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— July 2004 —

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1-13 July	BREAK (if you haven't yet, please take this opportunity to fill out the Bible Reading Program Survey — see below)	Personal study
14-15 July	Visions of the horses among the myrtle trees and the four horns and skilled workmen	Zechariah 1:7-21
16-17 July	Vision of the measuring of Jerusalem	Zechariah 2
18-19 July	Vision concerning Joshua the high priest and the coming Branch	Zechariah 3
20-21 July	Vision of the golden menorah and olive trees	Zechariah 4
22-23 July	Visions of the flying scroll and the ephah carried to Shinar	Zechariah 5
24-25 July	Vision of the four chariots and the crowning of Joshua	Zechariah 6
26-27 July	Tattenai's inquiry regarding the temple reconstruction and the decree of Darius	Ezra 5:3–6:13
28-29 July	The question of the extra fasts; Restoration of Israel and Judah; Fasts of mourning turned to joy	Zechariah 7–8
30-31 July	Temple completion and dedication; Passover observance; Rejoicing for the returned captives	Ezra 6:14-22; Psalm 126

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SURVEY REQUEST:

As mentioned last month, we are still asking all participants in the Good News Bible Reading Program to fill out an anonymous survey to evaluate it. For those with Internet access we request that you fill out this survey online at www.ucg.org/brp/survey/. For those without Internet access we request that the same persons who provide paper copies of the program itself do the same with the physical survey form, which can be downloaded from the main BRP Web page, www.ucg.org/brp/. (Please note, however, that in households where the program is shared, more forms will be required as each participant needs to fill out his or her own survey.) Surveys should be completed online or turned in to pastors or elders by **July 31**.

Pastors or elders should send collected survey forms to the address given on the forms (not to the home office).

Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading

Night Visions: Horses Among the Myrtle Trees (Zechariah 1:7–21)

July 14-15

Haggai's book ended on the 24th of the ninth month in Darius' second year. Zechariah's book resumes exactly two months later, on the 24th of the 11th month (1:7)—corresponding to mid-February of 519 B.C. Zechariah 1:7–6:15 records a sequence of eight visions (or seven, depending on how they are reckoned) that the prophet experienced that night followed by the symbolic crowning of the high priest Joshua, as we will later see. In this section, “Zechariah pursues the same end as Haggai, rebuilding the temple as the center of worship and world rule, and as a place of pilgrimage for the nations (8:20-23; Hag. 2:7-9)” (*The Nelson Study Bible*, note on Zechariah 1:7–6:15). Yet in going through these visions, we will likely find some of them to be among the most cryptic and enigmatic in the entire Bible.

The first vision (1:7-17) portrays a man on a red horse standing in a hollow or ravine among myrtle trees. “Myrtle is an evergreen tree that was once very common in the vicinity of Jerusalem (Neh. 8:15)” (note on Zechariah 1:8). The “man” is identified in verse 11 as “the Angel [*malakh* or ‘messenger’] of the LORD.” Many have viewed this phrase here as a reference to the preincarnate Christ, as it often is in the Old Testament. This is probably the case since the figure here is apparently the same as the Angel of the Lord in the fourth vision of the night who, as we will later see, is evidently divine (see 3:1-4).

The Expositor's Bible Commentary further notes: “In Revelation 6:4 the red horse (see also Zech 6:2) is associated with a sword, the instrument of war and death, which may also be the significance of the color here (cf. Isa 63:1-6)... In Nehemiah 8:15 [cited above] myrtle trees, which are evergreen, are associated with the Feast of Tabernacles for making booths; and in Isaiah 41:19 and 55:13 they are included in a description of messianic kingdom blessing. Perhaps, then, they speak of the hope and promise of the future, the restoration from Babylonian exile being but the initial stage in the progressive fulfillment of that promise. The trees are situated in a ravine. At the foot of the Mount of Olives are myrtle groves in the lowest part of the Kidron Valley. The ravine may picture Judah's lowly condition at the time; but, as suggested above, there is a ray of light or hope for the future. Behind the horseman were red, brown, and white horses—presumably [or, rather, possibly] with riders on them, since they report to the angel of the Lord in v. 11. These other riders or horses apparently represent angelic messengers (cf. v. 10). White horses are associated with vengeance and triumph (cf. Rev 19:11, 14 [and the *conquest* aspect of 6:2])” (note on Zechariah 1:8). It could be that the horses themselves represent angels, as they also may in Revelation 19:11 and verse 14 (compare Psalm 18:10). It may be that there were seven reconnoitering angels here in all who walk “to and fro throughout the earth” (Zechariah 1:11; compare 4:10). We will see the figure of horses of different colors again at the end of Zechariah's night visions in chapter 6, where they are “eager to walk to and fro throughout the earth” (verse 7)—in that case to deliver divine judgment on the nations.

The report the horses or horsemen give to the Angel of the Lord in chapter 1 is that all the earth is resting quietly (verse 9). This is not a description of the peaceful messianic Kingdom to come. Rather, we must view this report in light of the comment God makes in verse 15: “I am exceedingly angry with the nations at ease.” This description fit the circumstances of the time this prophecy was given. Recall that the first two years of the reign of the Persian emperor Darius (522-520 B.C.) were wracked with turmoil, as he put down one rebellion after another as recorded in his famous inscription high on the Behistun (or Bisitun) cliffs in western Iran (see www.livius.org/be-bm/behistun/behistun01.html). But by the end of 520, he had established control throughout the empire.

So the Persian Empire was secure and Judah remained in a lowly, oppressed position. “The report of the horsemen must have disappointed God's chosen people because it told of rest and peace among the nations, when, instead, they were expecting the ‘shaking of all nations’ (Hag 2:6-9, 20-23) as the sign of returning favor and full blessing to Zion” (*Expositor's*, note on Zechariah 1:12).

In verse 12 the Angel of the Lord, again probably a reference to the Being who would later be born as Jesus Christ, intercedes with God on Judah's behalf (compare Hebrews 7:25). In response, God declares His zeal for Jerusalem and His anger with the nations. God had been “a little angry” or, probably better translated, “a little while angry” with His sinning people (see *Expositor's*, note on verses 13-15). But now His anger turns to the gentile powers. While He had used them to punish

Israel and Judah, the personal motivation of the gentile nations in their assault on God's people was evil (verse 15). Given the end-time element to the prophecies of this section, we should recognize the peace and ease of the nations in verses 11 and 15 are probably mainly referring to a period in the last days—when the gentile powers seem triumphant, things seem quiet for a time and Israel and Judah are subjugated.

God promises that He will yet show mercy to Jerusalem, the stretching of the surveyor's line of verse 16 demonstrating God's intent of rebuilding the temple and the Jewish capital.

Considering this prophecy in the light of what we've already seen from Haggai and what is yet to follow in Zechariah, it seems that God building His house in verse 16 applied on one level to the temple reconstruction in the time of those prophets, on another level to the building of the spiritual temple, the Church (which would begin in Jerusalem and be referred to as spiritual Jerusalem and Zion), and then on another level to the millennial Jerusalem and temple and beyond. Note the mention of *cities* again expanding and prospering in verse 17, clearly pointing to the physical, national application of the prophecy. Besides simply referring to Judah's ancient return, this surely represents—considering the evident end-time focus in the series of visions here—the future restoration of all Israel.

Commentator Charles Feinberg gives a good summary of the first vision: “The distinctive features of comfort for Israel in this first vision are: (1) the presence of the Angel of [YHWH] in the midst of degraded and depressed Israel; (2) His loving and yearning intercession for them; (3) the promises of future blessings. We may say, then, that the import of the vision is this: although Israel is not yet in her promised position, God is mindful of her, providing the means of His judgment on the persecuting nations, and reserving glory and prosperity for Israel in the benevolent and beneficent reign of the Messiah. The series of visions carry us through God's dealings with Israel from the time of their chastisement by God under the Gentile powers until they are restored to their land with their rebuilt city and temple under their Messiah King. The first vision gives the general theme of the whole series; the others add the details...When the world was busy with its own affairs, God's eyes and the heart of the Messiah were upon the lowly estate of Israel and upon the temple in Jerusalem” (quoted in *Expositor's*, note on verses 16-17).

The same commentator also proposes that the first vision sets the stage for those that follow. “All eight visions form a unit, and the first is the key to all of them” (Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, 1952, p. 275).

Four Horns and Four Skilled Workmen (Zechariah 1:7–21)

July 14-15 Cont'd

Having in mind the above view, that the first vision is the key to the other visions of the night, Zechariah's second vision (verses 18-21) is understood to be an amplification of God's wrath on the nations at ease in verses 11 and 15.

Zechariah sees four horns “that have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem” (verse 19) followed by four craftsmen or workmen who come to terrify and cast out the horns (verses 20-21). The symbol of horns is a common one in Scripture. Based on these being the implements with which many animals fight, horns symbolize the power and strength of nations or their rulers (see Daniel 7:7-8, 24). As for the craftsmen, “the Hebrew word is used for any skilled workman in wood, metal, or stone” (p. 278). Some render the word as “smiths.” Here we have an image of those who smite with the hammer, grind down, break into pieces, plunge into fire, reshape what is usable and throw away what is not. In essence, they are workers skilled in destruction.

Who exactly the four horns are is not entirely clear. They seem to be described as having *scattered* (past tense) the people of Israel and Judah, which would seem to point to events that had already happened. However, the Hebrew verb could also be translated *scatter* (present tense, see *Expositor's*, note on Zechariah 1:18-19), which could point to scatterings yet to happen.

The horns are most commonly identified either as (from a solely past-tense perspective) Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Persia or (from a past-to-future perspective) as identical with the four empires of Daniel 2 and 7—Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. One problem with the *first* interpretation is that it does not continue to the time of Israel's ultimate restoration in the messianic age, in line with the rest of the visions in this section. One problem with the *second* interpretation is that it leaves out the nation that scattered the northern kingdom of Israel—Assyria (see again verse 19). Another problem with *both* interpretations is that the Persians did not scatter the people of Judah (see verse 21). Neither did the Greeks, even during the Seleucid persecutions.

All this being so, a more likely interpretation of the four horns would seem to be: 1) ancient Assyria, which deported Israel and part of Judah; 2) ancient Babylon, which deported Judah; 3)

ancient Rome, which would later deport the Jews of Judea; 4) the end-time revival of all these empires in the same power bloc, which will deport both Israelites and Jews from their homelands. The four smiths who remove these horns would then be: 1) ancient Babylon, conqueror of Assyria; 2) ancient Persia, conqueror of ancient Babylon; 3) the Gothic hordes who would bring down the Roman Empire; 4) the Messiah, who will ultimately defeat the end-time Roman-Babylonian-Assyrian power bloc.

In the end, God tells us in Psalm 75:10, “All the horns of the wicked I will also cut off, but the horns of the righteous shall be exalted.”

Measuring Jerusalem for Future Expansion (Zechariah 2)

July 16-17

Zechariah 2 brings us to the third vision of the night (verses 1-13). Feinberg states: “If the second vision be seen as an amplification of the truth of 1:15, then the third vision is an elaboration of the promise in 1:16” (p. 279). This seems entirely reasonable, as 1:16 related not only the temple being built but also a surveyor’s line being stretched out over *Jerusalem*, signifying the future reconstruction and expansion of the city. This is also described in 2:1-2. Notice that Jerusalem will be like “towns without walls” (verse 4). The populace will overflow the city walls, the prophecy continues, as the people will not need to huddle within them. This is because God Himself will serve as the people’s defense. Yet the absence of defensive fortifications has not characterized the city of Jerusalem from the time of Zechariah until now. Indeed, the setting is clearly the messianic age. “The wall of fire, indicating security and safety, is reminiscent of the pillar of fire in the Exodus. (Note Ex 14:24 [and verses 19-20, where the pillar stood between the Israelites and Egyptians], also Is 4:5 and Zec 9:8.) God will be her wall of salvation and protection (Is 26:1). The Shekinah glory is promised here” (Feinberg, p. 280).

