

Historical context. Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai and a post-exilic prophet. He preached in Judah in 520-518BC to the exiles who had returned from Babylon. As a priest, he gave a lot of attention to the Temple.

Two books in one. Like the book of Isaiah, Zechariah is more than one book. Most scholars believe that chapters 1-8 belong to the prophet we know as Zechariah. The second part, chapters 9-14, were written at a much later date by an anonymous prophet whom scholars called Deutero (Second) Zechariah. A brief look at the two books shows the many differences in style and content.

Zech 1-8

Mostly poetry
 Contains visions
 All about rebuilding the Temple
 Hope of a Davidic king

 Zerubbabel is mentioned
 Jerusalem is central

Zech 9-14

Mostly prose
 No mention of visions
 Temple not an issue
 No mention of Davidic king

 Zerubbabel absent
 All of Judah is central

Division of Chapters

First Zechariah (chapters 1-6) contains eight visions. The visions are symbolic representations of aspects of the restoration of Jerusalem and the Temple. The visions were employed by Zechariah the way Jesus used parables and Ezekiel did pantomimes to dramatize certain fairly simple ideas. They were intended to be words of encouragement for the disheartened exiles as they sought to rebuild the Temple. Peter Craigie writes:

Zechariah and his contemporaries were engaged in the physical work of building, but what he could see, more than the others, was the significance of their physical activity on God’s larger spiritual plans for his people. The temple was a symbol of God’s presence among his people; the temple rebuilding, however, somehow symbolized, and perhaps even inaugurated in some mysterious fashion, God’s renewal of his chosen people beyond that immediate time and place. (The Daily Study Bible Series—Twelve Prophets, Vol.2, p.157)

Second Zechariah (chapters 9-14) is filled with oracles and other prophetic messages that the New Testament writers saw as applicable to Jesus, e.g., the coming of a humble messiah king (9-9, Matt 21:5) and one who would truly shepherd the people (11:14-17) but who would be struck down himself (13:7) were real images of hope that Christians quickly saw fulfilled in Jesus. For the Jews returning from exile, these images represented God’s promise to restore them and watch over them.

The final section (chapters 12-14) speaks of God’s victory in the last days when Israel will be vindicated and all its enemies defeated.

The tone of the entire book of Zechariah is different from much of the prophetic literature. With its visions and strong symbolism, it is more of an apocalyptic literature, the literature of hope that developed later in times of severe persecution.

A final word of introduction. Peter Craigie writes:

The prophetic message has a kind of perpetual contemporaneity to it, for it addresses the issues that trouble mankind in every generation. Must evil always triumph over good? Is God really almighty? Will the world get better, or only worse? Will the Kingdom of God, of peace and of righteousness, ever be established in this sad world? It is questions such as these that are addressed in the Book of Zechariah. They are answered from the perspective of faith in God and hope in God’s future. But insofar as the book contains answers, they are addressed from faith and to faith. And insofar as those answers pertain in part to a future world, they are expressed in language which is difficult to interpret, but breathes nevertheless with the ultimate hope in God which cannot be destroyed. (ibid, p.158).

COMMENTARY

CHAPTER 1: Call to conversion; Vision of the Four Horsemen

“...Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Return to me ... and I will return to you....’” (v.3)

“... ‘I will turn to Jerusalem with mercy; my house will be built in it,’ says the Lord of hosts....” (v.16)

Verses 1-6—Call to conversion. The book opens with a theme central to the whole prophetic tradition – repentance. The heart of Israel’s covenant faith has always been the relationship between God and his chosen people. And the prophets have always been the conscience of Israel. When the people turn away from God, the prophets summon them, telling them that because their ancestors failed to heed the message of the prophets, disaster came to Israel. *“The Lord of hosts had treated us according to our ways and deeds...”* (v.6). Yes, the temple is being restored. This is wonderful, but much more important is the renewal of the heart, a true returning to the Lord.

First Vision—The four horsemen (vv 7-17). One for each corner of the earth, the four horsemen symbolize graphically the watchful control and providence of the God of history over the affairs of the earth. “The earth resting peacefully” probably indicates that the wars for the control of the Persian Empire are over, and Jerusalem has nothing to fear (Apoc 6:1-8). The vision contains three oracles of consolation, e.g., *“I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, my house will be built in it”* (v.16).

