



## An Introduction to the Book of Zechariah

### Author and Date

The prophet Zechariah was a priest, the son of Berechiah and grandson of Iddo. He was a member of a prominent priestly family who returned from Babylon with Zerubbabel in about 538BC (Nehemiah 12:4). Zechariah began his ministry in 520BC, shortly after Haggai had begun his prophetic work, and there are many points of contact between Haggai and Zechariah Chapters 1-8. Both contain precise date formulas for their oracles and address the need to rebuild the temple, along with giving reassurance that God will bless his people for their faithfulness.

Zechariah Chapters 9-14 is different in style and content from the earlier Chapters, showing more similarities to the later book of Malachi. Some scholars therefore claim that it was written by a different author at a different time. However, the evidence in the text can be explained equally well if Zechariah himself wrote those chapters significantly later, perhaps in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC, when different needs surfaced within the community of God's people.

### Theme and Purpose

Nearly 20 years after their return from the Babylonian exile in the time of Cyrus (538BC), discouragement dogged God's people, replacing their earlier enthusiasm. The foundation of the temple had been laid shortly after the initial return, in 536BC, but powerful opposition had prevented any further progress on rebuilding the temple. Although Persian foreign policy accorded a significant role to local traditions, unlike the previous overlords, the Babylonians prior to 538BC, life was still hard in the province of Judah, often referred to as 'Yehud' in this period.

Taxes were high, especially as the Persian king, Darius Hystaspes, prepared for a campaign against Egypt. There was little evidence of the kind of transformation of the state of things that the earlier prophets had anticipated, whether externally in a restoration of Jewish sovereignty, or internally in a moral reformation of the people. In particular, the city of Jerusalem was still only partially rebuilt and was

on the sidelines of world significance. Under the circumstances, it was easy for the people to conclude that theirs was a 'day of small things' (4:10) in which God was absent from his people. In such a context, faithful obedience was viewed by many as useless: pragmatically, it made more sense to pursue the best life possible in spite of the present difficulties.

Zechariah addressed such discouragement by reminding his hearers that, although hidden, God's envoys were watching everything, and that when the time was right, he would act to reorder the universe (1:8-11). Their forefathers had discovered God's faithfulness to judge his people if they failed to heed the words of the prophets (1:4-6). If the people would heed the words of the prophets and turn to the Lord, they would discover him turning to them. He would trouble the nations who were enjoying rest and grant rest to his troubled people, making Jerusalem once again the centre of the world, a place of universal pilgrimage (1:14-17).

The temple that was being rebuilt and the priesthood that would serve in it were signs of the Lord's commitment to his people, a commitment that would be demonstrated by the ultimate removal of all their sin from the land (3:8-10). This would happen when the promised Davidic king, the Branch, arrived (3:8). The result would be peace, harmony and prosperity for all the inhabitants of the land, as the Lord once more dwelt in their midst.

The latter Chapters of Zechariah also show that the coming of this Davidic ruler will not be without challenge. A new ruler will come to Jerusalem, a ruler who will not be like the existing rulers but will be righteous and humble, bringing salvation (9:9-11). In contrast to the shepherds who feed themselves at the expense of the flock, this good shepherd will take care of the flock and provide for them (9:16). He will cleanse them of all their iniquities (13:1). Yet the flock will themselves reject this good shepherd, and the Lord's own sword will be unleashed against him (11:4-16 and 13:7). The sheep will be scattered and left to their oppressors in a time of trial and testing. Yet ultimately God will redeem his flock and rescue his city. Final judgement will come upon all the nations that assaulted God's people, and the end result will be the complete holiness of Jerusalem. It will be restored as God's chosen city, to which the nations will come on pilgrimage (Chapter 14).

The Book of Zechariah is densely mined for quotations by the NT, whose authors discerned in it several prophecies concerning the Messiah's coming. The clearest instances come from Zechariah 8:16 in Ephesians 4:25, Zechariah 9:9 in Matthew 21:5 and John 12:15, Zechariah 11:12-13 in Matthew 27:9-10, Zechariah 12:10 in John 19:37, and Zechariah 13:7 in Matthew 26:31 and Mark 14:27. In addition to these are numerous allusions, which are sometimes difficult to assess; one estimate, however, finds about 54 passages from Zechariah echoed in about 67 different places in the NT, with the lion's share of these found in the Book of Revelation.

## Key Themes

1. The need for repentance and turning to the Lord (1:1-6).
2. The necessity of sincerity in serving the Lord (Chapter 7).
3. The Lord's concern and care for the plight of his people (1:8-17 and 4:10).
4. The future expansion and blessing of Jerusalem (2:4, 2:12, 8:1-8 and 14:16).
5. The complete and permanent removal of the sin of the people (Chapters 3 and 5).
6. The removal of false prophecy and idolatry from the land (13:2-6).
7. The centrality of the temple as the source of God's blessing (Chapter 4).
8. The Lord's wrath at the nations that plundered Judah and Jerusalem (1:18-21 and 14:3-5).
9. The return of the Divine Warrior to terrorise Israel's foes (9:1-8).
10. The coming of the Branch, a Davidic ruler who will save his people, cleanse their sins, and establish peace (3:8, 6:9-15 and 9:9-10).
11. The pouring out of God's Spirit, resulting in repentance, and the opening of a fountain for the cleansing of sin (12:10-13:1).
12. Judgement on the wicked shepherds of God's people and their replacement by a good shepherd (11:1-17).
13. The striking of the good shepherd and the scattering of the flock (13:7-9).
14. The final triumph of the Lord over the nations (Chapter 14).

