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Author(s): David L. Petersen

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ZECHARIAH'S VISIONS: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

by

DAVID L. PETERSEN

Denver, Colorado

Zechariah's visions remain some of the most enigmatic literature in the Hebrew Bible. Whether trance in the night, dream, or even nightmare, these eight reports of ocular and auditory experience continue to puzzle the reader. These visions do not puzzle because scholars have ignored them. Recent work on this literature has, in fact, revealed great richness, both in its form and in its symbolism.¹ However, despite the best efforts of scholars, what Zechariah heard and saw is not easy to explain.

A thorough *Forschungsbericht* of work on these visions would obviously be inappropriate in a study of this sort. Nevertheless, it is important to observe that scholars have promulgated important and yet quite different theses about Zechariah's visions. For the sake of convenience, I mention briefly two such theories.

(1) Klaus Seybold, in 1974, argued that Zechariah's vision cycle is to be construed as "Aufruf und Vorschau zum Wiederaufbau des Jerusalemer Tempels, als Denk- und Programmschrift zur Restauration des Kultzentrums auf dem Zion". He continued, the visions are "eine Art Heiligtumslegende, eine Gründungs- und Legitimationsschrift für den zweiten Tempel, ein Hieros-Logos-Dokument, vergleichbar den Perikope vom Jakobstraum (Gen. 28, 10-22...)"² For Seybold, Zechariah's visions focus almost exclusively on the significance of the reconstruction of the Jerusalem temple.

(2) Not dissimilarly, Baruch Halpern, in a recent article, has contended that these visions may be thought of as an integrated

¹ See conveniently, W. A. M. Beuken, *Haggai-Sacharja 1-8. Studien zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der frühnachexilischen Prophetie* (Assen, 1967); C. Jeremias, *Die Nachtgesichte des Sacharja. Untersuchungen zu ihrer Stellung im Zusammenhang der Visionsberichte im Alten Testament und zu ihrem Bildmaterial* (Göttingen, 1977).

² *Bilder zum Tempelbau: Die Visionen des Propheten Sacharja* (Stuttgart, 1974), pp. 107 and 100.

“temple song”. For Halpern, Zechariah’s night vision—which he thinks also includes the oracular material in the book—“rehearses in a mundane framework the ritual of temple reconstruction and, in a cosmic or visionary framework, extends and elaborates upon this rehearsal...”³ Halpern adds, “Representing a reverie at the foundation of the Second Temple, it bears a close relationship to the liturgy of temple renovation as reflected in Mesopotamian texts.”

As for Seybold, so for Halpern, temple reconstruction provides the *idée fixe* around which the symbolic notes of these visions are ordered.⁴

Others have, of course, maintained that the visions are much more general in their import. So L. Rignell wrote that they entail events of the time of salvation.⁵ And W. Rudolph, in his recent commentary, stated, “Die Visionen schildern durchweg ein Tun Jahwes: Er räumt alle Hindernisse beiseite, die den Arbruch der Heilszeit hintanhaltend könnten.”⁶ The assertions of Rignell and Rudolph are, however, so general that they do not accomplish much by way of explicating the specific details of the visions. Hence, of these two basic interpretive options, the explanations of Halpern and Seybold are the more compelling.

Halpern’s is, in many ways, the most forcefully argued position. He maintains that the visions focus on temple reconstruction for three basic reasons: a) the explicit mention of the temple in Zech. i-viii; b) the prominence of temple and cultic imagery in the visions; and c) the presence of a pattern in which the divine warrior saves his people, a pattern which entails cultic imagery and action.

Four responses seem appropriate to such claims:

1) Most of the direct references to the reconstruction of the temple in Zech. i-viii occur in the oracular material not in the visions themselves (i 16, ii 17, iii 7, iv 9, vi 12-14). So for example, the claim “my house shall be built in it”, occurs in oracular material following the first vision, and not in the first vision itself. No explicit mention of the Jerusalem temple is ever made in the vision reports.

³ “The Ritual Background of Zechariah’s Temple Song”, *CBQ* 40 (1978), p. 189.

⁴ See not dissimilarly, P. R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration. A Study of Hebrew Thought in the Sixth Century B.C.* (London and Philadelphia, 1968), p. 182.

⁵ *Die Nachtgesichte des Sacharja* (Lund, 1950), p. 245.

⁶ *Haggai-Sacharja 1-8—Sacharja 9-14—Maleachi* (Gütersloh, 1976), p. 63.