The presence of God’s indwelling glory also ties back to Zechariah 1:16, which this section appears to be amplifying. It was there mentioned that God’s house, His dwelling, would be in Jerusalem. Again, it seems likely that there is a partial fulfillment of this verse in spiritual Jerusalem, the Church of God, which experiences God’s indwelling presence and miraculous protection in lieu of physical defensive fortifications. But clearly what is written here is mainly a prophecy for the last days. As Feinberg remarks: “Surely it will not be denied that the fulfillment of this prophecy is in millennial times (Hab 2:14). The theme of the vision is the rebuilding and resettlement of Jerusalem, bearing out the words of 1:16-17, and the full accomplishment of these words will be the establishment of Jerusalem in the earth as the city of God’s dwelling. Blessed day for Israel and all the earth that will be” (p. 280).

The remainder of the third vision (2:6-13) gives more details regarding the future expansion of Jerusalem, both spiritual and physical, and its becoming God’s permanent dwelling.

Verses 6-7 states that more people who are to be of Zion need to flee out of Babylon. This probably has several levels of meaning. First of all, there was an application for Zechariah’s own time. Recall that when the Persian king Cyrus entered the city of Babylon he preserved it intact. But it would fare worse later. Darius had just crushed two rebellions there. And Darius’ successor, his son Xerxes, would sack Babylon in 482 B.C. After later rebellion, it was conquered yet again by Antiochus III Ochus around 340 B.C. It seems reasonable to believe that, on some level, Zechariah was warning the Jews still dwelling comfortably in Babylon of these upcoming invasions and resultant destruction.

Additionally, consider that God is addressing those He has “spread...abroad like the four winds of heaven” (Zechariah 2:6). This may be speaking to Jews all throughout the Babylonian Diaspora (or Dispersion) from Zechariah’s time until today—that they return from a Babylonian-rooted society to dwell in Jerusalem or its environs, thereby swelling its population. Quite likely there is also a sense of *spiritual* return to God intended here. Those who would be part of spiritual Zion, the Church of God, are to come out of the “Babylon” of this world’s false ideologies and values. And there is clearly an end-time application to escaping from Babylon, just as with God’s nearly identical admonitions to do so in other passages (see Jeremiah 50:8; 51:6; Isaiah 48:20; Revelation 18:4). The terminology “daughter of Babylon” (Zechariah 2:7) may even imply the end-time counterpart of the earlier system.

In verse 8 we find the “LORD” saying, “He has sent Me...”—that is, evidently, the preincarnate Christ is saying that God the Father has sent Him—in this case to bring judgment on the nations that have acted against His people. Touching—harming—God’s people is like touching the “apple of His eye,” meaning the eye’s pupil, one of the most important and guarded parts of a person’s body. In

short, God says, attacking His people is like poking Him right in the eye. God will give these nations as spoil to the ones they've oppressed, that is, to both physical and spiritual Israel (verse 9).

Yet this is not a hopeless message for the nations. For when God comes to dwell in Zion (verse 10), "many nations shall be joined to the LORD in that day" and they will become His people too (verse 11)—thereby vastly expanding the "city of God," in both the physical and spiritual sense. Indeed Jerusalem, as in many prophecies, represents the entire nation of Israel, and all other nations must become part of Israel spiritually to be God's people and, ultimately, part of His Kingdom. In that Kingdom they will dwell with Him and He will dwell with them as one family for all eternity. Incidentally, the phrase "the Holy Land," though rather commonly used today, occurs in Scripture only in verse 12.

The conclusion in verse 13 for the world to be silent in anticipation of God's intervention and judgment is essentially repeated from Habakkuk 2:20.

Joshua the High Priest and the Coming Branch (Zechariah 3)

July 18-19

Zechariah's fourth vision of the night concerns the high priest of his day, Joshua or Jeshua, yet as a type of the entire nation, as we will see. Recall that the high priest Joshua and the governor Zerubbabel had led the initial effort in resuming worship in Jerusalem and commencing construction on the temple—and later, after allowing the construction to lapse, responded in repentance to the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah, leading the nation then in renewed effort.

In verse 1, the "he" showing the prophet the current scene is either the interpreting angel who has spoken to him in the previous visions or God Himself, who was referred to in the preceding verse (2:13) and who was earlier mentioned as showing images to him (see 1:20).

The high priest Joshua stands before the Angel of the Lord (3:1). As this particular figure is able to remove iniquity (see verses 3-4), the reference is apparently to the preincarnate Christ. Indeed, in verse 2 we see the "LORD" calling a rebuke down from the "LORD"—evidently Christ calling a rebuke down from God the Father.

The rebuke is called down on Satan. "The Hebrew is literally 'the Satan,' meaning 'the Accuser'" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 1)—or, similarly, "the Adversary" or "the Opponent." The word "oppose" in verse 1 could also, in a legal setting, be rendered "accuse." "Satan's accusation invests [the scene] with a judicial character. The position of standing at the right side was the place of accusation under the law (Ps 109:6). Satan knows the purposes of God concerning Israel and therefore has always accused the Jews and accuses them still.... Satan is the accuser, not only of Joshua (i.e., Israel), but also of all believers (Job 1-2; Rev 12:10)" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on Zechariah 3:1). It is interesting to recall that the Samaritans, as agents of Satan to thwart the restoration of Judah and its worship, had constantly brought the Jews before the Persian imperial court (Ezra 4:4-5).

The reason for Satan's accusation in Zechariah 3 is evidently Joshua's impurity, as symbolized by his defiled garments. *Expositor's* states in its note on verse 3: "The Hebrew word *soim* ('filthy') is 'the strongest expression in the Hebrew language for filth of the most vile and loathsome character' (Feinberg...). Some interpreters maintain that Joshua was covered with excrement—only in the vision, of course! Such clothes represent the pollution of sin (cf. Isa 64:6). To compound the problem, Joshua (i.e., Israel), contaminated by sin, was ministering in this filthy condition before the Angel of the Lord."

Joshua had been guilty of sin, having previously abandoned the reconstruction of the temple while continuing in priestly service. "The high priest represented the people before God (see Ex. 28:29) and under no circumstances was to become defiled or unclean (Ex. 28:2; Lev. 21:10-15)" (*Nelson*, note on Zechariah 3:3). It is interesting to consider the high priest as representative of the nation, for the figure of Joshua is clearly being used that way in this passage. The whole nation, this priestly nation (see Exodus 19:6), stood guilty before God.

The national identification is clear from verse 2. Responding to Satan's accusation against Joshua, the One who would later become Jesus Christ responds, "The LORD who has chosen *Jerusalem* rebuke you!" He follows with "Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?" God had earlier told the people of Israel in Amos 4:11, "I overthrew some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a firebrand plucked from the burning." That prophecy was dual, referring to both ancient and end-time Israel. The current vision is the same in this regard. *Expositor's* notes: "The reference to the burning stick snatched from the fire is an additional indication that Israel, not Joshua, is ultimately in view. Israel was retrieved to carry out God's future purpose for her (cf. Amos 4:11). The 'fire' refers to the Babylonian captivity. Metaphorically, Israel

was snatched as a burning stick from that fire. However, this event may also look back to the deliverance from Egypt (cf. Deut 4:20; 7:7-8; Jer 11:4) and forward to the rescue from the coming tribulation period (cf. Jer 30:7; Zech 13:8-9; Rev 12:13-17)” (note on Zechariah 3:2).

Satan is justly rebuked by God because his accusations are, as is always the case, the pinnacle of blasphemy, hypocrisy and twisting of fact. For one, Satan’s accusations actually impugned God, calling into question how a perfect and just God could accept a defiled person or nation in His service—and perhaps implying that God’s whole plan was a failure. Furthermore, Satan himself was the principal reason for the defilement! While the high priest and nation did in fact stand guilty—as do the people of all Israelite nations today and in fact all of mankind (Romans 3:9-19)—Satan, as the “tempter” (see Matthew 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 3:5), is the main instigator of all the sin in the world, in fact the very father of sin (John 8:44). Ultimately, God intends to reconcile humanity to Himself and lay on Satan the guilt and condemnation for his leading role in mankind’s sins (see “The Day of Atonement: Removal of Sin’s Cause and Reconciliation to God” in our free booklet *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*, pp. 38-43).

In Zechariah 3:4, the Angel of the Lord (see verse 3)—again evidently the One who would become Jesus Christ—removes Joshua’s iniquity. At the beginning of this verse, He tells “those who stood before Him” to take away Joshua’s filthy garments. Many interpret the others standing here to be angels, tying back to the previous visions. Yet in what way they were the instruments of removing Joshua’s defiled garments is unclear. It could be that God’s other human servants are in mind here. It was through the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah that the high priest Joshua repented. In fact, it was through their preaching that the whole nation repented. God has always worked through such representatives. And yet, as the end of verse 4 states, it is Christ Himself who actually removes Joshua’s iniquity and clothes him with new garments—through His sacrifice (whereby He would actually bear the defilement of all of humanity’s sins as the sin-bearer and take them with Him to the grave) and then living His resurrected life within those who will receive Him.

“Joshua was to be clothed with rich garments—God’s representative clothed in God’s righteousness. God’s servant went from filthy garments to festive garments. The festive garments (the Hebrew word is used only here and in Isa 3:22) speak of purity, joy, and glory; but their chief significance is that they symbolize the restoration of Israel to her original calling (Exod 19:16; Isa 61:6). There is a contrast here: Joshua in filthy garments—Israel as a priest but defiled and unclean; Joshua in festive garments—Israel’s future glory in reconsecration to the priestly office” (note on verse 4).

The beginning of verse 5 is often seen as Zechariah’s enthusiastic expression of wish that the priestly restoration be completed. Yet this could be part of the quotation of God from the previous verse.

In verses 6-7, God promises Joshua (both the actual high priest and, in type, the nation of Israel) that faithfulness to His ways will result in authority and responsibility within God’s house and courts—in Zechariah’s day meaning the rebuilt temple but in an overall sense a reference to the Kingdom of God. Those standing with God are, again, either the angels or His human servants, the saints (such as Haggai and Zechariah), who will receive the Kingdom.

In verse 8, “Joshua and his companions were a *sign* because the reinstatement of the priesthood made public God’s continuing intention to fulfill his promises to His people” (Nelson, note on verse 8). Indeed, God’s restoration of Joshua and the priesthood was to serve as a powerful example of how God would restore the entire nation. The removal of Joshua’s iniquity in verse 4 was meant to directly symbolize the future removal of Israel’s iniquity (verse 9)—at the commencement of the millennial Kingdom (compare verse 10).

And there is another aspect to this sign. God says Joshua and his fellow priests were “a wondrous sign, for behold, I am bringing forth My Servant the BRANCH” (verse 8). The Branch is the Messiah, Jesus Christ (see also 6:12; Isaiah 4:2; 11:1; 53:2; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15). “Now it is clear why Joshua and his fellow priests are typical [i.e., representational] persons: the act of forgiving grace and cleansing look on to that of the Messiah whereby the nation will be not only potentially but actually redeemed, and their iniquity forever removed” (Feinberg, pp. 287-288). Even the name Joshua (or Jeshua, as Ezra renders it) meant “The Eternal Is Salvation.” It is from the later Greek form of this name that we derive the name Jesus—the very One through whom redemption and salvation would come, the ultimate High Priest of whom Israel’s human high priest was only a type.

