

Making the Familiar Strange & The Strange Familiar
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An important aspect of the Book of Haggai is that these writings give us a glimpse of post-exilic Judah or the Southern Kingdom that is available in few other places.

King Cyrus, as we studied in the last few weeks has decreed that the Jews should be set free from captivity in Babylon. It was King Darius who ultimately carried out the return of the Jews to Judah. A Judah quite different than the one they had left behind.

The year of the return was 536 BCE, fifty years after the fall of the temple to Nebuchadnezzar. For fifty years the Jews had been held in captivity, with those left behind not much better than squatters of our own times. Judah had become desolate following famine and drought; it was more like ghost town than its once former glorious self.

Wars and conflicts continued all around over struggles for power in the Southern Levant – generally considered to include the areas of Iraq, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Judea, Samaria, Lebanon, and Syria. The roots of these long-ago struggles in many ways are still evident in the warring and conflicts in this region today.

Resilient, determined, with no idea what to expect, the Jews returned to Judah and quickly laying the foundation for the new temple so God would have a place in which to reside and be worshiped. It wasn't long though, before they yearned for their own homes and lives to be ordered and priorities shifted away from building a temple to rebuilding their personal and communal lives.

Zerubbabel their administrator, Joshua their high priest, and Haggai the prophet joined together to galvanize the people to return to the temple or to suffer consequences forgotten for many, as life under Babylonian rule became more familiar.

It was a task, to be sure, but eventually the temple was finished.

Before the Book of Haggai ends, two other prophecies of note are given to the people. The first (2:10-19) questions the priests concerning clean and unclean Temple rituals, condemns certain people, for their impure ways, and promises fruitfulness now that the Second Temple has been founded. The second

prophecy (2:20-23) predicts a day of reckoning when all the heathen nations will be overthrown.

The religious importance of the Book of Haggai lies in its emphasis on the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem and on the reinstating of correct Temple rituals, without which the older beliefs and practices of Judaism might have been lost.¹

And so, the Jews once again are returned to a small geographic area: their homeland. And over the next 500 years the nation would grow, and in the time of Herod, somewhere around 6 BCE, give birth to Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus would be born into a time of continued struggle across the board: economically, in terms of class, the military state and its machinery of oppression, and a growing divide within the tradition of his faith.

It is easy for us to wave a hand and suggest that for the most part life was just fine in those times – but it was not. It has become familiar to us in ways that reflect the myth or our redaction to fill the gaps that cause dissonance. In the process and over time – 2 millennia – we have become far removed from the reality of its strange and harsh complexion.

Were we suddenly transported back to this time we would probably turn stone-like from the shock to our system and our own comfortable ways.

For Jesus though, it would have been all too familiar. Jesus would have grown up walking down the main paths of his and surrounding villages, finding himself frequently in the shadows of Roman torture and execution – including their favored public statement to deter those who would oppose them: crucifixion.

Jesus would have studied in the synagogue, worshiped in the temple, and been well-versed with the primary arguments of the time, including the debate over resurrection.

The two opposing groups on literal vs. a more interpretive reading of the Torah are well-known in the New Testament: the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

The Sadducees get their name from the priest, Zadok. They were members and supporters of the high-priestly family, tending to be wealthy and politically well-connected. They accepted only the Torah as authoritative scripture, giving the writings of the prophets a lower place in their system and rejecting oral tradition

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altogether. They rejected the idea of resurrection, because it is not found in the Torah, and they emphasized free will instead of determinism (the idea that that every event, including human cognition and behavior, decision and action, is causally determined by an unbroken chain of prior occurrences). But they didn't agree with all of the writings of the Torah. For example, they had no belief in angels, although angels were prominent in many parts of the ancient texts.

Proof-texting, it seems, has been alive and well for some time!

Pharisees, on the other hand, are considered to be more religious and less political. They accepted both Torah and Prophets as authoritative scripture, and relied heavily on oral tradition to understand scripture. They believed in resurrection, a concept not fully developed in the Old Testament and not mentioned in the Torah.

[Both of these groups challenged Jesus in different ways. Both were threatened by his growing following and authority.]

Into these charged political and theological times comes Jesus. We know very little, nothing really, of his life prior to the beginning of his public ministry when he was baptized by John the Baptist. He left no writings of his own, rather all we have about him has been written of him by others. The best we can do is to exegete the text and other sources to understand a bit more about him by knowing the times in which he grew up.

Still, even with all the exegetical work and research, there is no explanation for the radical change in theology that emanated from him and has lasted for more than 2000 years.

