

The Kingdom of God in Zechariah

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In this study my aim is to summarize several of Zechariah's teachings about the coming kingdom of God. Such teachings should not be extracted from isolated proof texts but have clear relevance to the prophet's message in general. Therefore, I have provided some introduction, which can easily be supplemented in conservative commentaries and annotated Bibles.

The Prophets Haggai and Zechariah. These two prophets were “post-exilic,” ministering to the small returned remnant of Israel described in Ezra 1–6. Their early ministry triggered an immediate and dramatic response by the remnant, which reconsecrated itself to God and proceeded to rebuild the temple (Ezra 5–6). The temple and its service provided a focus for divine worship until the Messiah came. Thus, Haggai and Zechariah were catalysts for God's people who awaited the restoration of His kingdom as promised.

The Book of Haggai records five prophecies (some say four) on four dates, all in 520 BC. After his first prophecy (Hag. 1:1–11) the people immediately resumed work on the temple (1:12–15). Haggai's third (2:1–9) and fifth (2:20–23) messages looked beyond his immediate future.¹ They predicted that God would finally shake the nations and establish His glorious kingdom. Between Haggai's third and fourth messages (i.e., between 2:9 and 10), Zechariah began preaching (Zech. 1:1). He emphasized the spiritual condition of the remnant (see “return” in Zech. 1:3, 4, 6) and the long-term purposes of God.

David Baron summarizes Zechariah's importance:

It seems to be the special aim and mission of Zechariah to condense and concentrate in small compass, and in his own peculiar terse style, almost all that has been revealed to the “former prophets” about the person and mission of Messiah—about His Divine and yet truly human character, and of His sufferings and of the glory that should follow.²

Zechariah Book Divisions. The Book of Zechariah begins by appealing to the remnant of Israel to repent (1:1–6). It continues with eight visions Zechariah saw in one night, presented in the literary form called apocalyptic (1:7 to 6:8). This section comes to a climax when the high priest, Joshua, is symbolically crowned (6:9–15). Closely tied to chapters 1–6 in themes, chapters 7–8 report four answers from the LORD to a question about fasting.

Chapters 9–14 are quoted a lot in the Gospel Passion narratives. They consist of two “burdens” (9:1; 12:1) of three chapters each (chs. 9–11 and 12–14). Both burdens have to do with Israel and Messiah. The first emphasizes Israel's Good Shepherd; the second, the inauguration of His

¹ Like other prophets, Haggai was limited in his perception of the future time element. It was not revealed to him that there would be gaps of time between events he saw together. The effect was similar to our seeing stars side by side that are actually at greatly differing distances.

² David Baron, *The Visions & Prophecies of Zechariah: “The Prophet of Hope and of Glory,”* second ed. (London: Hebrew Christian Testimony to Israel, 1919), pp. 5–6.

kingdom. Chapters 9–14 differ a lot in literary form and subject matter from chapters 1–8. Yet, I assume they were also written by Zechariah, probably at a later stage of his life. Study the following table.

Divisions of the Book of Zechariah				
Call to Repent	Eight Night Visions & Symbolic Crowning of the High Priest	Question about Fasting & Four Answers from God	First Burden The Good Shepherd	Second Burden The Kingdom Begins
1:1–6	1:7 to 6:8 6:9–15	7:4–7; 7:8–14; 8:1–17; 8:18–23	Chs. 9–11	Chs. 12–14

Zechariah’s Eight Night Visions, 1:7 to 6:8. Zechariah saw all of these in one night, February 15, 519 BC. The interpretations he was given for the first four visions made the general subject crystal clear: The LORD’s continuing and ultimate plans for Jerusalem and Judah. Here are the visions in order, with references and selected teachings.