This distinction is critical since, as many scholars maintain, the visions comprise a quite distinct body of material from the oracles.⁷

2) Not all the visions contain temple or cultic imagery. So, for example, the fifth vision presents an image of a flying scroll. This flying scroll, which is identified by the *mal'āk* as a curse, is designed to provide recompense to those who have stolen and to those who have sworn falsely and yet who remain unpunished.⁸ No detail of this vision warrants the notion that temple or cultic practice is involved.⁹ Rather the imagery of a reified covenant curse which, when loosed, provides for the right ordering of, among others, the newly nascent Judahite community.

3) Not all so-called cultic imagery actually present in the visions is necessarily to be related to temple reconstruction. One of the clearest examples of cultic imagery in the visions is the four horns in the second vision, Zech. ii 1-4. Though to be sure the four horns could be those of two bulls, it is in my judgement more likely that they refer to the four horns of the altar, the more so since there is immediate reference to four artisans, individuals who could fashion such an altar.¹⁰ However, there is no reason to think that this altar has a direct connection with the restored temple. In fact, the interpretation of the vision leads in a different direction. These horns come to symbolize the totality of world powers which have destroyed Israel and which are soon to be torn down by those who made them. The most one may say concerning the cultic background of this vision is that a disembodied altar—its four horns—provides the occasion for a visionary experience of international retribution.

Halpern contends that a stock ancient Near Eastern mythic pattern pervades these visions, a divine warrior combat myth or mythic pattern which entails certain ritual activity. Now a number of things may be said about the putative existence of pervasive mythic patterns in ancient Near Eastern, including biblical,

⁷ On the distinction between the oracles and the visions, see Beuken, *Haggai-Sacharja 1-8*, and A. Petitjean, *Les Oracles du Proto-Zacharie. Un programme de restauration pour la communauté juive après l'exile* (Louvain, 1969).

⁸ For this translation of Zech. v 4, see the JPS translation of *The Prophets* (Philadelphia, 1978), and my forthcoming commentary.

⁹ Cf. Halpern, pp. 178-9.

¹⁰ For a careful argument in favor of the horned animal interpretation, see R. M. Good, "Zechariah's Second Night Vision (Zech 2, 1-4)", *Bib* 63 (1982), pp. 56-9.

literature. However, in this particular case, perhaps the most telling objection is this. In the instances of divine warrior texts which Halpern cites, e.g., the *Enuma Elish* and *Exod. xv*, the divine warrior is directly present in the action and is involved directly in the martial activity. Such is not the case in Zechariah's visions. Yahweh is rarely present; and there is precious little martial activity. And when there is apparent conflict, artisans rather than warriors are involved. Zechariah's visions may, in fact, cohere, but not around the theme of Yahweh as divine warrior.

In sum, I contend that the case for the cultic character of these visions is weak. These visions focus even less on cultic matters than does Jeremiah's vision of the almond rod focus on ancient Near Eastern horticulture (*Jer. i 11-12*).

I

If Zechariah's visions do not comprise a vision of temple renewal, what is their import? I suggest the following beginning of an answer. Zechariah's visions stand somewhere between purely mundane concerns and an utopian vision of renewal. Zechariah's visions are not concrete in the way in which Haggai concentrates on agricultural yield (*Hag. ii 14-19*) and on the preservation of capital (*Hag. i 6*); and they are not concrete in the way in which Ezek. *xl-xlviii* provides detailed measurements for the restored temple compound. Nor are Zechariah's visions utopian as are the expectations for wealth in *Hag. ii 6-7* or as the Ezekiel's vision of a society without religious error (*Ezek. xliii 7*). Zechariah's visions stand somewhere between utopian social vision and concrete physical and social detail.

The notion of "somewhere in between" is apt not only as a description of where these visions sit *vis-à-vis* other early post-exilic literatures. This notion of "inbetweenness" also serves as an accurate indicator for the content of Zechariah's visions. In the first vision, we are conveyed to a geography which is not really of this world, and which is not directly that of the divine dwelling. We are near the cosmic deep, overseeing the divine corral.¹¹ But we see

¹¹ The term *mēšullāh* is regularly used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to the oceanic depths. The use of the term "deep" here probably refers to one of the singular places at which the cosmic deep bubbles up at the surface of the earth, a notion attested in both the biblical and Ugaritic material.

neither the deity nor any obvious location in this world. We are between worlds. In the second vision, Zechariah looks up and sees the four horns, and then four artisans approaching them. These are this-worldly objects and yet somehow removed from this world—hovering above Zechariah in the night. On moving to the fourth vision, we are presented with a scene in which Joshua is cleansed in the divine council. And yet the council lacks the one element which is regularly present, the deity himself. It is not the divine council which we have come to expect on the basis of 1 Kings xxii or Isa. vi.¹² In the fifth vision, the most static vision of the cycle, Zechariah sees an object which we normally associate with the temple compound. And yet the temple lampstand has no obvious cultic context, and it is surrounded with strange olive-tree people. Finally, in the sixth and seventh visions, the prophet perceives objects, a flying scroll and an approaching ephah. Both are in mid-air. The soaring ephah is, as the writer succinctly puts it, “between the earth and the heavens”.

