

Zechariah 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Zechariah chapter 1. In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying, The Lord was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, Thus declares the Lord of hosts, Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds. But they did not hear or pay attention to me, declares the Lord. Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers? So they repented and said, As the Lord of hosts purposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so has he dealt with us. On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month of Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying, I saw in the night, and behold, a man riding on a red horse. He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen, and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses. Then I said, What are these, my lord? The angel who talked with me said to me, I will show you what they are. So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, These are they whom the Lord has sent to patrol the earth. And they answered the angel of the Lord who was standing among the myrtle trees, and said, We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth remains at rest. Then the angel of the Lord said, O Lord of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these seventy years? And the Lord answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. So the angel who talked with me said to me, Cry out, Thus says the Lord of hosts, I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion, and I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease. For while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster. Therefore thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy. My house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Cry out again, thus says the Lord of hosts, My city shall again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion, and again choose Jerusalem.

And I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four horns. And I said to the angel who talked with me, What are these? And he said to me, These are the horns that have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.

Then the Lord showed me four craftsmen. And I said, What are these coming to do? He said, These are the horns that scattered Judah, so that no one raised his head. And these have come to terrify them, to cast down the horns of the nations who lifted up their horns against the land of Judah to scatter it. The book of the prophet Zechariah is the penultimate book within the book of the twelve.

It is helpful to read it alongside its immediate predecessor, the book of Haggai. Haggai and Zechariah ministered at the same time, both encouraging the people in the rebuilding of the temple. We read of their ministry in Ezra chapter 5 verses 1 to 2.

[3 : 18] Now the prophets Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Josedach arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them. And then in Ezra chapter 6 verses 14 and 15. And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia. And this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. There were 24 divisions of priests originally in the temple and we read of some of the priestly divisions that returned in Nehemiah chapter 12. In Nehemiah chapter 12 verse 16 we discover that Zechariah was one of the chief priests representing the house of Iddo. Recognizing that Zechariah was a priest can help us to make more sense of some of the imagery of his prophecy. In 586 BC the city of Jerusalem had fallen to the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonians had been dominant in the region since around 605 BC after the battle of Carchemish. Babylon however was defeated by Cyrus in 539 BC. By Cyrus's decree the

Jews had been sent back to Jerusalem. After an initial start made to the rebuilding of the temple under the governorship of Sheshbazzar the Jews had faced opposition from their neighbours and had abandoned the work. Now over a decade and a half later and chiefly through the word of Haggai who had encouraged them to take up their building again the temple was being constructed again. Haggai's first recorded prophecy was on the sixth month the first day of the month in the second year of the reign of Darius. On the 24th day of the sixth month they had taken up work on the temple once more. Three months to the day after the recommencement of the rebuilding of the temple Haggai had delivered his last recorded message an encouragement to the people and then another encouragement to Zerubbabel that the Lord would empower and bless them in their labours. Zerubbabel who had become the governor of the people was also a descendant of David. Paying attention to the chronology of Haggai can be helpful when we start to read Zechariah. Zechariah's ministry begins in the eighth month of the second year of Darius.

Haggai's initial rebuke to the people has been delivered. At the end of the sixth month they had taken up work on the temple again and Haggai had also addressed them on the seventh day of the feast of tabernacles. The first message of the book of Zechariah then comes after the first three messages of the book of Haggai before the messages with which the book of Haggai concludes. It's important to recognise that these messages are concerned with the rebuilding of the temple. As we see in Ezra chapter 5 and 6, the messages of Haggai and Zechariah were instrumental in galvanising the people and encouraging them in the task of rebuilding the temple. Imagery within the book that might otherwise confuse us will come into sharper focus when we consider that Zechariah is a priest and that his ministry at this point is focused upon encouraging the people in the building work.

Haggai and Zechariah are two witnesses bearing testimony to the word of the Lord to the people at this time. Zechariah's first message is a warning to repent. This might surprise us as the people had already committed themselves to rebuilding the temple on the 24th day of the sixth month and Haggai had already delivered the opening rebuke of his prophecy to them on the first day of that sixth month.

[6 : 46] Is Zechariah merely repeating a message that has already been received? It seems more likely that we should read Zechariah as reinforcing that original message. The temple will be of little worth if the hearts of the people worshipping within it have not returned to the Lord. The temple is among other things a symbol of the people and their relationship to the Lord. If the people do not have a right relationship with the Lord, the temple can become a dangerous source of presumption, undermining its proper purpose. The people need to learn from the cautionary example of their fathers.

