

The Prophet Zechariah



The Prophet Zechariah is often grouped with Haggai and Malachi as they are active in the post-exilic community. As described in the *Books of Ezra* and *Nehemiah* (who came ~100 years after the first wave of returnees), in the time of Haggai the Temple rebuilding project started, stopped, started and stopped under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua. The Prophet Haggai was the voice of challenge. Haggai is sent by God to compel the people of Judah to resume the construction of the Temple. His initial message is well received, yet he still has work to do. We know

that the Temple construction was complete and the Temple dedicated in 515 BC.

Zechariah includes historical markers: “*In the second year of Darius, in the eighth month, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah*” (Zec 1:1). That coupled with some additional markers, with high confidence we can date his writings as between November 520 BC to December 518 BC - the first 8 chapters anyway. The remaining chapters (9-14) lack date markers. The absence of any reference to the rebuilding of the temple, and the fact that worship has degenerated into mere routine suggest that some considerable time has passed since its rebuilding took place.

The Book of Malachi is a little difficult to date, but socially, conditions are reminiscent of the time of Ezra-Nehemiah. There is the same unwillingness to part with money for the temple funds; advantage was being taken of the poor and oppressed; and, most characteristic of all, intermarriage with non-Jewish families was threatening the survival of the covenant faith. This parallel evidence leads most scholars to a general consensus that Malachi belongs to the same approximate period as Ezra and Nehemiah when the walls of Jerusalem were the major project. This would place Malachi around the year 440 BC.

It would have seemed logical to treat Haggai and Zechariah together and then Malachi. After all, it should be noted that the Chronicler (editors who put the Hebrew Bible in its final written form), placed this as the last book of all the prophets. Why?

Zechariah in the Middle

While it seems that Zechariah’s natural place is in the middle between Haggai and Malachi, as mentioned in yesterday’s post the last 6 chapters of Zechariah lack time markers, have a different literary style and so the origin of these last 6 chapters is a contested issue among scholars. One set of scholars attribute them to Zechariah from around the turn of the 5th century BC (~500 BC; some 20 years after the date of the first 8 chapters). Another set of scholars believe these were later collections of oracles, associated with Zechariah that are (a) either from a later period of time when he was sorely disappointed in the people’s covenant compliance or (b) anonymous oracles from the period that were collected and added by the “chronicler” - a later editor.

Why are we treating Zechariah apart from the other two post-exilic prophets? Obscure though it is in places, chapters 9–14 are the most quoted section of the prophets in the passion narratives of the Gospels and, next to Ezekiel, Zechariah has influenced the author of Revelation more than any other Old Testament writer. Here are some of the key New Testament passages that quote or allude to Zechariah:

The Coming King on a Donkey (Zech 9:9) *“Exult greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! Behold: your king is coming to you, a just savior is he, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*

- **Matthew 21:4-5:** “This happened so that what had been spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled: “Say to daughter Zion, ‘Behold, your king comes to you, meek and riding on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.”
- **John 12:14-15:** Jesus found an ass and sat upon it, as is written: “Fear no more, O daughter Zion; see, your king comes, seated upon an ass’s colt.”

The Thirty Pieces of Silver (Zech 11:12-13) *“Then I said to them, ‘If it seems good to you, give me my wages; but if not, withhold them.’ And they counted out my wages, thirty pieces of silver. Then the LORD said to me, Throw it in the treasury—the handsome price at which they valued me. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the treasury in the house of the LORD.”*

- **Matthew 26:14-15:** Then one of the Twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, “What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?” They paid him thirty pieces of silver.
- **Matthew 27:9-10:** Then was fulfilled what had been said through Jeremiah the prophet, “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of a man with a price on his head, a price set by some of the Israelites, and they paid it out for the potter’s field just as the Lord had commanded me.”

Mourning for the One They Pierced (Zech 12:10) - *“And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.”*

- **John 19:34-37:** “Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water... and, as another scripture says, ‘They will look on the one they have pierced.’”
- **Revelation 1:7:** “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all peoples on earth will mourn because of him.’ So shall it be! Amen.”

The Shepherd Struck, and the Sheep Scattered (Zech 13:7) - *“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the one who is my associate — oracle of the LORD of hosts. Strike the shepherd that the sheep may be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones.”*

- **Matthew 26:31:** Then Jesus said to them, “This night all of you will have your faith in me shaken, for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be dispersed’
- **Mark 14:27:** Then Jesus said to them, “All of you will have your faith shaken, for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be dispersed.’”

The Mount of Olives and the Lord’s Return (Zech 14:4) - *“On that day God’s feet will stand* on the Mount of Olives, which is opposite Jerusalem to the east. The Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west by a very deep valley, and half of the mountain will move to the north and half of it to the south.”*

- **Acts 1:9-12:** When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven. Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away.

Living Waters Flowing from Jerusalem (Zech 14:8) - *“On that day, fresh water will flow from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea, and half to the western sea. This will be so in summer and in winter.”*

- **John 7:37-38:** On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood up and exclaimed, “Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: ‘Rivers of living water will flow from within him.’”

