

3. After peering into the darkness and glimpsing the curious scene before him, Zechariah queried the angel with him concerning its meaning (1:9). The text gives no explanation for the angel's sudden appearance, but the indication is that the Lord had sent him to His prophet to serve as interpreter for the series of visions (cf. 1:19, 2:3, 4:1, 4-14, 5:1-11, 6:4-7). What is notable is that it was the "man" among the myrtles – the main horseman identified as the angel of Yahweh – who answered Zechariah's query (cf. 1:10-11 with v. 8). Some have thus concluded that the interpreting angel and the angel of Yahweh were the same individual, but this would mean that the rider on the red horse interacted with Zechariah throughout the series of visions, which the text doesn't indicate (1:8-6:14).
 - a. Zechariah asked about the group of horsemen and the angel of Yahweh replied that the Lord had dispatched them to patrol the earth and now they'd returned to make their report. And what they reported was that they had found all the earth to be *settled* and *undisturbed* (1:10-11). This report is the fundamental interpretation of the vision and it provoked the angel's plea to Yahweh and His reply (vv. 12-17). Therefore, it is critical that it be correctly understood.
 - In general, settledness and tranquility are positive qualities and one would rejoice to find that the nations of the earth were characterized by them. Isn't the absence of unrest and strife exactly what men hope for?
 - And because this state of affairs is a central feature in God's depiction of the world when His restoration is complete, some have concluded that this report was indicating the future day when this world will at last enjoy universal, unqualified peace (cf. Isaiah 11:1-9; Micah 4:1-4).

A casual glance may suggest that this was a positive report heralding in proleptic fashion the future day when all the earth will finally enjoy peace and tranquility. But the truth of the matter is that the report was woeful and dispiriting; so far from being good news, it was something to grieve over.

- b. This is clear from the way the angel of Yahweh responded to the report: He didn't lift his voice in grateful praise to God for bringing peace on the earth, but cried out to Him to turn from His anger toward His covenant people and show compassion on them and restore their desolate inheritance (1:12). Framed by the surrounding context, the angel's response was an anguished plea to the Lord to return to His people and so bring their exile to an end. *The angelic patrol reported that the whole earth was settled and undisturbed, but this report was agonizing news for the returned exiles.* A closer look reveals why that was the case:

At the time of Zechariah's vision (520 B.C.), nearly two decades had passed since the Persian king, Cyrus the Great, defeated Babylon and assumed control of its holdings, which included Judea. Shortly before this he conquered the Medes (550 B.C.), thereby forming the foundation of the Medo-Persian Empire. Before the end of his reign in 530 B.C., Cyrus had expanded his empire beyond Mesopotamia as far as India to the east and Lydia (Asia Minor) to the west.

Cyrus was succeeded by his son, Cambyses II, who continued to expand his father's empire by defeating Egypt's forces in 525 B.C. But Cambyses' reign was short-lived and he died by uncertain means around 523-522 B.C. A usurper named Gaumata immediately seized his throne but was himself overthrown by Darius I (Darius the Great) in 522 B.C. (cf. again 1:1, 7.) Darius wasn't the son of a king, but his father Hystaspes was a noble who'd served as one of Cyrus' satraps, and Darius himself had gained distinction as a soldier under Cambyses.

Darius further enlarged the Medo-Persian Empire through his conquest of Thrace (encompassing parts of modern Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey) and Macedonia. But most importantly for this first night vision, Darius' immediate – and daunting – challenge as king was quelling various uprisings which were spreading across his vast empire, including in Babylonia, Persis, Elam, Media, Parthia, Assyria and Egypt. By some estimates, nearly every region of the empire was marked by revolt at the time Darius took the throne. But he commanded a powerful and loyal army and was able, astonishingly, to restore order to his empire within a year.

Thus the significance of the angels' report: When they patrolled the earth in the eleventh month of the second year of Darius' reign, they found a world marked by peace and tranquility – *but the sort of peace, stability and quiet that result, not from true harmony among nations and peoples, but from the indomitable power of a mighty ruling hand.* This is the reason the angels' report provoked such discouragement and angst.

- Darius had demonstrated his ability to subjugate and control a vast empire of nations and kingdoms – an empire stretching from India to North Africa and which included the decimated and powerless kingdom of Israel.
- If he could, by his military might, accomplish such a remarkable feat, what hope could there be for the restoration of David's throne and kingdom? How could a small Judean remnant prevail against such overwhelming power? Moreover, the prophets had indicated that God was going to restore David's kingdom and regather His people through a great theophanic upheaval – the *Day of the Lord*. But far from seeing such a move of God, these exiles saw settledness and tranquility in Darius' kingdom and the angelic report only affirmed their perception. Was it possible that Yahweh had abandoned His promise to Israel and David?
- True, the mighty Darius had sanctioned and even made provision for the temple; that amazing turn of events did indicate that the Lord's favor was again toward His people. *But facilitating the rebuilding of Yahweh's house was a far cry from permitting the restoration of David's fallen house.* Darius had shown that he would move swiftly and powerfully against all insubordination and efforts at independence; there was no way he would stand for a rival kingdom rising up within his empire and this tiny and powerless Judean remnant would never be able to prevail against him.