Both the prophets and their fathers had passed away, but the word of the Lord delivered by the prophets has stood firm. What's more, that word had overtaken their fathers. It had had its full effect in the destruction of the previous temple and in the devastation of the central site of Israel's worship for almost 70 years. It was imperative that the people took this lesson to heart if they were not to suffer the same fate themselves. One feature of Zechariah's prophecy here that's worth noting is the repetition of the expression, the Lord of hosts. The Lord is the God of armies, and when Israel feels beleaguered in its return to the land, in the smallness of their numbers and the precarious political position that they hold relative to the other people surrounding them, they can take comfort and assurance in the fact that the God that they worship is the great and powerful God over all armies and kings, with myriads upon myriads of angels and his host. Unsurprisingly, considering the fact that they had already responded positively to the message of Haggai, the people reaffirmed their repentance in response to the prophecy of Zechariah. Part of the founding of this temple will be the turning of the people's hearts back to the Lord, having learnt the lessons from the previous temple and its destruction. The vision that follows in verses 7 to 17 comes on the 24th day of the 11th month, five months to the day after the beginning of the rebuilding of the temple that's recorded in the book of Haggai. It's still in the second year of Darius, in 520 BC. This is the first of a series of night visions in the opening chapters of the book of Zechariah. The imagery of this vision, along with the imagery of other visions in this series, can be difficult to understand. However, James Jordan's insight that these all have to do with the building of the temple, I think, gives us the key to understand what's taking place. These visions are being delivered while the temple building is occurring.

They are means of encouraging the people in the task, and they encourage the people by relating the work on the building of the temple with the work that God is doing within the world more generally. It is as if while the people are working on the temple in Jerusalem, the Lord himself will be working upon the right ordering of the world. What is being done on earth is also being done in heaven.

In the vision, he sees a man riding on a red horse, standing among myrtle trees, and behind him red, sorrel, and white horses, probably best understood as dark and light chestnut, and white in colour.

The identity of the man riding on the red horse is likely given to us in verse 11, where it speaks of the angel of the Lord who was standing among the myrtle trees. The angel of the Lord is the messenger of the covenant, and also the commander of the army of the Lord, the same figure that Joshua meets in chapter 5 of his book. Translations of verse 8 will often place the myrtle trees in a glen.

[10:01] However, the word used here is more typically understood as the deep or the depths elsewhere in the Old Testament. Others understand the word here to refer to being in the shade, under the trees.

Myrtle trees are small evergreen trees. Mark Boda observes that they can grow to the size of a small bush, 2 to 3 metres, or a small evergreen tree of 6 to 9 metres. The flowers are used for perfumes and spices. Jordan notes that the Hebrew name of Esther, who was also operating around this period, Hadassah, also relates to the myrtle, an interesting detail that might be worth further examination.

In the book of Isaiah, the myrtle tree is associated with images of restoration. Isaiah chapter 41 verses 19 and 20. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive. I will set in the desert the cypress, the plain, and the pine together, that they may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the Lord has done this. The Holy One of Israel has created it.

Again in chapter 55 verse 13. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress, instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle, and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Elsewhere the imagery of a grove of trees might remind us of the Garden of Eden, or the building of the temple, which draws upon the imagery of the Garden of Eden. Jordan suggests that we might see in myrtle trees some similarity to cedar trees that are used in the temple building. The myrtle is a small analogy to the cedar. Imagery of divine horses is seen in the book of 2 Kings chapter 2, with the ascension of Elijah into heaven. Elsewhere in Revelation chapter 6 verses 1 to 8, where the four living creatures, in response to the opening of the first four seals, summon four horses that go out into the world, bringing devastation in their wake.

[11 : 50] Later in Zechariah chapter 6 verses 1 to 8, we also see horses that go out into the world. 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. There is an obvious comparison and contrast to be drawn between that, the final of the night visions, and this, which is the first.

In the final night vision, there are chariots going out to war, drawn by horses. In this first night vision, the horses and their riders are not drawing chariots. They are merely inspecting or maybe spying out the whole of the earth. What is taking place here is preparing for action that will take place later. In Revelation chapter 6, the four horses seem to be associated with the four living creatures or cherubim. The Lord is enthroned above the cherubim, which in 1 Chronicles chapter 28 verse 18 is described as the golden chariot of the cherubim that spread their wings and covered the ark of the covenant of the Lord. We see the reality corresponding to this furniture within the temple in places like Ezekiel chapter 1 and the vision of the throne chariot of the Lord that Ezekiel sees at the beginning of his ministry. While the Lord's throne chariot is driven by cherubim, angels and human beings are placed upon horses. Jordan suggests that the colour of these horses may correspond with the colours of fire. Dark red, a lighter red and white, just as the throne of the Lord is surrounded by fire and the movements within it are like movements of fire, so these angelic horses are like fiery horses.