1. The Rider among the Myrtle Trees, 1:7–17. The Angel of the LORD is concerned that the LORD has been indignant over Jerusalem and the cities of Judah for seventy years (1:12). The LORD tells of His jealousy for Jerusalem (1:14) and His plans to build His “house” there (1:16) and repopulate Judah (1:17a).
2. The Four Horns & Four Craftsmen, 1:18–21. The LORD is determined to terrify and throw down all nations that scatter Judah (1:19, 21).
3. The Surveyor, 2:1–13. The LORD plans to repopulate and protect Jerusalem (2:2, 4–5). He will also dwell there (2:10–12), with many nations becoming His people (2:11a).
4. The Cleansing of the High Priest, 3:1–10. The LORD, because He has chosen Jerusalem, graciously cleanses Joshua the high priest (3:1–5) and reinstates him to spiritual rule (3:7). This points to the fact that His servant The Branch (Messiah) will come (3:8–9) and cleanse all Israel (3:9d) in order to establish the kingdom of peace (3:10).
5. The Lampstand & the Olive Trees, 4:1–14. The LORD’s lampstand, His light to the nations, is Israel (cf. Isa. 60:1–3; 62:1–2). Through anointed leaders He will continuously provide oil, His Holy Spirit, to His lampstand,
6. The Flying Scroll, 5:1–4. The LORD will remove sin and its effects from Israel.
7. The Woman in a Basket, 5:5–11. The LORD will remove the system of sin and idolatry from Israel.
8. The Four Chariots, 6:1–8. The LORD will judge the nations who have resisted His rule.

The Future Kingdom in Zechariah 1:7 to 6:8

The LORD will live in Jerusalem and rule the earth from the temple built by the Branch (Messiah). The core of His kingdom will be His formerly rebellious and afflicted people Israel. They will be purified—and constantly supplied with the Spirit—to serve as His nation of priests and His light to other nations. They will be restored to their homeland. Nations resistant to His rule will be judged—and many nations will become His people.

Crowning Joshua, the High Priest, 6:9–15. This ceremony symbolizes the fact that the coming Branch (Messiah) will combine kingship with priesthood (6:12–13).

The Future Kingdom in Zechariah 6:9–15

The Branch (Messiah) will serve as both King and Priest.

Answers to the Question about Fasting, chs. 7–8. The fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in 586 BC marked the end of the LORD’s Old Testament kingdom. The Jews had instituted a fast (in fact, four fasts) commemorating that occasion. Now, some of them asked the priests and prophets, “Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?” (7:1–3). The LORD’s answer shows how fasting can be counterproductive—and what is more important than fasting. His answer came in four parts.

1. The LORD rebuked them (7:1–7). As a means of worship, their fasting was worthless. God accepts neither fasting nor feasting that does not focus on Him and is not motivated by love for Him.
2. The LORD instructed them (7:8–14). He had not called for fasting but for kindness and compassion. He had punished them for not responding to Him.
3. The LORD promised them (8:1–17). He was now ready to bring the blessings of His kingdom. He Himself would “do good again to Jerusalem and Judah” (8:15) if they would speak truth and render true judgment.
4. The LORD encouraged them (8:18–23). He would convert the fasts into feasts. From all over the world, men would come to worship the true God in Jerusalem (8:22–23).

The Future Kingdom in Zechariah 7–8

After Israel becomes obedient, God’s blessings will flow from Jerusalem. Nations will come there to worship. The kingdom will be full of feasting, not fasting.

First Burden: Israel’s Good Shepherd, chs. 9–11.

A. Zion’s King Comes, ch. 9

1. He comes from the north, conquering other nations but sparing Jerusalem (9:1–8).³
2. He enters Jerusalem and brings peace in a universal rule (9:9–10).
3. The Jews in exile return and, with the LORD’s presence, defeat their enemies (“Greece”) and enjoy blessing (9:11–17).

B. The LORD Strengthens His People, ch. 10

1. He punishes the false shepherds (10:1–3a).
2. He strengthens His people (10:3b–7).
3. He gathers them back to fill their homeland (10:8–12).

