

ZECHARIAH

The Prophet of Encouragement



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PART 1

Everyone familiar with the Awakening message knows that from its very beginning Zechariah 3 (the parable of Joshua and the Angel) has been a key passage of Scripture. Zechariah 3 is part of a series of parables and symbols written out in the first six chapters of Zechariah. We could be well profited by taking a closer look at this entire portion of Scripture. It is full of encouragement, hope and cheer for God's people today.

Some Principles of Interpretation

1 • HISTORICAL SETTING

Before we can understand many of the symbols and expressions used in the first six chapters, we should be familiar with the historical setting of Zechariah. By reading the book of Zechariah in conjunction with the book of Ezra and, if necessary, the sketch given in *Prophets and Kings*, pages 551 to 597, one may soon gain the needed background information.

The circumstances surrounding the book of Zechariah may be summarized briefly as follows:

The Jews had been in Babylonish captivity for seventy years. When Cyrus issued the first decree of restoration in 536 B.C., a mere 50,000 Jews responded to the opening of God's providence and participated in the second great exodus move-

ment. How feeble this movement seemed in comparison with the original exodus from Egyptian captivity! Under the leadership of Moses, about two million people left the land of captivity for the promised land. Israel then grew to become a nation of considerable strength. David defeated all the national foes. During the reign of Solomon, there was no nation on earth strong enough to trouble Israel. But with apostasy came national decline. As Israel grew weaker, her enemies became stronger. Finally the little kingdom of Judah was swept aside by the armies of Babylon.

The captivity to Babylon was not the end, however. God had promised a restoration. But when seventy years had passed, most of God's people did not look with pleasing anticipation upon the prospect of returning to Palestine. What was there to go back to? The land was a wilderness. The city was a heap of rubble. The temple was only ashes. Besides, many had become comfortably settled in the land of their captivity. Some of them had secured good positions and homes.

Consequently, only 50,000 chose to place themselves under the leadership of Zerubbabel in the return to the homeland. We might regard them as brave pioneers; and doubtless many of them sacrificed material advantages for the uncertain venture of restoring a desolate land.

Humanly speaking, circumstances were discouraging for the returned exiles. Numerically, they were pitifully weak. Naturally they would have sadly compared their little band with the mighty nation they once were. Even when their nation was born, they were two million strong; but now they were reduced to 50,000. Then too, they were poor. God impressed Cyrus to donate some means for the work of restoring the temple.

When they arrived back in the homeland, the realization of the ruins must have been worse than the anticipation. But they pressed ahead. In the year 534 B.C., about two years after the decree of Cyrus, Zerubbabel laid the foundation of the new temple. What a scene it was! The younger generation rejoiced to see the beginning of the new work. But the older generation threw cold water on the enthusiasm. These older ones could remember the splendor of Solomon's temple. They could see that this second temple was going to be so inferior. They wept in disappointment and did much to weaken the faith and zeal of that little band of builders.

But worse was to come. The Samaritans became jealous as they saw the work of restoring the temple going forward, and they did everything to weaken the hands of the builders. Beset by poverty, hardship, discouragement, Samaritans and

other difficulties, the work moved forward very slowly. Back at the court of the Persian king, Daniel was earnestly fasting and praying for the welfare of his people. Through the intervention of Christ and His angels, the forces of evil arrayed against God's people were held in check all the days of Cyrus and all the days of Cambyses, his son. But the builders did not take full advantage of the opportunity of the openings of Providence. Finally the false Smerdis came to the throne of Persia. He not only listened to the evil reports from the Samaritans, but he commanded the Jews to stop building the temple.

Thus the work had come to a complete standstill. Grass and weeds were growing over the site of the temple. The people worked hard to become prosperous, intending to complete the temple after they had acquired more means. But the Lord sent them drought, mildew and blasting winds upon their crops. What a sad position they were in! Difficulties increased instead of diminishing, and the prospect of restoring the sanctuary seemed further away than when they had first commenced the work of rebuilding.

God did not forsake His people, but looked upon them with infinite pity and solicitude. He overruled earthly affairs to help them. Smerdis was slain, and Darius the Great came to the throne of Persia. He was more favorable to the Jews.

It was about this time (520 B.C.), a time of extremity, that God sent two prophets to help and encourage the builders. The first was Haggai. He was one of the most successful prophets of the Bible in gaining an immediate response. His message was short, sharp and simple—*Resume building!* He told the people that they could never expect God's blessing upon their work while they let God's house lie waste. He promised that God would bless them from the day they would begin to build. The people were convicted, convinced and moved to action.

