

Lesson 1

Introduction

Why study Zechariah?

That is probably a good starting question for a book that we are about to march through verse by verse over a period of about 23 weeks.

But the question "why study Zechariah" should really be phrased as "What are some *other* reasons for studying Zechariah" because, of course, the primary reason to study Zechariah is that it is part of the inspired word of God.

One other reason is that it is a fascinating book. It has some obscure visions that take careful study to unravel. It is deeply rooted in the history of the time and yet parts of the book prophecy events that would occur many years later. Zechariah has some of the most beautiful Messianic prophecies found anywhere in the Old Testament and is repeatedly referred to by the New Testament.

Here is how various commentators have described the book of Zechariah:

Few books of the Old Testament are as difficult of interpretation as the book of Zechariah; no other book is as Messianic ... The scope of Zechariah's vision and the profundity of his thought are almost without parallel.

Zechariah is the longest book of the Minor Prophets, and in many ways it is the most obscure. We are confronted with visions, and angels, with apocalyptic observations and a very strong reference to the Messiah, who is also introduced as the Branch, or Sprout of David.

Yes, I think all can agree that Zechariah is long, and can be difficult and obscure. And that likely explains why the book of Zechariah is something else as well - neglected! But few books of prophecy are more Messianic or are more important for the New Testament than is Zechariah, and so Zechariah is definitely *not* a book that should ever be neglected!

Where are we and how did we get here?

We should always ask those questions when we begin to study a book in the Old Testament. Sometimes the answers to those questions are immediate, but for other books we need to do a little digging.

So our first topic will be to ask what is the historical setting of the book of Zechariah?

First, we should pause and ask ourselves why does this history matter? The answer to that question is found in the opening words of the very first verse of Zechariah - "In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius." The book itself is telling us that we need to understand the history in which the book was written.

If, as some suggest, Zechariah is pointing only to distantly future events far removed from the book's initial readers, why does it matter when the book was written? Why does the book begin as it does? The answer is that it does matter, and Zechariah 1:1 tells us that it matters.

The handout for this lesson shows an overview of a thousand years of history starting with King David and going through the end of the Flavian Dynasty of Rome in AD 96. We will be referring to much of this history in our study of Zechariah, so please keep it handy.

We should begin our historical overview today with two rulers who are not mentioned on the handout: King Josiah of Judah and Pharaoh Neco of Egypt.

Soon after coming to power in Egypt, Pharaoh Neco led his army northward to help the Assyrians in their battles with the Babylonians, who had captured the Assyrian capital of Nineveh in 612.

Neco sent envoys to King Josiah, assuring him that his purpose was **not** to fight with Judah but rather with Babylon. Josiah, though, was worried and tried to stop the Egyptians at the pass of Megiddo (the world's most famous battlefield!), but Josiah was defeated and mortally wounded.

When Neco heard that the people of Judah had crowned Jehoahaz, an anti-Egyptian son of Josiah, he deposed Jehoahaz, and took him to Egypt as a prisoner for the rest of his life.

In his place, Neco put Jehoahaz's brother and Josiah's other son, Eliakim, and changed his name to Jehoiakim to show that he was an Egyptian vassal. Neco also placed Judah under heavy tribute.

In 605, King Nabopolassar of Babylon sent his son Nebuchadnezzar against Neco's army. The Babylonians defeated the Egyptians and drove them out of Palestine. Jeremiah 46 describes

Babylon's defeat of Egypt.

King Jehoiakim of Judah then went from being a vassal of Egypt to being a vassal of Babylon, and it was at this time, in 605 BC, that some of the Judeans, including Daniel and his friends, were carried off in exile to Babylon. The year 605 is most likely the starting point for Jeremiah's prophecy of a 70 year captivity.

In 601, Nebuchadnezzar advanced against Egypt itself, but Neco withstood him in a bloody battle at Egypt's border. This battle may have encouraged Jehoiakim to revolt against Babylon in 601 despite Jeremiah's warnings. Nebuchadnezzar then decided to move against rebellious Judah.

Although the siege began with Jehoiakim on the throne, Jehoiakim was soon taken captive and died. Jehoiachin came to the throne next during the siege of Jerusalem, and Nebuchadnezzar took the city in 597 BC.

At some point during these events, *Crown Prince* Nebuchadnezzar became *King* Nebuchadnezzar with the death of his father, Nabopolassar.