A second feature present in the visions is motion. Things are on the move. To be sure, not all the visions are filled with movement. But even the so-called static visions function to enable movement in the visions which follow. The first vision, one which provokes a lament by the *malʾāk*, garners a divine response to move beyond the lamentable *status quo*. Movement must, and does, follow. Artisans are on their way to destroy the nations responsible for Judah’s demise. An individual, probably angelic, moves out to do survey work on Jerusalem, only to be intercepted and corrected. The high priest is reclothed and, thereby, cleansed. Action follows hard on the heels of the inceptive, static vision.

And then, in the second static vision, Zechariah sees a symbol of divine presence, one flanked by two anointed figures, figures probably representing the diarchic polity of the newly restored Judahite community. This vision suggests, among other things, that a new cultic and social order is in place. As a function of this newly constituted order, further action could take place. Flying scroll, soaring ephah, and surging steeds—each with its own function—complete the visionary sequence. These complex symbols represent the working out of this new order as it affects Judah as well as the entire

¹² See for a similar assessment, E. Theodore Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Chico, 1980), p. 275.

world. Though strange in their imagery, things are happening in these visions. Things are up in the air; and things are on the move.

A third feature shared by these visions is the *Leitmotif* represented by the phrase *kol-hā'āreš*. In six of the eight visions, the notion of activity encompassing all the earth is stated explicitly. In both beginning and concluding visions, horses have gone out or are going out to patrol "all the earth". In the second vision, one hears of horns of the nations which have destroyed Judah, a description which surely refers to more than the Neo-Assyrians and Neo-Babylonians. The number four here, as elsewhere, symbolizes the totality of world powers. The next two visions focus on the restored Judahite community, and do not, therefore, include explicit mention of world-wide scope. But in the fifth, sixth, and seventh visions, the phrase "all the earth" appears again. In the fifth, Yahweh is 'ādōn of whole earth. In the sixth, the flying curse is understood as proceeding out "over the face of the entire earth". And in the seventh, we hear of an ephah which represents "their sin" in all the earth.¹³ In these visions, then, Zechariah experiences visions which focus neither on the territory of Judah nor on a localized version of Yahweh's activity. The scope of the activity is cosmic, international, as befits a world sovereign deity.

These visions, therefore, share three essential elements: things occur in an intermediate realm, things are on the move, and the notion of "all the earth" is a *Leitmotif* of the deity's action. How are these features to be explained? Are these elements simply a function of the dream or trance experience which Zechariah reports? Or are they a function of a presumed Jerusalem temple rededication ceremony? In both cases, the answer is no. Rather, another explanation is more likely, or better, two related explanations are likely.

First, Zechariah's visions comprise the doing of theology. In them, he is explaining why it is and how it is that Yahweh will right earlier iniquity; how it is that Yahweh will be present in Jerusalem; how it is that the community's leadership will be organized; how it is that the problem of human error will be addressed; and how it is that the contamination of earlier sin and unclean existence will be expunged. The visions comprise Zechariah's experientially-based

¹³ Reading 'āwōnām with LXX, Syr. instead of MT 'ēnām.

responses to these problems of a community attempting to reorganize itself.

By way of answering the question how Yahweh will be present in Jerusalem, Zechariah reports that Yahweh will no longer be localized in his temple. Instead, Yahweh will be a wall of fire around the city. And as for the city itself, Jerusalem will be a different sort of urban entity from what it had been earlier. It will exist without walls. Here Zechariah may be reflecting on the Persian ritual capital Pasargadae, another city without walls and with fire altars on its perimeter.¹⁴ In any case, Zechariah was also being hard-headedly realistic. The city walls of Jerusalem were not to be rebuilt for another century.

Or another case, purity and holiness were constitutive categories for monarchic Yahwism. In 520 B.C.E., how could the high priest and, in turn, the people be purified? The temple lay in disarray. The older cleansing practices were, therefore, impossible to carry out. Zechariah does, however, provide a solution. Joshua was to be cleansed in the ritual setting of the divine council, though not by the deity himself. Once this agent of communal purification had himself been cleansed, then the polity of the new community could begin to function.

