

ZECHARIAH: A PROPHET DURING A PIVOTAL TIME

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The reader of the Book of Zechariah is confronted by a number of allegoric visions, which do not easily yield interpretations. The attempts to connect them to historic occurrences during the time of the prophet or to historic developments during the ensuing years are mostly nebulous and unconvincing. The later chapters of the book are of eschatological character and seem, at first glance, totally unconnected to the earlier chapters; so much so that many scholars concluded that we deal here with two personalities whose writings were arbitrarily combined into one book.

This article is an attempt to develop the underlying theme of the prophet, which will clarify the reported visions of the first eight chapters and apply equally to the later ones. It will thus justify the decision of those who canonized this book as the work of only one prophet.

All the biblical leaders and their writings can be fully understood only in the framework of their time. Unless we have a clear picture of the political, cultural and religious developments of the epoch in which they lived we cannot possibly enjoy full understanding of their written records. Zechariah is no exception. And, since he was a prophet, we are predominantly interested in the theological developments which he confronted.

THE UNFOLDING OF PURE MONOTHEISM

The Bible from its beginning could be called the Textbook of Monotheism. Starting with Genesis and throughout the Pentateuch, its teaching is anchored in the belief in one God, and one God only. No student of the Bible needs any evidence for this fact. Nor is there any lack of evidence throughout the Bible that historically pure monotheism did not gain full acceptance until the very end of the biblical period.

If the fear of, or attraction to, local gods was not sufficiently counterbalanced by the teachings and cults of the Temple and its priests, or by the leadership of believing kings, monotheism was often overshadowed and some-
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times inundated by the surrounding cultures. This is what ultimately happened to the Ten Tribes when they lost their geographical foothold. It became the fate of the Jewish colony in Elephantine, that tried to save its belief in the Jewish God with its temple, but simultaneously paid tribute to the local god Khun and swore oaths in the name of an Egyptian goddess.¹

In contrast to the Ten Tribes, the defeated population of Judah that was exiled to Babylon emerged as pure monotheists, free from all traces of idolatry. This is mirrored in the historical records of the Bible. The Talmud, likewise, records this fact in the story of the mystical fire, which burned the evil inclination for worship of idolatrous gods.²

WHAT CAUSED THIS DEVELOPMENT?

We do not possess sufficient historical data to answer this question convincingly. We must substitute with theories and logic. William Foxwell Albright suggests: "They [the Jews] were now living in the Diaspora, among idolators Compromise was no longer possible."³

Another theory could be developed that the presence in Babylon of the prophet Ezekiel gave the theological development a more precise direction towards pure monotheism. Additionally, we find that the prophet Jeremiah had sent a strong message to the exiled population and was perhaps still influential among them.⁴ Last but not least, the presence of the influential Daniel may have served for theological guidance. Irrespective of the causes, what emerged was a total adherence to pure monotheism.

The newly strengthened religious outlook, which erased the belief in the existence of geographical gods, made the Jewish God the God of the entire world. No longer, so it must have appeared to many, did He need a special location as His "dwelling place." When the opportunity arose to return to Zion and to the land on which the Temple was to be rebuilt, a substantial number of Judeans remained in Babylon. The Jews who remained in Susa addressed the same deity as did the returnees to Zion, as did those who had fled to Egypt. A new theological concept had made its appearance. It created what Elias Bickerman called a "paradoxical combination of universal monotheism and particularism."⁵ The return to Zion and the reconstruction of the Temple loomed as the ultimate meritorious deed to those who invested so

much effort and devotion in it. On the other hand, the universal God could be reached from any part of the world over which He singularly ruled.

This was the theological background against which Zechariah received his prophetic calling. His mission and his preachings created a confluence of these supposed paradoxes. His task was to confirm God's universal rule over all the world and, simultaneously, His desire to establish the Temple and the land upon which it was to stand as particularly holy places. So successfully has this confluence been incorporated into the Jewish religion (and through it into other major religions) that we have almost lost the understanding of the original paradox and thereby the appreciation for the accomplishment of the prophet Zechariah.

