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## OUTLINE

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## THE FIRST VISION Gathering of the church, 1:1-17

### 1.1 Introduction: 1:1-6

Zechariah is one of the “minor prophets.” Both his visions from the time period after the exile and the visions concerning the future rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple are still applicable today.

The name Zechariah means: “He whom the LORD has remembered.” This remembrance is to be connected with God’s work in this world: His *church*.

The night visions of Zechariah show us how the LORD remembers His church in a time of reconstruction and restoration after the dark years in exile.

The new era commenced with the fall of Babylon. The Persian Empire then arose and Cyrus’ edict in 539 B.C. granted the freedom to the exiles to return to their native land.

Approximately 50,000 Jews used this opportunity. On the other hand, thousands of Jews stayed behind in Babylon as is described in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. Nevertheless, the quantities of 42,360 Jews and 7,337 menservants and maidservants testify to the sizeable number of people who actually did return. The number of 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels and 6,720 asses testifies to the poorness of the Jews.

There does not seem to be much future, for the exiles have returned to a country inhabited with new and partly hostile people. Probably their number surpasses that of the Babylonian exiles. Yet, their return is a national matter. It is not just an arbitrary group of Jews but a people who represent the prior generations of Israel according to their tribes and distributed between twelve leaders.

Immediately after their return the daily cult of offerings is restored. The rebuilding of the temple is started in the beginning of the year 536 B.C. but the work is impeded by the Samaritan resistance. Besides this there are also other factors which play a role: economic crisis, bad harvests, natural diseases and campaigns of Cambyses along the borders of Canaan.

More than 15 years later the “twin prophet of Zechariah,” namely, Haggai, points to the fact that the temple still lies in ruins. This prophet also points to the root cause of the economic and political troubles which is the lack of faith on the side of the returned people. This preaching of Haggai brings the people to their senses. They don’t sit around idly anymore but start working again. Now the events quickly follow one another. Within approximately four years, i.e., in the year 516 B.C., the reconstruction of the temple is completed.

When the rebuilding of the temple started in 520 B.C., Darius had just succeeded in keeping all the riots in the Persian Empire under control. This established his absolute power and brought peace and rest for the people.

The eight night visions of Zechariah are also dated in the year 520 B.C., two months after Haggai’s last prophecy. They are night visions; not dreams. A night vision is experienced in a state of being awake in contrast to a dream which is experienced in sleep.

From chapter 4:1 it appears that the prophet is awake. During the reception of the night visions the prophet is awakened to a greater alertness and his eye is sharpened to the realities which he is observing.

God’s Word is revealed to the prophet by means of these visions. Zechariah, in turn, passes this Word on to the people. A comparison of the night visions in the Old Testament teaches us that all of them have a prophetic character. The eight visions are not dated separately and they form a unity according to their contents. In all likelihood, therefore, the prophet saw all of them in the same night.

Zechariah is called the son of Berechiah and grandson of Iddo. Iddo was the chief of one of the priestly families who returned from exile along with Zerubbabel and Joshua (Cf. Nehemiah 12:4,16; Ezra 5:1; 6:14) from which texts it is clear that Zechariah had descended from a priestly family. Not much else is known about his person. More emphasis is put on the message of the prophet. He is the instrument in God’s hand to proclaim the zeal of the LORD for His church in days of defeatism and lack of faith.

## **1.2 The report of God’s servants: 1:7-11**

The exact date of God’s prophecy is mentioned: “On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month in the second year of Darius.” In our terms: February 520 B.C.

In the early hours of the morning of that day many people came to the sanctuary to witness the ceremony of the daily morning service and morning sacrifice. At the same time they could see how things had developed during the five months of the temple reconstruction. This is in accordance with the date that we find in the book of Haggai. The people met the young prophet Zechariah in the vicinity of the altar. No doubt many of them crowded around him because they knew that he had

been inaugurated as a prophet just three months before. Now they expected a Word of God from him, a message from a prophet.

“I saw in the night a vision.” So the LORD God Himself was speaking to him. That night he had eight visions and Zechariah just had to pass on these night visions to the people. Zechariah knew: what I have received is God’s revelation. Now I have to proclaim this message to the people of Judah!

It is easily understood that the first vision was given at the beginning of the night while the eighth and last one was at the end of the night, just before dawn. This can more or less be derived from the colours mentioned in the first and last night visions. Thus, Zechariah had been busy with these night visions throughout the whole night. No wonder that he is tired at the end! Yet, only a few hours later he is already present again in the temple to pass on the visions to the people who are gathered there.

It is clear, then, that there is a certain connection between the various night visions. The connection also has to do with the contents of these visions. In spite of all the variety they do form a unity as well. In sum, they show the various aspects of the gathering of God’s church under God’s own leadership. The main thrust is the involvement, the zeal of the LORD in His work concerning Zion and Jerusalem to gather His people who had returned from Babylon to the holy city.

