

Zechariah 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Zechariah chapter 6. Again I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four chariots came out from between two mountains, and the mountains were mountains of bronze. The first chariot had red horses, the second black horses, the third white horses, and the fourth chariot dappled horses, all of them strong.

Then I answered and said to the angel who talked with me, What are these, my lord? And the angel answered and said to me, These are going out to the four winds of heaven, after presenting themselves before the lord of all the earth.

The chariot with the black horses goes toward the north country, the white ones go after them, and the dappled ones go toward the south country. When the strong horses came out, they were impatient to go and patrol the earth. And he said, Go, patrol the earth.

So they patrolled the earth. Then he cried to me, Behold, those who go toward the north country have set my spirit at rest in the north country. And the word of the Lord came to me, Take from the exiles Heldiah, Tobijah, and Jediah, who have arrived from Babylon, and go the same day to the house of Josiah the son of Zephaniah.

Take from them silver and gold, and make a crown, and set it on the head of Joshua the son of Jehozadak the high priest, and say to him, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold the man whose name is the branch, for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord.

[1 : 25] It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord, and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the council of peace shall be between them both.

And the crown shall be in the temple of the Lord, as a reminder to Helam, Tobijah, Jediah, and Hen the son of Zephaniah. And those who are far off shall come and help to build the temple of the Lord.

And you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. And this shall come to pass, if you will diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God. The night visions of Zechariah take up the first six chapters of the book.

The series of the visions end in this chapter with the eighth. The visions give Zechariah, and through him the people, an insight into what the Lord is doing in their days. Although many of them are discouraged by external opposition, and by the apparent reduction in the glory of the Restoration Temple, the Lord wants them to perceive, not by human sight, but by faith in his promise and vision, what is really taking place.

Something full more glorious than they might otherwise have appreciated. To this point, we've had seven visions. The first is the horsemen in the deep, the world being at rest, but at rest because the Lord has yet to act for his people.

[2 : 37] That was all going to change very soon. The second, the four horns and the four craftsmen. The four horns scatter Judah, representing pagan powers like the four horns of a false altar.

However, the four craftsmen are sent to cast them down, establishing the throne of the Lord instead. The third is the man with the measuring line, a man sent out to measure Jerusalem as the holy place of the Lord's dwelling.

The fourth vision concerns the cleansing of the high priest. Satan's opposition is overcome as the high priest Joshua has his filthy garments removed, and he is clothed once more for his office, representing the removal of the iniquity of the people.

The fifth vision was of the lampstand and the olive trees. Zerubbabel and the people were fuelled like a glorious lamp by the power of the Holy Spirit for their work in the land. The sixth vision was of a flying scroll, the Lord's judgment coming out from the temple to purify his people.

The seventh, a woman in a basket going out from the land. The wickedness that had been at the heart of the people was being removed and expelled. And now the eighth vision is of the chariots and horses going out.

[3 : 46] James Jordan has argued that there is a chiastic structure in these visions. The first of the night visions had four sets of horses, and this vision has four chariots. As in the first vision, the horses and their riders patrol the earth.

We've returned to elements of the first vision, when the world was at rest. But now the Lord is going to act in a new way, establishing his order and disrupting that false peace.

At the heart of the temple, in the Holy of Holies, the Lord's chariot was situated. 1 Chronicles chapter 28 verse 18 speaks of the golden chariot of the cherubim that spread their wings and covered the ark of the covenant of the Lord.

Outside the temple, there were chariots of water. Angels are presented as riding chariots in the ascension of Elijah. We also see chariots in 2 Kings chapter 6 verse 17, where the eyes of Elisha's servant were opened to see horses and chariots of fire on the mountains surrounding them.

Psalms 68 verse 17 also speaks of the chariots of the Lord. The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands. The Lord is among them.

[4 : 54] Sinai is now in the sanctuary. Chariots were military vehicles, key parts of the armies of many ancient Near Eastern nations. In contrast to the horses of the first vision, these chariots are prepared and sent out for war.

Here there are four chariots. In Zachariah's visions, we have already seen four sets of horses, four horns, four craftsmen, and four winds of heaven. The number four seems to represent, among other things, the whole of the earth, each of the directions of the compass, and each corner of the world.

The four chariots in Zachariah's vision come forth from between two mountains. In working out the meaning of the symbolism here, it is helpful once more to remember that Zachariah's night visions focus upon the temple, its rebuilding and the re-establishment of the Lord's throne, and the people's worship within it.