Though the sanctification of Jerusalem and its Temple had been emphasized repeatedly by earlier prophets, and has been anticipated as early as the time of the Torah, the impact of this sanctification upon believers in monotheism must have been totally different from that upon a population embracing pure monotheism. If God is perceived as a Deity for a circumscribed area, the sanctification of one place within it poses no conflict. To demand it when God is the ubiquitous ruler of the whole world calls for explanation and re-affirmation.

ZECHARIAH'S ALLEGORIC VISIONS

Zechariah's visions in the first six chapters alternate between motion, allegorizing the universality of God's kingdom, and emphasis on Zion as the geographic center from which His rule emanates. A summary of these visions is herewith presented to illustrate this point.⁶

Vision No. 1 (1:8-17): The prophet sees a man astride a red horse with an unspecified number of red, sorrel and white horses roaming over the countryside. The attending angel explains that the horses are to reconnoiter the land (or perhaps the earth). Upon their return, they report that all is tranquil. The angel then prays for the welfare of Jerusalem and its environs and predicts Divine protection for it and the reconstruction of its Temple. In this vision, the confluence between God's universality and the choice of Jerusalem as God's dwelling place is quite obvious. It is the apparent confirmation of this theme.

Vision No. 2 (2:1-4): The prophet sees four horns which had been used as destructive weapons against Jerusalem. They are followed by four craftsmen who set out to dismantle them. This is an almost undisguised prediction that Jerusalem is about to be rebuilt and will not be vulnerable to conquest as it had been.

Vision No. 3 (2:5-17): The prophet perceives a mysterious man carrying a tape measure, engaged in measuring the dimensions of Jerusalem. An angel intervenes, explaining that Jerusalem is not to be confined by walls. Its defense will be a Divine wall of fire, stretching to accommodate all who wish to dwell there. Its influence is to extend outward, as far away as needed. The proposed absence of a physical boundary opens Jerusalem to those who want to (and should) settle there, and allows its influence to spread all over the world. Again, an emphasis of the co-existence of belief in God's ubiquity and the special status of Zion.

Vision No. 4 (3:1-10): Here, Zechariah perceives the high priest in inappropriate clothing, being harassed by the Satan. However, God decrees that the Satan should cease to intervene and the high priest be adorned with appropriate clothing. And God Himself predicts a bright future for the holy places. In this vision, the emphasis is solely on the importance of the Temple and the prophet's demand to rebuild it in spite of the difficulties being encountered.

Vision No. 5 (4:1-14): There is a seven-branch golden candelabrum, with an olive tree on each side of it. The explanation given by the attending angel makes this lamp-stand a symbol of the Divine power given to Zerubbabel. Additionally, as the vision continues, it represents *the eyes of the Lord, ranging over the whole earth . . .* (v. 10). This vision includes, as additional emphasis, a repeated admission by the observing prophet that he does not understand the meaning without the explanations offered. The underlying theme of the combination of God's ubiquity with the choice of Jerusalem as the preferred place, emerges very strongly in this vision. The Lord who watches His universe from this sanctified spot commands His people to build the Temple, and promises a continuous flow of oil for the seven lights of the candelabrum.

Vision No. 6: (5:1-4): The prophet sees a flying scroll, on which there is recorded the curse that will descend on those who steal or swear falsely. This

vision returns to motion, allegorizing the Godly power to rule over the entire world. Theft and perjury are chosen as the basic symbols of ethical violations for which the Lord will send punishment. The name of the Deity Who enforces this demand is the Lord, the God of Zion.