CHAPTER 2: Second and third visions

“...These are the horns that scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem.” (v.2)

“I raised my eyes and looked up; there was a man with a measuring line in his hand.” (v.5)

Second vision—The four horns (vv 1-4). The horns are identified as those who have scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem. The blacksmiths may be a metaphor for those who exercise judgment.

Third vision—A city without walls (vv 5-17). Since the measuring line is an obvious symbol for a builder, Zechariah uses it to signify the rebuilding of the Temple. The vision foretells that Jerusalem will once again be a secure and prosperous city from where God will exercise his universal reign. Even the nations will be drawn to it. They will recognize God’s glory in Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 3: Fourth vision—Joshua the High Priest

“Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, while Satan stood at his right hand to accuse him.” (v.1)

“...See I have taken away your guilt....” (v.4)

Fourth vision—Transformation of the high priest (vv 1-10). Joshua, the high priest, is brought before the heavenly court, where he may represent the Jewish people after the exile when they are vindicated by God. In verses 6-10, Joshua, cleansed of all sin, is promised greater intimacy with God. The “Shoot” (v.9) is a messianic title taken from Jeremiah 23:5.

CHAPTER 4: Fifth vision—The lampstand

“...What are the two olive trees at each side of the lampstand?” (v.11) *“...These are two anointed who stand by the Lord of the whole earth.”* (v.14)

The lampstand and lights represent the presence of God who looks kindly on all creation. The two *olive trees* symbolize Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, and Joshua, the high priest—the temporal and spiritual powers in the Jewish state.

CHAPTER 5: Sixth and seventh visions—The flying scroll and the flying bushel

Both these visions represent God’s action to uproot evildoers from the community.

CHAPTER 6: Eighth vision—Four chariots

Like the four horsemen in the first vision, the four chariots patrol the four corners of the earth executing God’s watchful providence and justice. In verses 9-15, the symbolic crowning of Zerubbabel emphasizes the messianic significance of the Davidic prince, a shoot of that dynasty from which one day will be born the Messiah.

CHAPTER 7: True fasting

“The Lord came to Zechariah and said: ‘Render true judgment, and show kindness and compassion toward each other. Do not oppress the widow or orphan, the alien or the poor; do not plot evil against one another in your hearts.’ But they refused to listen....” (vv 9-11)

In chapters 7 and 8, we move away from visions to a set of oracles or sermons about fasting and the future.

In chapter 7, Zechariah addresses the issue of true and false fasting. False fasting focuses on self. True

fasting leads to compassion and acts on behalf of others.

CHAPTER 8: Blessings and encouragement, and challenges for Jerusalem

“...‘I am intensely jealous for Zion, stirred to jealous wrath for her.’ Thus says the Lord: ‘I will return to Zion, and I will dwell within Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain.’” (vv 2-3)

“These are the things you should do: Speak the truth to one another; let there be honesty and peace in the judgments at your gates and let none of you plot evil against another in his heart...” (vv 16-17)

In this chapter we have:

- Four oracles of blessing (vv 1-3, 4-5, 6, and 7-8)
- A covenant contracted by the ancestors of the returning exiles which remains a reality for them. *“They shall be my people and I will be their God”* (v.8).
- Oracles of encouragement (vv 9-13)
- Oracles challenging the people to be faithful to their covenant with God (vv14-17)
- Responses to questions about fasting (vv 18-19)
- The role of Jerusalem for the temple community and the nations (vv 20-23)

PART 2: SECOND ZECHARIAH (CHAPTERS 9-11)

As stated in the introduction, scholars believe that chapters 9-14 were written at a much later time. The focus is no longer on a small post-exilic community struggling to rebuild the temple. Now the focus embraces the broader scene of Israel and the world, and the end of time.

CHAPTER 9: Restoration under the Messiah

“Rejoice heartily, O daughter of Zion! Shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, meek and humble riding on an ass....” (v.9)

Verses 1-8 contain an oracle concerning the fall of Israel’s enemies.

