

3. At the outset of the vision Zechariah queried the angel concerning what he was seeing and what those things meant. The angel responded by proclaiming a word from the Lord to Zerubbabel. In some sense, the visionary scene testified to Yahweh's determination to see His house built by Zerubbabel – not, however, by human power or might, but through the effectual working of His Spirit. The Spirit had equipped and empowered the human builders of the original sanctuary (ref. Exodus 31:1-11, 35:30-35) and so it would be in this instance. (The Spirit's involvement in the construction of Solomon's temple is evident in, among other things, His gifting and enablement of Solomon himself as the son of David charged with building it – cf. 1 Chronicles 29:23; 2 Chronicles 1:1, 2:1-14).

Now, after hearing the Lord's word to him (vv. 8-10), Zechariah again inquired of the angel, this time asking him to explain the meaning of the two olive trees and their action in supplying oil to the gold lampstand. The prophet actually asked two questions (4:11-12), with the second one being a more precise articulation of the first one. After first asking about the two olive trees, Zechariah clarified his question by inquiring specifically about the fruit-covered branches of the trees which were pouring oil into the lampstand.

And as he'd done with the prophet's first inquiry, the angel countered by asking Zechariah if he didn't already understand what he was seeing, and once again the prophet responded that he didn't (4:13, cf. v. 5). Again it seems the angel expected that Zechariah should discern the meaning of the visionary scene, and probably all the more now that he'd received some explanation. Zechariah now understood that the vision pertained to the work of rebuilding the temple and it somehow signified Yahweh's commitment to its completion. The explanation also indicated that the Lord's design for His sanctuary looked beyond the Jerusalem temple to a greater and more glorious house. And yet, for all that, Zechariah didn't comprehend the symbolism of the olive trees pouring their oil into the lampstand. Thus the angel explained that the two olive trees – and specifically the oil-dispensing branches – signified two individuals: two “anointed ones” – *sons of oil* in Hebrew – standing before the Lord of the whole earth (4:14).

- a. The first thing to consider here is the angel's designation of these persons. The olive branches supplying their fresh oil symbolized two individuals who were “sons of oil,” and this expression suggests two possible meanings.
- The first is adopted by most English versions, where this expression refers to individuals who'd been anointed with such oil. These were “sons of oil” in the sense of being recipients of it in anointing. The greatest challenge to this interpretation is that fresh olive oil wasn't used for anointing (Exodus 30:22-25). In fact, this Hebrew term is never used of anointing oil.
 - The second is that the expression connotes the ideas of *derivation* and *fullness*. As a son derives from and is, in some sense, the fullness of his father, so a “son of oil” derives from and manifests the oil by which he (or it) is designated (cf. Judges 19:22, 20:13, where the expression “sons of worthlessness” denotes worthless men and Isaiah 5:1 where “a hill, a son of fatness” denotes a fruitful hill).

Meredith Kline holds the second view and so reasons that the “sons of oil” are men who might possibly anoint others but are not recipients of anointing; they are the source of oil for others. Thus he concludes that these individuals symbolize Israel’s *prophets* who mediated the oil (here symbolizing the Holy Spirit – v. 4:6) to the covenant household (here symbolized by the lampstand). This interpretation is conceivable, but it doesn’t accord closely with the thrust of this particular vision or with the entire episode of the night visions considered as a whole.

Most likely the angel’s reference to fresh olive oil was due to the vision’s imagery. This would still allow for the connotation of anointing since olive oil was the main ingredient in anointing oil. And so, while the primary issue in discerning these “sons of oil” is that they communicate fresh oil to the lampstand, associating them with anointing in a secondary sense is not unreasonable.

Concerning the practice of anointing in ancient Israel, in terms of a formal ritual it was performed to distinguish certain persons or things in recognition of their significance, role or function. More specifically, anointing was a ritual of *consecration*; it served to distinguish persons or things with respect to their relationship to God. Thus it was applied to altars and other sacred entities including the tabernacle and its furnishings (cf. Genesis 28:18-19; Exodus 29:36, 30:22-33, 40:1-11). Most notably, the anointing ritual was employed with Israel’s priests, prophets and kings. *All* Israel was holy (set apart to the Lord), but these particular individuals were uniquely consecrated to Yahweh as chosen servants of His people and kingdom and His rule as Israel’s covenant Father-Lord (cf. Exodus 28:36-29:9; 1 Samuel 9:1-17, 16:1-13; 1 Kings 19:1-16).

The angel didn’t identify these two individuals, but the vision’s imagery and their designation as “sons of oil” suggests two things: that they communicated the olive oil to the lampstand (which symbols have their own contextual meaning) and that they did so as persons set apart by God for His service and work. And considered within the context of the vision, their consecration to Yahweh should be understood in terms of serving the cause of His sanctuary and its construction.

- b. If the expression, “sons of oil,” carries some suggestion that these individuals were consecrated to the Lord and His service, the angel’s second descriptor affirms this suggestion: These two individuals were “*standing before the Lord.*” Moreover, this description gives the impression that Yahweh Himself had consecrated them; at the very least, their anointing and service were by His determination, in His presence and under His authority and accountability.
- c. These sons of oil were standing before the Lord Himself, whom the angel notably described in terms of His relation to the entire world. Just moments earlier the Lord spoke of His seven eyes ranging throughout the earth (ref. again 4:10), and here the angel referred to Him as “*the Lord of the whole earth.*” The obvious implication is that the God who exercises lordship over the whole earth does so with a watchful and jealous gaze (cf. 6:1-5).

