

Signposts in Zechariah

Introduction

Zechariah is an important work in the Minor Prophets. In fact, along with Daniel, themes from Zechariah are repeated and paralleled in Revelation; thus understanding these first helps one to interpret Revelation correctly.

I do not currently have time or energy to do a full commentary on this book but this paper seeks to explain some of the important themes, tropes, symbols and typology.

Horsemen

I saw by night, and behold, a man riding on a red horse, and it stood among the myrtle trees in the hollow; and behind him *were* horses: red, sorrel, and white. Zech 1:8

In general, horses symbolise power, strength and speed – and often in a military context.

Red horse

Usually symbolises war and slaughter. Cf. Rev 6:4.

White horse

Usually signifies peace. Can refer to righteous (white equals purity) conquering, as in Rev 6:2.

Sorrel horse

Or speckled, reddish, tawny, bay. Neither red nor white, a mix of peace and war. More settled times than war.

With the first chariot *were* red horses, with the second chariot black horses, with the third chariot white horses, and with the fourth chariot dappled horses -- strong *steeds*. Zech 6:2-3

Black horses

Usually speaks of death. In Rev 6:5 it refers to the death caused by famine.

Dappled horses

Dappled grey, spotted, marked. Neither black nor white. In between death and life, war and peace.

Cf. Rev 6:2-8.

Myrtle trees

Myrtle trees (rather, a shrub) were important to the Israelites and generally spoke of prosperity.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree; and it shall be to the LORD for a name, for an everlasting sign *that* shall not be cut off. Isa 55:13

It is mentioned three times in Zechariah chapter one (half of the entire mentions in the Bible):

I saw by night, and behold, a man riding on a red horse, and it stood among the myrtle trees in the hollow. Zech 1:8

And the man who stood among the myrtle trees. Zech 1:10

So they answered the Angel of the LORD, who stood among the myrtle trees, and said. Zech 1:10

So here we have an association of the myrtle tree with the Angel of the Lord and other angels involved in the purpose of God. Why myrtle?

What is it?

It is a small tree or shrub of the genus *Myrtus*, which gives its name to the large family *Myrtaceae*, containing some 3,000 species of small shrubs and trees. The European myrtle, *Myrtus communis*, is an evergreen shrub of southern Europe and western Asia. The family is mainly centred on tropical and subtropical regions and includes *Eucalyptus* and cloves. The bog myrtle, *Myrica gale*, is an unrelated shrub. It is an evergreen shrub, growing to about 16 feet tall, which has glossy aromatic foliage and white star-shaped flowers followed by purple-black oval berries.

The berries are crushed to make a type of pepper, which is used to spice alcoholic drinks and food. The leaves are crushed to make a fragrant essential oil. The leaves are also used in cooking.

Myrtle has long been used as a medicinal plant, being written about as far back as Hippocrates. It was prescribed for fever, sinusitis and as an analgesic as far back as Sumer (2,500 BC). It contains salicylic acid, similar to aspirin.

The plant was associated with many gods, such as Demeter or Aphrodite in Greek legend. It is a sacred plant in Jewish liturgy.

Throughout European history there have been traditions of weaving it into a garland, because of its association with fruitfulness, in a bride's head-dress or as a wedding bouquet. A sprig of myrtle from Queen Victoria's wedding bouquet was planted and sprigs from it have been included in royal weddings ever since.

- White flowers: white speaks of purity and righteousness. Flower petals speak of fruitfulness. Star-shaped speaks of heavenliness.
- Evergreen: symbolises eternal life, immortality.
- Aromatic foliage: speaks of being a sweet smelling aroma unto God.
- Berries full of seeds: symbolise fruitfulness.
- Oil: speaks of life and the Holy Spirit.
- Medicinal qualities: speak of God's healing power.

Historically, commentators have regarded the myrtle tree as a type of the church while ancient Jewish commentators saw it as a symbol of peace.

My view is that it is more specific. Its many properties speak of God's grace in the church.

In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, *was* the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each *tree* yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree *were* for the healing of the nations. Rev 22:2

This is a symbol of the Lord Jesus Christ, the source of life in the City of God. Eternal life resides in Christ and the immortality of saints is due to being united to Christ in life.

The myrtle of the Old Testament is really a pointer to the tree that is for the healing of the nations at the end.

The means of sharing the characteristics of the life of Christ (eternal life, peace, unity with God, fruit of the Spirit etc.) is the grace of God. It is through sovereign grace that we become partakers of Christ.