As we will later see, Zechariah 6:9-13 makes it clear that Joshua was, on one level, a type of the Messiah. Indeed, there are striking parallels in chapter 3. As Joshua was defiled by sin (that of the nation and himself), so also would Christ (though perfect Himself) bear the defilement of sin as the

sinbearer of the people. As Joshua was opposed by Satan, so also would Jesus be. And as Joshua was, in vision, re clothed in rich garments to serve as a fitting high priest for the nation, so would Jesus bear sin no longer and instead be clothed in glory as the perfect and ultimate High Priest. Joshua standing before the Angel of the Lord (Jesus) in the figure would represent Jesus Himself standing before God the Father. So we see in this amazing vision the redemptive work of Christ in both His first and second comings—similar to a later prophecy in the book of Zechariah (see 9:9-17).

It should be stated that all this still fits with the aforementioned picture of Joshua as also representative of *Israel*—both physical and spiritual—since the “Servant” motif of 3:8 is used of both the priestly nation and its Messiah (see the Bible Reading Program comments on Isaiah 42).

The stone of Zechariah 3:9 could be another reference to the Messiah. Feinberg remarks: “Many are the interpretations given to the stone mentioned here; it is said to be the foundation stone of the Temple, the capstone of the Temple, the jewel in Messiah’s crown, all the stones of the Temple in building at the time, Zerubbabel, an altar, a jewel on the breastplate of the high priest or upon a royal crown, and the finished temple itself. The manner in which it is introduced, and because of what is stated concerning it, the reference can scarcely be to an ordinary material stone. We have already declared our position that this is the Messiah. Scripture proof will be found in Genesis 49:24; Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 28:16; Matthew 21:42; Acts 4:11; and 1 Peter 2:6” (p. 287).

The stone’s “seven eyes” are thought by some to represent full or complete vision—omniscience—since the number seven often signifies completeness in Scripture. However, the seven eyes could be those referred to in the next chapter, the “seven...eyes of the LORD, which scan to and fro throughout the whole earth” (Zechariah 4:10), possibly synonymous with or related to the angels who walk “to and fro throughout the earth” and report back to God (1:11). The phrase “these seven...eyes” in 4:10 could also refer to the “seven lamps” of 4:2, as Jesus later explained that “the lamp of the body is the eye” (Matthew 6:22; Luke 11:34).

We will see more of this in our next reading, but consider for now that in the book of Revelation, the apostle John receives a vision of Jesus Christ amid seven golden lampstands with seven stars in His right hand (1:12-16). He is told, “The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands...are the seven churches” (verse 20). So perhaps the image in Zechariah 3:9 is of the spiritual temple, the Church of God. It is built upon the foundational Rock, Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 10:4; Ephesians 2:19-22). As the Church is the Body of Christ, the “lamps” of His Body would be “eyes.” And these seven lampstands, these seven churches (constituting the whole), are each committed to the responsibility of one of seven representative angels—also referred to as “seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God” (Revelation 4:5; 3:1)—who in this sense also serve as God’s watchful “eyes.”

We should also consider that while seven eyes “upon” the stone can mean that the stone has seven eyes, it could also mean that seven eyes are *looking upon* the stone—making it the focus of attention or the one looked to for direction and help (compare Psalm 141:8).

Many who identify the stone with the Messiah see the engraving on it as referring—especially given the mention that immediately follows of the removal of iniquity—to the cutting up of Jesus’ flesh in His sacrificial offering to provide atonement. Alternatively, the engraving could perhaps relate to Hebrews 1:2, where Jesus is said to be the “exact image” or “imprint” of the Father’s person—the Greek here being the word *charakter*, meaning “engraving,” from which we derive our English word “character” (Strong’s No. 5481). God’s character is also to be engraved into the hearts of all believers.

A further possibility regarding the engraved stone laid before Joshua is that it could parallel the reference in Revelation 2:17 to the “white stone...[with] a new name written” given to believers who overcome. Such a stone could signify acquittal from legal charges or a reward for victory (see *The Nelson Study Bible*’s note on this verse). We will examine this verse more when we come to the book of Revelation in the Bible Reading Program. Suffice it to say for now that such a meaning would not preclude the concept of the stone also being the Messiah Himself, as He is the source of forgiveness, new life, victory and reward for all of God’s people.

As already explained, the removal of Joshua’s iniquity in verse 4 was meant to typify the conclusion of verse 9, where God says, “I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day.” What Judah experienced in Zechariah’s own day was only a small forerunner of this prophesied event. What God is here referring to is the repentance of the whole nation at the return of Christ (see Zechariah 12:10-14)—as well as the purging away of those who refuse to repent. The rebuke against Satan (3:2) will be fulfilled when He is banished at that time of national atonement and his accusations cease (see Revelation 20:1-2). “And so,” Paul writes, “all Israel will be saved, as it is

written: “The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins” (Romans 11:26-27).

The time frame is made clear in Zechariah 3:10, which repeats the millennial prophecy of Micah 4:4 (see verses 1-5). Yet now added is the element that not only will everyone sit under his own vine and fig tree, signifying personal prosperity, but all will invite neighbors to join them—signifying not just individuals reaching out to each other, but all nations of the world being invited to share in Israel’s blessings. Israel will at long last be the righteous priestly nation God intended it to be.

“Not by Might nor by Power, but by My Spirit” (Zechariah 4)

July 20-21

In Zechariah’s fifth vision of the night, we see that he is “wakened...as a man who is wakened out of his sleep” (verse 1). This seems to imply that he was in reality still asleep, but was roused from a period of unconsciousness to a dream state to experience the next vision—this time of the golden lampstand, two olive trees and a message for Zerubbabel.

The description of the golden lampstand—a candelabrum with seven pipes and lamps—evokes, as it would have for the people of Zechariah’s day, the image of the seven-branched menorah of the temple. (The Hebrew word *menorah* is the word used in both cases for lampstand.) New here, however, is the picture of a bowl above it and an olive tree on each side of it.

As was noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on chapter 3, the book of Revelation also gives us lampstand imagery, wherein seven lampstands symbolize the seven churches making up the whole of God’s Church (see 1:12-16, 20). In a heavenly vision, the apostle John also saw “seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God” (Revelation 4:5)—seemingly parallel to the representative angels of the seven churches (see 1:20; 3:1).

A lamp allows people to see in the dark. It is scripturally a symbol of God’s Word and law, the light of truth and understanding to illuminate the path His people must walk (see Psalm 119:105, 130; Proverbs 6:23). Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, was sent into the world as the Light (John 1:1-9, 14; 8:12; 9:5). But His light is also to shine forth from all of God’s people—not only in proclaiming God’s Word but in living it. As Jesus told His followers: “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works [not just knowledge and words] and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).

In Jesus’ parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25:1-13, God’s servants are portrayed as carrying lamps—the wise with sufficient oil to keep their lamps burning and the foolish lacking oil so that their lamps are going out. The oil here—probably olive oil as in the temple menorah (see Exodus 27:20-21)—is the fuel for the flame. In Christ’s parable it represents the Holy Spirit in the lives of God’s people. To further demonstrate the symbolism, consider that oil was the consecrating agent in anointing and that Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:38). Returning to the parable of the virgins, we should understand that to continue shining forth the witness of God and His Word in what we say and do, Christians require a constant supply of the Holy Spirit (see Galatians 3:5; Philippians 1:19). And as the apostle Paul told Timothy regarding that Spirit, we must “fan into flame the gift of God” (2 Timothy 1:6, NIV). Thus, it is through God’s Spirit that His people are able to shine as lights and pierce the darkness of this world.

God’s Spirit is a central element in the prophetic vision of Zechariah 4. Indeed, when Zechariah asks the meaning of the symbols (verse 5), the first answer he receives, which we will further examine shortly, is that it pictures the work of God’s Spirit (verse 6). Consider the elements of the scene unfamiliar to Zechariah—the bowl above the menorah and the olive trees standing to the right and left of it (verses 2-3). Interestingly, we later find that the olive trees represent anointed ones—literally “sons of fresh oil”—who “stand by the Lord of the whole earth” (verse 14, J.P. Green’s Literal Translation). In the vision they stood to either side of the *bowl*, which would seem to identify this bowl as both a container of oil and as God Himself—or as God’s presence through His Spirit. Indeed, God is a container, so to speak, of His own Spirit. The bowl here is evidently the source of the menorah’s oil—just as God is the source of His Spirit, which He supplies to His people. Furthermore, we should consider that this is a temple-related scene. The menorah was a temple fixture representing the light of God as shining forth from His people—especially from His spiritual temple, the Church. As the Shekinah glory, the divine presence through the indwelling Holy Spirit, had come down upon the Mosaic tabernacle and Solomon’s temple, so this bowl representing the presence of God and the supply of His Spirit sits over the menorah.

The response given to Zechariah's inquiry was no doubt intended to be of great exhortation and encouragement to the people of his day—particularly to the Judean governor, Zerubbabel. But like Zechariah's other visions of this same night, this was a prophecy for not only his own time but the last days as well.

God's message to Zerubbabel is that the work he is engaged in, that of building the temple, will be accomplished *not* "by might nor by power"—that is, not by mere *human* strength or ability—but *by God's Spirit* (verse 6). Zerubbabel, as we know, had had a rough go of it. He had been unsuccessful in getting past the foundation stages due to the Samaritan resistance and his own people letting down—and apparently his personal lack of zeal as well. Things had ground to a standstill for years. Now the work was back in full swing. Nevertheless, if left to mere human effort, problems would set in and discouragement would win out all over again. Satan, working to thwart God's people, would prevail. There were, in fact, already signs of concern. Some "despised the day of small things" (verse 10)—either viewing the lesser second temple project as nothing compared to the former glory of Solomon's temple (see Haggai 2:3) or looking only at the present meager circumstances and not envisioning the future God had promised.

But God blazes forth the wonderful truth that His Spirit is the instrument that will accomplish His will. It is the power that works in His people to give them ultimate success—the "oil" to fuel their lamps so that they can shine forth His glory in achieving whatever He has commissioned them to do. This should serve as a great encouragement to all of God's people. In the work of participating in the building of God's spiritual temple, His Church, we would certainly never succeed if left to do it on our own. If left to our own devices, we would never remotely succeed in living the kind of life God requires of us. But we are not on our own. God is ever with us to help us. "How timely this message is for our day with its complex and manifold committees, boards, drives, plans, organizations, contests, budgets, sponsors, rallies, groups, and much more. These can never avail themselves to bring about the accomplishment of the task God has entrusted to us; since it is from first to last a spiritual work, it must be by the omnipotent and unfailing and unerring Spirit of God. The arm of flesh fails; He never does" (Charles Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 290).

Moreover, just because something starts out small does not mean it will stay that way. Great things may well lie in store. And that was certainly the case here. Indeed, Jesus would later explain that even God's great and glorious eternal Kingdom starts out like a tiny mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32). A day of small things is a *beginning*, not the end. We must remember this in all our endeavors. With the power of God through His Spirit added to our efforts, what starts out as seemingly small and insignificant can grow to heights unimaginable to us. Even seemingly insurmountable obstacles can be overcome. As Jesus said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible" (Mark 10:27).

