

Epilogue: Reading Zechariah For All It's Worth

Reading Zechariah's prophecy correctly begins with putting on the right pair of "glasses." The *Scripture* supplies this set of lenses when it is allowed to speak from its own perspective in its own way according to its actual concerns. This perspective consists of three related components:

- 1) The first is the prophecy's historical context. The Lord called Zechariah to prophesy in a coherent and meaningful way to his own generation, and this involved speaking to them within the framework of their own historical setting, circumstances and concerns. His audience was Judean exiles who had returned to Judea out of the Babylonian captivity and were presently undertaking the task of rebuilding the Jerusalem temple.
- 2) This was the setting of Zechariah's prophecy and many commentators and readers are content to stop here. *But, by itself, this historical data is of little interpretive value.* For the issue in interpretation is always the meaning of the data rather than the data itself. Historical facts are not irrelevant, but their value resides in their meaning and the meaning of individual data resides in its contribution to the whole to which it is related. In terms of Zechariah's prophecy (or any section of the Scripture), the meaning of its historical particulars is discovered by situating it within the overall Israelite history as recorded and interpreted in the Scriptures. And because the Israelite history is the history of God's outworking of His design to restore His creation (grounded in His promise of a Seed), it is the *history of salvation* (i.e., salvation history or redemptive history).

This is how the people of Israel understood themselves and their past and present circumstances. They didn't see themselves the way most modern people do – as discrete individuals who happen to occupy a place in time and space without any essential connection to a larger scheme, purpose or narrative. The recipients of Zechariah's prophecy saw themselves distinctly and precisely within the larger story of Israel: The one God who created all things had called them in Abraham to be the instrument of His restorative work by which the whole creation – and particularly the human race – would be delivered from its alienation and defilement and recovered to right relation with Him. Yahweh would restore shalom and shabbat to His creation in and through Israel.

This was Israel's unique calling and privilege, and it was precisely its failure to fulfill its calling that resulted in Israel's desolation, exile and captivity. Israel's authentic sonship lived out before the nations was the ordained means for Yahweh's blessing flowing out into the world; men would come to know the true God by observing this God's "son." (A son is of and reflects his father.) But Israel despised and rejected its sonship and joined the nations in opposing its covenant Father. Finally, Yahweh reciprocated by rejecting His unfaithful son, making this agonizingly clear in three powerful manifestations: the removal of His presence (the Shekinah) from the temple's Holy of Holies, the destruction of the temple itself and the banishment (exile) of the covenant son from His sanctuary land. This process of abandonment and banishment came in stages:

- Yahweh had established the house of Israel and the Israelite kingdom in David, and so the rejection process began with His curse on David's house and kingdom.

- The Lord brought the sword upon David's house with the result that the Israelite kingdom was cut into two parts – Judah and Israel – with only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin remaining as David's house and kingdom (i.e., the Abrahamic covenant household). The other ten tribes comprised "Israel": an apostate kingdom ruled by illegitimate kings (mostly not of David's line) and administered by a fraudulent priesthood presiding over unclean altars and sacrifices.
- Yahweh rejected the sub-kingdom of Israel from the outset, and thus His desolating and banishing hand came first on Israel, even while He preserved Judah as the remnant of David's kingdom (Isaiah 7-8, 36-39; Hosea 1). But Judah, too, proved to be an unfaithful son, and so its preservation was short-lived. Less than 140 years after Samaria's fall (the capital of Israel), Jerusalem and Judah met a similar fate at the hands of the Babylonians. The whole house of Israel had rejected its Lord and its covenant calling and He, in turn, abandoned them.
- The entire Abrahamic household was now in exile, yet this was not to be the last word. Yahweh had stripped Zion of her children and sent her away as a harlotrous "wife," but He hadn't divorced her. As He pledged through His prophets (reflecting His oaths to David and Abraham), Zion would be purged and restored and endowed with an innumerable multitude of new, faithful children taken from all the families of the earth (Isaiah 51-54). The restoration of David's house and kingdom would mean the fulfillment of His word to Abraham and so to Eve.

