

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Zechariah

Scripture: Zechariah

Code: MSB38

Title

The universal tradition of both Jews and Christians endorses the prophet Zechariah as author. His name, common to more than 29 OT men, means “The LORD remembers.” This book is second only to Isaiah in the breadth of the prophet’s writings about Messiah.

Author and Date

Like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Zechariah was also a priest (Neh. 12:12–16). According to tradition, he was a member of the Great Synagogue, a council of 120 originated by Nehemiah and presided over by Ezra. This council later developed into the ruling elders of the nation, called the Sanhedrin. He was born in Babylon and joined his grandfather, Iddo, in the group of exiles who first returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua the High-Priest (cf. Neh. 12:4). Because he is occasionally mentioned as the son of his grandfather (cf. Ezra 5:1; 6:14; Neh. 12:16), it is thought that his father, Berechiah, died at an early age before he could succeed his father into the priesthood.

Zechariah’s opening words are dated from 520 B.C., the second year of Darius I (cf. 1:1). The Persian emperor Cyrus had died and was succeeded by Cambyses (ca. 530–521 B.C.) who conquered Egypt. He had no son, he killed himself, and Darius rose to the throne by quelling a revolution. He was a contemporary of Haggai, and began his prophesying 2 months after him (cf. Haggai Introduction). He is called a young man in 2:4, suggesting that Zechariah was younger than Haggai. The length of his ministry is uncertain; the last dated prophecy (7:1) came approximately two years after the first, making them identical in time with Haggai’s prophecy (520–518 B.C.). Chapters 9–14 are generally thought to come from a later period of his ministry. Differences in style and references to Greece indicate a date of ca. 480–470 B.C., after Darius I (ca. 521–486 B.C.) and during Xerxes’ reign (ca. 486–464 B.C.), the king who made Esther queen of Persia. According to Matt. 23:35, he was murdered between the temple and the altar, a fate similar to an earlier Zechariah (cf. 2 Chr. 24:20,21), who had been stoned to death.

Background and Setting

The historical background and setting of Zechariah are the same as that of his contemporary, Haggai (cf. Haggai Introduction). In 538 B.C., Cyrus the Persian freed the captives from Israel to resettle their homeland (cf. Ezra 1:1–4) and about 50,000 returned from Babylon. They immediately began to rebuild the temple (cf. Ezra 3:1–4:5), but opposition from neighbors, followed by indifference from within, caused the work to be abandoned (cf. Ezra 4:24). Sixteen years later (cf. Ezra 5:1,2), Zechariah and Haggai were commissioned by the Lord to stir up the people to rebuild the temple. As a result, the temple was completed 4 years later in 516 B.C. (Ezra 6:15).

Historical and Theological Themes

Zechariah joined Haggai in rousing the people from their indifference, challenging them to resume the building of the temple. Haggai's primary purpose was to rebuild the temple; his preaching has a tone of rebuke for the people's indifference, sin, and lack of trust in God. He was used to start the revival, while Zechariah was used to keep it going strong with a more positive emphasis, calling the people to repentance and reassuring them regarding future blessings. Zechariah sought to encourage the people to build the temple in view of the promise that someday Messiah would come to inhabit it. The people were not just building for the present, but with the future hope of Messiah in mind. He encouraged the people, still downtrodden by the Gentile powers (1:8–12), with the reality that the Lord remembers His covenant promises to them and that He would restore and bless them. Thus the name of the book (which means "The LORD remembers") contains in seed form the theme of the prophecy.

This "apocalypse of the OT" as it is often called, relates both to Zechariah's immediate audience as well as to the future. This is borne out in the structure of the prophecy itself, since in each of the 3 major sections (chaps. 1–6, 7, 8, 9–14), the prophet begins historically and then moves forward to the time of the Second Advent, when Messiah returns to His temple to set up His earthly kingdom. The prophet reminded the people that Messiah had both an immediate and long-term commitment to His people. Thus the prophet's words were "good and comforting" (1:13), both to the exiles of Zechariah's day as well as to the remnant of God's chosen people in that future day.

This book is the most messianic, apocalyptic, and eschatological in the OT. Primarily, it is a prophecy about Jesus Christ, focusing on His coming glory as a means to comfort Israel (cf. 1:13,17). While the book is filled with visions, prophecies, signs, celestial visitors, and the voice of God, it is also practical, dealing with issues like repentance, divine care, salvation, and holy living. Prophecy was soon to be silent for more than 400 years until John the Baptist, so God used Zechariah to bring a rich, abundant outburst of promise for the future to sustain the faithful remnant through those silent years.

Interpretive Challenges

While there are numerous challenges to the reader, two passages within the prophecy present notable interpretive difficulty. In 11:8, the Good Shepherd “dismissed the three shepherds in one month.” The presence of the definite article points to familiarity, so that the Jews would have understood the identity of these shepherds without further reference. It is not so easy for modern readers to understand. Numerous alternatives concerning their identity have been suggested. One of the oldest, and probably the correct, view identifies them as three orders of leaders: the priests, elders, and scribes of Israel. During His earthly ministry, Jesus also confronted the hypocrisy of Israel’s religious leaders (cf. Matt. 23), disowning them with scathing denunciations, followed by destruction of the whole nation in A.D. 70. Since His coming, the Jewish people have had no other prophet, priest, or king.

Considerable discussion also surrounds the identity of the individual who possessed “wounds between your arms” (13:6). Some have identified him with Christ, the wounds supposedly referring to His crucifixion. But Christ could neither have denied that He was a prophet, nor could He have claimed that He was a farmer, or that He was wounded in the house of His friends. Obviously, it is a reference to a false prophet (cf. vv. 4,5) who was wounded in his idolatrous worship. The zeal for the Lord will be so great in the kingdom of Messiah that idolaters will make every attempt to hide their true identity, but their scars will be the telltale evidence of their iniquity.

Outline

I. Call to Repentance (1:1–6)

II. Eight Night Visions of Zechariah (1:7–6:15)

A. Man Among the Myrtle Trees (1:7–17)

B. Four Horns and Four Craftsmen (1:18–21)

C. Man with Measuring Line (2:1–13)

D. Cleansing of High-Priest (3:1–10)

E. Gold Lampstand and Two Olive Trees (4:1–14)

F. Flying Scroll (5:1–4)

G. Woman in Basket (5:5–11)

H. Four Chariots (6:1–8)

I. Appendix: Coronation of Joshua the High-Priest (6:9–15)

III. Four Messages of Zechariah (7:1–8:23)

A. Question about Fasting (7:1–3)

B. Four Responses (7:4–8:23)

1. Rebuke for wrong motives (7:4–7)

2. Repentance required (7:8–14)

3. Restoration of favor (8:1–17)

4. Fasts become feasts (8:18–23)

IV. Two Burdens of Zechariah (9:1–14:21)

A. Messiah's Rejection at First Advent (9:1–11:17)

B. Messiah's Acceptance at Second Advent (12:1–14:21)

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