

C. Third Night Vision – The Man with a Measuring Line

Zechariah's prophecy began with a word from the Lord in which He called to the exiles back in Judea to return to Him, even as He was committed to returning to them. That exhortation and promise set the foundation for Zechariah's first night vision. In that vision Yahweh declared His undying jealousy for Jerusalem and Zion; He had not forgotten or renounced His covenant commitment and He would again visit Jerusalem with compassion and bring comfort to Zion. That pledge, in turn, led into the second vision in which the Lord made clear what He'd only hinted at in the first vision, namely His resolve to throw down the nations which had "contributed for evil" in His work of punishing His covenant people (cf. 1:15 with 1:21-22). The result was that David's house and kingdom lay desolate with the sons of the kingdom in exile.

The settled ease of these nations meant that there was no end in sight for Israel's exile and subjugation and that there was little or no hope for the restoration of David's throne and kingdom (1:8-12). But here was Yahweh pledging the captors' overthrow; the day was coming when He would cast down the seemingly invincible horns of the nations. And the conquest of the captors implied the release and recovery of their captives. Thus the promise of retribution in the second vision was the promise of restoration which is the subject of Zechariah's third vision.

1. As with the preceding vision, this third visionary scene was starkly simple: When the prophet again lifted up his eyes he saw only a man carrying a measuring line (2:1). Zechariah called out to the man and asked him where he was going, and the man answered that he was on his way to measure the boundaries of the city of Jerusalem (2:2).
 - a. The first thing to note about this scene is that it has a figure going out to measure the length and width of a city which, at that time, lay in ruins as a pile of rubble. The obvious implication is that the vision pertained to Jerusalem *as it would exist in the future*. Thus the vision was intended first of all to convey to Zechariah (and so to the recovered exiles with him) the certainty of Jerusalem's rebuilding; one cannot measure the dimensions of a city that hasn't been built.
 - b. But even more important is the fact (which will soon become clear) that the city in question in the vision was not the Jerusalem that would be rebuilt under Nehemiah some 80 years later. *Yahweh's response in the vision shows that the Jerusalem being spoken of is the eschatological Jerusalem – the city the New Testament refers to as "New Jerusalem." This Jerusalem is the final manifestation of Yahweh's dwelling place and the center of His everlasting kingdom pledged to Abraham, Israel and David.*

Nothing is said about this man's identity, so it's not clear whether he was another angel or simply a visionary figure whose role was to introduce the vision. Whatever the case, Zechariah perceived him as an actual person and not an illusion, evident in the fact that he called out to him fully expecting him to reply.

2. What happened next has been subject to all sorts of interpretations. And key to those differing interpretations is how the four individuals and their interactions are understood.

The text records that Zechariah saw the angel who'd been speaking with him move toward another angel coming out to meet him. When the two met, the one angel gave a message to the other which he was then to communicate to "*that young man*" (2:3-4).

- a. The first interpretive issue is identifying which of the two angels communicated the message. Some argue it was the interpreting angel while others believe it was the angel who came out to meet him.
- b. An important consideration in answering this question is the identity of the "young man." Again, two possibilities exist: This individual could have been either the man going to measure Jerusalem or Zechariah himself.

It's impossible to be absolutely certain, but contextual considerations do seem to point in a particular direction with regard to both of the above questions.

- First of all, the fact that the vision and its message were intended for Zechariah supports the view that the second angel spoke to the interpreting angel – the angel whose role it was to communicate with the prophet throughout the entire episode of the night visions. And if this view is indeed correct, it suggests that the interpreting angel was charged to take Yahweh's message back to Zechariah, making him the "young man" the second angel referred to.

In this scenario, the interpreting angel was given a message from the Lord to convey to the prophet. And the apparent purpose for it was to clarify for Zechariah the meaning of what he saw in the vision. Thus Yahweh's words should be understood as *explaining* the symbolic action of measuring the city. In other words, "measuring" Jerusalem signified examining and assessing it (Isaiah 28:17) and the Lord's message amounted to that assessment.

- But there is another way of conceiving this scene which sets the man's action and Yahweh's words in a different relation. In this view, the divine utterance didn't explain the man's design; *instead, it intercepted and corrected it*. This view also has the second angel speaking to the interpreting angel (which the Hebrew syntax best supports), but it regards the "young man" as the man with the measuring line, not Zechariah. True, this has the interpreting angel breaking his pattern by speaking to someone other than the prophet, but this action accords with the angel's mission of insuring Zechariah's understanding of what he was seeing.

Nevertheless, there are arguments that can be raised against this view, the most obvious being that the text uses different nouns for the two individuals (*man* and *youth*). Why would it make this distinction if it intends the reader to see them as the same person? This objection, though, is easily answered: Zechariah saw a male figure; the angel indicated that he was a youth. A second argument (hinted at above) is that this interpretation seems to contradict the interpreting angel's role as God's interface with Zechariah. The Lord's message was ultimately for the prophet and so it seems logical that the interpreting angel would deliver it to *him*.