Zechariah the Prophet and his message

Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai. He was a priest descended from an important priestly family (his grandfather Iddo is mentioned in Nehemiah 12:4). His grandfather (& family presumably) had been part of the first batch of exiles to return with Zerubbabel in 538 BC (see Nehemiah 12:4 - Zerubbabel served as governor of the Israelite people and was a Davidic heir - the grandson of king Jehoiachin - more on Zerubbabel below). Worship at the temple mount had resumed and the altar of burnt offering was functioning, but the construction of the temple had ground to a halt because of external opposition and a lack of commitment or enthusiasm on behalf of the people of Jerusalem. The occasion for part I (chapters 1-8) of Zechariah is the prophetic push (together with Haggai) for completion of the construction of the Temple which began in 520 BC and was accomplished in 515 BC. Part II of Zechariah (chapters 9-14) came a couple decades later when disillusion had set in about the prospect of Israel’s and Jerusalem’s return to prominence.

Zechariah and Haggai seem to be a sort of prophetic team as the pair are mentioned twice in Ezra (5:1 & 6:14). Though Zechariah seems to supplement Haggai, he makes a contribution all his own to post-exilic prophecy. Zechariah is as aware as Haggai of the spiritual needs of the people, but Zechariah goes on to introduce glimpses of things as they are from a heavenly standpoint. The transcendent God is working out his eternal purpose for Judah and Jerusalem, equipping his covenant people to fulfill the spiritual role for which he chose them (Zech. 1:7–6:15).

The prophet goes on to spell out in everyday terms the quality of life which they are to display (7:1–8:23). But he knew it would be misleading to give the impression that the goal would be reached through a gentle evolutionary process. The last six chapters are dominated by struggle and tension. At first the battle is local and God’s people triumph, but later the rejection of the good shepherd (11:4–17), mourning (12:10–13:1) and the slaughter of the shepherd (13:7–9) intensify the sinister impression that evil forces are gaining control. Finally they capture Jerusalem, and that is the signal for the Lord’s intervention to establish his kingdom over all the earth. The book prepares God’s people for the worst calamity they can ever face, the triumph of evil over good. Even God’s representative dies at the hand of evil men. There is no room in Zechariah’s thinking for glib optimism, but when evil has done its worst the Lord remains King, and will be seen to be King by all the nations.

An outline of Zechariah

Zechariah's message is one of encouragement to the Jewish people as they rebuild Jerusalem and the temple after their return from exile. The book is divided into two main sections. The first section (Chapters 1–8) contains a series of eight visions that convey God's plans for Jerusalem and the nations. These visions emphasize God's control over history and His promise to protect and bless His people. The second section (Chapters 9–14) shifts to a more prophetic and apocalyptic tone, with oracles about the future, including the coming of a humble and righteous king and the ultimate victory of God's kingdom.

Part 1: Visions and Messages (Chapters 1–8)

1. Introduction and Call to Repentance (1:1–6) - Zechariah begins with a call to the people to return to the Lord, promising that He will return to them if they do.
2. The Eight Visions (1:7–6:8)
 - Vision 1: The Man Among the Myrtle Trees (1:7–17) - Symbolizes God's concern for Jerusalem and His intention to bless and restore it.
 - Vision 2: The Four Horns and Four Craftsmen (1:18–21) - Represents the powers that have scattered Israel and the forces God will use to destroy them.
 - Vision 3: The Surveyor (2:1–13) - Illustrates God's protection and the future prosperity of Jerusalem.
 - Vision 4: The Cleansing of Joshua the High Priest (3:1–10) - Depicts the purification of the priesthood and the coming of the Messiah, symbolized by "the Branch."
 - Vision 5: The Gold Lampstand and Two Olive Trees (4:1–14) - Represents the power of God's Spirit in empowering Zerubbabel and Joshua to rebuild the temple.
 - Vision 6: The Flying Scroll (5:1–4) - Symbolizes the judgment of God against sin and wickedness.
 - Vision 7: The Woman in a Basket (5:5–11) - Represents the removal of wickedness from the land.
 - Vision 8: The Four Chariots (6:1–8) - Depicts God's judgment on the nations and His control over the earth.
3. The Crowning of Joshua (6:9–15) - Joshua, the high priest, is crowned, prefiguring the coming of the Messiah, who will unite the roles of priest and king.
4. Messages of Encouragement and Instruction (Chapters 7–8)
 - Chapter 7: A message about true fasting and justice.
 - Chapter 8: Promises of future blessings, peace, and prosperity for Jerusalem.

Part 2: Prophecies of the Future (Chapters 9–14)

1. The Coming of the King and the Deliverance of Zion (Chapters 9–11)
 - Chapter 9: Prophecies about the coming of a humble king (often associated with the prophecy of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem).
 - Chapter 10: God's promise to restore His people and bring them back from exile.
 - Chapter 11: A lament over the rejection of the shepherd (interpreted as a prophecy of the rejection of Jesus).
2. The Day of the Lord and the Messianic Kingdom (Chapters 12–14)
 - Chapter 12: The deliverance of Jerusalem and mourning for the one whom they have pierced (seen as a prophecy of Christ's crucifixion).
 - Chapter 13: The cleansing of the people and the refining of God's remnant.

- Chapter 14: A description of the final battle and the establishment of God's kingdom, with all nations coming to worship the Lord in Jerusalem.

Key Themes:

- Repentance and Restoration: The call to return to God and the promise of restoration.
- God's Sovereignty: God's control over history and nations, ensuring the fulfillment of His promises.
- The Messiah: Prophecies pointing to the coming of a messianic figure, seen by Christians as Jesus Christ.
- Judgment and Hope: The dual themes of judgment against sin and wickedness and the hope of future redemption and blessing.