

Zechariah 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 24 September 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Zechariah chapter 4. And the angel who talked with me came again and woke me, like a man who was awakened out of his sleep. And he said to me, What do you see? I said, I see and behold a lamp stand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl, and the other on its left. And I said to the angel who talked with me, What are these, my lord?

Then the angel who talked with me answered and said to me, Do you not know what these are? I said, No, my lord. Then he said to me, This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts. Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain, and he shall bring forward the topstone amid shouts of grace, grace to it.

Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house. His hand shall also complete it. Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel. These seven are the eyes of the Lord, which range through the whole earth. Then I said to him, What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand? And a second time I answered and said to him, What are these two branches of the olive trees, which are beside the two golden pipes from which the golden oil is poured out? He said to me, Do you not know what these are? I said, No, my lord. Then he said, These are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth. Zechariah chapter 4 continues the night visions of the prophet Zechariah. Up to this point in the book, he has had four different visions. The visions of the riders among the myrtle trees in the deep, the vision of the four horns and the four craftsmen, the vision of the man with the measuring line, and then the vision of the re-clothing of Joshua the high priest in the preceding chapter. That vision was focused upon Joshua as the high priest, and now the fifth vision particularly focuses upon Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, and also the heir of David.

The visions of Zechariah more generally relate to the rebuilding of the temple and the re-establishment of the nation. For all the people's building, it would be of little effect were the Lord not with them. In these visions, however, it is revealed to Zechariah that the Lord is re-establishing the people. He is going to raise up his throne in Jerusalem once more. He is going to establish his rule in the world. He is going to extend his kingdom and surround and protect his faithful people.

[2 : 3 8] He is going to cleanse the priesthood, and now in this chapter he is going to empower his people and their rulers. This vision begins with Zechariah being awoken, which might suggest, as Mark Boda argues, the opening of a news section in the vision reports. James Jordan sees a journey through a night within the visions, and this is the turning point at midnight. Zechariah sees a vision of a lampstand of gold. It is difficult to work out exactly what the lampstand looked like. There was a lampstand, of course, in the tabernacle, and there were ten lampstands in the temple. The lampstand in the tabernacle is described in Exodus chapter 25 verses 31 to 40. You shall make a lampstand of pure gold.

The lampstand shall be made of hammered work. Its base, its stem, its cups, its calyxes, and its flowers shall be of one piece with it, and there shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it, and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it, three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on one branch, and three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on the other branch, so for the six branches going out of the lampstand. And on the lampstand itself there shall be four cups made like almond blossoms, with their calyxes and flowers, and a calyx of one piece with it under

each pair of the six branches going out from the lampstand. Their calyxes and their branches shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it a single piece of hammered work of pure gold. You shall make seven lamps for it, and the lamp shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it. Its tongs and their trays shall be of pure gold. It shall be made with all these utensils, out of a talent of pure gold. And see that you make them after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain. We should not presume that the lampstand in Zechariah chapter 4 is the same in appearance as that within the tabernacle or the temple. The shape of the lampstand in Zechariah's vision is most probably very different from the lampstand described in the book of Exodus, although the symbolism is clearly related. We see commonalities in the seven lamps and in the construction of the lampstand of pure gold. But beyond that they are quite different. There are seven lamps with seven spouts. Part of the challenge that we have here is working out the meaning of the key terms and then developing some picture of how it actually looked. David Peterson, working in part from archaeological evidence of lamps from the region, suggests that we should think of each of the lamps as likely holding seven wicks, each with its own channel, spout or pinched lip in the bowl holding the oil, so that each of the seven lamps would contain seven lights. We should probably think then of one large bowl with seven smaller bowls around it, each with pinched lips or indentations within which a wick would be draped, which could be lit. The whole thing would give a great deal of light. Zechariah's lampstand might have looked more like a birdbath in shape, with seven sevenfold lamps around it, than with the way that the lampstand of the temple is commonly imagined, an image that is drawn in part from the representation of the menorah on the arch of Titus in Rome. As Peterson notes, Zechariah's lampstand makes no mention of branches, for instance. The lampstand in the tabernacle has cups instead of a bowl, and it doesn't have channels in the way that Zechariah's does. The lampstand in the tabernacle draws heavily upon arboreal imagery, but Zechariah's does not to the same degree. There is no connection to almonds, for instance.