That is also the contents of the first vision.

We have the following active persons. In the first place we see the prophet Zechariah himself who is standing on a high hill. Beside him stands the angel who is talking to him. That is the interpreting angel who has to explain the night visions to Zechariah. In the valley below is the angel of the LORD.

On the one hand he is an angel. This means that he is a servant, an ambassador. On the other hand, however, he is someone to whom very special things are ascribed. We can even say that they are things which can only be said of God Himself. More than once we read the expression: THE angel of the LORD. Well, if the angel of the LORD is speaking or acting in the Old Dispensation, we have to do with God Himself, namely, as the Old Testament foreshadowing of what is going to be revealed in a richer way about Jesus Christ Himself in the New Testament.

So we may say that the angel of the LORD is God’s Son, just as He showed Himself in the Old Testament before the time of the incarnation of the Word.

Furthermore, in the depth are also the myrtles mentioned in verse 8. They were situated in the glen. What are these myrtles? There are many fantasies about the significance of these myrtles. It is important to note that in Palestine and Syria the myrtle tree is a kind of shrub with shiny dark green leaves and white flowers. The myrtle was primarily cultivated for the leaves which were used as decoration, e.g., during the Feast of

Tabernacles. In the prophecies of Isaiah the myrtle is mentioned more than once as a symbol of life that is going to flourish on all sides (cf. Is. 41:19 and 55:13).

As far as the location of these myrtles is concerned, we have to consider them to be in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem. In verse 16 the LORD says, "I have returned to Jerusalem with compassion." It is not impossible that we have to seek the source of the temple in the valley of the myrtles: the temple Siloah at the foot of the mountain of the temple, Zion. The reconstruction of the temple is not finished yet but the first measures have already been taken. The LORD is present in the neighbourhood of His earthly dwelling place. He is already at the construction site. He has taken up His residence at His headquarters close to His city and His house. Thus, the glen of myrtles is full of comfort. The waters of the temple of Siloah point to the eternal fresh power for God's people.

The prophet also sees riders on horses. The colours are important. First he saw a man riding on a red horse. Behind him were red, sorrel and white horses.

It strikes us that first two kinds of the red colour are mentioned (sorrel is actually ruddy) and then the white colour. Red is always the colour of blood and/or war. Only after this the white colour is also mentioned. If we compare the horses and their colours with those mentioned in Revelation 6, we discover a remarkable resemblance. There is the white horse whose rider is conquering and going to conquer. Then there is the red horse whose rider is permitted to take peace from the earth. Then follows the rest of the horses with their riders who also brought bad messages to the earth. Peace will be taken away from the earth and God's judgments will come on all sides and in all ways.

Zechariah does not know what these things mean. The answer to his question concerning the significance of this is given by the man who is standing among the myrtle trees. He says, "These are they whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth." This means that these riders make a reconnaissance. They serve the Lord of heaven and earth. They are sent out by God Himself as His army. Now they are back in the centre, at the headquarters, to report their experiences. They have to inform their commander about the situation on the earth. Is it peace or war? How is the world aligned politically and internationally? Are pressures building up to the extent that the world seems to be like a volcano? Then the several divisions are going to report what they have heard and seen on their expeditions.

They say, "We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth remains at rest."

Actually, this is a disappointing conclusion to the report given to the angel of the LORD, i.e., the Son of God, as He showed Himself in the Old Dispensation.

Here the Son of God is ministered to by the servants who are sent out over all the earth. They all reported and arrived at the far-reaching conclusion which is short and remarkable: "All the earth remains at rest."

This is a disappointment because the army of the LORD is ready to go out and conquer the world to bring God's judgments on it. Yet, all the world is at rest. There is absolute stillness, nothing has changed. There is a "status quo." For the background of this prophecy we have to consider Haggai's prophecy. A couple of months before, Haggai had prophesied in an obviously hopeless situation. A handful of people had returned to Canaan and experienced Persian lordship there. The country was no more than a province of the great Persian Empire. Besides, it also was damaged by droughts and subsequent failure of the crops.

But then Haggai comforted the people of Judah. He said: Just wait a moment and you will see great things! For thus says the LORD of hosts, "Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations so that the treasures of all nations shall come in. And I will fill this house with splendour, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts," (Haggai 2:6-8).

But also, the same message was given by the LORD, "I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders; and the horses and their riders shall go down, everyone by the sword of his fellow," (Haggai 2:21,22).

In that light the conclusion is indeed disappointing in this night vision of Zechariah, "We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth remains at rest." That means: it is still out of the question that all the nations are moved because of the temple. It is still out of the question that the strength of the nations is destroyed. It is still out of the question that God's army is going to conquer the world.

