serve as a political center again, even for the tiny state of post-exilic Judah.) Thus the prophets after

the exile had limited access to the real political power. They constituted, as it were, spectators on the sidelines, not players on the field. They could cheer and boo, encourage or cajole local players, but they could not influence decisions in the clubhouse or the owner's office.

In that new situation, five post-exilic prophets proclaimed somewhat different messages. Haggai and Zechariah hoped for the restitution of the monarchy and urged the rebuilding of the temple. However, Malachi, Joel, and the anonymous speaker(s) in Zechariah 9-14 envisioned a different future: they agreed that the new day promised in Isaiah 40-55, Jeremiah 29-31, and Ezekiel 34-48 had not come to fruition because the local leaders and priests had been unfaithful to God, but they did not always agree in detail about what the future held for Israel or the other nations.

For the first Christians, this disagreement among post-exilic prophetic texts became a rich resource for proclaiming the good news. In Jesus and the church, they declared, the longed-for restoration of Israel had occurred in the most unexpected way.

HAGGAI'S HOPE FOR A NEW KINGDOM

Cyrus the Great, who founded the Persian Empire, captured Babylon in 539 B.C. The following year he allowed Jewish exiles to return to Canaan and authorized rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4; 5:15b). Apparently, that first mission was led by Sheshbazzar (Ezra 5:16), who began to rebuild the temple, but did not complete it. Haggai and Zechariah urged a Davidic prince named Zerubbabel and a high priest named Joshua to take up the task again in the year 519 (Ezra 5:1-2; Haggai 1:12-15). The Judean community finished the rebuilding in 515 (Ezra 6:14-15).

The prophet Haggai predicted the overthrow of the Persian Empire and the restoration of the Davidic monarchy in the person of Zerubbabel (2:20-23). God would make Zerubbabel "like a signet ring," reversing the rebuke of his grandfather, the sinful king Jehoiachin (or, Coniah), sent into exile in Babylon (Jeremiah 22:24-27).

Unfortunately, Zerubbabel's fate is unknown. Zechariah, who also predicted Zerubbabel would finish rebuilding the temple (4:6-10), called him a

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“governor,” though this may mean only that he was an important person. Otherwise there is no evidence that Zerubbabel actually ruled over Jerusalem and Judah. Haggai’s prediction proves only that the prophet anticipated that he would.

Haggai had no illusions about Judah’s puny power to improve its political situation. Rather, he foresaw such improvement as the work of God, as Israel rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem (1:2-11) and God adorned it with the wealth of the nations (2:6-9). Such thinking is often criticized as nationalistic and materialistic, and we must admit that the prophet portrayed God’s shaking the nations until their gold came to Jerusalem. On the other hand, Haggai did not portray mass destruction of the nations as some of the pre-exilic prophets had done. Further, the notion of God’s taking action to right wrongs and to return wealth to the temple plundered by other nations might seem to be justified restitution, even if God collected some interest in the transaction! In any case, we can scarcely accuse the prophet of promoting selfishness among his audience, when his stated agenda was to promote their generosity to the temple and to see God restore the beauty of that building beyond its former glory. In fact, we should probably read Haggai as a prophet concerned about the restitution of the God-ordained, pre-exilic institutions of monarchy and temple as guides for the behavior of the government and individuals of Judah.

KINGDOM HOPE IN ZECHARIAH 1-8

The first major section of the book of Zechariah offers a series of visions and exhortations to the exiles in Babylon, with three passages being added after the exile, dealing with Joshua the high priest (3:1-10; 6:11-13) and Zerubbabel (4:6b-10a). The purpose of these passages is to legitimate the status of the Zadokite priest Joshua as the new high priest in Jerusalem and Zerubbabel as the new David.¹ More importantly for us, however, they directly address the political situation of post-exilic Judah.

In 4:6b-10a the prophet insists that Zerubbabel has founded the temple (probably in a ceremonial ‘kick-off’) and will complete it. On the surface there is nothing political about this statement. Yet “founding” temples was a function of kings, and Zerubbabel was a descendant of King David. This statement may be a thinly disguised affirmation of Zechariah’s hope for Zerubbabel. The prophet called for the restoration of the pre-exilic monarchy and the high priest (3:1-10) as the means to restoring God’s people religiously as well as politically. Ironically, the building of the temple resulted in the subordination of the royalty to the priests. (One indicator of that change appears in 6:11b, where scholars have long argued that the name “Zerubbabel” originally stood instead of or alongside of the name “Joshua,” and was removed by a later editor.) In any case, neither Zechariah nor Haggai was prepared to color outside of the lines of pre-exilic institutions, and neither spoke of admitting the other nations to the temple.

Their agenda stands in contrast with the hopes expressed in Isaiah 56, which celebrates the sabbath and the temple by insisting that even foreigners will be welcome in the temple. God declares in 56:6-8:

“And the foreigners who join
themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the
name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
every one who keeps the Sabbath,
and does not profane it,
and holds fast my covenant—
these will I bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.
Thus says the LORD God,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather yet others to him
beside those already gathered.”