But if it was indeed the case that the angel was to carry the message to the man with the measuring line, doesn't that mean that Zechariah had to have been close enough to overhear the angels talking? Otherwise, how would he know – and how could he record in his account – what was said to the interpreting angel? But how it was that Zechariah heard is not a question the text is concerned with. This was a supernatural, visionary episode and so can't be treated in terms of natural considerations and the natural faculties of sight and hearing. What matters is that this vision (as the whole series of visions) was devised for the sake of Zechariah's understanding and ministration and the Lord made sure he grasped its meaning.

In the end, the overall context and the meaning of the vision seem to point to the conclusion that the youth in question was the man with the measuring line. *The strongest evidence for this lies in the relationship between this visionary figure with his design to measure Jerusalem and the Lord's message for him – specifically, in the way those two features of the vision play together to highlight its meaning and purpose.*

3. Adopting this view, then, the first angel communicated the Lord's words to the interpreting angel and directed him to run after the man walking toward Jerusalem and relay them to him. That manifold message comprised the balance of the vision and provides the interpretation of what Zechariah saw before him (2:4-13).

The individual parts of the Lord's statements are obviously important to the vision's meaning and each must be addressed in turn. But the particulars are framed by the overall message and its function in context. This means that the divine utterance must be understood in terms of its pertinence to the man in the vision and the task he was undertaking. The matter can be expressed by the following questions: *How did the Lord's words speak to the man's design and why was it crucial that he hear them before he began his work of measuring Jerusalem?* (Notice again that the angel was instructed to run and intercept him as he made his way to Jerusalem.)

- a. The place to begin is with the vision itself and what it embodied and expressed. Zechariah saw a man with a measuring line going out to measure the length and width of Jerusalem and this visionary scene highlights several things:
 - The first is the most obvious and has already been mentioned, namely the fact that the vision implies Jerusalem's future restoration. But more importantly, from the vantage point of the man in the vision, this restoration was being treated in *physical* terms. He had a measuring cord which can only measure physical entities; this shows that he was thinking of Jerusalem in terms of its physical structure and layout.
 - Secondly, treating Jerusalem in physical terms implies that it was being conceived according to its *historical form*. For what image would come to the minds of the exiles when they envisioned Jerusalem's restoration? The prophets promised that *Jerusalem* would be rebuilt; weren't the sons of Israel right to expect the reconstruction of the city they had known?

- So also, measuring the city's length and width with a *cord* implies a relatively small footprint. A rope or cord can only be so long and isn't practical for measuring long distances. More to the point, such a device could only be used to measure a city with clearly delineated boundaries.
- All of the above observations point to one more critical feature of this visionary city: If Jerusalem was here being conceived in its historical physical form as a city having finite, readily identifiable borders suited to measurement with a cord, this suggests that the city was envisioned with a surrounding wall. *Jerusalem had such a wall prior to its destruction by the Babylonians and Nehemiah would later oversee the rebuilding of the perimeter walls as foundational to the city's restoration.*

Thus the man and his task appear to represent the *Israelite conviction* of what Jerusalem's restoration – the restoration promised by Yahweh through His prophets (cf. Isaiah 44:24-28, 51:17-52:9; Jeremiah 33:1-16; Ezekiel 36:16-38; Joel 3; Micah 4:1-8; Zephaniah 3; etc.) – would entail. Zechariah's generation clearly envisioned Jerusalem's restoration in terms of the rebuilding of the physical city, and thus the perspective and intention of the man in the vision: He was going out to measure restored Jerusalem, but he did so with the expectation that this city could be measured (assessed) in physical terms.

- b. Interpreting the vision this way provides the best, most contextually suited, explanation for why the interpreting angel was directed to run quickly and intercept the man: ***His perception and design in his task was misguided because his vision of Jerusalem's restoration was flawed.*** Yahweh's word to him shows just how this was the case (2:5):

- In contrast to the man's expectation (which expectation reflected that of the Israelite people), Jerusalem was to be restored as a city *without walls*. This statement is easily passed over by contemporary western readers, but such a thing was unheard of in the ancient world; no one could imagine a city of any consequence that wasn't surrounded by a wall. But this was precisely what lay ahead for Jerusalem. This was a startling revelation – one that would have stunned Zechariah and the exiles with him.

Necessity was the first reason given for this arrangement: Jerusalem's future profusion (here expressed in terms of an abundance of people and animals) precluded the constraints of a walled inhabitation. This imagery reflects back on Isaiah's prophecy in which restored Zion (which has a focal point in Jerusalem) was depicted as a mother bearing innumerable children for Yahweh, her covenant Husband (ref. Isaiah 50-54). Jerusalem would have to vastly enlarge her "tent" in order to accommodate all of her inhabitants – people from all over the earth who were going to come to her to seek Yahweh and worship Him in His holy sanctuary (cf. Isaiah 2:1-4 and Micah 4:1-8 with Zechariah 8:18-23; cf. also Amos 9:11-15).