

Introduction to Zechariah

Zechariah is a priest-prophet, which is rare in the Hebrew Bible. For most of Biblical history the priests and prophets are at odds, because the priests get co-opted by the kings for political purposes and end up corrupted. The prophets then call the kings and priests to repentance, and, in general, they don't. The implicit suggestion is the adversity of exile in Babylon resulted in the Levites again being righteous enough to be priestly prophets. The unrighteous or non-zealous Levites would have just stayed in Babylon, or wherever they were scattered to, while the more zealous Levites return to Jerusalem.

Contemporary with Haggai, Zechariah's writing style is prophetic along the lines of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel (a.k.a., the major prophets) where Haggai is more cut and dry with, "Thus says the Lord...".

Haggai and Zechariah are referenced in Ezra 6 (esp. note 6:14 where they are credited for spurring the people on to rebuilding the Temple) and Neh. 12.

History

The historical setting is well known and understood. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah review the historical context well, and the secular history surrounding these events is equally well known as both Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great left a considerable impression owing to their military, political and economic accomplishments.

The time is approximately 500 BC/BCE and Darius has replaced Cyrus as king of the Persian Empire. Cyrus conquered the Babylonians and his open-minded view towards religion paved the way for the Jews to return to Jerusalem, which Darius implemented and supported.

Purpose

As the Jews returned to Jerusalem, they were free to pursue their own religion. Having that opportunity, the Levites encourage those who remained in Jerusalem and those who returned from exile to be faithful and rebuild the Temple and re-establish the Jewish religious identity by worshipping according to the dictates of the Law of Moses. The Jews were to return to their land and return to the Lord, the ultimate symbol of which was Temple Worship.

Text

Based upon subject and structure, the text is in three blocks or sections ch. 1-6, ch. 7-8, and ch. 9-14.

Chapters 1-6 are the early prophecies of Zechariah following the classic symbolic style of the major prophets. The prophecies form a clear pattern that is intended to encourage the Jews at Jerusalem to reject the ways of Babylon and establish Zion and build the Temple.

1:1-1:6 Return to Me, don't be like your fathers, confess I dealt with them justly

1:7-1:21 Patrol of Four Horsemen, Israel was scattered to the four winds, flee Babylon

2 The Lord's plumb line comes to Jerusalem, protection, flee Babylon

3 The High Priest and Branch of David

4:1-2 The Temple Menorah

4 The two olive trees, the two anointed ones

5 The Lord's scroll of curses comes to Jerusalem, destruction, Babylon put away

6:1-8 Patrol of Four Chariots, Israel gathered out of from the four winds

6:9-15 Offering of exiles made into crown for the Branch of David, a priest-king

Chapters 7-8 are more cut and dry prophecies dealing with the people at Jerusalem, encouraging them to not be hypocrites (7:1-7) but to live the Law of Moses in spirit and truth (7:8-10), unlike their fathers, who hardened their hearts (7:11-13) and were scattered (7:14).

The Lord emphasizes that He will reestablish Zion (8:1-3) and make it peaceful and prosperous when He gathers His people to bring them home and they worship Him sincerely (8:4-8). Do not fear (8:9), things were bad (8:10), but they will now be good (8:11-15), because you will be worthy (8:16-17). You will enjoy the divinely appointed feasts from the Law of Moses (8:18-19), and be so prosperous and happy that people from all nations will seek after the Lord, because of your good example (8:20-23).

Chapters 9-14 are presumably later prophecies which again return to the symbolic style. These chapters are blatantly eschatological and foretell a terrible conflict wherein the Lord Himself intervenes to save Judah and Jerusalem. The connection between 9:9 and the later apocalyptic chapters explains why the Jews were so excited at the triumphal entry, and what their expectations were.

Chapter 9 The Lord will put down all of the foreign nations (9:1-7) and bring peace to Judah and Israel (9:8-10) and, because of the covenant (9:11) make them mighty and protect them (9:12-17).

Chapter 10 The Lord would have blessed them as He had promised (10:1, cp. Deut. 11:14-15), but they forsook Him for idols and false prophets, so they were punished (10:2-3b). But, the Lord will remember Judah and Israel and gather them back and redeem them (10:3c-12).

Chapter 11 Apparently an object lesson where Zechariah warns the people that they are following false prophets, and therefore reject the Lord's favor and unity. The JPS translation is more suggestive that this text is a record of a literal account, as opposed to a symbolic text.

Chapter 12 In the day that all nations gather against Jerusalem, Judah will be made strong and the Lord will strike down all the nations.

Chapter 13 The day of conflict is meant to purify Judah (13:1) because false prophets will be humiliated and destroyed (13:2-6), leaving the righteous who call on Him (13:7-9).

Chapter 14 The Day of the Lord, the great and terrible conflict between the wicked nations and the Lord. This final chapter is striking in its literal presentation, particularly given how symbolic the preceding text is.