### **1.3 The pleading of God's Son: 1:12**

The disappointing "visitation" report causes an immediate reaction by the Angel of the LORD, namely, a reaction of prayer. His reaction is not addressed to the reporting riders but to the LORD of hosts Himself. In verse 12 he asks, "O LORD of hosts, how long wilt Thou have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which Thou hast had indignation these seventy years?"

The Angel of the LORD pleads, "O LORD of hosts, Thou hast promised that this misery would not extend more than seventy years, these bitter years of exile. Please be gracious now and let the whole world know that Thou art indeed the mighty one, the God of hosts."

That prayer must have comforted Zechariah and his people.

In the same manner the people were also praying to God, “O LORD of hosts, how long yet?”

They were not alone in that prayer, but they had an Advocate who pleaded their cause to God.

In this way the church will be comforted over and over again by the great Advocate Jesus Christ, just as we read in John 17, Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 8:1.

Also the souls under the altar pray, “O Sovereign LORD, holy and true, how long before Thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?” (Rev. 6:10). But then Jesus Christ makes it His own cause in order that throughout the whole church, in heaven and on earth, in struggle and triumph, God’s Name would be professed.

## **1.4 The Guarantee of the LORD God: 1:13-17**

At the end of this chapter (verses 13-17) we see the climax of this first vision. God gives an immediate response to the prayer of the Angel of the LORD. It is remarkable that this response is not given to the Advocate Himself, but that it is said, “The LORD answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me.” In turn the angel passes on the LORD’s answer to the prophet Zechariah and the prophet then receives the assignment to proclaim this answer to the people of Judah.

Yet, is this really so remarkable? What is the present situation?

Did the Angel of the LORD pray something for Himself? No. It is just the other way around: the great Advocate pleads to God for His people! He is the great Intercessor for the church of the LORD.

The answer to the prayer, therefore, is announced to the oppressed church. That is very comforting: the answer reaches its destination, namely, the people of the LORD.

The answer shows a rich response to the prayer. The LORD had answered gracious and comforting words. They are glad tidings! The angel therefore says to Zechariah, “Cry out, thus says the LORD of hosts, I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion.” This retort is a sharp contrast to verse 11.

The report of the riders mentioned, “Behold, all the earth remains at rest.” It is very quiet everywhere. Nothing happens.

But while the earth is at rest, a gale is blowing in heaven! It is a storm of divine jealousy.

Jealousy is a word connected with a marriage relationship. The one party can’t stand it that the other one is going away to look for a third party; or, that the other party is attacked.

In this way we can also speak of God’s jealousy. The LORD can’t stand it that anyone attacks the honour of His bride whom He has married. With holy jealous love the LORD guards His people.

He can't stand it that the heathen nations destroyed the city and its temple and also trampled on His own people.

Therefore He continues, "I am very angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster."

The heathens were indeed instruments in the hands of God in the execution of His wrath. But they had made it worse. Their motive was to destroy God's people completely.

We may say: how comfortable for the church of God! The nations are still at ease. In the meantime, though, the LORD Himself is exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. He is as jealous as a bridegroom who guards his bride against anyone who will attack her!

In this way Psalm 147 will be fulfilled: "The LORD builds up Jerusalem; He gathers the outcasts of Israel." Already in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah the temple had been built up again and the cities of Judah had been restored.

After that, the great salvation in the LORD Jesus Christ was revealed. In Him God's zeal had been shown in its fulness. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Then the time had fully come (cf. Galatians 4:4,5). But there will be a complete fulfillment of this prophecy when the LORD returns the second time. It is a great comfort for the church today that the LORD chooses Jerusalem. The LORD gathers His church from all over the world. When nations rise in anger and disturb the world, they are there because of God's work, because of God's church, because of the population of the new earth. We may therefore not desire quietness and rest. Woe to a church who desires peace of mankind, the peace of unbelief. Oh, if a church does not have any pretension, then she can keep peace with everybody. Then a peaceful coexistence with the world is possible. Also the other way around: the world wants to live in peace with a nonnormative church in her midst.

The LORD promised something else also. In the world you will have oppression. The church who maintains God's standards has to expect unrest. That restlessness is caused by God Himself. Because of our belief we meet unrest. In this way Haggai 2 will be fulfilled. See also Hebrews 12:21-28.

## **1.5 Some questions**

1. *What is the explanation of the fact that so many Jews remained in Babylon while Cyrus gave the opportunity to return to Canaan?*
2. *Can anything be derived from the fact that Zechariah descended from a priestly generation?*
3. *Are there other texts in the Old Testament from which we can see that the Angel of the LORD is the Mediator in Old Testament representation?*

4. *May the church pray for a quiet and peaceful life? How should the quietness be considered? (Cf. also Psalm 36, 95; Hebrews 4)*
5. *What is the basis for Christ's pleading for His people? Does this have consequences for the praying of God's people?*
6. *How was the zeal of the people for God's temple when the LORD was jealous for Jerusalem? (Cf. also Haggai 1:2)*

## **1.6 Literature**

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