The second prophet was Zechariah. He joined Haggai in giving needed encouragement to the builders. Notice how clearly this is stated in the words of Ellen White:

"Just two months after Haggai's last recorded message was delivered, Zechariah had a most encouraging series of visions regarding the work of God in the earth. These messages, written out in the first six chapters of the book of Zechariah, were given in the form of parables and symbols. They came at a time of great uncertainty and anxiety, when it seemed as if the permission granted the Jews to rebuild was to be withdrawn. The future appeared very dark. God saw that his people were in need of being sustained and cheered by a revelation of his infinite compassion and love. His testimonies at this time were of peculiar significance to the men who were advancing in the name of the God of Israel."—*The Review and Herald*, Dec. 26, 1907 (see also *Prophets and Kings*, p. 580).

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2 • PURPOSE OF THE PROPHECIES OF ZECHARIAH 1 TO 6

With the foregoing knowledge of the historical setting of Zechariah, we are able to see the point of the series of visions given in chapters 1 to 6. According to the statement from Ellen White, the visions "written out in the first six chapters of the book of Zechariah . . . were of peculiar significance to the men who were advancing in the name of the God of Israel." The messages of Zechariah 1 to 6 were given to cheer, comfort and encourage the builders of the temple.

3 • APPLICATION TO OUR DAY

These prophecies of Zechariah also have great meaning for our day. This is because God's people in this dispensation find themselves in a similar situation. The end of the seventy years corresponds to the end of the 2300 years. On both occasions there was an exodus movement from Babylon—one from literal Babylon in 536 B.C., and the other from spiritual Babylon in A.D. 1844. The Jews were engaged in the work of restoring the sanctuary that was made desolate by Babylon; the Adventists began restoring the sanctuary that was trodden down by the Papal power (see Daniel 8:11-14). As there was a delay in restoring the temple in the days of Zerubbabel, so there has been a longer

delay caused by the Laodicean condition of the church. We could go on making comparisons, but one thing is plain. The same encouragement, hope and cheer given by Zechariah in 520 B.C. is needed just now for a situation that is astoundingly similar.

To summarize: The prophecies of Zechariah 1 to 6 primarily apply to the rebuilding of the temple after the seventy years' captivity to Babylon. They were given to cheer, encourage and comfort the builders. Because God's people are now engaged in working in harmony with Christ in restoring the heavenly sanctuary, the same cheer, comfort and encouragement are suited to God's people today.

4 • REFERENCE TO PRIMARY APPLICATION

Some make the mistake of trying to apply the visions of Zechariah 1 to 6 to our day without due attention to their primary meaning in reference to the local, historical situation in Palestine. We must remember that the prophetic books of the Bible were written in reference to local, historical situations in Palestine. Daniel and the Revelation are exceptions. (The prophecies of these two books were written about future events beyond reference to any local, historical events among the Jews.)

Let us take an example. Chapters 40 to 49 of Isaiah are written about the restoration from captivity at the end of the seventy years. They speak of Cyrus, the drying up of the Euphrates, the downfall of Babylon, and Cyrus' decree to restore Jerusalem. Of course they have an eschatological (last-day) application too. So there is a primary and a secondary application of the prophecy. The primary application of a prophecy serves as a *type* of the larger and perhaps more important application.

Zechariah's prophecies were primarily written to encourage those who were rebuilding the temple at the end of Babylonish captivity. This work of restoration, carried on under the leadership of Zerubbabel, serves as a type of the great work of restoration of the heavenly sanctuary going forward under the leadership of Jesus.

In the very nature of the case, we must have some understanding of the primary application before we can appreciate the full force of the secondary (eschatological) application. If one does not understand the type, how can he adequately understand the antitype?

Therefore the first thing to do when considering the meaning of Zechariah 1 to 6 is to see how the visions applied to the men who were rebuilding the temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel. The statement of Ellen White is explicit—the

parables and symbols of chapters 1 to 6 were written to encourage the men who were building the temple. This point must be made decisively clear, for some have given such loose reign to imagination that they have interpreted Zechariah 1 to 6 in such a way as to have no relation to the local, historical setting of the book. As we look at each vision, we must ask, How would this vision encourage, cheer and comfort those men who were rebuilding the temple? When that is understood, then we may proceed to see how the same vision may cheer, encourage and comfort those who are doing a similar work today.