Jehoiachin and his family were carried off to Babylon. Second Kings 25:27-30 tells us that Jehoiachin was later released from prison by the next king, Amel-Marduk.

The king that replaced Jehoiachin was his uncle, Mattaniah, whom Nebuchadnezzar renamed Zedekiah. Zedekiah ignored Jeremiah and rebelled against Babylon, hoping for help from Egypt.

In 586 BC, Jerusalem fell, the walls were torn down, and the temple was demolished. Some of the Jewish leaders were executed and others were deported. Zedekiah tried to escape, but was captured, blinded, and taken to Babylon. Only the poor were left to till the soil.

What sort of impact did that event have on the Jewish people? In a word, dramatic. We can't overstate the impact it had. We can see the impact of Jerusalem's fall from the very first verse of Zechariah. Look at the first verse of Zechariah again and compare it, for example, to the first verse of Isaiah.

Isaiah 1:1 - The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

Zechariah 1:1 - In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, came the word of the LORD

unto Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet.

Did you notice the difference? Isaiah gave his time frame using the reigns of the kings of *Judah*. Zechariah gave his time frame using the reign of a king of *Persia*.

By the time of Zechariah, there were no more kings of Judah - but God was telling them in this book that that would not be the case forever. Zechariah would tell the people about the great king who was to come and sit on the throne of David. By the time of Zechariah, God's city was in ruins - but Zechariah would tell them that that would also not be the case forever.

Nebuchadnezzar ruled until 562 BC and then was followed by a series of unsuccessful rulers from 562-556, including his son Amel-Marduk, his son-in-law Neriglissar, and finally Neriglissar's son Labashi-Marduk.

Nabonidus, a powerful general in the Babylonian army, was finally able to stabilize the empire in 556 BC. He ruled for awhile along side his son, Belshazzar. The last day of Belshazzar is described in Daniel 5.

In 539 BC, Cyrus crossed the Zagros mountains, forded the Tigris, and marched with little resistance into Babylonian territory before taking the city of Babylon. Cyrus gave permission for the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland, which we see in the opening chapters of the book of Ezra.

Cyrus' reign was cut short by his death in 530 BC in a battle on the eastern frontier of his empire. His son Cambyses ascended the throne and by 525 BC had succeeded in incorporating Egypt into the Persian Empire.

While he was at this western frontier of his empire, Cambyses' rule was challenged at home in 522 BC when an imposter (often called Pseudo-Smerdis) rebelled, claiming to be Cambyses' brother Smerdis. (Cambyses had eliminated his actual brother prior to his Egyptian campaign, so he knew this person was an imposter!)

The core of the empire supported the rebellion because the new ruler had promised tax relief. Cambyses, leading the main flank of the Persian army, began the journey back to Mesopotamia to quell the rebellion, but he died of an accidental self-inflicted wound along the way.

Darius, one of his generals, replaced Cambyses in 522 BC, claiming blood relation to the royal family and gaining the support of the army. Darius succeeded in eliminating Pseudo-Smerdis in September

of 522 BC.

The death of Pseudo-Smerdis prompted rebellions across the empire, which Darius had to put down. In one case, Darius impaled the leader of the rebellion along with 2500 of his supporters in the city of Babylon.

Egypt revolted in 519 BC, leading to Darius' Egyptian expedition in 519 and 518 BC, during which he succeeded in reconquering Egypt for Persia.

Why is this important? Zechariah's visions in 520 BC are dated between the Babylonian revolts in 522-521 and the Egyptian revolt in 519, which explains Darius' concern for his western frontier in the preceding years and will also help us explain some of the visions we will soon study.

During Darius' rule, the Jews continued to return to their homeland. The restoration of the temple was renewed, leading to a foundation-laying ceremony in 520 BC and a dedication in 515 BC.

While Darius successfully put down the Egyptian rebellion in 519-518 BC, it would be his western frontier that would eventually spell his demise. Darius' desire to extend his dominion over Europe met with strong resistance from the Greeks, who defeated him in the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC. This defeat emboldened the Egyptians, who rose in rebellion in 486 BC. In the midst of these setbacks, Darius died, passing the scepter to his son Xerxes (the husband of Queen Esther). Alexander the Great conquered Persia about 150 years later.

Why was the book of Zechariah written?

The easiest and surest way to *misinterpret* a book of the Bible is to *not* ask this all-important question. **Why was the book written?**

The historical overview we just discussed provides one very important reason why the book of Zechariah was written. With all that was then going on in the world - wars between great powers, political instability in Persia, the rise and fall of kings - where was God's attention focused? On his people - a small, seemingly powerless group of outcasts on the edge of the empire trying to rebuild their fallen city and temple.