Zechariah 4 has something to say about obstacles in this regard. After explaining that Zerubbabel's efforts will bear fruit through the power of God's Spirit (verse 6), God further states: "Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain!" (verse 7). Jesus likewise told His disciples, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20). In both cases, the image is one of removing whatever obstacles stand in the way. In Zechariah's day, the obstacles were the Samaritan resistance, the negative spiritual influence of Satan and the human tendency to give up in the face of antagonism.

Interestingly, the particular prophecy of Zerubbabel here seems to parallel the prophecy in Isaiah 40 of one who would prepare the way before the Messiah: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and *every mountain and hill brought low*; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth...'" (verses 3-5). The idea again is one of removing obstacles from the path. As the Bible Reading Program comments on Isaiah 40 explained, this prophecy was fulfilled in part by John the Baptist, who prepared the way before Christ's first coming, and yet it was to be fulfilled in a greater sense prior to Christ's second coming—preparing a people to receive Him at that time. Indeed, it may well be that the reference to Zerubbabel in Zechariah 4 is to not just the governor of Zechariah's day—that Zerubbabel here could also denote an end-time counterpart, as we will see.

Verse 7, in the NKJV and other versions, says that Zerubbabel would "bring forth the capstone"—that is, of the temple he was building. The "capstone" would be the top stone that finishes the project. This interpretation would seem to fit with verse 9, which says, "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundations of this temple; *his hands shall also finish it.*" Yet the word for

capstone is literally “head stone,” and others equate this with the “head stone of the corner” in Psalm 118:22 (KJV)—that is, the cornerstone *of the foundation* (compare Isaiah 28:16; Job 38:6). Yet that would seem to make no sense in the prophecy of Zerubbabel in Zechariah 4:7 since he had already laid the foundation of the second temple—in fact he had done foundation-laying work twice and would do no more. For this reason, most interpret “head stone” here to be capstone—yet it *could* refer to the foundation cornerstone if a different, future Zerubbabel and a different temple were intended.

Oddly enough, there is some question as to whether Zerubbabel remained as governor much longer beyond the time that Zechariah gave this prophecy—some question as to whether he even was still directing the temple reconstruction at its completion. After the intervention of the Persian emperor Darius to promote the temple’s rebuilding in Ezra 6, which we will soon read, there is no mention of Zerubbabel working on the project during the period in which it was finished (see verses 13-22)—only a mention of the “elders of the Jews” doing the building (verse 14). Some have speculated that this is because Darius or one of his subordinates removed Zerubbabel from power.

Recall that Darius, in securing his own position, had just put down a succession of revolts all over the empire—most instigated by claimants to the royal thrones of their respective areas. And Zerubbabel was of the line of David. In his book *Old Testament History*, Dr. Charles Pfeiffer writes: “The disappearance of Zerubbabel from his position as governor of Judah may be a result of the civil reorganization effected by Darius. There is no hint in the Biblical records that he was removed for sedition, as some have suggested. The fact that his name simply drops out of the Biblical record may suggest that the change of policy which Darius inaugurated resulted in his removal” (1973, p. 519).

Historian John Bright, in *A History of Israel*, points out that some of Haggai and Zechariah’s prophecies could have been interpreted by the Jews of that day as pointing to Zerubbabel as the Messiah. Bright says that even if Zerubbabel himself was not thinking in these terms, “the talk had a seditious ring, and Zerubbabel could scarcely control it. What the Persian authorities would have thought of it, had it come to their ears, one can readily guess. And apparently there were those who took pains to see that it did [referring to the Samaritans].... What happened to Zerubbabel is a mystery. It is entirely possible that the Persians ultimately got wind of the sentiment in Judah and removed him. But we do not know. There is no evidence whatever for the assertion that he was executed. Yet, since we hear no more of him, and since none of his family succeeded him, it is likely that the Persians did strip the Davidic house of its political prerogatives” (2000, pp. 371-372). *Expositor’s* says one commentator “suggests that Zerubbabel was probably summoned back to Persia since one of his descendants, Hattush, returned with Ezra (8:2; 1 Chronicles 3:19-22)” (note on Ezra 5:15-17).

If Zerubbabel was still in office at the temple’s completion, then Zechariah 4:9’s statement, “his hands shall also finish it,” would certainly apply to him. But they would not have to apply *exclusively* to him, as there could still be a later fulfillment wherein Zerubbabel serves as a type of someone else. On the other hand, if Zerubbabel was *gone* from office when the second temple was completed, then verse 9 most likely refers not to him at all but to a future figure fulfilling a similar office of whom Zerubbabel was a type. It should also be remembered from the example of Elijah and Elisha that a person’s special commission can be fulfilled by someone else—as Elijah’s three-fold commission at Mount Sinai (1 Kings 19:16) was only partially fulfilled by himself, the rest being completed by Elisha and someone else whom Elisha sent.

Who would the later Zerubbabel figure be? Consider again the voice of one crying in the wilderness in Isaiah 40, preparing the way before Christ. As already explained, John the Baptist fulfilled that role on one level. He even “brought forth the head stone with shouts of ‘Grace, grace’” (Zechariah 4:7). As several verses show, Jesus is the foundation stone, the head of the corner (see Matthew 21:42; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7, KJV). And John the Baptist is the one who announced Him to Judea, proclaiming His grace (John 1:14-16, 29). Furthermore, consider that John’s ministry prefigured another Elijah-like work of the end time that would accomplish a great restoration and prepare a people for the second coming of Christ (see Malachi 4:5-6; Matthew 17:11-13). Of course, the people being prepared in the latter days are part of the Church of God, the spiritual temple. So we again see that Zerubbabel’s work of restoring the physical temple finds its parallel in an end-time spiritual counterpart. This end-time counterpart could even involve the laying of a foundation—for though, as the apostle Paul explained, Jesus Christ is the ultimate foundation of His Church (1 Corinthians 3:11), he also implied that a great apostolic-type work in an area was in essence the laying of a foundation (see Romans 15:20).

Yet we should recognize that the ultimate builder and restorer in this picture is the Messiah Himself, Jesus Christ. This is clear from what was stated at the end of this sequence of visions in Zechariah 6:12: “Behold, the Man whose name is the BRANCH! From His place He shall branch out, and *He* shall build the temple of the LORD; *yes, He* shall build the temple of the LORD.” The point is repeated for emphasis. Even the work that Zerubbabel the governor was doing was *really* the work of Jesus Christ—that is, Christ was the one accomplishing it. In the case of Zerubbabel’s end-time counterpart, again Christ is the one truly doing the work. He accomplished the building of the physical temple. And He accomplishes the building of the spiritual temple. As He said, “I will build My church” (Matthew 16:18). And He will finish that work.

Jesus will also cause a new temple to be built in the Millennium. Indeed, besides what we’ve already seen, the mention of a great mountain becoming a plain before Zerubbabel in Zechariah 4:7 may be related to this. For Zechariah 14:10 says that during the reign of the Lord, the mountainous area of Jerusalem and its surroundings will be turned into an elevated plain. Of course, we should also consider that the original Zerubbabel, if resurrected as one of God’s saints, could very well play a leading role in the leveling and temple-building work of the millennial age. It should also be noted that the great mountain becoming a plain is seen by some as referring to the world government of Satan being blasted away at the return of Christ.

In Zechariah 4:10, the plumb line in Zerubbabel’s hand, a device for making sure walls were vertically straight, means that he is engaged in his building work. In the spiritual parallel, Christ makes sure that all are aligned with Him. And those who will not be brought into alignment are purged (compare Amos 7:7; Isaiah 28:17).

“*These seven*” who rejoice to see the work in progress in the same verse—referred to as the “eyes of the LORD”—have no immediate antecedent. It would have to be referring back to either the seven lamps of this vision (verse 2) or the seven eyes of the previous vision (3:9)—or both if their meanings overlap. Indeed, seven spirits do seem to stand as angelic representatives for the seven churches that constitute the whole of God’s Church. This was examined to some degree in the comments on our previous reading. While part of what is intended here is probably God and His angels being pleased at Zerubbabel’s restored work on the physical temple, the depiction is also applicable to the Church and its representative angels rejoicing at the building up of the spiritual temple and the purging of its problems. (Amos 5:7-9 describes a vision of *God* standing on a wall with a plumb line, setting it in the midst of Israel to show the people as crooked and to remove whatever was not aligned with Him and His way.)

Zechariah now returns to his inquiry, wondering at the meaning of the two olive trees in the vision (Zechariah 4:11). In verse 14, they are referred to as the two anointed ones or, literally, “sons of fresh oil” (Green’s Literal Translation)—evidently nourished from the bowl above the scene, representing God as the reservoir of His Spirit. But the flow of God’s Spirit does not stop with the olive trees. In verse 12, Zechariah describes branches of each tree—or “two olive clusters” (Green’s Literal Translation)—dripping oil into the golden pipes next to them. Thus, these two sons of oil are not only anointed with the Spirit, they are also anointing—administering it to others.

In his book *Glory in Our Midst: A Biblical-Theological Reading of Zechariah’s Night Visions*, Dr. Meredith Kline notes on this passage: “The misunderstanding of the sons of oil as [simply] anointed ones has led to the common interpretation of the two as the royal and priestly offices, represented in Zechariah’s day by Zerubbabel and Joshua. But if the trees are the (mediatorial) source of the oil that streams to the menorah, if the sons of oil are not the anointed but the anointers, we must think of prophets, not kings or priests. The prophets, outstandingly the paradigm prophet Moses, were God’s chief agents for anointing. Moreover, in Rev[elation] 11:4 it is the two prophetic witnesses [verse 3] that are explicitly said to be the two olive trees. Further, the description of the sons of oil as ‘standing by the Lord of all the earth,’ that is, as his servants, comports with the familiar designation of the prophets as God’s servants (cf. Amos 3:7; Jer. 7:25; 25:4; Rev. 10:7; 11:18). This description also points to prophetic identification in that it denotes the status of those admitted into the divine council...a special privilege of prophets” (2001, pp. 164-165).

In Zechariah’s own day, he and Haggai were the two prophet witnesses whom God used in a special ministration of His Spirit to redirect the nation back to Him—to bring, through a call to repentance, Zerubbabel, Joshua and the nation back to the work to which they were called. In that sense, Zechariah was being given a vision concerning his own work. Yet the vision was not only for that time as we’ve seen. God has repeated this pattern in history. The final two witnesses of the end time will be given great power to accomplish their work (see Revelation 11:3-6). Yet as always, the

power to do the will of God will not come from themselves—indeed, it cannot. Rather, it will be of God’s Holy Spirit—as it must be. That is the lesson we must all learn.

The Flying Scroll and the Ephah of Wickedness (Zechariah 5)

July 22-23

Chapter 5 presents us with what are commonly reckoned as Zechariah’s sixth and seventh visions of the night. However, it seems more likely that they constitute one vision in two parts. In his book on Zechariah’s visions, Dr. Meredith Kline introduces the chapter this way: “According to the pattern of the introductory formulae (cf. 1:7-8; 1:18...2:1...3:1; 4:1-2; 5:1; 6:1) there are seven visions in Zech. 1:7-6:8, not eight [as often reckoned], for Zechariah 5 is not to be divided into two visions but regarded as a unit, the sixth vision. The introductions to the two triads of visions bracketing the central hinge vision (Zechariah 3) all include the phrase, ‘I saw and behold,’ but that is absent from Zech. 5:5, where many commentators would begin a separate vision. The phrase we find instead at v. 5 is like one which marks the middle, not beginning, of a vision at Zech 2:3.