Grace is multifarious; it involves many aspects and not just mercy. As such, myrtle is a good type.

So the myrtle tree represents the manifold grace of God but especially as directed to the church, the body of Christ. This is why the angels in Zechariah stand in the midst of myrtle trees – God's grace. Angels are also closely connected to watching the church (Eph 3:10).

Horns and craftsmen

Horns

Then I raised my eyes and looked, and there *were* four horns. And I said to the angel who talked with me, 'What *are* these?' So he answered me, 'These *are* the horns that have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem'. Zech 1:18-19

To cast out the horns of the nations that lifted up *their* horn against the land of Judah to scatter it. Zech 1:21

'Horn' generally signifies power; usually military or national power; a kingdom.

The four horns are generally taken to mean the Babylonian Empire, the Medo-Persian Empire, the Greek (Macedonian) Empire and the Roman Empire; illustrated in Daniel 2 and 7. These ruled over Judah up to the times of the Messiah.

Craftsmen

This word is *charash* which means workman, craftsman, artisan, engraver, artificer, and skilful to destroy. These destroy the horns.

This refers to the angels or princes over various kingdoms that attack the enemies of God's people.

The human power guided by angelic power are the same as the four chariots mentioned Zech 6:1-3, 6-7. Commentators following Calmet identify them as:

- The first was Nabopolassar, father of Nebuchadnezzar, who overturned the empire of the Assyrians.

- The second was Cyrus, who destroyed the empire of the Chaldeans.
- The third was Alexander the Great, who destroyed the empire of the Persians.
- The fourth was Ptolemy, who mastered Egypt.

However, the horns do not refer to Assyria, which overturned Israel long before this period. It seems best to merely identify the craftsmen as the angelic powers protecting the elect.

John Gill has it thus:

- The Babylonians were destroyed by the Medes and Persians.
- The Persians by the Grecians.
- The Grecians by the Romans.
- The Romans by the Goths, Hunns, Vandals, &c. in the western part of the empire; and by the Saracens and Turks in the eastern part of it.

Trying to identify uncertain historic details is pushing into the realms of speculation.

JFB says it well:

The several instrumentalities employed, or to be employed, in crushing the "Gentile" powers which "scattered" Judah, are hereby referred to. For every one of the four horns there was a cleaving "artificer" to beat it down. For every enemy of God's people, God has provided a counteracting power adequate to destroy it.

As does the notes in the Geneva Bible:

These craftsmen or smiths are God's instruments, who with their mallets and hammers break these hard and strong horns which would overthrow the Church, and declare that no enemies' horn is so strong, but God has a hammer to break it in pieces.

So also Kliefoth (in Keil and Delitzsch),

The four smiths, therefore, symbolize the instruments 'of the divine omnipotence by which the imperial power in its several historical forms is overthrown'.

And Theodoret,

The powers that serve God and inflict vengeance upon them from many directions.

Measuring line

Then I raised my eyes and looked, and behold, a man with a measuring line in his hand. So I said, 'Where are you going?' And he said to me, 'To measure Jerusalem, to see what *is* its width and what *is* its length'. Zech 2:1-2

This refers to judicial examination. The line is in the hands of the Messiah who is asserting God's control of circumstances; divine sovereignty. The measuring is preparation for building work and extension. Jerusalem will be restored to its former glory. Cf. Ezek 40:3 referring to the same promise, 'He took me there, and behold, there was a man whose appearance was like the appearance of bronze. He had a line of flax and a measuring rod in his hand, and he stood in the gateway'. This is a promise to encourage the despondent inhabitants after the restoration with much building to do amidst opposition. The rest and peace came in the days of the Maccabees.

However, the measuring of Jerusalem is really a measuring of the elect. Jerusalem stands for all the elect of God; where God dwells. The promises in verse 3 onwards really speak about the future glory of the church: 'Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls', 'the LORD, 'will be a wall of fire all around her, and I will be the glory in her midst', etc. 'Towns without walls' speaks of enlargement of boundaries; universality.