Who at that time would have thought that group had any significance? Who at that time would have thought that it was that group who would eventually usher in a kingdom that would sweep aside all of

the kingdoms of this earth?

Did that group of outcasts see any of that themselves? Did they see themselves as God saw them? Did they understand their vital importance in the plan of God?

A major goal of Zechariah is to open their eyes to those things and to the great King who was coming from among their own people. A great king was coming who would bless the entire world and establish an unshakable, immovable, eternal kingdom for the people of God.

And perhaps we, too, sometimes need our eyes opened. Do we see ourselves as God sees us? Do we understand our own importance and our own significance in God's plan? If not, perhaps Zechariah can open our eyes as well.

For another answer to the question of why the book was written, we should consider what Jerusalem was like at this time. Jerusalem at this time was a picture of utter gloom. The walls of the city were just a pile of rubble. The once magnificent temple of Solomon was devastated beyond recognition. The former exiles were surrounded by angry opponents who threatened them and ridiculed them at every move they made and were working behind their backs to frustrate all of their plans.

What did the people of Zechariah's day need to hear? They needed encouragement. They needed to know that God had not forgotten them and would never forget his faithful people. They needed a glimpse of what was coming for the people of God. They needed to see Jesus. And Zechariah (more than any other prophet except Isaiah) lifts the spiritual curtain to show the people their coming Messiah.

They were rebuilding the temple. They must have known that this new temple could be destroyed just as easily as the prior temple had been destroyed. They must have thought, **why bother?** Zechariah answers that question. They needed to see the one who was greater than the temple (Matthew 12:6). They needed to see the one whose body was the true temple (John 2:21).

If our interpretation of Zechariah would not have provided such answers and such encouragement to its initial readers, then our interpretation is wrong. We will have turned left when we should have turned right. If our view of this book is that it speaks entirely about an age separated 2500 years (and counting) from its initial readers, then our view is wrong.

Zechariah was written for us, but it was *not* written only for us. In fact, it was not even written *primarily* for us. Its primary audience was its original audience. **And if we want to understand**

Zechariah's message for us, we first must understand Zechariah's message for them.

Yes, Zechariah speaks to us, and yes Zechariah is a book of prophecy, but Zechariah is firmly anchored in history. And how do we know that? The very first verse of the book tells us that. If we can understand Zechariah apart from the history in which it was written, then why did the Holy Spirit begin the book by anchoring it firmly in history?

And, make no mistake, although firmly anchored in history, Zechariah does have a vital message for us today. We, too, can become discouraged, and when we do, we need to do what Zechariah told the ancients to do - we need to lift up our eyes to Jesus.

And *our* view of Jesus is infinitely more clear than their view. They were looking at Jesus from afar as a prophetic curtain was briefly lifted - but we see Jesus with great clarity in the full revelation of the New Testament.

We, like that ancient remnant, need to see where we fit in the plan of God. We, like them, need to look beyond the gloom and the confusion of this world and keep our eyes focused on Christ.

If we take nothing more away from our study of Zechariah, let's be sure we take that. Zechariah's answer to the immense problems they faced was to point them to Jesus.

Who was Zechariah?

There are about forty Zechariah's in the Bible. Who was this one?

The first verse tells us that he was "the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo" (meaning that Iddo was his grandfather). But that verse raises an immediate question. Ezra 5:1 and 6:14 refer to Zechariah simply the son of Iddo. Why? What doesn't Ezra mention Berechiah?

One possibility is that Berechiah died young, leaving Zechariah to be raised by his grandfather.

Another possibility, and the one that I favor, is that Iddo may have been a much more prominent figure than Berechiah. In Nehemiah 12:4, a priest named Iddo is named among those who returned from Babylon as part of the first return in 538 BC. Nehemiah 12:16 tells us that this Iddo had a son (which could mean grandson) named Zechariah.

If Nehemiah 12 is describing Zechariah the prophet, then we know that his grandfather was part of the initial return in 538 BC. And what does that tell us about his grandson, Zechariah?

It most likely means that Zechariah was a young man when he had the visions recorded in this book. It tells us that Zechariah was almost certainly born in Babylon.

And this is very different from Zechariah's contemporary prophet, the prophet Haggai. They both preached at the same time, but Haggai was an old man having seen the *original* temple with his own eyes many years earlier.

