

Zechariah

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Introduction

The book of Zechariah has been classified as one of the Minor Prophets and post exilic in composition. It is “Minor” in the sense of size not importance. In other words, it is a comparatively short prophecy encapsulated in 14 brief chapters and was written by the Prophet Zechariah (distinct from the Zechariah father of John the Baptist). Although this is the longest book among the Minor Prophets, the prophecy is none the less comparatively shorter than the Major Prophets such as Isaiah or Ezekiel for instance.

Furthermore, Zechariah may be classified among the latter rather than the former prophets. The book has several thematic points as shall be seen, given by the visions that the prophet received. The book makes extensive use of symbols, signs and alludes to dreams as the means by which the visions were given by God.

Several characters are depicted in the book and may represent real people that were to come. For instance, there is reference to Joshua in the third chapter with the accuser of the brethren, Satan. Joshua in tattered clothes represents the soiled people of God being accused before God but later made clean when the garments are changed and Satan trounced as a result. The book of Zechariah is a rich read worth investigating and grasping.

What the Book is About?

The book is a series of eight-night visions that Zechariah the prophet received¹. Its main aim is to encourage the post exilic Israelites to commence the abandoned Temple building as well as point to the fact of a future Messiah to come who would come, be rejected, return to reign and judge the world. Many years had passed since King Cyrus (whom God had raised to conquer Babylon and then free the Israelites to return and practice their religion) had passed a

¹ Though some like the African Bible commentary authors hold that they were eight. Kline holds they were seven, combining two visions into one because he holds they were indeed one not two.

decree but because of opposition and frustration, the Temple building work had stalled.

The Prophet Haggai and Zechariah were commissioned separately to bring God's message to His people both to rebuke and encourage them to take up this long abandoned noble work. Thus, this book is set in a context where people have been discouraged and reluctant to proceed with the work leading to compromise and to some extent despair (i.e. about 522 BC there about). Though the City walls remained broken, the foundation of the Temple had already been done and needed to have the superstructure erected as instructed by God.

As earlier intimated, the book is composed of several night visions in which God reveals some important information relating to Israel, the Temple and the coming messiah who would come in the person of the Lord Jesus. Each of these visions has specific information it communicates using different symbols and signs. Interestingly, some of these signs are used in other prophetic books like Isaiah and Revelation. For instance, the Lord Jesus is pictured as the Theophany commander of the lord's army riding triumphantly to victory. There is evident struggle/opposition from Satan and his allies but God ultimately gets the victory and glory.

Interestingly, in this book (at least as explained by Kline), Satan is bound for a 1,000 years hence granting salvation to the Gentiles. This is a debatable position in theological circles as there are many reasons to view 1,000 years not as literal but symbolic (G.K. Beale)." Kline also assaults the Post millennial eschatological position as questionable.

In a nutshell, the book is Christo-centric through and through pointing to Jesus as the long-awaited saviour/Messiah right from creation to consummation. The Holy Spirit of God is prominent in creation all the way through into eternity future bound by the all loving Covenant God. The book revolves around several points that include the return & presence of God's glory in salvation, promised consequences and elimination of evil as well as redemption for the Zion community. God is depicted as creator, re-creator, judge of the world, victor over Satan and redeemer of His people. With its eschatological dimension, the book is literary a gold mine of truth! What a glorious God is presented in the book of Zechariah!

Its Structure

The book is generally divided into three parts (though some argue that it has two parts) with respective sections. The first six chapters roughly constitute the first section, the next two (i.e. 7 & 8) the second while chapters 9 through to 14 constitute the latter part. The probable reason for this tri-dissection is because the first parts had a more or less common/similar theme and in a sense

connected while the last part is written at a different time with somewhat different concerns although both point to Christ- his first advent, rejection, return, judgement and the future Temple. But the book has sections too under those heads. These include the night visions which hold the secrets of the prophecy because it is in them that instructions from God lie (though restricted to the earlier sections of the book).

Linkages

The book has interesting connections to other books of the Bible. For one thing, it is the most frequently quoted prophetic book in the New Testament. For another thing, it ties in well with the major prophets such as Isaiah as well as links to many books right from Genesis, Job, Ezra, Nehemiah, Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, Daniel, the Gospels, the Epistles all the way to Revelation.

Its scope and reach is by that token very wide but points to the creation of the Temple of God, right from creation and the recreation which is finally fulfilled at the close of history as Revelation narrates. Because of its extensive use of sometimes unclear symbols, visions and allegorical features, the book is generally viewed as difficult to decipher but the well schooled reader will note that it is written after the exile and aims to encourage the building of the Temple which points not only the physical but also the spiritual Temple, the church in which God lives by His Spirit.

