

Zechariah—the Most Messianic and Apocalyptic of the Prophets

The emphasis of Zechariah the prophet, especially in the second section of his book, is not only on the coming of the Messiah, but the emphasis is on the end times prophecies about the Messiah which makes it apocalyptic in nature as well. This accounts for why Zechariah is so often quoted in the New Testament. Like his contemporary, Haggai, he was a post-exilic prophet who began his ministry about 520 BC to encourage the returning exiles to Jerusalem to finish building the Second Temple. You may remember that Solomon's Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The returning Jews were able to lay the foundation of the Temple in 536, but were stalled by opposition. Now in 520 BC, God raised up Haggai and Zechariah to encourage the people to get busy and get it built. Through their prodding and inspiration, the Temple was finally completed in 515 BC.

Zechariah was a Levite priest born in Babylon according to Nehemiah 12. He had the rare distinction of being both a priest and a prophet of God. Zechariah's method of operation was to encourage and motivate the people by revealing to them God's plans for the future of Jerusalem, Israel, the Messiah, and the Temple. Just as many people in the church today get excited by studying prophecy in the book of Revelation, the Jews in 520 BC got pumped up about the future by hearing Zechariah's prophecies about the end times when the Jewish Messiah would come and save Jerusalem, restore Israel, and set up His Kingdom. Through Zechariah, God wants His people who have been beaten down by forced servitude in exile, to know that He will renew His promise to Abraham and Moses to restore Judah as His people. Even though they will still suffer, the believing remnant will be restored. God will one day judge all their Gentile oppressors, the Messiah will come to save them, and He will rule the world from Jerusalem.

The structure of Zechariah can be divided into two main parts of Zech.1-8, and Zech.9-14. The first section is composed of eight symbolic visions in chapters 1-6, and then four messages for the people in Zechariah's audience in chapters 7-8. The second section of chapters 9-14 contain two predictive oracles about Israel's future deliverance, restoration, and its Messiah.

The Age of Discouragement

Zechariah's ministry began in an age of discouragement that was unprecedented in Israel's history. Try to imagine what the approximately 50,000 Jews returned to about 536 BC. The city of Jerusalem lay in ruins and rubble, and the land of Judah was desolate. The surrounding people objected to their presence, and did everything they could to prevent their rebuilding. All the cities in those days had high walls for protection, but the walls of Jerusalem had been broken down. They were alone and outnumbered in a hostile environment. They had been beaten down as captives in exile to the Babylonians for 70 years, and now they faced an uncertain depressing future as vassals to the powerful Persian Empire. In this age of

discouragement, the Word of God came to them through the prophet Zechariah. We might expect his initial message to be a Knute Rockne pep talk to lift their spirits and fire them up, but instead God sent a call to them to repent in Zech.1:1-6. God wants them to first remember the historical situation and why conditions came to such a low. Israel has had a history of unfaithfulness. God was righteously angry at their forefathers. Therefore Zechariah's first message to this generation is to repent because the Lord has taken the initiative to bring them back, and renew a relationship with them. The key message here is "Return to Me!", otherwise they will suffer the same fate as their ancestors. In the future there is great hope if the people will return to the Lord with a heart felt repentance.

The Eight Night Visions of Zechariah 1-6

In one night Zechariah received eight visions which an angel interpreted for him, and thank goodness he did because they are cryptic and hard to understand. Generally, they all have a similar message that even though Judah had been through a very difficult time and knew no peace, in the future God would have compassion on Judah. I think if we interpret the first vision in Zechariah 1:7-17, we can understand all of them. Zechariah saw a man riding a red horse standing in the myrtle trees with red, sorrel, and white horses behind him. They are like a troop of heavenly cavalry. The angel told Zechariah that God is righteously angry at the evil nations that currently feel secure while Jerusalem was in ruins. God would show mercy to Jerusalem, and rebuild the Temple and the city of Jerusalem itself. In the future there would be peace and prosperity. Even though it seemed like God had forgotten about Jerusalem, the Lord has the city in His plans. We can imagine that the returning exiles needed to hear that after all they had been through. The second vision was four horns and four craftsmen who were symbols of leaders that God would raise up to overthrow Israel's enemies. Then he saw a vision of a man with a measuring line to measure Jerusalem, meaning that the city would be rebuilt and expanded. The next five visions in chapter 3-6 deliver the message that God had forgiven the people of Israel, and God would judge and give retribution to the surrounding nations that had afflicted them.

The Four Messages of Chapter 7-8

These messages came from Zechariah about halfway through the rebuilding of the Temple around 518 BC. The occasion of these messages was an answer to some questions of some men who came from Bethel to ask the Lord if they should continue the fasts which had been observed since Judah had been in captivity. It appears that they had a desire to discontinue them now that the rebuilding had begun. God did not answer with a yes or no, but gave teaching about the necessity of sincere heartfelt love as opposed to the empty formalism prevalent in most religious practices. They were to analyze if it was truly for the Lord or was it for the approval of men? The previous generation had been disobedient in this way, so don't repeat their mistakes. The messages in chapter 8 are encouraging the people that their restoration from exile was a precursor of the future restoration and blessings in the

Kingdom. In that day all the people of the earth will join with the Jews to worship God.