This, then, is the salvation-historical backdrop of Zechariah's prophecy. Zechariah brought the Lord's words to a remnant of Judah (David's house) who had returned from Babylon to Judea. And this remnant was zealous to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, not because it was the city's centerpiece, *but because it was critical to ending their exile and seeing Yahweh's word fulfilled*. Israel's exile would not end until He returned to them, but the Lord would not return until His house was restored. And His house would not be restored until it was made a fit habitation: Yahweh's return to Zion depended upon Zion being purged along with her children (1:1-3:10). The exiles with Zechariah understood this all too clearly, for all of Israel's prophets had spoken in this way. Desolation and exile were the outcome of apostasy and uncleanness, but they were not to be the final word; the Lord would yet fulfill His covenant oaths to Abraham and David, but this would necessitate a mighty theophanic work of deliverance, purging and ingathering.

Thus Zechariah's audience perceived their labors in rebuilding the temple as a critical component of the outworking of Yahweh's purpose for Israel – and, through Israel, for the whole world of men and the entire creation. They weren't merely reconstructing a building; they were laboring in faith of Yahweh's return to put all things right. When He again took His throne in His sanctuary, Israel would at last be truly "Israel" and Zion would enjoy her promised exaltation as the Lord's radiant bride and the mother of His faithful children. It's in this sense that the historical circumstance of Zechariah's prophecy is both the foundation and framework for its words, orientation and emphases. *The historical context is important precisely because of its place in the unfolding salvation history as it was advancing by divine orchestration toward its appointed goal.*

- 3) The historical situation behind Zechariah's prophecy has its meaning within the larger Israelite history. But that larger history is the history of salvation; it is the Lord's outworking of His purpose for His creation as it is bound up in the Abrahamic people. The historical context thus finds its meaning in the salvation history of which it was part, but the salvation history derives its own meaning in the attainment of its appointed destiny. And that destiny was realized in the Christ event – which is to say, in the person, work and accomplishment of the Messiah, Jesus. Thus the historical context of Zechariah (or any Old Testament passage) looks to the salvation-historical context which, in turn, looks to the *christological* context. Expressed differently, because the history recorded in the Old Testament is the history of salvation, scriptural history is *itself* revelatory. And what it reveals is the coming Messiah. In Paul's words, all of the promises of God are “yea and amen” in Him (2 Corinthians 1:19-20; cf. Luke 24:1-27, 44-46).

Thus Zechariah's prophecy must be read and interpreted in the light of the Israelite history leading up to it, but also in view of the destiny appointed for Israel – the destiny bound up in Israel's Messiah; the one in whom Israel would become Israel indeed and fulfill its calling. This is the perspective Zechariah's hearers brought to his prophecy, evident in the Jewish writings of the second temple period. Those writings reveal a messianic hope centered in a series of related phenomena: *When Messiah came, he would prevail in a mighty triumph over the subjugating powers, thereby securing the temple's cleansing and restoration (from Jewish as well as Gentile defilement) which would enable Yahweh's return to Zion. And those events would bring the exile to its end and culminate with the re-establishment of David's house, throne and kingdom.*

This was exiled Israel's messianic hope – a hope engendered and bolstered by the words of their prophets through the centuries. The people clung to the prophetic promises, but they misjudged them, interpreting them through natural minds with natural expectations. Thus the Baptist's work as Yahweh's forerunner announcing the Messiah and His kingdom was a call to *repentance*: Unless the children of Israel rethought their notions of the promised kingdom and its king they would miss both; with relatively few exceptions, this is exactly what happened.

John exhorted Israel to rethink its messianic and kingdom doctrine and Jesus followed John's lead by embodying in Himself and His words and actions the truth Israel needed to perceive and embrace. All that the people hoped for – liberation from subjugation through the vanquishing of their enemies, the purging of Zion's uncleanness, Yahweh's return to His sanctuary and the restoration of David's kingdom – was “yea and amen” in Him, but in a way they didn't recognize. Thus the two-fold aim of the four gospel writers: On the one hand, they labored to demonstrate that Jesus, in His person, words and work, had fulfilled everything the prophets had predicted about the Messiah and the messianic age; on the other, they emphasized the painful truth that Israel had missed the day of her visitation and therefore desolation was all that remained for her (cf. Matthew 23:29-39; Luke 19:11-44).