## History of Salvation Summary

After the horrors of the exile, God is renewing his commitment to restore Judah as his treasured people. They will still suffer more distress, but in the end God will judge the Gentile oppressors and Judah will produce the Messiah, who will rule over the whole world, bringing them to worship the true God.

## Literary Features

The main genre of Zechariah is futuristic prophecy. Although the second half of the book contains some conventional oracles of judgement and oracles of redemption, in the first half the preferred medium is visions that embody in symbolic form what God plans to do. This part of the book needs to be approached much like the NT Book of Revelation – by first allowing the images and symbols to activate the imagination, and then by exploring what those details symbolise. Visions and oracles of salvation predominate over images of judgement. Chapters 1-6 of Zechariah, with their striking otherworldly visions in the company of an angelic interpreter, form an important precursor to later apocalyptic literature.

Like other prophetic books, the Book of Zechariah is a collection of individual units. In keeping with its dream format of momentary pictures that follow each other quickly and partly disjointedly, little narrative continuity emerges. The nine visions that open the book are organised like a succession of visual pageants. The oracles that constitute the second half of the book are equally kaleidoscopic in their arrangement, although they are unified by the motif of God’s blessing his people.

**The Near East at the Time of Zechariah (circa 520BC)**

Zechariah prophesied to the people of Judah soon after they had returned from exile in Babylon. Several years earlier, in 539BC, Cyrus the Great, who had united the Persians and the Medes under his rule, conquered Babylon and absorbed its territory into his empire. A year later he permitted the people of Judah to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple. He and his son Cambyses extended the Persian Empire until it stretched from Egypt and Lydia to the borders of India.



**Regional Map**

## Palestine at the Time of Zechariah (circa 520BC)

By Zechariah's time the borders of the land of Israel and Judah, later called Palestine, had been completely redrawn from the days before the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions. The minor Persian province to which exiles of Judah returned from Babylon was now called Judæa, and it encompassed only a fraction of the territory that had once belonged to Judah. Edomites had migrated northwest from their traditional homeland just south of Moab into the area immediately south of Judæa, and this land was now called Idumæa. Territory that had once belonged to the Northern Kingdom of Israel was divided into several different minor provinces, including Samaria.



Map of Palestine

## Outline

- I. Oracles and Visions (1:1-8:23)
  - a. Israel Urged to Repent (1:1-6)
  - b. Eight Night Visions and a Coronation (1:7-6:15)
    - i. First Vision: The Horsemen (1:7-17)
    - ii. Second Vision: The Horns and the Smiths (1:18-21)
    - iii. Third Vision: The Man with a Measuring Line (2:1-5)
    - iv. Interlude: An Appeal to the Exiles (2:6-13)
    - v. Fourth Vision: Joshua and Satan (3:1-10)
    - vi. Fifth Vision: The Lampstand and Olive Trees (4:1-14)
    - vii. Sixth Vision: The Flying Scroll (5:1-4)
    - viii. Seventh Vision: The Woman in a Basket (5:5-11)
    - ix. Eighth Vision: Four Chariots (6:1-8)
    - x. The Coronation of the Branch (6:9-15)
  - c. From Fasts to Feasts (7:1-8:23)
    - i. Ritual or Reality (7:1-14)
      - 1. Hypocritical Fasting Condemned (7:1-7)
      - 2. Punishment for Rejecting God's Demands (7:8-14)
    - ii. The Promise of the Future (8:1-23)
      - 1. God's Promises to Zion (8:1-17)
      - 2. Joyful Fasting (8:18-19)
      - 3. Many Peoples Drawn to Jerusalem (8:20-23)
- II. The Return of the King (9:1-14:21)
  - a. The First Oracle: Leaders and their People (9:1-11:17)
    - i. The Return of the Ruler (9:1-17)
      - 1. Judgement on Israel's Enemies (9:1-8)
      - 2. The Coming Ruler of God's People (9:9-17)
        - A. The King enters Jerusalem (9:9-11)
        - B. The King's Enemies Destroyed and his People Redeemed (9:12-17)
    - ii. Restoration of Judah and Israel (10:1-11:3)
      - 1. Judgement on Judah's Shepherds (10:1-5)

2. The Restoration of the Flock (10:6-12)
      3. Judgement on Judah's Shepherds (11:1-3)
    - iii. Two Kinds of Shepherds (11:4-17)
  - b. The Second Oracle: the People and their Leaders (12:1-14:21)
    - i. The Restoration and Renewal of God's People (12:1-13:6)
      1. Jerusalem's Victory (12:1-9)
      2. Mourning for the Pierced One (12:10-13:1)
      3. Idolatry Cut Off (13:2-6)
    - ii. Judgement and Transformation (13:7-14:21)
      1. The Shepherd Struck, the Flock Scattered (13:7-9)
      2. Future Warfare and Final Victory (14:1-21)
        - A. Jerusalem's Judgement, Deliverance, and Exaltation (14:1-11)
        - B. The Nations Humbled and Brought into Submission (14:12-21)