

Zechariah's Message of Coming Blessings
May 17, 2020

As we continue our studies in the scriptures of the “minor” prophets, we come to Zechariah. I have long known the Book of Zechariah as the one before Malachi. As a child I memorized the order of the books of the Bible, but always struggled with the “Book of the Twelve.” Which came after which? But I had no problem remembering, “. . . . Zechariah and Malachi.” Maybe it just seemed that a Z name should be at or near the end. As with Zephaniah, I could not recall hearing any sermon preached from this book. Thus, this Bible Study lesson had given me the pleasure of exploring new territory, about which I knew but little. The post-exilic period is mostly neglected by the Church, as far as I’ve been able to see, except occasionally Ezra and Nehemiah get attention. So, please join me as we put on our helmets, gird our loins for the jungle, and plunge in to see what we may discover!

Zechariah’s period of prophesy is well established in his writings by dates relative to the Persian king, Darius, who followed Cyrus the Great. So, we can confidently date Zechariah’s prophesies recorded in his book as 520 B.C to 518 B.C. The Jews first returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, and started rebuilding the temple in 536, shortly after the fall of Babylon to the Persians under Cyrus the Great. Zechariah was a contemporary of the prophet Haggai (the book preceding Zechariah). Both prophets urged rededication to the task of reconstructing the temple. And, indeed, the reconstruction was completed in 516 B.C. (It would be several decades, until 458 B.C. and 444 B.C. respectively, before Ezra and Nehemiah came to Jerusalem. That was when the strict policy of separation from the Samaritans began in earnest. Malachi was later still.)

So, Zechariah was on the scene in Jerusalem when the original pioneers from Babylon had returned to the Jewish homeland to rebuild Jerusalem. Zechariah was the son of Iddo, identified elsewhere (Ezra, Nehemiah) as a priest, who was one of those in the original return. Zechariah may also have been a priest. But, perhaps not, because his focus was not on the details of the sacrificial system. He drew from the messages of the “former” prophets, that is, those whose ministry came before the exile. This is why our lesson writers chose a scripture from Zechariah, and not, say, Haggai, Nahum, or Obadiah. We have been focused on God’s message to his people to love truth and justice. The last verses in the assigned scripture reading are consistent with those of “former prophets” Amos, Micah, and Isaiah as well as others:

Zechariah 8:16 “These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgements that are true and make for peace, 17 do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, says the Lord.”

I believe the context in which Zechariah delivers these words, and those earlier, are quite interesting. When the Jews came back from Babylon, they found that the land was not entirely depopulated. Yes, Jerusalem was a ruin, but there were others about, others who worshiped the

Jewish God, and claimed to have been doing so all along! (There were also Edomites, Moabites, and others.) One of the things the returnees faced was a crisis of legitimacy. Who were they, who had been gone all of those years, to come back and settle as if they belonged there?

Zechariah's book (chapters 1-8) has three parts. The first (1: 1-6) is a message given in the eighth month of 520 B.C. It is a call to reform, and turn back to God, to the returned Jews: those living in Jerusalem, who had started but had not completed work on the temple. The second part, to 6:15, is dated to the 11th month of 520 B.C. It is a series of visions. Some of these are quite interesting. The third part (7:16 on) concerns a visit by a deputation from the nearby city of Bethel. (Chapters 9-14 seem to be from a later prophet.)

The visions are most interesting. The first concerns four horsemen! An angel interprets the meaning, much as John is given understandings of what he sees during the Revelation of John, that concludes the New Testament. In this case, the horsemen are ranging forth to observe conditions in the land. At the conclusion of the message, the Lord says,

“I have returned to Jerusalem with compassion; my house shall be built in it.” And later, **“My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.”** (excerpts from Zech 1: 16 and 17)

A later vision expands that prophesy:

“Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of you, says the Lord. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in the midst of you,.... “ (Zech 2: 10-11)

The circle of the faithful that seems so small in Zechariah's day, the remnant of God's Chosen in the vicinity of Jerusalem, will be expanded to include many nations!

The visions then get down to some specific, more immediate matters. The High Priest in Jerusalem was a man named Joshua. In Zechariah's vision, he was seen first in filthy garments standing before the Lord, with Satan ready to accuse him. But Satan was rebuked, and Joshua was cleansed and given new, clean garments. **“Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you in rich apparel.”** Joshua was then charged to **“walk in my ways and keep my house”**, and was to be given charge of the temple as God's high priest. This is most interesting in that it represents the priest Joshua as in some way being in disrepute, and needing forgiveness and cleansing. One speculation is that this “cleansing” makes him fit, in the eyes of the residents of the land who were not returnees, but had long resided in nearby cities. That is, that Joshua was now fit for the office of High Priest in Jerusalem. That Jerusalem's priesthood, and temple, could again be recognized. This is pertinent to the visitors from Bethel coming later.

