

# THE BOOK OF ZECHARIAH

## A. ORIENTING DATA FOR ZECHARIAH

- Content: visions aimed at encouraging the postexilic community, especially the leadership, to rebuild the temple, plus oracles about the future coming King who would be slain and eventually triumph
- Prophet: Zechariah of Jerusalem, a contemporary of Haggai, but with a longer known ministry (cf. Zech 1:1 and 7:1 with Hag 1:1; see also Ezra 5:1; 6:14)
- Date of prophetic activity: 520 B.C. until sometime in the early 400s
- Emphases: God is with the remnant community of people who have returned from exile; God will prosper her leaders; the future of Jerusalem and Judah is bright and full of peace and glory; Israel's King will come back to Jerusalem in triumph, yet he will be slain for the sins of the people; God will punish his people's enemies, yet many of the nations will come to know the Lord

## B. OVERVIEW OF ZECHARIAH

This eleventh of the Book of the Twelve has two such distinct parts (chs. 1–8; 9–14) that many scholars believe chapters 9–14 to be from someone else. But the Bible presents both parts together, with the second to be understood in light of the first. Here is a case where the near future and the great future of God exist in tension by the very structure of the book.

Both sections have recognizable parts. After an introductory call to repentance (1:2–6), you encounter a series of eight night visions (1:7–6:15), which are interpreted by an “angel who was talking with [Zechariah]” (1:9). These center in visions 4–5, which focus on the leadership of Joshua and Zerubbabel and the building of the temple. The rest of this section (chs. 7–8) uses a question posed about certain fasts to preach about the true nature of fasting and to announce God's future blessing of Jerusalem.

Chapters 9–14 contain two “oracles” (chs. 9–11 and 12–14) having to do with God's glorious future for his people and judgment on his/their enemies. The first contains a judgment against the nations (9:1–8) set in the context of the coming and subsequent rejection of God's kingly Messiah (9:9–17; 11:4–17) and the great regathering of his scattered people (10:1–11:3). The second oracle picks up all of these themes but sets them into an even more obviously eschatological context, as they focus on “that day,” climaxing in chapter 14 with the final defeat of God's enemies and the establishment of his universal kingdom, when all the nations come to worship him.

## C. SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING ZECHARIAH

Most people find Zechariah an especially difficult read, even for a prophetic book. This is undoubtedly due to the highly symbolic nature of the night visions plus the normally complex character of prophetic eschatological oracles—and these are what make up most of Zechariah. But with a bit of help you should be able to negotiate your way through the book and appreciate some of its grandeur.

For the history of the period and the basic concerns of the prophet, see “Specific Advice for Reading Haggai,” p. 253. What is important to note here is that all of the primary concerns of Israel’s prophetic tradition occur in Zechariah—judgments of God’s people for their own sins; judgments against surrounding nations because of their sins against God’s people and because Yahweh is sovereign over all the nations; a glorious future for the redeemed and purified people of God—and all of this set in tension between soon-to-be temporal realities and the final glorious future of God. What is also a pronounced feature of Zechariah is his expectation of God’s future messianic king, which is why he is quoted so often by the New Testament writers (especially with regard to Christ and the final expression of the kingdom of God).

A couple of observations may help your reading of the night visions. First, they are arranged in a concentric (chiastic) pattern. Note that visions 1 and 8 (1:7–17; 6:1–8) both envision four groups of colored horses, whose purpose is to go throughout the whole earth, as the backdrop for the building of the temple. Visions 2 and 3 (1:18–21; 2:1–13) and 6 and 7 (5:1–4; 5:5–11) have to do with obstacles facing the restoration community and its building of the temple (in 2 and 3 the obstacles come from without and in 6 and 7 from within). Visions 4 and 5 (3:1–10; 4:1–14) are the centerpiece, dealing especially with Joshua’s and Zerubbabel’s leadership, both for the building of the temple and for leading the community.

Second, you will note a similar pattern to most of these visions: Zechariah describes what he sees, he asks about its meaning, and an interpreting angel gives the explanation. Four of the visions ([1] 1:14–17; [3] 2:6–13; [5] 4:6–10a; [8] 6:9–15) also contain one or more oracles, which make specific the message of the visions. The heart of all of this is a word of encouragement, declaring to the people that the time is ripe—the conditions are now in place for them to rebuild—while at the same time it is, as with Haggai, a word of encouragement to those in leadership.

The two oracles in chapters 9–14 are especially difficult to follow, but in the main they follow a pattern as well. Both have to do with the triumphal intervention of the Lord in the affairs of Judah and the nations. The first looks toward the more immediate future, the second toward the final coming of God’s universal rule. Common to both is the central place of God’s kingly Messiah, and the fact that he is rejected by the people.

One final note. Later prophets sometimes make use of the language and images of earlier ones. This is especially true of Zechariah, who not only mentions the “earlier prophets” (1:4, 6; 7:7, 12), but deliberately echoes their language in a number of places (e.g., cf. 1:4 with Jer 35:15). This may be the best explanation for the intriguing piercing and suffering of God’s kingly Messiah in Zechariah 11–13, which sounds like further reflection on Isaiah’s suffering servant (Isa 52:13–53:12). This also helps to explain why the New Testament writers refer to these two passages so often as the way to explain the Messiah’s crucifixion.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [\*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 256–258.