Examples of Wrong Application

In chapter 1 Zechariah sees some horses—red, speckled and white—which report certain things to "the angel of the Lord." Some expositors have suggested that these horses represent different periods of the history of the church—i.e., from creation to the end of the world. But according to Ellen White, each vision in chapters 1 to 6 was "of peculiar significance to the men" who were building Zerubbabel's temple. She states that each vision was especially designed to encourage and cheer these builders. It may be readily seen that the previously-cited interpretation of the horses has no "peculiar significance" to the builders at all! How could they be encouraged and cheered by

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such an empty interpretation. Such an interpretation has no relevance to the context or to the message of the book. In chapters 1 to 6 God was not mocking the builders in riddles that could not be understood by them; or if they could be understood, had no special reference to their task at hand.

In chapter 1 Zechariah also sees four horns. "And I said unto the angel that talked with me, What be these? And he answered me, These are the horns which have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem." Verse 19. Some have tried to interpret the vision of these horns without reference to the plain context of Zechariah 1. The chapter refers to the affliction of God's people by the heathen powers and their seventy years' captivity. Primarily, Zechariah was not prophesying of future powers that would scatter Judah, Israel and Jerusalem. Writing in the true historical context, Ellen White says, "Zechariah then saw the powers that *had* 'scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem,' symbolized by four horns."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 581. Notice the tense of the verb both in Zechariah 1:19 and in *Prophets and Kings*, page 581. Zechariah was shown the horns that *had* scattered the Jews. In this context the horns refer to the powers that had scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem *prior* to 520 B.C.

Then Zechariah was shown "four car-

penters" (Zechariah 1:20, 21). Notice how clearly Ellen White applies this symbol to the historical situation of 520 B.C.:

"... the prophet sees the powers that had 'scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem,' symbolized by 'four horns.' Immediately afterward he sees 'four carpenters,' representing the agencies used by the Lord in restoring his people and the house of his worship, as decreed by Cyrus and his successors, as well as by God himself."—*The Review and Herald*, Dec. 26, 1907.

One can readily see how this vision would encourage Zerubbabel and those helping him rebuild. Jerusalem was still desolate. The temple had not been rebuilt. The heathen powers were hindering them in their task. But through Zechariah they could be encouraged to know that God had sent "four carpenters" to cast out the horns of the Gentiles and to restore His house of worship according to the decree of Cyrus and of God Himself.

But some ignore this plain, historical context and interpret the vision of the carpenters in a way that is in no way relevant to rebuilding the temple. An exposition before this writer says, "So the carpenters do their work during the period of history reaching from the thirteenth century and the national Sunday law." The expositor does not even hint that this interpretation is a secondary application to the four carpenters. According to him, this is what they are! But according to Ellen G. White,

the carpenters represent "the agencies used by the Lord in restoring his people and the house of his worship, as decreed by Cyrus and his successors, as well as by God himself."

To see the utter fallacy of applying the carpenters to the period between the thirteenth century and the Sunday law, we have only to consider this question: How could this possibly be encouragement of "peculiar significance to the men" who were building the temple in 520 B.C. Nay, worse, how could they even understand the vision if that were the meaning, since they could not know anything about the Papal period or the Sunday law? This expositor has failed to notice that each vision was specifically given to encourage Zerubbabel and his brave helpers, who were weighed down with great difficulties.

One more example of failure to notice the historical context and theme of the visions will suffice. In Zechariah 6 the prophet records how he sees four chariots with horses attached to each chariot. According to Ellen G. White, this vision, along with the others that preceded it, was "of peculiar significance to the men who were advancing in the name of the God of Israel" by rebuilding the temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel. This vision, along with the preceding visions, was to encourage, cheer and comfort these men who were pressed under a great trial

of faith. So then, if an interpretation of the four chariots is true, it must meet these specifications: It must be relevant to the men rebuilding the temple, and it must be of such a nature as to give great encouragement to them. But according to a recent expositor, the four chariots represent four periods in the history of the Christian church, starting from the thirteenth century after Christ. To see how utterly wide of the mark is such an interpretation, one has only to ask, How could such a concept encourage Zerubbabel and those working under his leadership? How could this be a message of special comfort to them?

But, says one, do you mean to say that Zechariah only applies to the situation and to the builders of the temple in 520 B.C.? No! We have already seen that in 1844 God began to restore the great truth of the heavenly sanctuary, according to the prophecy of Daniel 8:14. As God had men back in 520 B.C. who were repairing the ruins caused by Babylon, so God has men today who are working to "raise up the foundations of many generations." Isaiah 58:12. The rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel is a type of the work of restoration that began in 1844, not the thirteenth century A.D. When we understand how Zechariah's visions were suited to encourage the builders back in his day, we may rightly apply their encouragement to our day.

To be continued