Zechariah began preaching in 520 BC, which means that only about 18 years had elapsed since the time his grandfather came to Jerusalem from Babylon.

Zechariah was likely in his twenties when the temple was completed in 515 BC, and in his sixties when Queen Esther came to power far away in Persia and when Xerxes I was defeated by the Greeks. Zechariah would have seen the Greeks rising on the horizon as a new enemy of God's people, and we will see a mention of that great threat in Chapter 9.

How did Zechariah die?

If you are flipping to the end of his book to answer that question, you can stop flipping. Zechariah's death is not recorded in his own book. But we may see the answer to that question somewhere else in the Bible.

There is a puzzling reference in the New Testament about the death of someone named Zechariah.

Matthew 23:35 - That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.

Is that verse describing the same Zechariah who wrote the book of Zechariah? It certainly seems so based on the name of his father, Berehiah, which is the same name we find in verse 1 of Zechariah. But most commentators believe that Jesus was speaking in Matthew 23 of another Zechariah from 2 Chronicles 24.

2 Chronicles 24:20-22 - And the Spirit of God came upon Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the

priest, which stood above the people, and said unto them, Thus saith God, Why transgress ye the commandments of the Lord, that ye cannot prosper? because ye have forsaken the Lord, he hath also forsaken you. And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king in the court of the house of the Lord.

That Zechariah from 2 Chronicles 24 certainly seems to have died in the manner described in Matthew 23, but the name of his father (Jehoiada) does not match the father's name in Matthew 23 (Berekiah). How do we explain the difference?

Of course, one possibility, and perhaps the most straightforward, is that Jesus is in fact describing the death of the prophet Zechariah, and both Zechariah's just happened to meet similar fates, but there is no other indication anywhere that Zechariah the prophet died that way.

Another possibility is that the name Berekiah was added at some point by an over-zealous scribe. This is not my favorite explanation, but the manuscripts show that it did happen on rare occasion. (And before we act as if the issue of some scribe adding an explanatory phrase to the text is just an ancient problem, we should keep in mind that some modern versions of the Bible do the same thing all throughout the text of the Bible!) This view is supported by the parallel passage in Luke 11, which makes no mention of Berekiah.

Luke 11:51 - From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation.

The short answer is that we don't know for sure. It is even possible that the Zechariah Jesus was speaking about in Matthew 23 may have been a contemporary of those who were hearing Jesus at that time.

Why is the book of Zechariah considered so difficult and obscure?

Although the book of Zechariah does contain some straightforward historical narrative, it also contains some visions that are definitely not straightforward.

The first eight chapters have caused some commentators to throw up their hands in frustration. One commentary I have is called *The Evasive Text: Zechariah 1-8 and the Frustrated Readers*. In the preface, the author of that commentary (if we can call it that!) confesses that he doesn't understand Zechariah! He writes:

"It is finally concluded that Zechariah lacks a concrete symbolic logic, defies grammatical conventions, and is unreadable as it stands - and always was this way."

That statement is, of course, completely wrong, but it does show the problems some have had with this book.

And the book doesn't get any easier after Chapter 8. Martin Luther began his commentary of Zechariah Chapter 14 by writing:

"In this chapter I surrender, for I am not certain of what the prophet treats."

The visions and the oracles in Zechariah have given the book its reputation, and these visions in Zechariah are often described using something called *apocalyptic language* - what is that?

The book of Revelation (not Revelations!) is called *Apokalupsis* in Greek, and it is from that word that we get the word *apocalyptic*, which means unveiled, uncovered, or revealed. (It does *not* mean hidden! It means the opposite of hidden!)

Apocalyptic language is composed of symbols that are often lurid in color, violent in tone, and easily remembered. They strike the imagination and grab hold of the mind. In addition to Revelation, such language can be found in Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Isaiah, the minor prophets, and even sometimes in the gospels and epistles.

Apocalyptic language is almost always used to denote conflict and victory. Apocalyptic language is used when God judges and smites an oppressor and vindicates his people. Apocalyptic language is used to describe times of crisis and judgment.

Why Does God Use Apocalyptic Language?

Some think it was used in Revelation to shield the church from Roman retaliation. But that explanation has never appealed much to me. If we can understand the book 2000 years after it was written, then surely Rome could understand the symbols at the time it was written.