Verses 9-17. The warlike tone of verses 1-8 is now transformed into one of tranquil sound for a rejoicing Jerusalem. The city is to rejoice at the advance of its king who is triumphant and yet humble as he rides on an ass. In the liturgy, we listen to this text on Palm Sunday, which is used to describe Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The arrival of the messianic king into Jerusalem signals the coming of a new age.

CHAPTERS 10-11: Shepherd oracles

“This is why they wander like sheep, wretched for they have no shepherd. My wrath is kindled against the shepherds....” (10:2-3)

“Thus says the Lord: ‘Shepherd the flock to be slaughtered.’” (11:4)

10:2-5 contrasts good and bad shepherds

10:6-12 develops the theme of restoration

11:1-4 is a taunt song against bad shepherds

11:4-17—Allegory of the shepherd. In verses 4-6, the prophet uses the image of buyers and sellers of sheep to condemn the leaders of Israel.

11:7-14. The good shepherd who truly cares for his sheep takes two staffs with the symbolic names “Favor” (or Grace) and “Bonds” (as Unity). The names represent God’s concern for his people, God’s favor, and unity between Israel and Judah. In carrying out his duties, the good shepherd fires three incompetent shepherds. Instead of being grateful to the good shepherd, they reject him.

The good shepherd breaks his two staffs to symbolize the end of his commitment to the sheep.

11:15-17 speaks of God’s intention to raise up a worthless shepherd for the people who reject the good shepherd.

CHAPTERS 12-14: Restoration

“I will make Jerusalem a bowl to stupefy all the peoples round about.” (12:2)

“They shall look on him whom they have thrust through, they shall mourn for him as one mourns for an only son....” (12:10)

“On that day, says the Lord, I will destroy the names of the idols from the land, so that they shall be mentioned no more....” (13:2)

“...Strike the shepherd that the sheep may be dispensed....” (13:7)

12:1-9. An attack on Jerusalem is anticipated. Many nations, including Judah, will attack Jerusalem but they will fail because God is on Jerusalem’s side.

12:10-14. A tragedy has happened within the city. The people have killed an innocent and good person. They recognize their sin and the community grieves.

13:1-6 describes the purification of Jerusalem, false idols and bogus leaders.

13:7-9. *God* will purify Jerusalem of bad shepherds.

CHAPTER 14: The fight for Jerusalem

Peter Craigie writes: *“We have in this final chapter of the book a description of something that is in the last resort indescribable, but the prophet attempts to describe it anyway, for beyond the coming chaos he sees a new world arising from the ashes of the old”* (ibid, p.220).

Two battles are described in which God will be present as antagonist against (v.2) and protagonist for (vv 3-5) Jerusalem. The changes in the land described in verses 4-5 continue in verses 6-11. The plague and tumult described in verses 12-15 enlarge upon the description of verse 3.

The concluding verses (16-20) suggest the total dedication of Jerusalem and Judah to God. The Temple itself is not the source of holiness. Instead, ordinary objects will become holy because of the persons who own them.

Concluding reflection

Concluding his commentary on Zechariah, Peter Craigie (writing in 1985) says:

“There is a danger in becoming too obsessed with the apocalyptic portions of the Bible, a danger which is evident in certain areas of the contemporary Christian world. The times are ripe, near the end of the 20th century, for a fascination with apocalypse, but the danger of obsession is that balance may be lost. Apocalyptic writings quite rightly impart hope

to the faithful in a hopeless time. They restore conviction in the biblical truth that God is ultimately sovereign in human history. But they may also impart to the unwary an attitude of laissez-faire. There is nothing we can do. History is moving inexorably towards its climax and we, as bystanders, can only watch with fascination. Such an attitude misses the mark by a wide margin. If we are to benefit from the vision, we must also accept its responsibility. History is also in large part the outworking of our own actions, and we are responsible for them. Faith in the vision of the future must be balanced by commitment to action in the present. And the faith will succor the action helping us to realize, often despite all evidence to the contrary, that not all that we do is in vain” (ibid, p.223).

Resources

- The Daily Study Bible Series—Twelve Prophets, Vol.2, Peter Craigie
- The Collegeville Bible Handbook
- The Men & Message of the Old Testament, Peter Ellis