When looking for clues to the meaning of elements of the visionary imagery, we should look first to the temple and to its furniture. We should observe that the mountains here seem to function as a sort of threshold, with the horses coming out from between them.

Significantly, they are made of bronze. Commentators speculate about their identity, but the most natural way to understand these is by recalling the two bronze pillars, Jachin and Boaz, that were at the entrance to the temple.

[6 : 11] In addition to being a symbolic model of things such as the human body, the temple was a symbolic model of the cosmos. The courtyard contained symbols of the land, the bronze altar.

It contained a symbol of the sea, the bronze sea. And perhaps we should see the bronze pillars as symbols of, among other things, mountains. The earth and the heavens were poetically conceived of as having supporting foundations and pillars.

Job chapter 9 verses 4 to 6 He is wise in heart and mighty in strength, who has hardened himself against him and succeeded. He who removes mountains and they know it not, when he overturns them in his anger, who shakes the earth out of its place and its pillars tremble.

Job chapter 26 verse 11 The pillars of heaven tremble and are astounded at his rebuke. Psalm 75 verse 3 When the earth totters and all its inhabitants, it is I who keep steady its pillars.

Once we have appreciated the connection between mountains and pillars, the meaning of the bronze mountains may make a bit more sense. As in others of Zechariah's visions, what he is seeing is not merely the physical earthly temple, but the heavenly reality to which it corresponds and which it symbolises.

[7 : 26] The bronze mountains flank the entrance to the Lord's throne room in heaven, from which the chariots are sent forth. As in Ezekiel's vision of the restoration temple, and in other aspects of Zechariah's night visions, we see that the divine reality that corresponds to the modest building of the temple is quite remarkable.

The people seeing the restored temple may only see bronze pillars of relatively short stature, but these bronze pillars represent the entrance to the Lord's palace and should be seen as if they were vast bronze mountains.

In verses 2 and 3 we are given the colours of the horses of the chariots. We were also given the colours of the horses back in chapter 1, but the colours are different here. The colours of the horses here have much more in common with the colours of the horses in John's vision in Revelation chapter 6 verses 1 to 8.

Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, Come. And I looked, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, Come. And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

[8 : 47] When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, Come. And I looked, and behold, a black horse, and its rider had a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine.

When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, Come. And I looked, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him.

And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, and with famine, and with pestilence, and by wild beasts of the earth. What are we to make of the colours of the horses in Zechariah's vision?

Elsewhere in the prophets we see groups of destroyers listed, typically three, or sometimes four in number. Most commonly these are given as pestilence, sword, and famine, with captivity as an occasional addition.

The horses in Revelation seem to represent conquest, sword, famine, and death, or pestilence. Here in Zechariah we should presume that the red horses are connected with blood, and therefore the sword, and the black horses with death, mourning, and desolation, perhaps also economic disaster.

[10 : 04] The white horses represent victory and conquest. The dappled horses represent plague, sickness, and pestilence. Jordan suggests that the dappled horses might make us think of leprosy.

Zechariah asks the interpreting angel about the meaning of the horses. He is told that the horses are going out to the four winds of heaven. The four winds of heaven were formerly mentioned in Zechariah chapter 2 verse 6 in the third of the visions.

For I have spread you abroad as the four winds of the heavens, declares the Lord. There the Lord declared that he was making his people like the four winds of the heavens. The second vision also referred to four craftsmen responding to the four horns.

As in the case of the third vision, we should recognise connections to this final vision. In chapter 1 there was a man riding on a red horse, to whom the three sets of horses and their riders reported.

Here there are four sets of horses mentioned, but only three of them are mentioned as going out. There is no reference to the first chariot with the red horses going out. Likely we should connect the chariot with the red horses, with the man on the red horse in chapter 1.

[11 : 10] Although some wonder whether the red horses are referred to as the strong horses in verse 7, it is likely that they do not go out. The Lord's judgments are occurring by means other than war, chiefly through pestilence and plague and by economic disaster.

The chariots that go forth go in the direction of the north and the south. The two chariots that go north are the black chariot, followed after by the white chariot, presumably symbolising devastation and desolation, followed by conquest.

The chariot that goes south is the chariot pulled by the dappled horse, representing pestilence and plague. Fittingly it seems to go to Egypt, which would be struck again as it was in the Exodus.