“The unity of the two parts of Zechariah 5 is also indicated by certain interdependencies of grammar and terminology. Thus, the suffix in ‘their appearance’ (v. 6) has as its antecedent the thieves and perjurers of v. 3. And the phrase ‘in all the land’ (v. 6) resumes ‘all the land’ in v. 3. [The NKJV has ‘the whole earth’ in both places.] Most compelling, however, are the clear thematic interrelationships of the two parts of the chapter and the remarkable intermeshing of their symbolism. The sixth vision portrays the judgment curse of exile, distinguishing its two distinct stages: destruction of the victims’ holdings in their homeland (vv. 1-4) and deportation with relocation in a foreign land (vv. 5-11)” (*Glory in Our Midst: A Biblical-Theological Reading of Zechariah’s Night Visions*, p. 177).

A major theme through Zechariah’s visions is spiritual renewal. That includes restoring the repentant as well as disciplining those who are yet unrepentant—both elements of which were signified by the plumb line of the previous chapter (see 4:10). Now, in chapter 5, we see the disciplinary action actually taken.

The chapter opens with a flying scroll bearing a curse. The imagery of flying here is variously interpreted. Some say it represents the swiftness of coming punishment (see Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 293). Others suggest that the flying shows the impossibility of escaping the judgment the scroll brings (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, chaps. 5–6 summary). Still others maintain that the flying simply shows the scroll as unrolled—unfurled—for all to read (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on 5:1-2). While it could signify all of these things, there is probably a more specific meaning, as we will see. Note that the scroll pursues violators of God’s law (verse 4).

The size of the scroll is 10 by 20 cubits (verse 2). Using the smallest cubit of 18 inches, that would be 15 by 30 feet—yet it could be a little larger if a larger cubit is intended. In any case, this would be like a large billboard, and some maintain that this is the point—that it was very large for all to see. However others point out, as Feinberg does, “that the holy place in the tabernacle of Moses [based on the measurements in Exodus] and the porch of Solomon’s Temple (where the Law was usually read) were of the same dimensions (1 Ki 6:3). The vision would teach us that the holiness of the sanctuary of the Lord is the measure of sin and that judgment must begin at the house of God. (See 1 Pe 4:17-18)” (p. 293). Notice also the possible parallel with Ezekiel 9:5-6, where Israel’s punishment was to begin at God’s sanctuary. The curse in Zechariah 5:3 then goes out over “all the land.” “The whole earth” could also be correct if this is denoting the Israelites of the end time scattered all around the globe—as the people of Israel and Judah do seem to be the recipients of punishment in this prophecy.

Kline states: “By identifying the scroll Zechariah saw as a ‘curse’ (Zech 5:3), the angel tells us it is a covenant document, the Lord’s treaty given through Moses.... A standard section of [ancient Lord-vassal] treaties was the sanctions, which...included blessings but were heavily weighted on the curse side [for disloyalty] (see Deut 8:1-68; 29:16-28; cf. 27:11-26; Lev 26:3-39). It is the execution of this curse sanction of...[God’s covenant relationship with Israel] that is portrayed in Zechariah 5. The expression in Zech 5:3, ‘on this side...on the other side’ [referring to writing on both sides of the scroll], is possibly a specific allusion to the covenant tablets of Sinai [that is, the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments], since it is used in Exod 32:15 to describe those stone tablets as inscribed on both sides. But the idea might also be [to signify] that the curse strikes here and there, that is, everywhere throughout ‘the whole land’ (cf. Deut 28:16-19)” (p. 178).

If the reference is meant to parallel the writing on the Ten Commandments, it is interesting to consider the two sins that are mentioned in verses 3-4—stealing and swearing falsely by God’s name. The first is a violation of the Eighth Commandment, which would probably have appeared on the

back of the commandments tablets. As for the second sin, while some see it as simply bearing false witness (breaking the Ninth Commandment), the more serious aspect of perjury here is breaking an oath made in God's name and thus taking God's name in vain—thereby violating the Third Commandment, which would have appeared on the front of the commandments tablets. The first four commandments summarize man's duty toward God and the last six summarize man's duty toward fellow man. Some see the violations of the Third and Eighth Commandments as representing the violations of both aspects of the law in general, though more specific violations could be intended.

Notice that the penalty for the covenant breakers is expulsion (verse 3) along with destruction of dwelling places (verse 4). While expulsion could signify death, it seems to tie in with the later part of Zechariah 5, where wickedness is bound away and carried off to another land (verses 5-11).

Consider that Zechariah sees something "going forth" from the land (verses 5-6). It is said in the New King James Version to be a "basket," yet the actual Hebrew, as it is rendered in the King James Version, is *ephah*, the largest ancient Hebrew unit of dry measure, about a half a bushel. Of course, there evidently is some kind of basket, barrel or other container since it has a heavy lid on it (see verses 7-8). Inside the basket sits a woman referred to as "Wickedness"—a personification of the sin and spiritual harlotry of the people and likely a representation of the wicked people themselves. They have been gathered up, as it were, in full measure—that is, all of them—and then forced down and confined. We then see the imagery of winged women coming to carry them away to Shinar—that is, to the land of Babylon (verses 9-11).

Kline explains the vision this way, tying both parts together: "When calling upon Israel to swear their covenant loyalty Moses forewarned: 'It shall come to pass, if you do not obey Yahweh your God,...that all these curses will come upon you...They [the curses] will pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed' (Deut 28:15, 45)" (p. 178). This seems the most likely meaning of the flying scroll. Kline continues: "Ultimate among the threatened curses would be the siege and destruction of their dwellings in the holy land and banishment to an alien land. 'Yahweh will bring a nation against you from afar...swooping down like an eagle' (Deut 28:49). 'They will besiege you in all your cities until your high and fortified walls come down throughout all your land' (Deut 28:52). 'You will be plucked off the land...and Yahweh will scatter you among all peoples' (Deut 28:63-4). By Zechariah's day such an exile judgment had befallen Israel and Judah alike [Israel at the hands of the Assyrians and Judah at the hands of the Babylonians], and now those recently restored from that Babylonian captivity are warned by Zechariah that again in the future such a curse would descend on the covenant community. The houses of the covenant breakers in the promised land would be consumed (Zech 5:1-4) and they would themselves be removed to the land of Shinar (Zech 5:5-11)" (p. 178). Notice that the "house" in the homeland is destroyed (verse 4) and a new "house" awaits them in the land of Babylon (verse 11).

The Jews of Judea experienced such devastation and deportation nearly six centuries later at the hands of the Roman Empire, a successor to the Babylonian Empire and essentially a continuation of the Babylonian system. In anticipation of this disaster, Jesus had even warned them: "See! Your house is left to you desolate" (Matthew 23:38)—paralleling Zechariah 5:4. Yet this was only a forerunner of destruction that will befall both Israel and Judah in the last days at the hands of a revived Roman Empire designated in Scripture as end-time Babylon.

The two winged women represent the forces carrying the Israelites away (see verse 9). They are pictured with wings like those of a stork. "The stork is a migratory bird frequently seen traveling north along the Jordan valley in the spring of the year" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 9). "Those acquainted with the habits of this bird inform us that in its annual migration, the stork actually traverses a longer distance than that from Judea to Shinar" (Feinberg, p. 296). "Specification of the wings as those of a stork might be due simply to the suitability of the strong wings of the stork for this assignment, but...the stork's unclean status must be relevant (cf. Lev 11:19; Deut. 14:18). Unclean agents are used by the Judge of Israel to remove the defilement from his holy land to unclean Babylon, habitation of demons and a hold of every unclean spirit and unclean bird (Rev 18:2)" (Kline, p. 186).

While it seems that the two winged women carry the ephah together, it could be that one takes it and then the other—perhaps signifying the Roman deportation of the Jews in apostolic times and then the end-time Babylonian captivity. If the women are carrying the basket together, they could represent Israel and Judah's ancient captors, Assyria and Babylon, combined in the end-time in the same power bloc. Alternatively, they could represent the two aspects of end-time Babylon, as both a religious power (Revelation 17) and a commercial empire (Revelation 18).

God's main point in Zechariah 5 seems to be that wickedness has no place in His covenant community. Rather, it will be purged and sent to where it belongs, to Babylon—the focal point of all opposition to God—which, as the next chapter shows, will meet with His judgment. Yet as we will also see, hope remains for future repentance.

Four Chariots From Between Two Mountains of Bronze (Zechariah 6)

July 24-25

The final vision of the night, often reckoned as the eighth but most likely the seventh (see comments on previous reading), is that of four chariots coming from between two bronze mountains (verse 1). Each drawn by horses of a different color, they thunder forth throughout the earth, evidently to deliver judgment on the nations (verses 2-8). This follows right on from the previous vision of the end-time captivity of Israel and Judah by a final revival of Babylon (see Zechariah 5).

The picture of two bronze mountains is rather mysterious. In the Hebrew, the first occurrence of the word for mountains, after the word for two, is *ha-hari*, containing the definite article *ha* and therefore meaning “the mountains.” And yet there does not appear to be any immediately preceding explanation for them—or a following one for that matter. So is the image here literal or figurative?

Well, there are no bronze mountains in the world. Bronze is not a naturally occurring metal. It is an alloy of copper and tin. The King James Version has “brass” here (6:1), which is an alloy of copper and zinc, and there is some dispute over which is intended, as the bronze of ancient Israel “varied a great deal in composition, and some contained an admixture of zinc, approaching brass. Such may have been the ‘fine shiny bronze, precious as gold’ (Ezra 8:27, NASB...)” (*The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, “Mineral Kingdom”). In any case, there are no mountains of bronze or brass, yet mountains do provide the ingredients. God described the Promised Land as a land “out of whose hills you can dig copper” (Deuteronomy 8:9).

Yet bronze could also denote appearance rather than actual material composition. As explained in the Bible Reading Program comments on Isaiah 6, the Hebrew word for bronze, *nechoshet*, is related to the word for serpent, *nachash*, evidently because of the “shiny” quality they both share. Recall Daniel’s vision of the glorious being with “arms and feet like burnished bronze in color” (Daniel 10:6). When the apostle John described the present appearance of Jesus Christ, he said, “His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace” (Revelation 1:15). The metal, then, would seem to denote a flashing, fiery appearance, as Ezekiel describes His legs and feet as “the appearance of fire with brightness all around” (Ezekiel 1:27).

There is also the figurative usage. One of the curses on the Israelites for disobedience was that God would make their “earth like bronze” (Leviticus 26:19), meaning hard and dry and unable to produce crops. Bronze could also signify firmness and invincibility. God set Jeremiah as “bronze walls against the whole land” so that no one would prevail against him (Jeremiah 1:18). Others point to the two massive bronze pillars that stood before the vestibule of Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 7:15-22)—one named Jachin (meaning “He Will Establish”) and the other named Boaz (meaning “In Him Is Strength” or possibly “He Is Quick.”) Some, pointing to the bronze serpent Moses made and the bronze altar of sacrifice of the tabernacle and temple, see the metal as signifying judgment.