It's noteworthy that, in responding to the report, Yahweh's angel appealed to the same truth as Daniel had some two decades earlier, namely God's pledge that Judah's desolation and exile would last for seventy years (ref. Daniel 9; cf. Jeremiah 25:1-12, 29:1-11). Daniel realized that the seventy-year period was nearing an end and he petitioned the Lord in light of it; Yahweh's response through His angel was that the seventy years were seventy *sabbaths*: seventy sabbatical years owed to the land. And since sabbatical years occurred every seven years, the actual duration of desolation and exile was 490 years (cf. Leviticus 25:1-5, 26:1-46; 2 Chronicles 36:17-21).

So in the present vision Yahweh's angel pled with Him on the basis of His promise of liberation and ingathering after seventy years of exile. Those years had passed in terms of normal reckoning and thus it appeared that the Lord's word had fallen short. One may question this apparent ignorance on the part of Yahweh's angel; why wouldn't he know what God had revealed to Daniel years earlier? And if he did know, why would he mention the seventy-year period in his plea? *The answer lies in the fact that the vision was for Zechariah and the exiles who'd returned to Judea.* The angel wasn't pleading on his own behalf, but in Zechariah's presence and hearing, even as Yahweh's response was communicated to Zechariah with the command to proclaim it to the other exiles.

- c. To the minds and experience of the Judeans who'd return from captivity, nothing seemed less possible than that the Lord would fulfill His promise to David. Everything argued against it, and yet Yahweh remained resolute; over five centuries His word had never changed and it would not now. Thus the Lord responded to the angel's plea with words of comfort and assurance (1:13). David's kingdom was in ruins and there was no human reason for hope, but these exiles were to be steadfast in courage and faith; their God would yet prevail.
- d. The Lord spoke comfort and assurance to His angel, but apparently with words that Zechariah couldn't hear. For, while the prophet recorded the plea of the angel of Yahweh, he provided no such account of the Lord's communication to the interpreting angel. But Yahweh's words weren't for the angel, but Zechariah and the exiles with him. Thus the angel was instructed to pass along a message to the prophet which he was then to proclaim to the others. And that message was the assurance of Yahweh's enduring jealousy for Jerusalem and Zion and His commitment to fulfill His promise concerning restoration and renewal (1:14-17).

At the time of the vision Jerusalem and the cities of Judah remained in essentially the same state as the Babylonians had left them decades earlier. They were devastated and desolate, the haunt of wild animals (cf. Jeremiah 9:1-11 and 10:17-22 with Lamentations 1:1-2:13). For centuries the prophets warned that a day of destruction was coming and it had overtaken Israel and Judah like a flood. And seven decades had only exacerbated the desolation of Jerusalem and Judea; time, nature, and the elements had all taken their toll and no human hands were present to resist them or undo their work. The land had indeed enjoyed its sabbath rest.

But the same prophets had promised deliverance, renewal and ingathering. At the appointed time, Yahweh would arise to judge and destroy the enemies who'd subjugated His people and He would bring them out with a great deliverance.

- The Lord sent Assyria and later Babylon against the unfaithful and unrepentant houses of Israel and Judah; these barbaric nations were the instruments of His indignation and righteous judgment (cf. Isaiah 10:5-15; Jeremiah 51:11-23). Assyria and Babylon were Yahweh's servants, but not knowingly or willingly; their design was conquest and tyranny and thus their service incurred immense guilt. (Even Cyrus, who'd honored the Lord's will that the temple and Jerusalem be rebuilt, acted in ignorance of Him; ref. Isaiah 44:24-45:7). These imperial powers took perverse pleasure in the devastation, oppression and suffering they inflicted even while exulting in their own complacent ease. Yahweh's "war club" had "contributed for evil" and would itself be brought under the fire of His indignation (1:15; cf. Isaiah 10:24-26 and Jeremiah 51:20-26).
- Yahweh had pledged to destroy the destroyers of His people, and at the time of Zechariah's vision He'd fulfilled that promise with respect to Assyria and Babylon. And Babylon's destruction had resulted in the liberation and regathering of His exiled people just as His prophets foretold (cf. Isaiah 46-47 with 44:24-28 and Ezra 1:1-4).
- A Judean remnant was back in the land and the temple was being rebuilt. But Jerusalem and its environs remained in ruins. Nevertheless, just as surely as the work on His house would succeed, so Yahweh was going to have compassion on Jerusalem and see to its restoration. The day was coming when Jerusalem would no longer be a heap of rubble, but a rebuilt and reordered city over which one could again stretch a measuring line (1:16). Zion's harlotries had provoked the Lord to forsake her, but He would again direct His devotion toward her (choose her) and comfort her with His presence and care (1:17; cf. Isaiah 49-54 and Hosea 1-2).

Thus this first night vision introduced and set the stage for the entirety of Zechariah's prophecy. Building on the opening oracle, it established the prophecy's critically important baseline by highlighting and interpreting the condition in which the house of Israel found itself. This interpretation consisted of reiterating the reason for Israel's woeful condition, but unto the end of showing the meaning of it and its role in Yahweh's larger purpose and promise. He had liberated and restored a remnant from David's house and was fulfilling His word concerning His own house. And within a century, His jealousy and compassion for Jerusalem would be evident when the city and its environs enjoyed their own restoration. And yet, for all that, the true essence of Yahweh's promise – His pledge to end Israel's exile through liberation, ingathering and renewal and usher in David's everlasting kingdom – awaited more than the rebuilding of the temple and the city of Jerusalem. It awaited the fulfillment of His oath to return to His people and secure their return to Him; it awaited the Servant (1:3-4; cf. Isaiah 44:1-28; Jeremiah 24:1-7).