The two great powers that dominated much of Israel's life were the northern power and the southern power. The southern power was typically Egypt, the power in the north was Assyria, Babylon or Persia, or some other power like that.

It is possible, as Anthony Pettersson notes, that the south country might be a reference to Edom. However, Egypt is the more likely possibility. The horses sent forth are described as strong.

[12 : 16] They are the war horses of the Lord, eager for battle. As they perform their work, they set the spirit of the Lord at rest, having accomplished the purpose for which they were sent out. The chariots deal with the bad peace that the patrolling riders described in chapter 1 verse 11, establishing a good rest for the spirit of the Lord in its place.

Perhaps we should also note a hint of a Sabbath theme here. After the night visions end, Zechariah receives a prophecy and is instructed to perform a sign act. He is instructed to take some recently returned exiles, Heldai, Tobijah, Jediah and Jeziah, taking silver and gold from them and making a crown with it.

Returning exiles brought with them large quantities of treasures for the rebuilding of the temple and other purposes, often donated by rulers, as we see in places like Ezra. The form of the term used for crown here is plural, but the context makes it clear that this is a single crown.

As Pettersson notes, some commentators see in this a composite or a two-tiered crown, which would be a fitting image for the vision. The crown is then placed upon the head of Joshua the high priest, symbolising the uniting of the offices of king and priest.

Zechariah then delivers a prophecy concerning the coming branch. The figure of the branch was previously mentioned in chapter 3 verse 8, again in connection with Joshua. Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign.

[13 : 45] Behold, I will bring my servant the branch. There it was clear that Joshua himself was not the branch, but that he was a sign of the coming branch. The figure of the branch is mentioned elsewhere in scripture, in places like Jeremiah chapter 23 verses 5 to 6, where it is clear that he is the messianic heir of David.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called. The Lord is our righteousness. As Jordan underlines, It is the priest who has made a king, not the king who has made a priest.

Although the high priest had a turban with a golden plate, with holy to the Lord engraved upon it, here he is given the sort of crown that the king might wear. In the Old Testament, kingship and priesthood were separated.

However, the expectation was that one day a priest would come who would enjoy the prerogatives of kingship. Most famously, there is a reference to priesthood after the order of Melchizedek in Psalm 110 verse 4, which was of great interest to the author of Hebrews.

[14 : 59] The sign act immediately raises some questions. Is Joshua being identified as the branch? From chapter 3, where he is presented not as the branch, but as a sign of the branch, and from the fact that Joshua is not a descendant of David, it doesn't seem to be that he is the one being referred to as the branch here.

The branch is said to branch out from his place, perhaps a reference to his arising from the root of Jesse. He will build the temple of the Lord. Although the temple of the Lord is currently being built by Zerubbabel, and according to divine promise, Zerubbabel would also finish that building, this seems to point forward to a greater temple, which the Messiah, the branch, would construct.

We are told that there will be a priest upon or by his throne. Whose throne? The branches? Some see two different figures here. Jeremiah chapter 33 verses 17 to 18 speak of continuing Davidic kingship and Levitical priesthood.

For thus says the Lord, David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the Levitical priest shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to make sacrifices forever.

However, this does not seem to fit the context or the language well, especially when we consider the way that Joshua the high priest has just been symbolically crowned. It's probably better to take his throne as a reference to the throne of the Lord.

[16 : 25] The Lord establishes the branch to rule in his own name. What is the meaning of the statement, the council of peace shall be between them both? It most likely refers either to the branch and the Lord, or to the Lord and the people, not the offices of priest and king considered in the abstract.

Seeing it as about the relationship between the branch and the Lord might fit with the description of Psalm 110 verses 1 to 5. The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.

The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies. Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments, from the womb of the morning.

The dew of your youth will be yours. The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind. You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. The Lord is at your right hand.

He will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. The crown is a sign. It will be placed in the temple as a memorial, presumably for the Lord primarily. It is a sign of the fact that, just as the four men brought treasures from the north country that were used to make a royal crown, the Lord would one day establish the branch, who would build the great temple of the Lord, wear the crown of rule, and receive tribute and gifts from people of far off for his establishment of the Lord's house.

[17 : 51] A question to consider. James Jordan underlines the way that this prophetic sign draws our attention to the fact that the prophecies of Zechariah have a near and also a further fulfillment.

What are some of the ways in which the other night visions of Zechariah might anticipate a longer term fulfillment?