The fact that the lampstand has 49 lights should not escape us. 49, seven times seven, is a number that is significant as it's connected with jubilee. Numbers associated with jubilee, 25, half a jubilee, 49, the number of years that would pass before the jubilee, and then 50, the year of jubilee, are all numbers that are repeated within Ezekiel's vision of the Restoration Temple.

Solomon's temple took the original lampstand of the tabernacle and multiplied it by 10, having five on each side. But this is a sort of a glorified or jubilee lampstand, seven times seven. We see related imagery, of course, at the beginning of the book of Revelation, with the seven golden lampstands, presumably lampstands with seven branches. As in the lamps of Zechariah's vision, each of the seven is sevenfold. We can see a sort of Russian doll, or perhaps fractal, pattern here. As you zoom in more closely, the pattern repeats on a smaller level.

The lamb, for instance, in Revelation chapter 5 verse 6 is described as follows, The seven horns and the seven eyes might remind us of the seven lampstands and the seven lights.

[7 : 28] The seven lampstands are the seven churches, and then the seven stars or lights are the seven angels of the seven churches. But these have their analogy within the lamb himself. The lamb's sevenfold glory flows out and repeats itself on a lower plane. We can probably see the lampstand in Zechariah's vision then, as representing the people of God as light within the world. Although the lampstand is not tree-like here, it is connected with two olive trees. Zechariah sees these two olive trees, one on the right and one on the left. Jordan suggests that we should see the lampstand as standing before the Lord, with the olive trees as being on either side of the throne of the Lord, on the right and the left, but above and behind the lampstand. The interpreting angel who guides Zechariah through his visions, just like Gabriel guides Daniel through his visions, asks him the question of whether he understands what he is seeing. Zechariah does not. It's possible that he understands the fundamental symbolism, but does not understand how it relates to their situation. What we are given next is not so much an interpretation of the symbolism, but an explanation of what its import is. This glorious and elevated seven times seven-fold lampstand represents something about the way that the Lord will relate to his people, and most especially to their leader Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel is currently leading the people in this task of rebuilding the temple, a great yet a daunting operation that had been abandoned for almost 15 years, only being restarted a few months previously. To that point the Jews had faced opposition from their neighbours and been frustrated in their task as a result of it. The frustration of the people to this point had probably occurred in large part as a result of the guilt of the people that had not yet been taken away. Now, however, as the filthy garments of the high priest that represented the guilt of the people were

removed, being replaced with clean garments, the opposition, behind it all Satan the accuser himself, could no longer be so effective. Zerubbabel and the people would achieve their purpose, not through human might, but by the work and the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Nothing that stood in

Zerubbabel's way would be sufficient to provide an impassable obstacle. The great mountains of the time might be the political powers in the region, and the greater power of the Persian empire behind them. In the first of Zechariah's visions, the myrtle trees were in the deep, an image that implied something about the state of the people of God at that time. They, however, are going to be raised up.

The Lord is going to establish them, as it were, on the mountain, and any other mountain that would presume to oppose them would be flattened. Zerubbabel himself will bring forward the top stone of the temple, accompanied by shouts of rejoicing among the people. The exact nature of this stone is unclear.

Mark Boda suggests that it is the beginning stone, the headstone, or the chief cornerstone. However, in verse 9, we see that the hands of Zerubbabel had already laid the foundation of the house, something that he had done a number of years previously. Peterson raises the possibility that the stone is the former stone, something that connects the temple with the previous temple that had been destroyed as part of the rededication. James Jordan, connecting this with the tin stone that's mentioned in verse 10, speculates that the stone in question was one that was placed above the threshold to the temple. As such, with the two pillars of Jachin and Boaz on either side, it corresponded to the Lord's presence between and above the cherubim. The Lord assures Zerubbabel and the people that the rebuilding of the house will not be a long and drawn-out process. In fact, just as Zerubbabel had laid the foundation, he would complete the building. This would demonstrate the Lord's presence with his people, and also the truth of the ministry of Zechariah. As we also see in both Ezra and Haggai, a number of the people were disheartened as they compared the temple that was being rebuilt with the former temple of Solomon. The new edifice was much smaller and less impressive by comparison. However, throughout the night visions of Zechariah, as the veil is being removed and we're seeing the work of the Lord, it becomes apparent that though the physical edifice of the temple is much smaller, its spiritual reality is much elevated. The Lord's throne that it symbolizes is going to be lifted up in the years that follow. Many translations speak of the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel, yet a large number of commentators dispute this reading of the text, suggesting that it should be seen not as a plumb line, but as the tin stone. The question then is raised, what is the significance of this tin stone? Jordan, as I've already noted, sees this as being placed above the doorway.