Once might have asked then, as now, "Where did this guy come from?!" Where or when or how did the idea of the Torah being a record of how God interacted in the lives of humankind – to the God of Jesus being Abba, God that could be petitioned and relied upon for loving compassion and eternal life, God that sought out and held up the oppressed – from where did Jesus get this? Mary? Joseph? His brothers and sisters.

What he got it, I think, was from somehow seeing the familiar as strange: strange that people could say and do and believe what they were saying, doing, and believing – strange that faithful allowed it to continue.

And so he challenged. Boy, did he. He challenges everyone around him – as he does us today – challenging us to change – to believe in new and exotic ways.

And this morning's gospel shows, once again, just how he does it:

² Ibid.

In the reading, a group of Sadducees, remember – non-believers in resurrection, ask a complicated question about the Law of Moses and its teaching on marriage, marital identity, spousal obligation and family heritage in the resurrection, or age to come.

Instead of falling into a trap that would have either alienated the Sadducees or the Pharisees, Jesus changes the subject, shifting the focus from marriage to God, and asserting that in resurrection life, what we might call life in God's presence, neither marriage nor death are primary concerns,

Pause...

since God is the One to whom our whole being and life is turned; our flourishing as human creatures culminates in the communion with and presence of that divine love.

To make his point, Jesus recalls that when Moses was standing before a burning bush and on holy ground, he was given neither answers to his question nor solutions to his problems. He stood in the presence of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God who is not God of the dead but of the living, the same God who generously invites us to share in the extravagant exchange of love and the endless possibilities of what we cannot begin to imagine.³ For some, that's just a bit much to take.

Now and then, there were those who refused to see. Luke and Mark give some indication of that, taking us through a series of tests that Jesus faces on his way to Jerusalem, now a rebuilt and thriving center under Roman rule.

We are told that when Jesus arrives in the city he sees but a sad and strange reflection of what was once the center of faith for the Jews – a higher ground, if you will.

What does Jesus do?

He weeps over Jerusalem (19:41-44)

- 41 And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes."

cleanses the temple (19:45-46)

- Then He went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in it, saying to them, "It is written, 'My house is a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'"

³ <http://www.theolog.org/blog/2007/11/blogging-toward.html>

teaches in the temple while the chief priests, scribes and leaders of the people look for a way to kill him (19:47-48).

- And He was teaching daily in the temple. But the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people sought to destroy Him, and were unable to do anything; for all the people were very attentive to hear Him.

Jesus knew that deep down the people knew there was better, that what they had become accustomed to was what was strange, and he uprooted the familiar that confronted the status quo in ways that its leaders wanted him dead. Dead. Dead.

So they tried to trap him, after all, was he not the son of the carpenter or mason Joseph? They continuously tried to trick him to undermine his authority with the growing masses of those following him.

Remember some of the questions they posed to him before this morning's attempt?

- First, the chief priests, scribes and elders ask, "Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?" (20:2).
- Second, the chief priests and scribes (or their spies — see 20:20) ask, "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" (20:22).
- Finally, in our Gospel lesson for today, the Sadducees ask, "In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her" (20:33).

Jesus lifted others up, right to the heavens. He raised the art of "thinking outside the box" to new ground, right into the arms of God, and he invited those around him to soar with him.

Quite different from the strange concepts of fulfillment not being here on the surface of this rock, third seated from our sun-star. Rather, releasing all our human instincts and desires from the bindings that too often hold us down, knowing that beyond all the control we attempt, the angst we experience, the incomprehensible events that sometimes surround us —that all this is nothing compared to the resurrection that's to come.

Making that strange concept/belief familiar in our every day life; turning upside down the tables of the normative and gentility and polity that binds us in light of the new familiarity of God's presence and love —

That is the challenge and the Good News. What awaits us can only make its way to us as we change and move forward. Had Jesus just stuck with the prophets of old – that's where we would still be: stuck in a God that rewards and punishes, changes its mind, is vengeful, and sometimes downright violent!

Jesus set in motion new and fresh breezes – the ruach- bringing something new and glorious to us – beyond anything we can understand.

All it takes is loving one another as best we can, refusing to be discouraged no matter what, welcoming change even when we would rather stay with the familiar, refuse injustice or delays in justice – period, and trust wholeheartedly in God – as Jesus did.

If we can ever make those the familiar things in our lives – the world would change long before the hereafter.

May this be so...

Blessing

What opened a door for me were some unexpected words from Philoxenus of Mabbug, a sixth-century monophysite bishop and author of 13 very long sermons on the Christian life in the early Syrian and Egyptian monastic traditions. One morning when I was going through a pile of books, I picked up a fat, red, 19th-century translation of these homilies, and there was Philoxenus speaking to me: "Monks ought not judge each other, because God judges us much more leniently than human beings are able to do."⁴

⁴ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3095>