Jesus embraced the radical theme that the temple “shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Mark 11:17). The same sentiment appears again in Isaiah 60:1-14, coupled with the prediction that even the children of Israel’s conquerors would worship at the new temple, albeit in a role of subservience to Israel.²

MALACHI’S CRITIQUE OF ISRAEL

The hope for restitution of the monarchy, temple, and priesthood had taken quite a turn by about 450 B.C. Zerubbabel apparently never became king; a Persian-appointed “governor” handled secular affairs (Malachi 1:8) and the priests, led by the high priest, controlled the temple. The prophet condemned them for their lax observance of sacrifice, which revealed their contempt for God (1:12-13). He called the priests to observe God’s “covenant with Levi” and the people to observe the “covenant of the ancestors” (2:4-10). Rebuilding the temple had not ushered in the new kingdom, however, and Malachi explained why.

The priests had become functionaries (1:6, 12-14), giving little ritual or moral direction to the people. They had divorced their “companion and ... wife” under the covenant (2:14) and married “the daughter of a foreign god” (2:11).³ God’s punishment would be like a refiner’s fire or a fuller’s soap, ridding the “descendants of Levi,” the priests, of their sin (3:2b-3).

Once the priests were purified, God would turn to rid the people of

sins like sorcery, adultery, bearing false witness in court, making oaths and not keeping them, and oppressing the poor, the orphans, widows, and resident aliens (3:5). This list of sins recalls not only the Ten Commandments, but also prophetic injunctions against oppressing the poor—the people with no economic clout, and hence no political clout (cf., Isaiah 1:17). In pre-exilic times, the king especially was responsible for insuring that justice

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God's relationship with Israel, Malachi says, is like a parent's relationship with her child. When the people sin against one another and God, therefore, they

do not simply behave badly; they repudiate their deepest familial obligations. More than violating covenant responsibilities conveyed at Sinai, their sin damages a relationship basic to life itself. No wonder the prophet chided the priests for conduct that would be offensive even to a governor (1:8) and for offering sacrifices even the gentiles could top (1:11). Since all people have the same father in their creator God, their false behavior toward one another was an affront to God as well (2:10-16). How dare they proclaim their innocence (2:17)? Most of all, how dare they question whether God was on the side of justice (2:17)?

Malachi famously called on the people to bring a "full tithe" of their produce to the temple for storage (3:10). During Nehemiah's first term of leadership in Jerusalem, the people pledged to bring "tithes from our soil" for the Levites, who would in turn give a tithe to the priests (Nehemiah 10:37-8). Since the priests also received a share of all the sacrifices, the tithe was far more important to the Levites.⁴ Between Nehemiah's two terms, the wealthy and influential Tobiad family apparently emptied the storage area, and forced the Levites to return to farming to eke out a living. Nehemiah remedied the situation during his second term (13:10-13). Malachi's complaint about the tithes, then, was a plea for justice toward the Levites.

REASSESSING PROPHETIC HOPES IN ZECHARIAH 9-14

The second major section of Zechariah repeats many of the hopes associated with the pre-exilic prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, including:

- ♦ the restoration of the land of Canaan to Israel (Zechariah 9:1-8; cf. Isaiah 44:24-28; Jeremiah 32; 30:18-20; 31:4-6; Ezekiel 36:7),
- ♦ the restitution of the monarchy (Zechariah 9:9-10; cf. Isaiah 3-5; Jeremiah 30:9, 21; Ezekiel 34:23-24; 37:24-25),

- ♦ the return of all the exiles (Zechariah 9:11-12; 10:8-12; cf. Isaiah 43:1-7; Jeremiah 30:10-11; 31:21-22; Ezekiel 36:8-12),
- ♦ the overthrow of foreign enemies (Zechariah 9:13-16; cf. Isaiah 45:1-4; 47:1-15; Jeremiah 30:11a; 50-51; Ezekiel 38-39), and
- ♦ the reunion of northern and southern Israel (Zechariah 10:6-7; cf. Jeremiah 31:15-20, 27-30; Ezekiel 37:15-27).

Amazingly, Zechariah 9-14 challenges many of these hopes, as if the prophet raised them in order to correct them. Before the monarchy could be restored, the Davidids, or house of David, would have to repent and be cleansed (12:10-13:1). The same held true for the priests (12:13-14) and the prophets (13:3-6). The exiles might return, but they could be “scattered” again (13:7-9). God had overthrown the Babylonians, but other enemies would attack in the future (12:1-6; 14:1-5, 12). The north and the south would not reunite (11:7-11), at least not as long as the current leaders (the shepherds of 10:1-3a; 11:4-17; 13:7-9) remained in control and unrepentant. The author apparently had struggled to understand why the glorious future the prophets had predicted and Judah had expected did not come to fruition and concluded that the fault lay with the leadership in Jerusalem, not with God and not even primarily with the populace as a whole. The “true” Israel that would reap the promises of God was not limited to those who returned from exile or who wielded power, perhaps because those people were thought to have “sold out” to the Persians. In contrast with the Zadokite view articulated by Ezekiel 40-43 and intimated in Second Zechariah’s inherited traditions in which Jerusalem stood as the holiest place in Palestine (12:5; 14:8, 10), the writer predicts that the holiness of the temple would extend throughout Judah, making every mere cooking pot sacred (cf. 12:7; 14:21). Furthermore, “in that day” all nations would come to Jerusalem to worship God—or else!

