

# The Book of Zechariah—Part 2

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This article is the second in a series of articles designed to give a brief commentary on the prophetic portion of the Old Testament known as the book of Zechariah. In particular, this article will deal with the introductory verses to the entire book given in Zechariah 1:1-6. These verses highlight the call for national repentance on the part of the people of Judah during the early years following the Babylonian exile. The introduction to the book of Zechariah given in these verses can be divided into two parts: (1) the general opening statement (v. 1), and (2) the command to learn from the past (v. 2-6). These combined elements summarize God's desire and call to the nation through Zechariah in light of His full intentions to keep His covenant promises from the nation's past. These intentions in their ultimate fulfillment are especially emphasized in Zechariah chapters 9-14. Consequently, the view that the introduction of 1:1-6 only serves to set up the first vision of the book (the vision of the horses, 1:7-17) should be rejected. For the same reason, one should not see these introductory verses as only framing the start of the eight night visions (1:7-6:15).

## **General Opening Statement (v. 1)**

Three areas can be discussed concerning the opening statement given in 1:1. First, the time of this particular word from God through Zechariah is stated (it also marks the start of *all* of the prophecies that Zechariah gave). It is significant that the prophecy of 1:1-6 is given during the reign of Darius. Darius, the Persian king, is also mentioned in 1:7 and 7:1. This emphasizes the fact that even in the return from the exile, the nation of Israel is living in the time of domination by the Gentiles as shown by Daniel's exilic prophecies (Dan. 2, 7). There is no rule of an Israelite or Davidic king whereby the prophecy can be placed chronologically. In the last article, we saw that the time of Zechariah's first message was about two months after Haggai had begun his own ministry. Thus, the two prophets are contemporary and possess essentially the same audience of post-exilic Jews.

Second, one must not gloss over the statement that the message of Zechariah was one delivered from the LORD, that is, Yahweh or Jehovah. Yahweh is the only Hebrew name for God used in the book of Zechariah (roughly 140 times in 110 verses) although the name does occur in the expression "LORD of hosts" over one-third of the time. This emphatic focus on the name Yahweh in the book of Zechariah underscores the ultimate message that the covenant God of the nation of Israel will one day keep all of His promises in exhaustive detail and bring deliverance and victory to the nation. The "word" is God's message, His talking, not just the prophets words or ideas. In this way, the book of Zechariah gives self-attestation to its divine origin and inspiration.

Third, the divine messenger is identified as the man Zechariah. In the last article, his heritage and position as a priest was discussed as well as the meaning of his name (God remembers). He is referred to in verse one as the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo. Apparently, the focus is on his relationship to his grandfather Iddo rather than his father Berechiah since Iddo is called a prophet. This is in harmony with other passages that state that Zechariah was a son (descendant of) Iddo without mentioning Berechiah (Ezra 5:1, 6:14). Iddo is also listed as one of the prominent priests who returned from exile with

Zerubbabel (Neh. 12:4). The priestly occupation of Zechariah may serve to show that Zechariah's overall ministry was to represent the people to God as well as represent God to the people, the latter being the content of the book of Zechariah.

### **Command to learn from the past (vs. 2-6)**

The second part of the introductory verses to Zechariah consists of God's command to learn from the past (1:2-6). The keeping of this command should yield a people who repent and return to the LORD and His ways. Thus, the command to learn from the past is actually a call to national repentance and obedience. These verses can be divided into the following three sections:

1. General statement of God's anger toward previous generations (v. 2),
2. Summary of God's command to repent and His promise if they repent (v. 3),
3. Example of past generations (v. 4-6).

The general statement of God's anger given in verse two begins in the Hebrew text with the verb "was angry" and ends with the noun "anger." This emphatic arrangement underscores the intensity of God's wrath. However, His anger does not target Zechariah's current audience, i.e., Zechariah's generation. Instead, the statement is a reminder that God had been angry with the "fathers." This opens up the possibility that Zechariah's generation still had time to avoid the consequences of God's anger. The discussion in verses four through six helps to identify whom the "fathers" actually are in this context. However, the language of verse two does show that the prevailing and pagan twentieth-century view of a "mush God," who cannot do anything but love, is foreign to biblical teaching. It even goes further and shows that God can even become angry with His own children, i.e., believers (cp. Amos 3:1-3).

This general statement about God's wrath to certain prior generations serves as a simple warning to Zechariah's post-exilic Jewish nation. The people should respond in light of God's anger to past generations by repenting of their sins in the present (v. 3). In that way, they can avoid the pouring out of God's anger upon them, that is, evade what others in the past were forced to endure. Some commentators have suggested that the main point of the call is for the people to convert spiritually to the true God, i.e., become genuine believers and followers of God. Certainly an application in this area might be made especially when comparing Zechariah's post-exilic generation to the pre-exilic generation that had abandoned true faith in the living God. However, in the context of Zechariah's day, when the people had previously committed to God in the very act of returning to the land after the exile and when Haggai was urging upon them a restoration of the temple life, it is best to see Zechariah's call to repentance here as an issue of sanctification of an already believing people. God's love is demonstrated, thereby balancing His previously mentioned anger, when He promises to respond to their repentance by turning to them (v. 3), presumably in a new and deepened fellowship as their covenant God.

Zechariah 1:4-6 gives more details as it discusses the example of past generations, which should motivate Zechariah's audience. Verse four reminds them that those who had gone before had not listened to the "former prophets." The language of the verse reflects the language of several pre-exilic prophets such as Hosea (14:1) and exilic prophets like Ezekiel (33:11). However, the language more strictly resembles that of Jeremiah (see Jer. 17:23, 18:11, 25:5, 29:19, 35:15, 36:31). This may place the focus of the term "fathers" squarely on the generation directly preceding the Babylonian exile. This generation culminated the moral declension which had started centuries before in

Judah and demonstrated the nation's total abandonment of its walk with Yahweh in spite of what He had done for them.

Verse five bluntly teaches via two terse questions that both the former prophets who had warned the fathers and the fathers themselves were now dead. This sets up the final introductory comment of verse six. In spite of the fact that the former prophets are not around to repeat the needed message of repentance to Zechariah's generation, that message still stands. Furthermore, it stands through the example of history. The disobedience by the fathers to the message of the prophets led to the judging act of God in history. That is, the nation was taken captive into Babylon. This experience as an object lesson, still fresh in the minds of Zechariah's generation, should be a warning as strong as any verbal message by any present day prophet. As a result, the people of Zechariah's day should repent of their sins and turn wholly to serving the LORD.