C. Israel’s True & False Leaders, ch. 11

1. The invasion of Lebanon and the Jordan Valley (11:1–3), symbolizing the punishment of unworthy leaders
2. The LORD’s flock doomed to slaughter (11:4–6).
3. The LORD quits showing favor to Israel because they have low esteem for Him (11:7–13).
4. The LORD breaks the union between Judah and Israel, leaving them only a “foolish shepherd” (11:14–17).

The Future Kingdom in Zechariah 9–11

The King presents Himself to Jerusalem and brings universal peace. Relieved of foolish rulers, His people Israel defeat their enemies and return to Jerusalem.

Second Burden: The Kingdom Begins, chs. 12–14

A. Besieged Jerusalem repents, ch. 12.

1. A burden about Israel (12:1–2)
2. The LORD will destroy the nations besieging Jerusalem—and save Jerusalem (12:3–9).

³ 9:1–8. For this interpretation suggested by Eugene Merrill, see the appendix.

3. The house of David and inhabitants of Jerusalem will repent from piercing the LORD (12:10–14).
- B. Jerusalem purged from reliance on false prophets and idols, ch. 13.
1. The day of purging (13:1)
 2. Reliance on idols and on false prophets is fully eliminated (13:2–6).
 3. Smiting the shepherd leads to a small remnant (13:7–10).
Only a third survive, which is then refined to become God's remnant.
- C. The kingdom described, ch. 14.
1. The LORD intervenes on the Mt. of Olives, to save Jerusalem from invading nations (14:1–7).
 2. Living waters flow from exalted Jerusalem when the LORD is king (14:8–11).
 3. The plague with which the LORD smites the attackers (14:12–15).
 4. The nations worship the king in Jerusalem (14:16–19).
 5. Everything is holy in Jerusalem (14:20–21).

The Future Kingdom in Zechariah 12–14

The kingdom will be inaugurated after the Lord comes to the Mount of Olives. He will miraculously destroy armies besieging Jerusalem. Then the remnant of Israel will repent of piercing their God, be purified, and quit relying on idols. The Lord will rule from Jerusalem, where everything will be holy. Raised high, it will be the source of living waters and the place where nations will go to worship.

Appendix: Zechariah 9:1–8

Here I will quote from Eugene H Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi : an Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1994). He points out that Zechariah 9:1–8 has been seen as describing the conquests of Alexander the Great, or of others. The general course of invasion fits many campaigns from the north. None, however, has fulfilled all the details, especially those of verse 7. In fact, continues Merrill, the whole passage is not intended to be literal:

The march that commenced in the North will overwhelm successively Hadrach, Damascus, Hamath, Tyre, and Sidon, and four of the Philistine cities. It will end at Jerusalem with YHWH, triumphant in His procession, standing guard over His house and His people. In the tradition of holy war He has come against the foe, defeated him in battle, and established Himself as ruler in His royal palace. This is precisely the pattern seen elsewhere in such holy war passages as Ex. 15:1-18, many of the Psalms (e.g., 2, 9, 24, 29, 46, 47, 48, 65, 68, 76, 77:17-21 [EB 77:16-20], 89b, 97, 98, 104, 106:9-13, 110), Isaiah (11:1-9, 42:10-16, 43:16-21, 51:9-11, 52:7-12), and Habakkuk 3:1-19.

What has traditionally been overlooked is that this is eschatological literature which, though being grounded in the present time of the prophet (hence, well-known place names), views the future in very stylized and conventional patterns. The point here is that YHWH, like many conquerors before Him in human history, will manifest Himself in the last days as a vanquishing hero. Because most conquests of Palestine originated in the north, He will come from the north as well, smashing all hostile powers before Him until He comes to Zion, the city where He is pleased to live among men. One should not, therefore, look to precise historical events of which this is an account, nor should one even anticipate a future scenario in which God will literally march from Hadrach to Jerusalem, establishing his dominion over all opposition. What is at hand is a formulaic way of asserting an unquestionably literal establishment of YHWH's kingship in the end times, a suzerainty to be achieved in the pattern well known to Zechariah and his fellow countrymen on the human level. The next section (vv. 9-10) will put this beyond doubt.