The horses seem to have riders who give answers to the angel of the Lord as he inquires of them. There is also an interpreting angel who speaks to Zechariah, much as Gabriel interprets the visions of Daniel to him. How then can we put the elements of this vision together? First of all, in the angel of the Lord we see the commander of the armies of God. Angelic forces have been sent throughout the earth.

[14 : 22] The four sets of horses, the red, sorrel and white horses, and then the man on the red horse, representing the four corners of the earth, and also the four cherubim. The myrtle tree is associated with blessing. It also reminds us in some ways of the temple and the garden of Eden. Yet the myrtle trees are situated not on a mountain as we might expect, but in the depths, or perhaps in a glen.

The angels patrolling the earth on their horses report back to the angel of the Lord, declaring that all of the earth remains at rest. This, however, does not appear to be good news, because the angel of the Lord responds to the news by speaking to the Lord of hosts, asking him when he will have mercy upon Jerusalem and the cities of Judah. It has been almost 70 years since the destruction of the temple and the deportation to Babylon. When will he have mercy upon them?

Interpreting the imagery in terms of this, maybe we should see in the myrtle trees an image of the people and of the Lord's presence in their midst. They seem to be beleaguered. They are situated not on the mountain, but in the depths. They are not a forest of great cedars. They are rather a gathering of smaller myrtle trees. The world may be at peace, but it is at peace under the rule of a pagan nation.

This is not as things ought to be. However, as the angelic riders patrol the earth, they seem to be preparing for action that will take place soon after. As Haggai had foretold, a great shaking of the world is going to take place, a shaking that will continue for many years, getting greater and greater. At the end of the book of Hebrews, we are told that God will once more shake the heavens and the earth, most likely referring to the establishment of the reign of Christ and the bringing down of the temple and the old covenant order in AD 70. Recognizing that this is the chief subject matter of the book of Revelation and that the book of Revelation also has an image of horses being sent out by the cherubim, we might notice a further illuminating parallel between the angel of the Lord in the midst of the myrtle trees here and Christ in the middle of the tree-like lampstands in Revelation chapter 1. The Lord delivers a message of reassurance and comfort to the angel who talks with Zechariah, declaring that the Lord is jealous for his people, that he has returned for them, and that he is angry with the nations that are at ease, as they have overstepped their bounds in bringing his judgment upon his people. In verse 3 of Zechariah's first prophecy, the Lord had said, return to me, and I will return to you. They had returned to the Lord, and now the Lord had returned to Zion. With his renewed presence in their midst, the temple, Jerusalem, and the cities of Judah would all flourish once more. In the second of his night visions, Zechariah is shown four horns.

We're not told in what form he sees these four horns, but he is told that the horns represent those forces that have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem. Horns are obviously connected with beasts. They represent the power and the authority of beasts. We see this in the book of Daniel, where the horns symbolize particular rulers or authorities, also in the imagery of the book of Revelation. As Jordan notes, it's probably significant that in places like 1 Samuel chapter 16, the king is anointed by the horn. It communicates authority and power. Significantly, the imagery of the horn is also associated with the altar, which has four horns, one at each corner. In Revelation chapter 7 verse 1, we see four angels at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. The altar corresponds to the earth, and the four horns to the powers that govern the earth. The four horns that have scattered Judah, meaning Israel and Jerusalem, are pagan powers that dominate the earth. We don't necessarily need to identify four specific powers. Rather, we can see this as a representation of the world being dominated by these pagan forces. The reality that the altar corresponds to, the earth and its four corners, has taken a perverse and adulterous form. The Lord, however, will answer these four false horns with four craftsmen. Craftsmen elsewhere in scripture are particularly associated with the building of the tabernacle and the temple. We might think of the work of Bezalel and Aholiab, of the various craftsmen that accompanied them. We might also think of Hiram and his work on Solomon's temple. The Babylonians had deported the craftsmen and the artisans and the smiths and all skilled workers to ensure that Jerusalem could not rebuild the temple, its walls, or re-establish a well-armed fighting force. Now, however, with the rebuilding of the temple, the Lord is also going to act within the world against the forces that dominate it. He will establish the reality that corresponds with the temple symbol. The four craftsmen are like four builders that are forming the true altar of God.

[18:55] They correspond to the four false horns, being sufficient to the task of overcoming them and establishing the true worship of God in their place, the world becoming the four-horned altar of the Lord once more. A question to consider. In both of the books of Haggai and Zechariah, we see the reaction of some of the elderly people to the re-establishment of the temple, their dismay and sorrow at its smaller proportions. All of this led to a tendency to disregard its significance. How might the prophecy of Zechariah here encourage the people to think of the temple in its building in a different way?