The stone with eyes

'Hear, O Joshua, the high priest, you and your companions who sit before you, for they are a wondrous sign; for behold, I am bringing forth My Servant the BRANCH. For behold, the stone that I have laid before Joshua: upon the stone *are* seven eyes. Behold, I will engrave its inscription,' Says the LORD of hosts, 'and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day'.
Zech 3:8-9

Joshua himself stands as a type of Christ in two ways. Firstly, because he is high priest, and this office is a type of Christ, the Great High Priest. Secondly, his name is the same as 'Jesus'. 'Joshua' is the Anglicised rendition of 'Yeshua' or rather; 'Yahowshuwa' (meaning, 'Yahweh is salvation'). 'Jesus' is the Anglicised transliteration of the Grecian form of this word, 'Iesous'.

The Servant of God, the Branch, is also symbolic of Jesus Christ. The Jamieson, Fausset and Brown commentary says,

The Branch--Messiah, a tender branch from the almost extinct royal line of David (Zec 6:12; Isa 4:2; Isa 11:1; Jer 23:5; Jer 33:15). Luk 1:78, where for "day spring," "branch" may be substituted (Mal 4:2, however, favours English Version). The reference cannot be to Zerubbabel (as GROTIUS thinks), for he was then in the full discharge of his office, whereas "the Branch" here is regarded as future.

The 'Branch' is a symbol of the promised Messiah, 'There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD' (Isa 11:1-2). The 'Branch' refers to Jesus being of the line of David.

The stone is also a type of Christ. The whole passage is a Messianic prophecy.

God promises to provide a stone that removes the iniquity of the elect in one day. That can only be Jesus.

Jesus referred to himself as a stone many times, as did the apostles:

Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes"? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.' Matt 21:42-44 [Also Mk 12:10-11; Lk 20:17-18.]

This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. Acts 4:11-12

They stumbled at that stumbling stone. As it is written: 'Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offence, And whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame'. Rm 9:32-33

'The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone', and 'A stone of stumbling and a rock of offence'. They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed. 1 Pt 2:7-8

The reference to seven eyes speaks of the omniscience of God and is usually associated with the Holy Spirit. This stone, Jesus, is God and full of wisdom.

Revelation follows this line of thought,

And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. Rev 5:6

The Lamb is a symbol of the Lord Jesus. The seven horns refer to supreme power while the seven eyes figure the all-seeing Spirit of God.¹

This passage, therefore, uses multiple symbols pointing to the Lord Jesus as the promised Messiah.

The lampstand

And he said to me, 'What do you see?' So I said, 'I am looking, and there *is* a lampstand of solid gold with a bowl on top of it, and on the *stand* seven lamps with seven pipes to the seven lamps. Two olive trees *are* by it, one at the right of the bowl and the other at its left'. Zech 4:2-3

Then I answered and said to him, 'What *are* these two olive trees -- at the right of the lampstand and at its left?' And I further answered and said to him, 'What *are these* two olive branches that *drip* into the receptacles of the two gold pipes from which the golden *oil* drains?' Then he answered me and said, 'Do you not know what these *are*?' And I said, 'No, my lord'. So he said, 'These *are* the two anointed ones, who stand beside the Lord of the whole earth'. Zech 4:11-14

¹ 'Seven Spirits of God' are figurative, poetic emphasis speaking of the omnipotent Spirit of God. There is only one Holy Spirit.

Description

- A lampstand of solid gold with a bowl on top of it; there are seven lamps on the stand.
- On the *stand* seven lamps with seven pipes to the seven lamps.
- Two olive trees *are* by it, one at the right of the bowl and the other at its left.
- Two olive branches that *drip* into the receptacles of the two gold pipes from which the golden *oil* drains.

Interpretation

The lampstand

This is figurative of the church; that which shines the light of God in the Earth. 'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven' (Matt 5:16).

I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. ... The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches. Rev 1:12-13, 20

In Zechariah there is a single lampstand speaking of the unity of testimony with seven lamps on it representing divine perfection and universality; in Revelation it is seven lampstands, representing the multiplicity of churches of various characters.

Gold speaks of the divine origin.

The bowl

The bowl is full of oil that is a reservoir to feed the lamps and allow them to burn. This represents Christ, the fulness of the Spirit of God and giver of grace. Jesus is the fountain of life.

For with You *is* the fountain of life; in Your light we see light. Oh, continue Your lovingkindness to those who know You, and Your righteousness to the upright in heart. Ps 36:9-10

The water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life. Jn 4:14

Note that the oil is golden, that is divine in origin. ['What are these two olive branches that drip into the receptacles of the two gold pipes from which the golden oil drains?']

Pipes

There are seven feeding pipes to the seven lamps, making 49 pipes in all.