It is worth noting that Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai and the two prophesied about the same time though Haggai came much earlier and much older by that token. Zechariah would continue to prophesy long after Haggai had been gathered to his fathers.

Nature of the Book

Obviously, the book is prophetic given its extensive use of symbols, visions, oracles and signs. Its genre may appear apocalyptic but it is prophetic, bringing hope and encouragement to the covenant children of God.

The Content

As earlier intimated, the book is prophetic in nature and touches on a number of pertinent issues both historical and future. It draws from history as it bears on the present history at drafting time (i.e. what led to exile, God's covenant and relevance to God's faithfulness and Temple construction despite the odds) but also it points to the future as to what the promised Messiah would do, achieve, triumph and foster God's eternal reign as well as the vanquishing of His enemies. In assessing the book, we adopt the break down that Kline offers us verbatim

followed by a brief description of each vision.

The Visions ²

1. Governor of the nations: God is sovereign and reigns through all generations. He is in control of all events and able to do as He pleases. He also pleases to restore the nation of Israel even after seventy years in the Babylonian captivity, if only they call upon him. He is a covenant keeping God and loves His own.

2. Avenger of the afflicted: God is faithful to His covenant and committed to His people. Though Israel had sinned and been dispersed into exile, He remembers His promises and comes to their aid when they call upon Him. The church is under the shadow of His loving, caring wings. The battle belongs to the lord. By that token, the wicked are punished for their sin.

3. Builder of God's city: The Holy Spirit works through God's people in regeneration. The Church is God's Temple under construction and as more people get saved, so grows God's city. Though Zerubbabel led the physical Temple construction, God's Spirit works through his church to build the body of Christ.

4. Guardian of God's courts: Christ (the second Adam) is the chief guardian of God's courts as he saves his people through his atoning blood, imputed righteousness and death. People in their nature are sinful like Joshua in torn robes but God comes and cleanses them through the blood of Christ. Satan is by that token rebuked, trampled upon and defeated by the sacrifice of Christ although the struggle continues until the final consummation. The gospel is the principle means by which Satan's kingdom is destroyed and plundered. The saved people are thus recreated anew in Christ to the glory of God.

5. Anointer of God's Temple: God's Spirit is the one that fills the church, thus anointing it for divine service. While in Chapter 3 Jesus is the focus, in chapter 4, the Spirit is the focus because He is the one that regenerates, creates and sustains God's people. It is by His might that the Temple is a possibility without which all is a waste of time, resources and energy. The New covenant

² Different sources refer to the night visions in various other ways, For instance, according to the Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible there were eight visions.

The Eight Night Visions (Zech. 1:7-6:8)

1. The Man Among the Myrtle Trees (Zech. 1:7-17)
2. Four Horns and Four Craftsmen (Zech. 1:18-21)
3. A Man with a Measuring Line (Zech. 2:1-13)
4. A Clean Garment for the High Priest (Zech. 3:1-10)
5. The Gold Lampstand and the Two Olive Trees (Zech. 4:1-14)
6. The Flying Scroll (Zech. 5:1-4)
7. The Woman in a Basket (Zech. 5:5-11)
8. The Four Chariots and the High Priest (Zech. 6:1-8)

guarantees that God's Temple is filled with the Holy Spirit rather than the mere physical structure that was the centre of Jewish worship. In effect, there is no need for physical structures because the church is the very Temple of God, the body of Christ as it were. By that token the saint radiates the glory of God as they walk through life.

6. Desolator of the Apostates: The apostates are enemies of God and are thus destroyed. They cannot escape. God has promised that His enemies who trouble His people, the apple of His eye will eventually have to pay for their atrocities. God does more; he judges them and consigns them to a serious punishment as evidenced in the seventh and eighth visions.

7. Judge of the world: At the Parousia leading to the final judgement, Christ will Judge the world. In his first advent, he came as a saviour but the final time He comes as the judge, with each group getting their just reward.

8. King of Glory: Jesus is the King of Glory indeed. Having atoned for His people, he reigns eternally and sits at the right hand of God. This is probably the eighth vision but some do not regard it so.

Some Interesting Features About the Prophecy

Zechariah's prophecy certainly came at the right time when the liberated Israelites needed encouragement to complete the task of building the Temple. Having been allowed to return by King Cyrus about 538 BC some returned to Palestine to commence the Temple building but encountered some stringent opposition. As a result, the work stalled for close to sixteen years before the work commenced about and finally completed in 515 BC. Ezra captures the development phases narrating how the exiles returned, set the foundations and got hindered for a long time. Evidently, there is a lot of emotion around Temple worship for the Jewish community because this signified the presence of God giving them a distinctive identity. Without the Temple and its rituals, the Jewish community felt lost and disoriented.