I think the reason apocalyptic language was used is simple - God wanted to use it! Apocalyptic language has been called an oil painting from God. Numbers 12:8 reminds us that God does not always speak clearly, but sometimes uses dark language, and perhaps such dark language is reserved

for times of conflict and judgment.

Can we understand apocalyptic language? Absolutely we can. God intended his word to be understood, and we can understand it. But we need to proceed carefully, and we need to keep a few interpretative ground rules (or perhaps I should say guidelines) in mind.

Rule 1: We should use easily understood verses to help us understand verses that are harder to understand.

This rule always applies in Bible study. If we find some doctrinal position (such as a thousand year of reign of Christ on earth) in apocalyptic language, and if that doctrinal position is found nowhere else in the Bible and in fact contradicts very easy to understand statements found elsewhere in the Bible, then we can be certain that that doctrinal position is wrong and that those who hold it have misunderstood the apocalyptic language.

Rule 2: We should interpret apocalyptic language figuratively unless we are forced to do otherwise.

This is the opposite rule from how we understand most things in the Bible. Usually we take a verse literally unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise. What is an example of when we might be so compelled? Matthew 5:29 comes to mind - "And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee."

Apocalyptic language is figurative language, and so the opposite rule applies - we understand apocalyptic language *figuratively* unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise.

Rule 3: Similarity of speech does not imply identity of subjects. (The same image can be used to depict different subjects.)

This is a common pitfall. Often in the study of apocalyptic language you will hear someone say that such and such symbol could only apply to the end of the world. Really? What if that same symbol is used elsewhere in the Bible to apply to something other than the end of the world, as is most often the case. The same image can be used to depict different subjects.

Rule 4: Dissimilarity of speech does not imply distinctness of subjects. (Different images can be used to depict the same subject.)

As an example, many different symbols are used both in the Old Testament and the New Testament

to describe the church. God shows us the eternal kingdom from many different angles and many different perspectives, and he uses many different symbols to do that. Different images can be used to depict the same subject.

Rule 5: We should always carefully study how the same symbols are used elsewhere in the Bible, while keeping Rules #3 and #4 in mind.

If we find the same symbol in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, that symbol may or may not have the same subject. We need to examine it carefully.

But if the subject in the Old Testament is something that has already occurred, then it would be very unlikely that the New Testament subject is the same - but the subjects are likely similar, such as Babylon in the Old Testament and Rome in the New Testament.

Rule 6: We must pay careful attention to context.

The surest way to go wrong with apocalyptic language is to atomize the text by looking at one verse at a time without any regard for the verses that precede it, the verses that follow it, the reason those verses were written, and the history in which those verses were written. The context is vital.

And we must do more than just *say* the context is important - we must actually pay close attention to the context! And that context includes *historical* context. Apocalyptic language **always** has historical significance, so we must study history to properly understand the symbols.

Rule 7: We should not add symbols to the text.

As an example, in the book of Daniel we see a giant image of a man. Daniel described the man's feet and toes in Daniel 2. Now, almost certainly, the giant man had two feet and ten toes - but the number two and the number ten are never mentioned in Daniel 2.

Premillennialists split the fourth kingdom of Daniel 2 into two parts - and they rely heavily on the two feet and the ten toes in making that argument. If two and ten were that important to the meaning of the vision, then don't we think two and ten would have been mentioned?

We should not read symbols into the text. Let's stick with the symbols we already have!

Rule 8: We should pay careful attention to any explanations that are given in the inspired text.

In this book we will often see Zechariah asking an angel what a particular symbol means. We should, of course, listen carefully to that answer! We find the same thing in Revelation. Zechariah's questions and John's questions are most likely our own questions! We should pay close attention to the inspired answers.

Rule 9: Sometimes a *literal* person, place, or thing is used as a figure for a similar person, place, or thing.

For example, literal Babylon is used in the New Testament as a figure for Rome. Why? Because both are great enemies of God's people. Egypt, Assyria, and even Jerusalem are sometimes used in the same way.

Rule 10: Sometimes a *literal* number is also a *figurative* number.

For example, the 70 years of captivity was a literal 70 years, but the number 70 denotes perfection and completeness, and so 70 is also used figuratively to show that the period of captivity was the perfect length of time for God to teach his people the complete lesson he wanted them to learn.

And, of course, the number 70 was not just a coincidence. The literal 70 year period was determined by God, and most likely it was chosen by God because he wanted to teach a lesson based, in part, on the symbolic significance of that number.

#Zechariah