The next vision concerns a man chosen by God to be a messiah. This was Zerubbabel, a grandson of King Jehoiachin. Jehoiachin was the King of Judah who was carried off to Babylon and kept prisoner there, but who was eventually released and allowed to eat at the king of Babylon's table. (He wasn't the last king. That was Zedekiah, who reigned after Jehoiachin had been carried away.) Zechariah refers to Zerubbabel as a King. He was the kingly descendent of David (and an ancestor of Jesus). Joshua and Zerubbabel are called "anointed ones" who were charged with completing the temple, and ushering in an age where the scattered people of God would flock to Jerusalem from the four winds. (The prophet Haggai similarly called Zerubbabel the "chosen one".) In the Persian view, Zerubbabel was simply the governor of this contingent of Jews who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. He didn't rate being called a king. We don't know what happened to Zerubbabel. He disappeared from history shortly after this, and no Davidic kingship was established. Perhaps he did remain until the Temple was completed. He was apparently important in resuming the work. But we know little more.

This brings us to the visitors from Bethel. The date given is in 518 B.C., a bit less than two years later. Bethel was still there from before the exile. It was a city of the "northern" part of what was once the united kingdom of David and Solomon. Indeed, it was one of the cities where Jeroboam, leading the revolt against Solomon's son, had set up a golden calf for the Israelites to worship. But now, there were worshipers of The Lord there. People who would later be called "Samaritans" for the city of Samaria, capitol of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, that had fallen to the Assyrians. Bethel was one of the most important sites in the history of Israel, and had been Israelite long before David had captured Jerusalem. It was in Bethel that the "former prophet" Amos had, about a century earlier, delivered his message, a message still applicable to Zechariah's times, and in ours as well.

The people of Bethel sent a delegation to inquire of the Lord about religious practices. Specifically, the people of Bethel had been mourning and fasting in the fifth month to commemorate the fall of Jerusalem. They also had been fasting and mourning in the seventh month, to commemorate when the Babylonian governor Gedeliah was murdered. The remaining residents fled to avoid retribution, leaving Jerusalem not only wrecked but also deserted. These people of Bethel had been doing this for seventy years, since these events had happened. Their question was, now that people had returned to Jerusalem, whether they should continue this mourning and fasting. They come to Zechariah, the Prophet of the Lord, in Jerusalem with this question. (The implication is that, at the time, there was not the bitter enmity between the two groups, the returned Jews and their neighbors, that would be prevalent decades later.) Zechariah is given a message, starting in verse 7:5:

"Say to the people of the land and the priests, When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? 6 And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves? 7 When Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity, with her cities round about her, and in the South and the lowland were inhabited, were not these the words which the Lord proclaimed by the former prophets?"

8 And the word of the Lord came to Zechariah saying, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy each to his brother, 10 do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother in your heart.” 11 But they refused to hearken

Zechariah has told them that the Lord is not interested in their fasts; he is watching how they behave. He goes on to recount how neglect of that message led to the desolation of Jerusalem. But then he turns to recent events starting in our scripture for today, 8:1-17. (I won't repeat all of that here.) What Zechariah has done is tell them the reasons, applicable both in Bethel and Jerusalem, for God's judgments, and that the Lord now expects what he has called for all along. Now, the Jews, having repented, return to Jerusalem and expect a glorious future.

Alas, things did not work out in the near future as Zechariah had expected. We have some history in Ezra but that doesn't tell us what happened to Zerubbabel. We know the Temple was completed, but the Jews were in a sorry state by the time Ezra and Nehemiah came later. Hostility by the “peoples of the land” (the Samaritans, represented in Zechariah by Bethel) were a part of it. A hostility returned by Ezra and Nehemiah in the days to come, so that by Jesus's days the Jews and their nearest kin were bitter enemies, more bitter than relations with the children of Esau (the Edomites), the children of Lot (Moabites and Ammonites) the other close kin, or the various tribes of Arabs that trace to Ishmael.

So, what can we take away from this? The picture of rejoicing in the Lord known to his servants who keep his commandments, who are called to his purpose, and who do as God calls his followers to do in verses 16 and 17 (as in 7:8-10 earlier). But wait! There is more! The verses that follow, like those earlier in 2: 10-11, envision a more universal worship of the Lord by many peoples and nations. Zech 8: 21-23:

21 “... the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, ‘Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts; I am going.’ 22 Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and entreat the favor of the Lord. 23 Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’”

So it was in the time of Jesus. Pagans, Greek speaking “gentiles,” came to Jerusalem, and attended synagogues, seeking to know God. They were called “God fearers.” Archaeologists have found inscriptions in ancient synagogues indicating that many of these Greeks made generous donations. It is they who, hearing the gospel, found a Jesus that welcomed them, and gave an invitation that they could accept to become true children of God. An invitation that we, too, as gentiles, have accepted and made our own heritage in our day. May we be as generous in our open invitation to others who seek God, as Zechariah envisioned in his day!