How, then, are we to understand the bronze mountains? As the chariots that come from between them (Zechariah 6:1) are also described as going out “from their station before the Lord of all the earth” (verse 5), this would seem to locate God in this picture either where the two mountains are or between them. Various explanations have been proposed. Here are seven such possibilities:

1. Given that Zechariah prophesied in Jerusalem and that the work of the nation at that time was rebuilding the temple there, many would identify one of the mountains as Jerusalem or its Temple Mount (see also 8:3). And some would identify the other mountain as the one across the Kidron Valley from the temple—the Mount of Olives. The picture here would be of God in the Kidron Valley unleashing His forces of devastation against the nations, the mountains to either side of Him—Jerusalem and the Temple Mount—ablaze or illuminated like bronze. Indeed, as other prophecies show, even those at the end of the book of Zechariah, the returning Jesus Christ will fight the nations who oppose Him at Jerusalem. And as explained in the Bible Reading Program comments on Joel, many equate the Valley of Jehoshaphat (meaning “Judgment of the Eternal”) with the Kidron.

2. Another possibility relates to Zechariah 14:4, which says that the returning Christ will stand on the Mount of Olives, which will then split in two, leaving a northern half and a southern half. God refers to the resultant rift between the two halves in the literal Hebrew as “the valley of My mountains” (verse 5, Green’s Literal Translation). The image is that the chariots of destruction then go out from this location.

3. Others take the two mountains as meaning the heavenly Mount Zion (seat of God's spiritual temple) and the earthly Mount Zion (seat of God's physical temple)—with Christ descending in the air between them and sending out His forces of judgment from this location. Bronze here would seem to have the figurative sense of firmness or strength.

4. Still others, given that “mountain” often represents a kingdom in prophecy, see “between the two mountains” as signifying the transition from God's earthly kingdom of national Israel to the millennial Kingdom of God—and that “between” them denotes the *time* of coming judgment.

5. There are some who would take the two mountains as signifying God's Kingdom and Satan's kingdom, though it does not seem that both of these would be characterized by the same metal in the same prophecy.

6. Yet another theory is that “*the two mountains*” must refer to something previously mentioned in the relating of Zechariah's visions. The flying scroll of the previous chapter represented the curses for disobedience in God's covenant with Israel pursuing the people to visit judgment upon them. Interestingly, God through Moses had told the Israelites to publicly post the covenant between two mountains at Shechem—and for half the people to proclaim the blessings from Mount Gerizim and half to proclaim the curses from Mount Ebal (see Deuteronomy 27). And this they did (Joshua 8:30-35). Yet how could this possibly relate to the punishment on the *gentile* nations indicated in Zechariah 6? Notice that just after telling the Israelites of the curses that would befall them for disobedience (see Deuteronomy 27:1–30:1), God said that they would repent and return from captivity (verses 2-6) and that *this* would then happen: “Also the LORD your God will put *all these curses on your enemies* and on those who hate you, who persecuted you” (verse 7). So the curses that had pursued and stricken the Israelites would turn around and strike the *gentile* nations. Consider also that after proclaiming the blessings and curses between the two mountains at Shechem, Joshua and the Israelites went out from there and conquered the Promised Land. This was figurative of the end time, when another Joshua (Jesus Christ) will lead His hosts to victory over the nations, conquering the “promised land” of the Kingdom of God—the entire earth.

7. Another possibility that has been offered, and perhaps the simplest, is that the two bronze mountains refer directly to the two bronze pillars (literally “standing things”) before the temple. Mountains are certainly symbols of strength, just as were the bronze pillars—given their names related to strength and God establishing. Indeed, mentioning *the two bronze mountains* as the place of God's presence to a people engaged in the work of rebuilding the temple would quite likely have made them immediately think of the two pillars. So the picture here would simply be of God's agents going out from the place of His throne (which the temple represented).

Let's next consider the horse-drawn chariots. The picture of red, black, white and dappled horses in Zechariah 6 recalls the red, white and brown horses of chapter 1. Though similar, the images are not the same. The different colors in chapter 1 may have represented the different areas of oversight of some of God's angels in their reconnaissance of the nations. The colors in chapter 6 seem to most closely resemble the colors of the horses in Revelation 6: white, red, black and pale. While the order is not the same, the meanings of the colors are probably similar. The red horse of Revelation 6 signifies war and bloodshed, the black horse signifies famine, and the pale horse symbolizes plagues of disease and other calamities. “Dappled” in Zechariah 6—or splotchy—could fit the image of a variety of plagues. The parallel between the white horses of Zechariah 6 and Revelation 6 is perhaps not immediately grasped, as the one in Revelation is often designated as false religion—which does not fit with the one sent out by God in Zechariah. In fact, the white horse simply signifies conquest—as Christ Himself arrives on a white horse (Revelation 19). In Revelation 6, it is false religion doing the conquering: “And he went out conquering and to conquer” (verse 2). In Zechariah 6, it is God's agents who claim victory.

Yet the agents of God in this chapter are evidently not angels as in chapter 1. Rather, the horses and chariots of chapter 6 evidently represent waves of judgment from God. In verse 5, “four spirits of heaven” could also be “four winds of heaven,” symbolizing destructive power sent out over the earth by God (see Jeremiah 49:36). In fact, notice Revelation 7: “After these things I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, on the sea, or on any tree... ‘...till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads’” (verses 1-3). The sealing is completed during the Great Tribulation (see verse 14) so that the four winds are released thereafter during the day of the Lord. (There might be some relation, at least thematically, to the releasing of four angels bound at the Euphrates during the Day of the Lord in Revelation 9:13-21 to cause vast destruction.)

The red horses of Zechariah 6 are not designated as going to any particular place but evidently are first in going “throughout the earth” (see verse 7, which applies to all the horses)—that is, to the whole world, indicating a period of global war. In verse 6, the chariot of black horses charges into the “north country.” In Zechariah’s third vision earlier the same night, “the land of the north” was specifically equated with Babylon (Zechariah 2:6-7). And Babylon was mentioned again in the previous vision (5:11). So it appears that end-time Babylon will be hit with a period of devastation and famine—which it will experience in the Day of the Lord. This may parallel the imagery in Joel 2:2-11 (see also verse 20). The black horses are followed to Babylon by the white horses of conquest—to be ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Christ and His heavenly hosts.

The plagues of the dappled horses strike south toward Egypt and other areas that are today Muslim. Interestingly, “if the chariots in Zechariah’s seventh vision are understood as moving from Zion in just the two directions, north and south, the geo-political outlook of Zech 6:1-8 is comparable to that in Daniel 11 with its concentration on the Ptolemies to the south and the Seleucids to the north, threatening the covenant people in between” (Meredith Kline, *Glory in Our Midst: A Biblical-Theological Reading of Zechariah’s Night Visions*, p. 218 footnote)—with the conflict continuing to the end-time. Later in the book of Zechariah, we are told of plagues on Egypt following Christ’s return if they refuse to observe the Feast of Tabernacles (14:16-19), showing how God will work with all nations.

Yet the principal enemy of chapter 6 is Babylon. Recall that God had been “exceedingly angry with the nations at ease” (1:15)—the enemies of Israel. He had foretold their punishment (verses 18-21), particularly that of Babylon (2:6-9). Now, with the judgment on the Babylonians accomplished, God’s Spirit is at last able to rest from bringing punishment on them (6:8).

The Crowning of Joshua (Zechariah 6)

July 24-25 Cont’d

Whether or not Zechariah was still experiencing his final vision when God gave Him the instructions of verses 9-15 is not clear. In any case, his carrying out of the instructions, including his relaying of God’s message, would not have been part of a vision. Evidently, the episode described here literally took place on the day following the night of visions. The date would still have been the 24th day of the 11th month, because days were reckoned as beginning at sunset and lasting until the following sunset.

A new group returns from Babylon (verse 9), represented by a certain Heldai (referred to in verse 14 as Helem), Tobijah and Jedaiah. Following the vision in chapter 5 of the future captivity of Israel and Judah by Babylon, and the vision earlier in chapter 6 of Babylon’s coming punishment, the newly returned group represents, in the context of the visions, the returning captives from end-time Babylon. The men of Zechariah’s day brought gold and silver for the temple. Even so, the captives of the end time will return and contribute to God and His work.

Regarding Josiah the son of Zephaniah, Dr. Meredith Kline identifies him as “a treasury steward. Confirming this identification of his role is the designation for him in v. 14. In place of the name Josiah is *lehen*. The *l-* is usually taken as the preposition ‘for,’ which is prefixed to each of the other three names. It should, however, be taken together with the *hn* and this *lhn* has been shown to be an Akkadian loanword, the Neo-Assyrian *lahhinu* (also attested in the Aramaic *lehen*), used as a title for a court or temple official, a steward of precious commodities. Josiah was then a temple official. Such an office was occupied in the days of Hezekiah by Kore ben Imnah, who was set over the storage and distribution of the offerings (2 Chr 31:14). Josiah’s ‘house’ does not refer to his residence but to the storage or treasury room(s) connected with the temple, over which he was in charge. It was naturally to this ‘house’ of Josiah that the returning exiles brought their treasures for the temple. And it would have been at that (treasury) house that Zechariah received through Josiah’s offices the exiles’ donation as requisitioned by the Lord” (*Glory in Our Midst*, pp. 228-229).

With their gift Zechariah was to see to the making of a royal crown to be placed on the head of Joshua the high priest, probably to encircle the base of his priestly miter or turban. This would signify combining the priesthood and monarchy in one office. Yet Joshua was certainly not being actually crowned as king. Judah was still under Persian rule and there was no provision for the line of Aaron to reign anyway. Some have speculated that this ceremony was to signify Joshua, the ecclesiastical leader, soon taking over civil rule as well given the conspicuous absence of Zerubbabel after this point. The event is also seen as representative of the later rise of the Hasmonean priest-kings around four centuries later. But this episode symbolized neither of these things.

Joshua was in no way personally assuming the royal office. He would not wear the crown again beyond this symbolic coronation. Rather, it would be kept in the temple for a memorial (verse 14).

The point is that “again, as in chapter 3, Joshua is typical of Messiah both by name and office. The crown was to be a composite one (the verb is singular in v. 14), one set above another” (Charles Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 300). As in chapter 3, the Messiah typified by Joshua is again referred to as the Branch. He is introduced with the words “Behold, the Man...” (verse 12), the very words by which Pontius Pilate introduced the brutalized Jesus to the crowd that cried out for His death (John 19:5). The prophecy states that the Branch would “branch out” (Zechariah 6:12). Jesus told His followers, “I am the vine, you are the branches” (John 15:5). His Church would grow out from Him—and eventually His Kingdom throughout the earth and then the whole universe. The Messiah, as the ultimate Zerubbabel figure, would be the one to build the temple (Zechariah 6:12-13; see 4:9). He would accomplish the building of the second temple in Zechariah’s day. He would build the spiritual temple of His followers, the Church of God. And He will also build a new temple in Jerusalem in the Millennium. Church and state will be united through His rule as both Priest and King.

Not only would the crown in the temple represent the hope of Christ’s future coming as both ruler and intercessor, but it would also serve as a memorial to those who had contributed to the crown and thus to the Kingdom by their gifts to the work of God—and this as a representation of those who would come from afar in the future (verse 15). This would include not only Israelites but also the gentiles. All would be allowed and encouraged to “build the temple” along with the Messiah Himself—though this remained, as always, contingent on faithful obedience (same verse). Some of this is fulfilled in the Church of God today, God’s spiritual temple, but the ultimate emphasis here, as throughout Zechariah’s visions, is on the incredible time of Christ’s return.