He exercises His lordship, not as a tyrant who rules according to the “procedure of the king” (1 Samuel 8:9ff), but as a loving and devoted sovereign. And His beneficence is not whimsical, but purposeful, effectual, good and all-glorious: Viewed within this context, the Lord’s jealous, all-encompassing gaze has its concern in the realization of His design to see the whole earth become His sanctuary by drawing the entire world of men to Himself (ref. 2:3-5, 10-11, 6:15; cf. also Psalm 72:17-19 with Isaiah 2:1-4, 9:1-7, 11:1-12; Daniel 2:31-44, 7:1-27; Amos 9:11-12; Micah 5:1-5; Haggai 2:1-9 and Psalm 100).

- d. The vision’s imagery/symbolism is obviously a most important consideration in determining the identity of these two individuals. As noted, these “sons of oil” are represented in the vision by the two olive branches pouring their oil into the gold pipes (or spouts) that feed the lampstand. The vision depicted the olive oil as flowing continuously from the branches into the lampstand, *so that the two olive trees are to be understood as supplying the critical animating resource by which the life and function of the lampstand were sustained in perpetual fashion*. Stated differently, the vision depicted the lampstand as utterly dependent upon the provision of the olive trees – and specifically the branches supplying the fresh oil into the spouts – for its own continuing “life” and function.

This means, then, that determining the identity of the two “sons of oil” depends upon discerning the meaning of the symbolism of the lampstand. Whoever these individuals are, they are the continuous supplier of the life-giving, life-sustaining resource for the lamp. As noted at the outset, there are two reasonable possibilities for this visionary lampstand: It could either represent a common lamp or a facsimile of the sanctuary lampstand. Zechariah’s description suggests differences between the lampstand in the vision and the one that had stood in the Lord’s sanctuary. Nevertheless, various considerations argue that the lampstand the prophet saw should be regarded as a stylized version of the sanctuary one.

- First and foremost, the vision itself is expressly concerned with the rebuilding of the temple and so the visionary lampstand must be interpreted in those terms. Zechariah apparently didn’t understand the thrust of the vision at the outset, but he soon did and would have naturally associated the lampstand appearing before him with the one which lighted the Lord’s sanctuary as one of its most prominent furnishings.
- And while the prophet’s description of the visionary lampstand doesn’t match exactly the sanctuary lampstand, it does bear a close resemblance to it. And that resemblance – set in the context of the vision and its concern with the temple – would have only reinforced Zechariah’s tendency to associate what he saw with the sanctuary lampstand.
- Consistent with these things, Zechariah identified the lampstand in the vision with the Hebrew designation *menorah*, a term almost entirely reserved in the Scriptures for the lampstand in Yahweh’s sanctuary.

- Finally, the fact of stylistic differences between the vision’s lampstand and the sanctuary counterpart actually argues *for* their being associated with one another. For the vision concerned the physical temple, but as it implicated a greater and more glorious counterpart. With that in mind, it makes perfect sense that the lampstand appearing to Zechariah would resemble the one in Yahweh’s temple while also being distinguished from it. *The lampstand, like the sanctuary it illumined, was a prophetic “shadow”: God had destined it for fulfillment in a consummate, glorious counterpart.* And the Scripture makes clear what that counterpart is: As a metonym for the Lord’s sanctuary, the lampstand also symbolizes the community who comprise His new-creational temple (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:11-22 and 1 Peter 2:4-5 with Revelation 1:9-2:5).

Assuming, then, that the visionary lampstand corresponds to the sanctuary counterpart and that it symbolized the ultimate lampstand associated with the Lord’s new-creational sanctuary, the vision’s meaning and significance can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The vision highlights Yahweh’s resolve to see His dwelling place restored. The immediate referent is the Jerusalem temple then under construction, but the divine interpretation and the broader visionary episode show that the Lord’s design looked beyond that project to His goal of an ultimate, everlasting dwelling place.
- 2) This ultimate sanctuary was to be distinguished from the one being built in that it would see Yahweh’s return and the return of His people to Him. Moreover, this sanctuary was to be constructed in connection with His conquest of His enemies (and the enemies of His people and kingdom) and His ingathering of sons and daughters from all the nations of the earth (1:18-21, 2:6-11). His eyes that were so fiercely jealous for Jerusalem and Zion and His dwelling place were the same eyes that roamed throughout the earth. When His sanctuary was *truly* complete (4:7-10), it was going to encompass the whole earth and all of its families. Yahweh’s people would at last dwell in peace and security because He was going to be a wall of fire surrounding them and the glory in their midst (2:1-5).
- 3) And Yahweh was going to accomplish this unspeakably glorious outcome solely through the presence and power of His Spirit. His Spirit attended and empowered the construction of the various iterations of His physical, prototypical sanctuary; how much more would that be the case with His ultimate dwelling place?
- 4) Yahweh’s house *would* be built because it was the work of His Spirit, not human power or might. And yet, the Spirit accomplishes His work through men. In the imagery of the vision, the Spirit is the fresh oil which flowed to and enlivened and sustained the lampstand representing the Lord’s sanctuary. But the oil flowed through two *sons of oil*. In Zechariah’s day, these were Zerubbabel and Joshua (Haggai 2:4-5). But these sons of oil would see their own fulfillment in *one* son of oil: an anointed Davidic prince and high priest by whose outpouring of His Spirit the Lord’s house would at last be built to everlasting praise and exultation.