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JOEL’S INCLUSIVE VISION

The slightly earlier book of Joel challenged the priests of Jerusalem for abdicating their duty and predicted dire consequences if they did not lead Judah to repent.⁵ However, if the people were genuinely repentant (2:12-13), God would free them from foreign oppression (3:12-17, 21), restore fertility to the land of Israel (2:18-27; 3:18), and pour out God’s spirit upon all people: male and female, old and young, slave and free (2:28-29):

Then afterward

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.

Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

This last promise is remarkable for its inclusiveness, embracing all classes and both genders of Judeans, though not foreigners. Though the nature of the people's sinfulness is not clear, the admonition to return to God with all their heart with fasting and mourning implies that there was ample sin among them.

Four centuries later, as the Apostle Simon Peter surveyed the mysterious events on the day of Pentecost, he discerned, "This is what was spoken through the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16). In other words, the new age and the return of prophecy predicted in Joel 2:28-29 was coming to fruition in the church, beginning that day.

CONCLUSION

The post-exilic prophets had to rethink the future and their expectations for God's people in terms of accommodation to the political power of Persia. Haggai and Zechariah hoped for a restitution of pre-exilic institutions, particularly the monarchy, temple, and priesthood, but on terms God had laid down in the pre-exilic prophets. Malachi and Zechariah 9-14 dealt with the grim realities of post-exilic politics, in which priests, Davidids, and others seemed to have compromised too much with the Persians and to have lost their right to rule. Joel and Isaiah 56-66 foresaw a future with a more egalitarian society. Isaiah 56-66 and Zechariah 9-14 envisioned other

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nations (with some exceptions like Edom) taking their places alongside Israel at the temple and thus sharing God's favor.

Some accommodations to foreign power seemed appropriate, even

necessary, in all these programs for the future. With the rise of the Greek Empire and particularly the rise of the ruler Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century, however, how much accommodation was possible became the point of contention within Judaism. This new concern produced diverse reactions, ranging from armed revolt by the Maccabees to the hope expressed in the book of Daniel that God would intervene directly through a Son of Man.

NOTES

1 For more on this, see my commentary *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 38-42. The secondary nature of the Zerubbabel passage (4:6b-10a) and the second Joshua passage (6:11-13) is shown by the fact that they interrupt the flow of thought in their contexts. Scholars often distinguish First Zechariah (chapters 1-8) and Second Zechariah (chapters 9-14). Such a division in the book should not obscure the fact that in its present, canonical form, the whole of chapters 1-14 stands under the name Zechariah. Two recent works develop this point: R. David Moseman's "Reading the Two Zechariahs as One," *Review and Expositor* 97 (2000), 487-498, and Edgar W. Conrad's *Zechariah* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

2 Unfortunately, the soaring ecumenism of Isaiah 56 did not extend to all foreigners, particularly not to those who refused to serve Israel. Moreover, the author repudiated the Edomites in a gory depiction of their demise at the hands of God (63:1-6). The prophet's point is that God does not wink at evil deeds, but holds people accountable for them. Still, God's justice should be appropriate to the offense and tempered with mercy (Isaiah 63:7-9).

3 Some scholars understand this language to refer to idolatry, rather than divorce and remarriage. The latter view is a more defensible interpretation, however, especially if the remarriages were entered to advance the priests politically or economically. If so, Malachi 2:16 is the only passage in the Old Testament to object to divorce, and there the objection seems to be based on unfair treatment of the marriage partner.

4 The priests were a subgroup of the Levites. During the exile Ezekiel insisted that many Levites had squandered their right to be full priests through their sinfulness and were to be assistants only, whereas the Levites who were descendants of Zadok would be full priests, qualified to offer sacrifices and enter the holy of holies (Ezekiel 44:10-27). The compromise reached in the post-exilic period apparently was that all Levites would participate in the offerings, though the priests might well get the lion's share. The call for Israelites to bring the "full tithe" to the storehouse suggests that the group behind the book of Malachi was comprised of Levites more or less disenfranchised by the new state of affairs. They needed for the people to pay "all" the tithes, and not just bring sacrificial animals to the full priests. For more about this, see Redditt, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 151-2 and "The Book of Malachi in Its Social Setting," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994) 240-255.

5 Joel, in its current form, probably originated between 515 and 445 B.C. (see Paul L. Redditt, "The Book of Joel and Peripheral Prophecy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48 (1986) 225-40, especially 235). For the date of Zechariah 9-14 as soon after the career of Nehemiah (i.e., before 400 B.C.), see my "Nehemiah's First Mission and the Date of Zechariah 9-14," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994) 664-78.

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