These are important conceptual problems. Rather than rushing in where angels fear to tread, rather than proposing, as had Haggai, that the temple needed to be rebuilt, or that Zerubbabel was to be anointed as king, Zechariah experienced Yahweh's angelic agents and discerned how it was that the new religious and social order was to be initiated.

What Zechariah reports in these visions is initial restoration within the cosmic order. Once Yahweh had decided to act beneficently toward what was now Judah, there were certain processes which must begin, certain issues which must be resolved, certain decisions about community organization which must be broached; and all this before humans could do the mundane work

¹⁴ Pasargadae was under construction during the period 545-530 B.C.E. and would, as the unwallled ritual capital built by Cyrus to celebrate his universal dominion, have been well known in the ancient world. It was a city which broke significantly with earlier Mesopotamian and Persian architectural styles. Whether or not Zechariah ever lived in Mesopotamia, he would most likely have heard reports about this magnificent new city. See David Stronach, *Pasargadae. A Report on the Excavations conducted by the British Institute of Persian Studies from 1961-1963* (Oxford, 1978).

of restoration. What we see in the visions is the beginning of restoration on a cosmic plane. Things are being carried out over "all the earth", not just in Judah as Ezek. xl-xlviⁱⁱⁱ would have it. Yahweh's steeds and angelic host are busy with the work of creating a new social and religious structure which will affect the entire world, not just Judah.

My first answer to explain the peculiar elements of these visions—that things are up in the air, on the move, and cosmic in scale—is that Zechariah is experiencing and reporting restoration within the cosmic order. In so doing, he is providing the theological rationale which will enable concrete forms of restoration. He is not, in these visions, directly proposing or engaging in the mundane work of restoration.

II

Why was it necessary for Zechariah to bother with such an effort when the immediate conditions of the community made mundane work so necessary? The answer to this question provides the second, and perhaps more important, reason for the peculiar configuration which these visions have. Zechariah seems to be presenting an alternative vision of restoration. It revises significantly a vision included in another prophetic book, a vision which details the manner in which Judah, and more particularly the temple is to be restored. I refer, of course, to the so-called *Verfassungsentwurf* of Ezekiel.¹⁵ In order to make this point as clearly as possible, we must consider eight major points of contrast between the visions of Zechariah and "the visions of God" preserved in Ezek. xl-xlviⁱⁱⁱ.¹⁶ In order to accomplish this task concisely, I propose to raise eight questions and then provide answers drawn from each of these two corpora.

(1) What is the scope of Yahweh's restorative activity? Ezekiel's answer is clear. "The hand of Yahweh was upon me, and brought

¹⁵ On this block of material, see especially H. Gese, *Der Verfassungsentwurf des Ezechiel traditionsgeschichtlich untersucht* (Tübingen, 1957); W. Zimmerli, *Ezechiel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1969), pp. 977-1249; J. D. Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40-48* (Missoula, 1976).

¹⁶ For an assessment of the relation between Zechariah and Ezek. xl-xlviⁱⁱⁱ, though without the benefit of higher critical perspectives, see C. Mackay, "Zechariah in Relation to Ezek 40-48", *Evangelical Quarterly* 40 (1968), pp. 197-210. Mackay's basic argument is that "Zechariah is our first expositor of Ezek 40-48."

me in the visions of God into the land of Israel'' (Ezek. xl 1b-2). Everything happens in the land of Israel. Even the paradisaal river, which was world-wide in the primeval history of Genesis, is here limited to the land of Israel, so Ezek. xlvii. For Zechariah, however, Yahweh's activity is cosmic in scope, as the *Leitmotif kol-hā'āreṣ* clearly indicates.

(2) What will initiate the new order? Ezekiel is not explicit here. But we may infer that a newly completed temple is a requisite. Only with the temple rebuilt do the visions of Ezekiel make sense. The actual building of the temple was necessary to enable the new order. Not so for Zechariah. The new order required a decision by the deity and activity on the part of his agents in order to set up the basic cosmic and social structure for the new order. Human beings must wait for the deity and his agents to act.

(3) What will the new Jerusalem be like? Ezekiel is, here definitively clear. In Ezek. xlviii 30-35, we hear of a square city four thousand five hundred cubits on a side. Each side will have three gates. And since we hear of gates, we may presume that sides were those of a walled city (see Levenson, pp. 119-25).