Peterson argues that it is most likely a royal signet stone, perhaps a metallic tablet that is placed at a key point in the foundations of the building. The meaning of this action probably wouldn't be that dissimilar to some official or royal unveiling a plaque for a new building.

[12:11] Jordan argues that the seven mentioned in verse 10 relate to this stone. The stone that he sees as being above the threshold corresponds to the stone of the preceding chapter, which is upon the forehead of the high priest on his turban. Some analogy should definitely be drawn between these two things.

However, I don't believe that this is a reference to the stone. Rather, it's a reference back to the lamp. As Carol and Eric Myers argue within their commentary, what we are given now is an explanation of the meaning of the vision. Zechariah did not understand what the elements of the vision meant, but now they are explained to him. From the last part of verse 10 to the end of the chapter, we have an explanation of the vision by its elements in order. First the seven lamps, and then the olive trees and their various components. Elsewhere in scripture, we see an association between the lamp and the ruler of the people. In 2 Samuel chapter 21 verse 17, for instance, then David's men swore to him, you shall no longer go out with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp of Israel. In 2 Kings chapter 8 verse 19, yet the Lord was not willing to destroy Judah for the sake of David his servant, since he promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons forever. The imagery of the eyes of the Lord is also found in places like 2 Chronicles chapter 16 verse 9, for the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him. Given the context in which the flowing of the oil is particularly important, some commentators believe that we should understand the eyes here as wells or springs, another meaning of the Hebrew term.

These are eyes or springs from which water or oil flows out to the whole earth to give sustenance and strength. While this meaning might not be entirely excluded from the text, it seems far more likely to me that the focus here is upon eyes. Eyes are means of judgment and rule. They observe and inspect the earth and then cast judgment upon it on whether it is good or bad. We might think of the description of David in 2 Samuel chapter 14 verse 20, but my Lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth. We might also think of the horses that patrol the earth and report back to the Lord in chapter 1 of Zechariah. Perhaps the king and the people here are being represented as extensions of the Lord's authority within the world. The Lord will act and rule through them. The olive trees are then explained in verses 11 and following. In thinking about the two olive trees, one on the right and one on the left, we should probably think of the two great statues of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies in the temple, and we should also think of the two pillars, Jachin and Boaz, placed at the threshold of the building. As described in 2 Chronicles chapter 3, the wings of the two cherubs in the Holy of Holies reached out and touched each other, forming between them, as Jordan observes, a sort of threshold, with the Lord's presence symbolically situated above that threshold. We then get more details concerning the olive trees than we had in the initial account of the vision. There are two branches of the olive trees, which are poured out by some means into the bowl of the lampstand. Many regard this means as being two golden pipes. However, Boda and some others translate the verse in a way that makes reference to people who are working upon the tree.

Boda reads verse 12 as follows, Then I responded a second time and said to him, What were the two branches of the olive trees which are in the hands of the two oil pressers, the ones who empty golden oil from them? In this reading then, the attention is placed far more upon these figures of the oil pressers, not upon the olive trees by themselves. The image of the oil pressing that we have here, straight from the tree, is very similar to the image in the dream of the cupbearer in Genesis chapter 40 verses 9 to 11. So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand.

[16:17] Our reading of verse 12 has a lot of bearing upon our understanding of verse 14, and the two figures who are called sons of oil. Many Bible translations as commentators see sons of oil as an obvious reference to people who are anointed. However, if we've noticed the figure of the oil pressers, it could very likely be a reference to them, against the more common traditional reading, that sees in this a reference to Joshua the high priest, and Zerubbabel the leader of the people, as the two anointed ones. We might see the two anointed ones who stand before the Lord, as the prophets who are entering into the divine council, Haggai and Zechariah. It is through their pressing of the oil of the spirit, that the oil is fed in to fuel the lamp of the people and their rulers. The lamp perhaps has a specific applicability to Zerubbabel as the heir of David. Furthermore, as one aspect of the sevenfold pattern, we might observe that in 1 Chronicles chapter 3 verses 19 to 20, Zerubbabel has seven sons. The twofold witness of the Lord's prophets will equip his people to burn as a powerful light within the world, fuelled by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

A question to consider. How could we unpack the relationship between the two olive trees, the two cherubim in the Holy of Holies, and the two pillars at the threshold of the temple, Jachin and Boaz?