The Burdens About the Future, ch. 9-11

In this the second major division of Zechariah, he unloads the future predictions that theologians call oracles, but literally they are called “burdens” in the text. Chapter 9 and 10 are about judgments through which Gentile world power over Israel will be destroyed. Zech.9:1-8 appears to foretell the conquest of the Mediterranean coast by Alexander the Great’s Greek armies between 336-333 BC. Alexander crossed into what is now Turkey and defeated Persian armies, then took Damascus, Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia just as Zech.9 predicted. Amazingly the history books tell us that he marched toward Jerusalem as well, but the high priest of Jerusalem came out with all the other priests to meet Alexander. This impressed the great warrior and it correlated with a dream he had about the God of Israel, so he left Jerusalem alone. This fulfilled the prophecy of Zech.9:8, “But I will camp around My house”. After Alexander died, his generals divided up the Mediterranean world, and the Greek General Seleucas and his descendants ruled over the Middle East from Syria between 323 and 167 BC. In 167, the Jews led by the Maccabees, revolted and won their independence from the Greeks. This appears to be the prediction of Zech.9:11-17 where the prophet spoke for God and said “I will stir up your sons, O Zion, against your sons O Greece.”

In Zech 9:9-10, we have a clear prediction of events in Jesus’ first advent that were quoted by the New Testament authors concerning Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, “Rejoice greatly...Zion! Shout in triumph...Jerusalem! Behold your king is coming to you...Humble and mounted on a donkey”. This event we call Palm Sunday is mentioned in all four Gospels, and it is made clear that it is a fulfillment of prophecy in Zechariah. The prophet predicted that the Messiah would be righteous, he would provide salvation, be gentle and humble, and be a peacemaker. You have to admit that out of all the kings in history, only Jesus can be described in these ways.

The Dark Prophecy of Zechariah 11

Zechariah 11 is a prediction of a future harsh judgment on Israel that many theologians believe occurred after their rejection of Jesus. There would be a delay of the regathering and blessing of Israel because they rejected the Messiah. In Zech.11:4-14, Zechariah is told to assume the role of a good shepherd pasturing a flock of sheep doomed to slaughter. In this allegory, Zechariah has the role of the Messiah and the sheep are the people who reject him. There are other false shepherds who represent the leaders who reject Jesus, and we see their evaluation of the good shepherd in verses 12-13 as 30 pieces of silver that are then thrown to the potter in the Temple. This of course was fulfilled by Judas who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces that he later threw back and they used it to buy a potter’s field (Matt.27:1-7).

Apocalyptic Visions of Zechariah 12-14

The second “burden” or oracle of Zechariah found in chapters 12-14 are concerning the end time events of the gathering of all the nations’ armies into the Middle East for the final battle of Armageddon (Rev.16:16). At that future time, the Messiah, Jesus, will return to wipe out all those armies and deliver Jerusalem. The Jews will all look on Him whom they pierced and mourn (John 19:37). The believing remnant shall be saved. The Lord will descend upon the Mount of Olives, and the remaining people will become holy. From that time on all the other nations will go to Jerusalem to worship God. The references for these prophecies are as follows:

1. God will deliver Jerusalem from the nations, Zech.12:1-9
2. The Jews will look on Him whom they pierced, and mourn, Zech. 12:10
3. The land will be cleansed from sin, and the people forgiven, Zech.13:1-3
4. They will be God’s people again, Zech.13:9
5. The Lord (Jesus) will descend on the Mount of Olives, Zech. 14:4
6. All the nations will gather against Jerusalem but Jesus will return with the heavenly host to destroy the Gentile armies, Zech.14:1-7
7. The surviving remnant will become holy, Zech.14:20-21
8. Then the Lord will be the only King and He will rule the earth, Zech. 14:9
9. After the Lord’s return, all the surviving Gentiles will go to Jerusalem to worship Him, Zech. 14:16-17

Surely we now all notice that nothing in this last section of Zechariah 12-14 fits past historical events. Therefore the fulfillment of these events must be in our future. The passage presupposes that there will be a Jewish nation of Israel in the last days. Since this was not the case from 70 AD up until 1948, then we can see that the stage is set for these events. Before WWII, theologians mocked the possibility of any of these events, but now the reality is unfolding before our eyes in the Middle East. In the past no one could understand why so many Gentile armies would converge on the Middle East, but now with the oil situation that is easy to understand. In Acts 1:11, after the resurrected Christ ascended to heaven from the Mt. of Olives, the angel told the onlookers that He would return in the same way they saw Him go. What would be more appropriate than for the Messiah to return to the Mt. of Olives just in the nick of time to save the city and the world? God’s final battle will destroy evil and transform all the surviving peoples into holy worshipers. Don’t forget that we all pray the Lord’s Prayer in church and regularly say, “Thy kingdom come”, and this is what Zechariah delivers to us in way of foresight- Jesus will be king over the whole of creation, and so we say “Come Lord Jesus!”

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