Thus, the book of Zechariah has some interesting salient features worth noting:

The first is that the book has numerous night visions that Zechariah received about the present and future state of the nation of Israel as well as the battle which Satan wages against God's elect.

The second feature about this book is that the first few chapters, the visions appear to have been given relatively close to each other because they are dated from about November 520 BC on ward to a much later date. The remaining chapters, chapters 9-14, however have no date but appear to have been revealed and written long after the Temple had been completed and commissioned. This partly explains why some people suggest that the latter

chapters were not written by the same author of the first part of the book. But such assertions are not sufficiently convincing because the book is essentially one and united, though may appear to take different slants at times. Both parts point to Christ, the church and God's work by His Spirit.

The third feature about this book is the issues raised in the book. The writer for instance raises points like "who has despised the day of small things?" or "not by might nor by power but by my Spirit says the Lord". These sayings are pointed and designed to encourage as well as provoke the immediate Jewish mind.

The fourth feature is that the Prophecy seems to bring a conversational tone where God's words are quoted verbatim. God speaks directly or uses his Angels to deliver His word. At times, the Angel even explains or interprets some symbols.

The fifth point worth our note is the extensive use of symbols that depicts or points to either the future or draws from the past. We note the different coloured horses, riders, horns, myrtle trees, lamp stands, lamps, oil and a host of other symbols all pointing to a specific meaning. There is also an allusion Satan the accuser of the brethren, Joshua, Zerubabel and others that point to the church, the Promised Messiah, God's kingdom, types and shadows as well as allusions to a complete recreation of what failed to materialize in the probationary period in the Garden of Eden.

Finally, the book highlights the fact that building of the Temple is a royal covenantal undertaking often assigned to Kings to lead their nations with attendant blessings and cursing. This building took place in various forms and ways across history until finally the final Temple is in people's hearts where the Spirit of God dwells.

A critical analysis of the book will highlight the fact that God has been in the business of creating His Temple and calls upon human agents to carry out this mandate through covenants. For instance, in the book of Genesis, we have the creation account with the first humans put on probation and to "work" in the Garden. The initial creation is complete and declared "very good" but man was to continue to manage and populate this Temple. Then the fall comes along and ruins everything. Then there is Noah and the ark, Abraham, Moses, David and finally Christ who wraps up everything at the giving of the great commission leading to the end of things with a new Heaven and Earth as depicted in the book of Revelation. Note that in each case, there is an issue identified, a person selected e.g. a King, a commissioning, a covenant stipulating the consequences and God pledging to undertake ensuring that which has been agreed comes to pass. As you will notice, in each case, there was some issue that frustrates the effort to build but God's purposes will eventually prevail. In the Old Testament, physical structures are the main issue but in the New, it turns to be human

beings in whom God lives by His Spirit. This ties in well with the discourse Jesus had with the Samaritan woman in John 4.

Thus, we can see that the book has a lot of themes and ideas that relate to God and His purposes for mankind and ultimately for His glory.

What Others Have Said?

Many have said different things about the book. The following are some of their observations and comments:

1. The book is too complex and cannot be fully understood by a cursory reading but by diligent study, background information and applying the correct hermeneutical approach. This confuses and discourages some people.
2. The book was not written by one person and was evidently drafted at different times. But Jewish authorities, documents and writings point to the fact that Zechariah was written by one person though probably at different times.
3. Some say (including the African Bible Commentary) that the book is divided into two sections not two as suggested in this paper.
4. The number of the visions Zechariah saw is not agreed by all. While some hold that they were 8, others hold that they were 7 only.
5. The exact time of Zechariah's visions and the completion of the book are not clear with varying conclusions.

Conclusion

Having surveyed the book landscape of the critical and pivotal narrative, it is abundantly evident that this post exilic prophecy, alongside Haggai served a very important function in Israel, calling and urging them to return to the Temple building, as led by Zerubbabel and ultimately pointing to Christ. Although the book poses some challenges in grasping as well as interpretation, it is none the less a book worth embellishing oneself with the truth, extracting it from its hidden crevices applying the truths to one's own profit and good.

The symbolic language, obscure prophecies, Theophanies, types and shadows seem to cast a curtain behind which many would be Bible explorers have quit rather too soon but with a patient and diligent heart, they would no doubt come away very rich spiritually.

The Biblical-Theological reading approach advanced by Meredith Kline and others is well worth considering and adopting as one way to open up the Minor Prophets or indeed any book in the Bible with similar genre. Let's get back to this short but packed 14 chaptered book and marvel how it opens up the New as well as throwing light on the Old Testament!

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