The Decree of Darius (Ezra 5:3–6:13)

July 26-27

The Jewish rebuilding project elicits an inquiry by Persian officials. The account here is not precisely dated. The phrase “at the same time” (5:3) tells us that it was close to the commencement of the project in the second year of Darius (4:24–5:2)—that is, 520-519 B.C. The foundation was newly laid in December of 520 B.C., as we saw in Haggai 2:18, and the visit of the Persian officials had to come after that because of the report of timber now being laid in the walls (Ezra 5:8). Zechariah’s night visions, the subject of our previous readings (Zechariah 1:8–6:15), came in February of 519 B.C., two months after the new foundation was completed (see 1:8). The Persian visit might have come shortly before Zechariah’s visions but it seems more likely to have come after them. Either way, the time required for the matter to reach the emperor, be researched and then responded to would place the conclusion of the matter several months later—definitely beyond Zechariah’s night of visions (thus explaining the placement of our current reading).

The two leading figures in the official visit are “Tattenai the governor of *the region* beyond the River and Shethar-Boznai” (Ezra 1:3). The italicized words here, “the region,” have actually been added to the text. The designation “Beyond the River” (Hebrew *Abar nahar*, equivalent to Aramaic *Ebir-nari*) was actually the proper name of the Persian province containing Syria and Judea. The name denoted the region west of the Euphrates from a Mesopotamian and Persian perspective. Confirming the accuracy of the biblical record, archaeologists have found “a document that can be dated to 5 June 502 B.C., which cites *Ta-at-tanni* as the *pahat* (‘governor’) who was subordinate to the satrap over *Ebir-nari* [‘Beyond the River’]. Shethar-Bozenai may have functioned as a Persian official known as the *patifrasa* (‘inquisitor’) or *frasaka* (‘investigator’)” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verses 3-5).

Just what brought the Persian sub-governor and his retinue is not stated. He may have simply been conducting a general inspection of his territory. However, it seems likely that the Persians had informants all over the place and that the activities in Judea would have caused regional authorities some concern. Moreover, given that there was a history of Samaritan antagonism and reporting to the imperial authorities, this may well have been another instance of it.

The Persian inquiry was conducted among the Jewish elders—probably a governing council (verse 9). It perhaps seems odd that Zerubbabel does not appear more prominently here. He is mentioned in the official Jewish response, evidently being referred to as Sheshbazzar (verses 14-16), which was probably his Persian name (see the Bible Reading Program comments on Ezra 1). And Darius specifically refers to him, though not by name (6:6). Why then does it appear in the passage that the Persian governor did not deal directly or particularly with him? And why did not Zerubbabel himself, rather than the Jewish elders, give the official response to Tattenai recorded in the letter to Darius? It is conceivable that the Jewish elders purposely downplayed the role of Zerubbabel.

As explained in the Bible Reading Program comments on Zechariah 4, Darius had recently put down a number of rebellions instigated by claimants to the royal thrones in various areas of the

empire. As Zerubbabel was of the line of David, grandson of a former Jewish king, this may have been recognized as a potential Persian concern. In fact, as pointed out in the same comments, some of Haggai and Zechariah's prophecies might well have sparked rumors that Zerubbabel was the promised Messiah—further fueling the Persians' concerns if they learned of this. It would not be out of character for the Samaritans to have made an issue of this. Given the circumstances, perhaps Zerubbabel himself and the other Jewish leaders decided to downplay his role as a precaution. Whatever the reason, there is no hint that the position of Zerubbabel was even an issue at this time as far as Tattenai was concerned.

Verse 5 says that the Persian entourage "could not make [the Jews] cease till a report could go to Darius." Perhaps Tattenai's initial response called for a temporary halt to construction but the Jewish elders, now emboldened by the national spiritual renewal, did not just throw up their hands and comply. It is likely that they pressed the legality of their actions based on Cyrus' decree (we know this information came out at some point, as it appears in Tattenai's letter to Darius)—and Tattenai may have been satisfied with that until word came back from the emperor.

The decree of Cyrus would have been an enormously powerful factor in support of the Jewish rebuilding because of the Medo-Persian precedent of unchangeable law (see Daniel 6:8, 12, 15).

Historian Werner Keller writes: "The official exchange of letters with the Persian court on this matter can be found in the Book of Ezra (5:6–6:12). Many experts are convinced of the historicity of these documents although others are doubtful. If they are not genuine, however, they are very clever imitations both as to form and content. The Bible here even uses the Aramaic of the empire, the commercial language of the Achaemenide Empire"—that is, the Persian Empire ruled by the Achaemenid Dynasty (*The Bible As History*, 1981, pp. 303-304).

The reference to finding a copy of Cyrus' decree in Achmetha, the capital of Media more commonly referred to today as Ecbatana, is rather interesting. French archaeologist Roland de Vaux says: "Now we know that it was the custom of the Persian sovereigns to winter in Babylon and depart in the summer to Susa or Ecbatana...and we also know that Cyrus left Babylon in the spring of 538 B.C.... A forger operating in Palestine without the information which we possess could hardly have been so accurate" ("The Decrees of Cyrus and Darius on the Rebuilding of the Temple," *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 1971, p. 89, quoted by *Expositor's*, note on Ezra 6:2).

As verses 3-11 show, Darius endorses Cyrus' decree and even adds to it in his new decree, ordering that the Jews be left alone in their work, that the project be funded out of the taxes on the "Beyond the River" province, that the Persian state provide a steady stream of animals and other products necessary to the continued offerings of the Jewish national worship in Jerusalem, and that violation was punishable by death. The word "hanged" in verse 11 "does not mean hanged by the neck from a rope. It refers to impaling the dead body of the condemned on a pole as a public display and a grim warning to others" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 11-12).

Werner Keller states: "Numerous other contemporary texts confirm...the extent to which Darius fostered the indigenous [religions] of the peoples incorporated in his empire, not only in Palestine but also in Asia Minor and Egypt. For example the inscription of Usahor, an Egyptian doctor, runs as follows: 'King Darius—may he live for ever—commanded me to go to Egypt...and make up once more the number of the holy scribes of the temple and bring new life into what had fallen into decay....'" (p. 304). This happened about the same time as Darius' decree regarding Jerusalem, around 519 B.C. (see *Expositor's*, note on 6:12).

Illustrating his concern for local religious matters even above palace concerns, Darius wrote to Gadata, the steward of his estates, taking him to task over his attitude toward the sacredness of the temple of Apollo in Magnesia: "I hear that you are not carrying out my instructions properly. Admittedly you are taking trouble over my estates, in that you are transferring trees and plants from beyond the Euphrates to Asia Minor. I commend this project and the Court will show its gratitude. But in disregarding my attitude to the gods you have provoked my displeasure and unless you change your tactics you will feel its weight. For you have taken away the gardeners who are sacred to Apollo and used them for other gardening jobs of a secular character, thereby showing a lack of appreciation of the sentiments of my ancestors towards the god who has spoken to the Persians..." (quoted by Keller, p. 304).

Clearly, Darius' statements regarding the true God in his decree are no indication of any real belief regarding Him. This was more of a public policy issue. Yet how interesting it is that this was the Persian policy. And how remarkable it is that this turn of events came to pass at this particular point—just in time to enable the temple to be completed within the 70-year time frame God had foretold long before. And how wonderful an encouragement this was for the Jewish nation. They had

returned to God. And now, as He promised, He returned to them (Zechariah 1:3)—looking out for their national welfare and blessing and ensuring it by the mouth of the most powerful man and greatest political power on earth.

Fasts of Mourning Turned to Joy (Zechariah 7–8)

July 28-29

Zechariah 7:1 is dated to the fourth day of the ninth month Kislev in the fourth year of Darius, corresponding to late November of 518 B.C. Almost two years have passed since Zechariah's memorable night of visions and the symbolic coronation of the high priest Joshua (see 1:7). With the decree of Darius in the intervening time bringing about a sea change in the region—the Persian province of which Judea was part now helping to provide for the temple's construction—the rebuilding of the temple was really on the move. The nation was now being blessed instead of cursed, so we would presume the people were seeing bigger harvests and greater wealth and prosperity in general. The nation's spiritual renewal had progressed even further. This was a time of restoration and great joy. The 70 years since the former temple's destruction were nearly over—only two more years to go! So this prompted a sensible question regarding certain national fast days that had been instituted as times of mourning over the calamities at the beginning of the exile.

A delegation is sent to the temple in Jerusalem to pray and inquire of the priests and the prophets (the latter referring to Zechariah and Haggai) about the matter (7:2-3). The New King James Version says the deputation was sent “to the house of God” (verse 2). Others, such as the NIV, translate this as “from Bethel,” the town 12 miles north of Jerusalem. The uncertainty stems from the fact that in Hebrew *Beth-El* means “house of God.” The town of Bethel seems more likely as the temple is nowhere else referred to in Scripture as Beth-El and verse 3 immediately afterward refers to the temple as “the house of the LORD of hosts.” “Over two hundred Jews from Bethel returned from Babylon in 538 B.C. (Ezra 2:28; Neh. 7:32), and the city was reoccupied during the restoration period (Neh. 11:31)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Zechariah 7:3).

Zechariah then gives God's response in chapters 7–8, each of four sections beginning with the same basic wording (see 7:4, 8; 8:1, 18). The fact that the last section returns to the matter of the fasts shows that these are really four parts of one prophecy.

As recorded, the question was particularly concerned with the fast of the fifth month, the 9th of Av (see 7:3), as this day commemorated the destruction of Solomon's temple. But perhaps the other fasts were initially mentioned as well. God's first response through Zechariah also mentions the fast of the seventh month (verse 5). This does not refer to the fast God commanded in the Law for the seventh month, the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 16:29). Rather these and the other two mentioned in Zechariah 8:18) were all instituted through tradition:

“Counting the beginning of the year from the month of Nisan, the Jewish sages identified these dates as follows (in the Talmudical tractate *Rosh Hashanah* 18b): the fast of the fourth month fell on the ninth of Tammuz, the day when the city walls were breached (2 Kings 25:3-4; Jer. 39:2); the fast of the fifth month was on the ninth of Ab, when the house of God was destroyed by fire (2 Kings 25:8-10); the fast of the seventh month was on the third of Tishri, the anniversary of the assassination of Gedaliah the son of Ahikam (ibid. 25; Jer. 41:2); and the fast of the tenth month fell on the tenth of Tebeth, which was the day when the king of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:1, Ezek. 24:2). In Zechariah's day, sixty-eight years after the destruction, when the rebuilding of the Temple was almost complete, the question naturally arose whether the time had not come to annul these fasts, since Jeremiah's prophecy about the duration of the exile might well be thought to have been fulfilled” (*The Illustrated Family Encyclopedia of the Living Bible*, Vol. 8, p. 93, quoted in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on Zechariah 7:2-3).

Rather than a simple yes or no, God points out that there's a much larger question to look at here with regard to what is being asked. Just what are these fast days all about anyway? He does not condemn the idea of national fast days. Instead, the real issue is one of motive and making sure to properly prioritize what is truly important. The exiles who have returned have undergone a period of spiritual renewal. But they still have areas to grow in—just as Christians do many years after conversion. God wants the people of Judea—and those Jews who were still in Babylon for that matter (as word would no doubt get back to them)—to really examine their hearts and consider the reasons they did the things they did, including why they engaged in the particular religious practices they did.

God asks, “Did you really fast for Me—for Me?” (verse 5). The sad truth is that their fasting was selfishly motivated. In verse 6, God says the same was true in regard to their feasting—it was all for themselves. It may be hard, though, to understand how self-denial can be selfish. Yet consider that rather than using fasting as a tool to draw closer to God, to realize total dependence on Him and

more readily discern His will—which is the true purpose of fasting—the people were using the fasts to both wallow in self-pity and make God feel sorry enough for them to do something for them. Moreover, some likely fasted to feel good about themselves—and some to prove their righteousness to others. Centuries later, Jesus Christ would condemn such impure motives for fasting (Matthew 6:16-18).