All of this discussion underscores the fundamental truth that, from the Bible's own perspective, the Old Testament is the *Scriptures* which the New Testament insists have been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. Put differently, the New Testament is the inspired record of the Scriptures' fulfillment in Jesus together with all that this fulfillment entails and implies. Thus, to fail to read Zechariah's prophecy in the light of the Christ event and its fruit is to fail to read it rightly.

At the same time, reading Zechariah in light of the Christ event doesn't mean reading the *person* of Jesus into the prophecy as if He were the explicit subject of its messianic references (i.e. such passages as 3:1-10, 6:9-15, 9:9-10). The prophecy interacts with the scriptural concept of the coming messianic figure and specifically characterizes him as Israel's true king, temple-builder and agent of cleansing and ingathering for the world's peoples. In this way Zechariah reiterated and further developed the prophetic *specification* of the coming Messiah, but he did not *identify* this individual; Jesus Himself provided that identification by linking His words and works with the messianic revelation in all the Scriptures. *Thus Zechariah must be read in terms of the Christ event, not by reading Jesus **back** into the prophecy, but by projecting the prophecy **forward** so as to find its referent, meaning, and fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus.*

This consideration may appear subtle, but it is critically important. First and foremost, it accords with the New Testament's approach to the Old Testament scriptures, which is the paradigm for our approach and interpretation. And the implication here is that we must apply this approach in order to rightly interpret the concepts and images around which Zechariah's prophecy is constructed (temple, land, Zion, house of David, Judah, Jerusalem, etc.). Like the prophecy itself, these concepts and images have a christological trajectory and terminus; they, too, looked ahead to the Christ event and the way in which the messianic kingship and kingdom would be realized in Jesus of Nazareth. The New Testament writers – informed by Jesus' Spirit – understood and applied this principle, not just with respect to Zechariah's prophecy (ref. Matthew 27:1-10; Mark 14:26-27; John 12:12-15, 19:31-37) but all of the Scriptures, and we must follow their lead (cf. John 14-16 with Acts 2:1-3:26, 10:34-43, 13:14-48, 15:1-21, 24:1-21, 26:1-29, 28:16-31; etc.). This is the sense in which the Old Testament must be read in the light of the New Testament.

And it is precisely at this point that many misstep and fall short in reading Zechariah and the other prophets. Rather than letting the Scripture define its terms, concepts and imagery, they insist upon assigning their own. Often this is done in the name of upholding verbal inspiration and scriptural veracity, but, again, inspiration and veracity are matters of meaning and not merely words as such. The Scripture must tell us what it means by what it says, and it does so by patterns of usage and development and, most importantly, by the Spirit's own interpretation as provided by Jesus and the New Testament writers.

Thus, for example, rather than assuming that Zechariah's restored temple must refer to a third temple in Jerusalem, Jesus and His inspired disciples show us that this promise was fulfilled fundamentally in His incarnation and, more fully, in His resurrection and the community of believers who form Yahweh's true sanctuary by sharing in Jesus as the cornerstone (cf. John 1:14, 2:13-21, 4:19-26 with 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:12-19; Ephesians 2:11-22; 1 Peter 2:4-6; note also the Scripture's treatment of New Jerusalem as the true sanctuary designated as God's habitation with His people – Hebrews 12:22-24; Revelation 21:2-3). This sanctuary will find its consummate fullness in the new heavens and new earth when all creation is summed up in Christ. Similarly, the Scripture indicates that Zechariah's imagery of Israel and the nations being gathered to a restored Zion refers, not to Jewish immigration to Palestine after World War II and circumstances in a future millennial kingdom centered in Jerusalem, but to Yahweh's ingathering of all of the earth's families to Himself in the "place" of His habitation, namely the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Isaiah 2:1-4 with 11:1-12 and 49:1-6; ref. also 59:1-61:11; so also cf. 53:1-55:13 with Galatians 4:21-31 and cf. Matthew 11:25-30 and John 12:23-32 with Matthew 28:16-20).