Vision No. 7 (5:5-11): The prophet sees a measuring cup [*eifah*] containing a woman. Then come two women with wings, flying while carrying the measuring cup. The angel tells the observing prophet that they will fly to the Land of Shinar to deposit their load. A measuring cup is of fixed dimension. As an allegoric symbol, it represents restriction. The woman in it, as well as the two flying women, refer allegorically to the major sin of this era, the uninhibited selection of pagan marriage partners, against which Ezra fought so strongly. The Land of Shinar, the third major symbol in this vision, refers to the place where the captured vessels of the Temple had been stored (Dan. 1:2). However, the mere presence of these vessels had not sanctified the locality, as perhaps some may have thought. The picture that emerges from this vision is the limitations that the universality of God brings with it. It does not allow the conclusion that all locations and all of mankind are equal. The men who live in the sanctified area and who are building God's Temple cannot marry outside their chosen circle, no more than Shinar became holy when the Temple vessels were stored there. God rules over all territories and all human beings, but He sanctifies a special place and a selected people. The confluence of universality and particularism has its limitations; it must be measured in a measuring cup.

Vision No. 8 (6:1-8): Four chariots emerge from between two mountains of brass, drawn by horses of varying colors. They are identified as *the four winds of heaven* (v. 5), moving over all the earth. This vision parallels the first one (though without the prayer for Jerusalem). It allegorically re-emphasizes the newly acquired faith in pure monotheism.

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EXILE

After the visions have explained the philosophy of the pure monotheistic religion and its need for a spiritual center, the prophet describes the relationship between the Temple and those who chose to remain in exile. Are they part of the outside world, or are they an integral component of the center of monotheism which they also practice? In later centuries, up to the present,

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this question no longer arises. At the time of Zechariah, it took a prophetic message to clarify this point. We must never forget that in this era practically all gods had power only within geographic boundaries.

The second half of Chapter 6 tells us that when three representatives from Babylon arrived, it took a prophetic message to allow the builders of the Temple to accept their contribution. This act then classified the Jewish monotheists of Babylon, and wherever else they may have been, as a part of the people whose center was Jerusalem. It even obligated them to donate to the construction of the Temple as participants in this effort, and instructed them to discontinue the mourning on days recalling the destruction of the First Temple.

This unification must have eradicated the last traces of monolatry, if any were left, because it eliminated any belief in the territorial confinement of God's rule.

ZECHARIAH'S ESCHATOLOGY

Chapters 9-14 are the eschatological messages of Zechariah. They are the logical continuation of the earlier prophecies, inasmuch as eschatology depends upon pure monotheism. Unless the belief in boundaries for gods is eliminated, no universal acceptance of the true God is possible. All eschatological prophecies depend on this development in theological thinking.

Several earlier prophets delivered messages of a better future, and of the ultimate spread of God's rule over all the world. However, their messages were exhortations to the ones addressed; attempts to paint a glorious future as an enticement to adopt the needed belief and actions which could bring about this ideal state. In the time of Zechariah, when the belief in monotheism had been completely accepted by the Jewish people, his predictions for the coming of an ideal world must have had a tone of reality for his listeners.

This is, then, the over-all message of the prophet Zechariah: The acceptance of monotheistic creed combined with the reconstruction of the Temple in the Holy Land finally brings the world a step closer to the realization of the eschatological predictions he and earlier prophets had presented.

NOTES

1. See Bezalel Porten, *Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Jewish Military Colony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).
2. BT Yoma 69a
3. William Foxwell Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity* (New York: Doubleday & Co, 1957) p. 328.
4. See Jeremiah 29.
5. Elias Bickerman, *From Ezra to the Last of the Maccabees* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972) p. 8.
6. There are variations among commentators on how to count the visions. These different approaches do not interfere with the attempted interpretations presented here. The count used is taken from the commentaries in Mossad Harav Kook, Jerusalem 1990.

RESPONSES from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book TORAH DIALOGUES

1. To the servants: *See, he has brought us a Hebrew man, to ridicule us. He came to lie with me. . .*". To Potiphar: *The Hebrew slave you brought us came to mock me. . .*". It is not surprising that Joseph is not executed.

2. Yehudah HaLevi in his "Kuzari" (1:97) explains that the sin was not the creation of a physical symbol *per se*. True, many symbols were permitted but this one was unauthorized (see: N. Leibowitz: *New Iyyunim II*, p. 397).

3. From Leviticus 9:22: *Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them.*