

# Voices: Not-so-Minor Prophets: Zechariah

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Zechariah is written to people living in chaos, because God's promises of a restored kingdom have not happened. How might we respond to hopes delayed or disappointed?

Zechariah prophesied in Judah after the Babylonian exile, around the late 6th century B.C. He is a contemporary of Haggai and often is seen as joining Haggai in urging the rebuilding of the temple.

In a sense, Zechariah is a bridge figure between the classic prophets and the time of apocalyptic literature.

## Strange images

The first portion of his book (chapters 1-6) is expressed through "night visions" and contains strange, even bizarre, imagery similar to that seen in Ezekiel and Revelation. One might wonder at the heavy use of symbolism by prophets such as Zechariah.

In general, the communication of biblical truths often requires the use of analogies to express the message to be delivered. Further, apocalyptic literature's images and symbols often function as an "insider's code" that will remain inaccessible to outsiders.

One may also recall Jesus' use of parables, not only to illustrate his teachings, but as texts like Matthew 13:13-15 show, an inability to catch the meaning of the symbols and images may point to spiritual blindness or an outsider's status.

Despite these apocalyptic elements, Zechariah is firmly rooted in the line of prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Over 20 allusions to these earlier prophets can be detected in Zechariah—for example: Zechariah 2:13 and Habakkuk 2:20; Zechariah 3:2 and Amos 4:11; Zechariah 14:16 and Isaiah 2:2-4; Zechariah 14:8-9 and Ezekiel 47:1-12.

While difficult to summarize, Zechariah sees God continuing his divine plan for both foreign nations and Judah, despite circumstances in which evil seems to triumph over good.

## **Interlocking visions**

Zechariah's visions interlock with each other, almost in a mirroring pattern. Through them, the reader can anticipate the punishment of foreign nations and the removal of wickedness to a land far from Judah.

We are told Jerusalem will be rebuilt with no need of walls, since God himself will serve as its protecting wall. In describing the certainty of these outcomes, Zechariah points to the standard of the Torah as the criterion for assessing and passing judgment.

Amid these visions, we are presented with a symbolic representation of Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the governor. They are symbolized as olive trees supplying oil for a golden lamp stand which illuminates the whole world.

As such, Zechariah's view of restoration includes the recovery of the original Abrahamic vision of God's people revealing God to the entire world. This assignment is not modified by harsh conditions or the social problems that plagued the Judeans trying to replant themselves in the land.

Joshua also takes center stage in a fourth vision, accused by Satan as unfit

and disqualified for service as the high priest. This picture of Satan as the accuser is similar to his function in Job and not quite like the picture of Satan as the father of evils we see in the New Testament.

God elects to cleanse and equip Joshua for his responsibilities as high priest, which presents the reader with a hint of the grace seen so clearly in the New Testament.

Similar themes will be found in the visions and messages of chapters 9-14, where the foreign nations are placed under judgment and destruction, Israel is restored, and the day of the LORD is described.

## **Repentance**

Between these collections of visions and messages is a section that calls on the people to repent and return to God. As seen in the earlier prophets, God's intention to do good for his people is contingent upon their repentance and return to the covenant. Their conduct must be transformed before true worship and meaningful service in the restored temple can take place.

In language similar to Micah and that may serve to modify Ezra's worst exclusionary tendencies, the people are summoned to seek God's favor, practice justice and show kindness and mercy to what Jesus called the "least of these"—widows, orphans and foreigners. If this happens, God's people can anticipate a time when the people of foreign nations will stream to Jerusalem to worship the Lord.

Zechariah closes with the repentance of those who have "pierced" the messianic shepherd king, followed by their cleansing. The restoration anticipated presents Jerusalem as the spiritual center of the world, with the rebuilt temple symbolizing the peace, righteousness and holiness characteristic of the kingdom of God, and God himself ruling, not just

Judah, but all the earth.

## Preaching and teaching Zechariah

So where do we go in preaching or teaching Zechariah? Consider these themes:

- His emphasis on the earlier prophets points us to the unity of both God's word and God's plan. We are biblical people, not just New Testament people.
- Despite appearances or expectations, God is executing his plans, not just for his people, but for the entire world. A future is coming when both evil and crooked ministers and priests will be removed, and God's people will enjoy righteous leaders.
- Evil sometimes overcomes good, but like Habakkuk, Zechariah calls us to prepare for a time of restoration and hope. Even when God's messianic shepherd-king is struck down, his work will lead to repentance, peace, reconciliation and a time when God's own Spirit cleanses us.
- With the judgment of nations and the restoration of both Jerusalem and God's people, it becomes clear that no matter how delayed, we will see God as the Lord of *all* nations, personally ruling over the earth.

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