Realize, further, that these fasts were instituted to mourn the terrible *calamities* that God had brought, not to mourn over and consider the behavior that *had brought* the punishment—the nation’s *sins*. Whereas it would have been fitting to use these anniversaries as opportunities to reflect on just why they had gone into exile, they merely grieved over their circumstances. Where was the searching self-examination and the depth of heartfelt repentance that God desires? As we will see, the people continued in many of their wrong attitudes and practices. So when they persisted in violating what God commanded, He would of course not look very highly on their form of piety that He did not command. Again, however, traditional national fast days were not the problem. The problem was attitude and motive. The same wrong mindset of the people could of course attach to God’s *commanded* Holy Days too—and in fact did. It was just particularly incongruous that fasting over calamities would ignore the very reasons for the calamities!

In verses 8-10, God reminds the people to focus on what’s really important—the weightier matters of the law, such as justice, mercy, faith and love (compare Micah 6:8; Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42), the true religion of looking out for the widow and orphan (see James 1:27), and other matters of serving and helping one’s neighbor. It was the refusal of their forefathers to heed this message that brought about the exile (Zechariah 7:11-14). These are the kinds of contemplative thoughts the national fast days should have been stimulating. The fact is, the relationship of the people to God could not have been right or they would have been right with one another (compare Matthew 5:23-24). Faith without a right way of life is a mockery of everything God stands for. The same challenge exists for God’s people today. Fasting, prayer, Bible reading, church attendance and the like can all become shallow rituals if they are not accompanied by a genuine desire to serve God and a lifestyle of integrity and outgoing concern toward others.

Zechariah 8 “continues the thought of the previous chapter. The prophet emphasized in chapter 7 the need of obedience from the fate of their fathers [a warning]; now he exhorts them in chapter 8 to the same condition of heart by placing before them promises of God’s future blessing [a message of the good news of God’s Kingdom]. This section parallels that of 1:14-17, just as chapter 7 answered to 1:1-6” (Charles Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 308). The Church of God today is also to deliver a warning and call to repentance as well as the all-important message of the gospel of the Kingdom of God.

God in the person of Christ will come to literally dwell in Jerusalem (see 8:3). Chapter 8 gives us a beautiful picture of the security, peace and joy that will then permeate not only the Holy City but all the world. Considering the terror and violence of the Middle East today, the imagery in verses 4-5 of people growing to great age and children playing in Jerusalem’s streets is an astounding contrast. *Expositor’s* comments on verse 6: “Such things may have seemed too good to be true in the eyes of the Jewish remnant living ‘at that time,’ but the Lord Almighty did not so regard them. Nothing is too hard for him (see Gen 18:14...). [Merrill Unger]... explains the thought of the verse thus: ‘If the remnant of the nation in that future day will scarcely be able to comprehend how such miraculous things just promised could become a reality, the divine reply is, “Because they seem difficult to you, must they also seem hard to me?”’ The answer is obvious.”

In verses 7-8, God promises the restoration of all His people. He will gather them from both east and west—that is, from wherever they have been scattered throughout the world.

In verses 9-10, God encourages His people to be strong in their work of building the temple—and there is likely a spiritual meaning for His spiritual people of the end time intended here too. With confidence in God’s promises, we should be strong in participating in God’s spiritual-temple-building work today.

Israel will be blessed tremendously. Notice that God says He will deliver both Judah and Israel at that time—that is, all 12 tribes (verses 11-13).

In verses 14-17 God again sets forth our moral responsibilities—as all people living by these precepts is the way that will bring about the wonderful world of peace God proclaims.

Finally, in verses 18-19, God returns to the matter of the Jewish fasts. During the millennial reign of Christ, they will be turned into times of joy and feasting. This would parallel Christ’s point about His followers not fasting while He was with them (Matthew 9:15). In the future Kingdom of God, Christ will again dwell with His people.

“Therefore,” God instructs at the end of Zechariah 8:19, “love truth and peace.” God’s point through all that we have read is that our integrity and manner of life—in thought, word and deed—is what is most important. We cannot substitute false piety for righteousness—for that will serve only to take us away from God. Instead, in drawing close to Him by striving to obey all His commands, paying special heed to areas of life He refers to as more important, God’s people will ultimately live in a perfect world of peace where they will never again need to seek of Him the reason for their national punishment through fasting. For they will be perpetually delivered. That, Zechariah proclaims, is where the focus needs to be.

How, then, was this matter of the fasts resolved? We are not specifically told. “According to Jewish tradition, when the nation was in peace and prosperity the fasts were suspended; when they were in trouble the fasts were reinstated. Since AD 70 [when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and its temple] the Jews keep the principal fasts” (Feinberg, p. 312). This would seem to be acceptable, as long as the right focus is maintained when participating in the fasts. As Jesus said in the same verse cited above, Matthew 9:15, His own followers would fast when He was no longer with them. Of course, this refers more to personally chosen times. Yet national days of prayer and fasting on traditional days would be acceptable as well as long as they don’t devolve into ritualism, legalism, self-pity or false piety.

While the negative aspect here sadly still often characterizes Jewish religious practice today, that will not be the case in the world to come. Indeed, the people of other nations in the Millennium will even seek out the Jews as those who are close to God—and who can therefore guide and teach them in the ways of true worship (Zechariah 8:20-23).

The Temple Completed; Passover Celebrated (Ezra 6:14-22; Psalm 126) July 30-31

With the ongoing preaching and encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the elders of the Jews built and at last finished the second temple (Ezra 6:14). Whether or not these elders included the governor Zerubbabel is not made clear (though they are differentiated in verse 7). That Zerubbabel’s name is not mentioned in conjunction with the temple’s completion could be an indication that he was no longer in office (see the Bible Reading Program comments on Zechariah 4). Yet again, the matter remains unresolved.

The timing is of course significant. Solomon’s temple had been destroyed in 586 B.C. Seventy years later, as foretold in Jeremiah 25, brings us to the sixth year of the Persian emperor Darius the Great (516-515 B.C.). The particular date, the third day of the 12th month Adar (Ezra 6:15), corresponds to March 12, 515 B.C.

Verse 14 says the temple was built in obedience to God and “according to the command of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia.” Artaxerxes (who reigned 465-425 B.C.) seems out of place here. He “did assist the rebuilding of the temple, although it was completed years before Artaxerxes came to power. Artaxerxes contributed to the welfare of the temple by issuing a decree regarding its maintenance (7:15, 21)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 6:14). The king’s purpose was “to beautify the house of the LORD” according to 7:27. Note that this was part of an Aramaic section of the book, which ends in verse 18 of chapter 6. So it may be that this was intended to be part of the Persian state records and that chronological consistency with the rest of Ezra’s book was not the main consideration here. Since Ezra’s mission came during the reign of Artaxerxes, it could be that Ezra placed the king’s contribution in this spot to give him honorary mention in this particular state document.

At the dedication of the temple there is a great sacrifice, albeit not remotely approaching Solomon’s dedicatory sacrifice. Yet, “although there were more than 200 times as many sheep and oxen offered in Solomon’s dedication (see 1 King. 8:63), it should be noted that there were more people—and more wealthy people—participating in Solomon’s dedication” (note on Ezra 6:17). Still it was an occasion of great joy (verse 6). By this time there is no mention of any sorrow over the smaller size and inferior quality of the second temple as compared to Solomon’s, such as that described in 3:12, Haggai 2:3, and Zechariah 4:10.

Though the returned exiles are referred to the “children of Israel” in verse 16, we understand from other passages that the returned exiles were predominantly of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi (see Ezra 1:5)—with only a very few from the other tribes whose ancestors had become part of the kingdom of Judah. Nearly the whole of the other tribes remained scattered. Note that in verse 16, “children of Israel” is meant to designate the common people as opposed to the Levites and priests mentioned in the same verse. And all the Jews of Judea, as the remnant of Israel, were children of

Israel. That being said, it is interesting to note that 12 male goats were offered as a sin offering for all 12 tribes of Israel (verse 17)—showing that God still viewed His people in terms of the 12 tribes.

In a matter of weeks after the temple dedication came the observance of the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread. Verse 21 again refers to the children of Israel—but of course only those “who had returned from the captivity,” who were almost all Jews. (For more on what happened to the other tribes of Israel, request, download or read online our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*.)

Those who had “separated themselves from the filth of the nations of the land [that is, from the corrupt religious practices of the Samaritans]” (verse 21) were the few poor of the land whom the Babylonians had left in Judah as vinedressers and farmers (see 2 Kings 25:12).

“King of Assyria” (Ezra 6:22) is a somewhat surprising title for Darius. Yet it is a legitimate distinction as he was ruler of the former realm of Assyria. Persian rulers took the title “king of Babylon” for the same reason (see 5:13; Nehemiah 13:6).

It remains a time of great joy (6:22), as at long last, once again, the Jews celebrate before their own temple in their own land. And let us realize that this was only a tiny precursor to the awesome restoration of Israel and Judah that will come at the return of Jesus Christ.

“The Lord Has Done Great Things for Us” (Ezra 6:14-22; Psalm 126) July 30-31

Psalm 126 is the seventh of a group of psalms known as “the Songs of Ascent (Ps. 120–134). This group of hymns was likely used by pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem to worship the Lord during the three annual national feasts—Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Lev. 23)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Psalm 120).

The 126th Psalm is distinctive in that it was composed following the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon. And given the great joy expressed within the song, it certainly fits with all that we’ve recently read regarding the restoration of God’s worship in Jerusalem and the newly rebuilt temple.

The return from captivity in Babylon had been anticipated for so long that when it came, it seemed like a dream (verse 1). Was this really happening? It was! And when the reality set in, joy was overflowing in laughter and song. The events that Judah experienced through the decrees of Cyrus and Darius and the temple reconstruction all stood as a great testimony among other nations (verse 2). And it was a great witness to themselves of the reality and power of their God. “The LORD has done great things for us,” they cried, “and we are filled with joy” (verse 3, NIV).

Still, all was not yet accomplished. God had “brought back the captivity of Zion” (verse 1). And yet the people pray in verse 4, “Bring back our captivity, O LORD...” Only a small percentage of the Jews who had been exiled to Babylon had returned. And the rest of the tribes of Israel remained scattered. Ultimately, this prayer was for the end-time work of Jesus Christ in bringing Israel and Judah back from around the globe. “...As the streams in the South [the Negev]” (same verse) is a request that this happen quickly and with great force. “The wadis in the steppe south of Hebron, around Beersheba, were generally dry; but on the rare occasions when during the winter months it rained even as little as one inch, the water ran down its ‘streams’ with great rapidity and often with destructive force.... Roads and bridges [have been] destroyed by the force of these torrential streams. The ‘streams in the Negev’ are not ordinary phenomena, as much as they represent proverbially the sudden unleash of God’s blessing” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verse 4).

Finally, *The Nelson Study Bible* notes on verses 5-6: “The people of Judah had gone to Babylon in tears. Yet their sorrow reaped tremendous rewards; the Lord came to the rescue of His humbled people (34:18; Is. 66:2; Matt. 5:4). Upon their return to Jerusalem and Judah, they were reaping a harvest of rejoicing.”

As we assemble annually to observe God’s feasts, let us all go with such a mindset—as if leaving the captivity of this world to rejoice before the Almighty King who has done great things for us, knowing that all our toil and sorrow in this age will ultimately reap a reward in His presence for all eternity.