This is the means of getting the oil to the lamps from the reservoir. This is the function of the Holy Spirit to bring the grace of Christ to the church. Seven pipes to each speaks of the perfection of the divine supply of grace. They could also refer to the word of God, the Bible, the means used by the Spirit to impart grace and knowledge.

The olive trees

- Two olive trees *are* by it, one at the right of the bowl and the other at its left.
- Two olive branches that *drip* into the receptacles of the two gold pipes from which the golden *oil* drains.
- These *are* the two anointed ones, who stand beside the Lord of the whole earth'

The number two refers to witness and testimony.

Olive trees in isolation speak about fruitfulness, value, beauty (Deut 8:8; Ps 52:8; 128:3; Rev 11:4). Connected to this, in the OT the olive tree alone signifies Israel as the elect are valuable and fruitful to God (Jer 11:16; Hos 14:6).

The two olive trees here are parallel to the two witnesses in Rev 11:3-4:

And I will give *power* to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the God of the earth.

The olive trees amplify and repeat the symbol of the church but as a witness, in Zechariah and Revelation. This is fulness of spiritual testimony, prophetic ministry. The two drainage pipes speak of the power of the Spirit empowering the church.

The two anointed ones, also refer to the church. 'Two' emphasises divine testimony in the church.

The branches are the means of the oil dripping to the lamps. Oil speaks of grace. The power of the Spirit is given to the church to allow it to shine by grace.

The initial fulfilment of this is seen in God's representatives Joshua (spiritual power) and Zerubbabel (political power). These two helped establish the exiles in Jerusalem. But the main fulfilment is in the future expression of the church as a divine witness, as in Revelation.

The main point is a spiritual testimony seen in the world as light, manifested in the church as God's witness, enabled by the Holy Spirit giving divine grace.

This also parallels the statements made about Zerubbabel:

So he answered and said to me: 'This *is* the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit," Says the LORD of hosts. "Who *are* you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel *you shall become* a plain! And he shall bring forth the capstone with shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!' "' Zech 4:6-7 etc.

The work of the church is not done by human strength but by grace given by God's Spirit.

The flying scroll

Then I turned and raised my eyes, and saw there a flying scroll. And he said to me, 'What do you see?' So I answered, 'I see a flying scroll. Its length *is* twenty cubits and its width ten cubits'. Then he said to me, 'This *is* the curse

that goes out over the face of the whole earth: "Every thief shall be expelled", according to this side of *the scroll*; and, "Every perjurer shall be expelled", according to that side of it.' I will send out *the curse*,' says the LORD of hosts; 'It shall enter the house of the thief and the house of the one who swears falsely by My name. It shall remain in the midst of his house and consume it, with its timber and stones'. Zech 5:1-4

Scroll description

The scroll is a rolled up parchment that predated books with paper.

The measurement: 'Its length is twenty cubits and its width ten cubits'. This equates to 30 feet by 15 feet. These measurements equal the Holy Place of the Tabernacle (also pointed to by the lampstand) and also the porch of the temple (1 Kg 6:3).

The porch of the temple was where the law was read out. The law was sometimes called, a 'scroll' (Ps 40:7).

'Over the face of the whole earth': this refers to Judah.

Symbolism

The scroll usually refers to God's decree or judgments. It does so in Rev 5 where only Jesus can open the scroll and loose the seven seals – i.e. fulfil God's decree, which involves judgments on the wicked as well as salvation for the elect. It is the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose.

Here it is specifically stated that the scroll is God's judgment of a curse on the Earth to condemn liars and thieves. This is the condemnation of God's law on sinners.

'Flying' refers to the speed of the coming judgment.

The writing on both sides of the scroll may point to sins against God and sins against men; possibly a reference to the two tablets of the law.

The woman in a basket

Then the angel who talked with me came out and said to me, 'Lift your eyes now, and see what this is that goes forth'. So I asked, 'What is it?' And he said, 'It is a basket that is going forth'. He also said, 'This is their resemblance throughout the earth: Here is a lead disc lifted up, and this is a woman sitting inside the basket'; then he said, 'This is Wickedness!' And he thrust her down into the basket, and threw the lead cover over its mouth. Then I raised my eyes and looked, and there were two women, coming with the wind in their wings; for they had wings like the wings of a stork, and they lifted up the basket between earth and heaven. So I said to the angel who talked with me, 'Where are they carrying the basket?' And he said to me, 'To build a house for it in the land of Shinar; when it is ready, the basket will be set there on its base'. Zech 5:5-11

This has reference to the exile whereby wickedness was removed from Judah and transferred to Babylon where it could mingle among its own. Babylon is repeatedly portrayed as a woman or harlot steeped in wickedness (see Rev).

