

ZECHARIAH – SHORT VERSION

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).

Suggested texts to read

1:1-6: Call to conversion

7:1-14: True fasting

9:9-17: This messianic text is read on Palm Sunday to describe Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.'