‘Basket’ (or ‘*ephah*’, a type of dry measure) refers to God weighing out and judging the sins of the wicked.

Here, the woman is Judah who has become like Babylon in her sins; wickedness personified.

Lead cover refers to the wrath of God holding down this sin. There is no escaping God’s judgment. It may also refer to the heaviness of sin’s guilt.

The two winged women: the agents carrying the woman away are themselves agents of wickedness. Two are required to carry such a heavy load. It may specifically be the heathen nations used by God to punish Israel and Judah for idolatry: Assyria² and Babylon (there are various suggestions), but essentially it refers to the agents used by God in judgment. Wings represent speed. The stork refers to a migratory bird with very big wings; an unclean bird in the law.

‘They lifted up the basket between earth and heaven’: that is, visible in the eyes of the world.

‘Shinar’ refers to Babylonia (southern Mesopotamia, Gen 10:10); the centre of rebellion to God going back to the times of Nimrod and Babel.

‘Build a house for it in the land of Shinar’: in Babylon (cf. Jer 29:5, 28); the Jews were told to build houses in the place of exile due to their long exile there.

‘Set . . . on its base’: fixed in its proper place. Idolatrous wickedness is cast out of Judah to dwell with the idolatrous wicked (of whom Babylon is the type).

The four chariots

Then I turned and raised my eyes and looked, and behold, four chariots *were* coming from between two mountains, and the mountains *were* mountains of bronze. With the first chariot *were* red horses, with the second chariot black horses, with the third chariot white horses, and with the fourth chariot dappled horses -- strong *steeds*. Then I answered and said to the angel who talked with me, ‘What *are* these, my lord?’ And the angel answered and said to me, ‘These *are* four spirits of heaven, who go out from *their* station before the Lord of all the earth’. Zech 6:1-5

In general, this refers to the angelic powers (‘spirits of heaven’) sent by God to defend the elect.

- Mountains: kingdoms, nations, powers.
- Bronze: judgment.

² Assyria conquered Israel in 721 BC. Babylon conquered Judah in 586 BC.

- Four: figurative of the whole Earth.
- Horses: strength, speed.
- Chariot: military speed and efficiency.

The visions and structure of Zechariah

Vision	Meaning
Israel urged to repent. [1:1]	
First vision: the horsemen. [1:7]	Judgment of war and unsettled times.
Second vision: the horns and the craftsmen. [1:18]	The kingdoms set against Jerusalem attacked by the craftsmen (God's agents).
Third vision: the man with the measuring line. [2:1]	God's sovereignty over the elect. Future restoration.
Interlude: an appeal to the exiles. [2:6]	
Fourth vision: Joshua and Satan. [3:1]	The spiritual war between God and Satan worked out on the Earth.
Fifth vision: the lampstand and the olive trees. [4:1]	The testimony of the church.
Sixth vision: the flying scroll. [5:1]	God's decree and judgment.
Seventh vision: the woman in a basket. [5:5]	The sinners in Judah relocated to Shinar.
Eighth vision: four chariots. [6:1]	The angelic powers sent by God to defend the elect.
The coronation of the Branch. [6:9]	
<i>Didactic: c7-8.</i>	
Hypocritical fasting condemned. [7:1]	
Punishment for rejecting God's demands. [7:8]	
God's promises to Zion. [8:1]	
Joyful fasting. [8:18]	
Peoples drawn to Jerusalem. [8:20]	
<i>Prophecies c9-11, 12-14.</i>	
Judgment on Israel's enemies. [9:1]	
The coming Messiah. [9:9]	
The restoration of Judah and Israel. [10:1]	
The mission of the Messiah. [11:4]	
Jerusalem's victory. [12:1]	
Mourning for the pierced one. [12:10]	
Idolatry cut off. [13:2]	
The striking of the shepherd. [13:7]	
Future warfare, the glory and final victory of the church. [14:1]	

Conclusion

In general, the visions speak about the power of God's sovereignty in fulfilling his decrees of judgment and salvation. And in particular the salvation, protection and glory of the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit imparting the grace of God, to be the divine testimony of Jesus the Messiah on the Earth.

The later prophecies continue this theme, which require a separate study.

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