Zechariah's notion is quite different. For him, to talk about measurements of breadth and width is wholly inappropriate. Further, to speak of a walled city is also improper. The new Jerusalem will not have walls because it will be a different, and more heavily populated, sort of urban entity. Zechariah could not differ more from Ezekiel's notion of the restored Jerusalem.

(4) How will Yahweh be present in the restored city? Ezekiel is at this point characteristically straightforward. In chapter xliii, we hear of the return of Yahweh's *kābôd*. The deity addresses Ezekiel, "Son of Man, this is the place of my throne and the place of the soles of my feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the people of Israel forever." This place is, of course, none other than the temple. The glory of Yahweh entered the temple. That was to be the locus for Yahweh's presence.

Zechariah's perspective is quite different. There is no reason to think that Yahweh will be limited to the temple compound. In the third vision, a divine oracle emphasizes Yahweh's presence in a way quite distinct from the temple: "For I will be to her a wall of fire round about, says Yahweh, and I will be the glory within her" (Zech. ii 9). Nothing in Zechariah's visions leads one to think that Yahweh is thought of as bound by the temple precinct in quite the same way as that notion is expressed in Ezekiel's vision.

(5) How is the priesthood to be restored and renewed? Ezekiel, or a tradent of Ezekiel, contends that the Zadokites are to provide the core of priestly leadership (Ezek. xlv 9ff). They are to undertake special offerings to cleanse and to rededicate the newly constructed temple (xliv 18-27, xlv 18-20). To put it another way, there are priests who survived the destruction and exilic experience without becoming ritually suspect.

Zechariah, however, argues that the restoration of the priesthood is to begin with a specific high priest, Joshua. He is to be cleansed, not in some standard purification ceremony, but in a rite performed in the divine council. There is, in Zechariah, no mention of Zadokite versus non-Zadokite, Levite versus non-Levite. Further, there is no warrant, in the visions of Zechariah to think that any priestly groups were degraded as is clearly the case in Ezek. xl-xlviii.

(6) How is the priesthood to be ordered? The picture in Ezekiel is one of collegial activity. No particular hierarchy is present. And rather surprisingly, the role label "chief" or "high priest" is wanting. Zechariah, on the other hand, makes it clear that, despite the fact that there is a group of priests—so Zech. iii 8—there is a high priest who has significant prerogatives, one whose ritual purity enables the priestly system as a whole to function properly.¹⁷

(7) How will the new community be ruled? With Ezekiel, we are forced to consider the enigmatic *nāšîʔ*. Levenson's comments are apt: "the School of Ezekiel hoped not for a diarchy of Davidid and Zadokite such as was to emerge just after the return from Exile (Ze. 3), but for a community so fundamentally liturgical and sacral in nature that the Davidid, politics having vanished, could only be a liturgical figurehead ... Ezek. 40-48 hoped not for a restoration of the monarchy, but for a restoration of the monarch, who is now redefined according to his deepest and truest function as the servant of God, one devoted to the divine service, to liturgy" (p. 143). Clearly, leadership in the restored community focuses on this utopian priest-monarch amalgam, the *nāšîʔ*.

Zechariah operates with a different ideal. In his fifth vision, he sees two olive trees, trees interpreted as being "the two anointed who stand by Yahweh of the whole earth". Commentators uniformly view these anointed figures as signifying the diarchic

¹⁷ Admittedly this material is from the oracles.

polity recoverable in the oracular material, e.g., Zech. vi 9-15.¹⁸ Zechariah apparently thinks in terms of joint civil-religious leadership, though the character of the civil side of the equation remains notably unclear in the visions themselves. The visions do, however, make clear that the high priest is to have an important leadership role, and this in contrast to Ezek. xl-xlvi.

(8) How will the post-exilic community deal with disorder? For Ezekiel, one has the suspicion that the new community is to be without disorder. He writes: "The house of Israel shall no more defile my holy name" (Ezek. xliii 7). Similar is his statement about the priests in the new order: "They shall not defile themselves by going near to a dead person..." (Ezek. xlv 25). One senses that this is a utopian setting, one in which Jeremiah's expectations of a new covenant are to be realized.

Zechariah, by way of contrast, appears more pragmatic. His vision of the new order includes mention of those who have violated covenant norms and yet who go unpunished. This situation is addressed in the sixth vision (Zech. v 1-4), a vision which is designed to solve that problem by having a flying curse punish those for whom punishment is appropriate. The admonitory material elsewhere in Zech. i-viii, though outside the bounds of the visionary texts, buttresses this notion of a not-so-perfect society.

These eight questions and the presumed answers of Ezekiel and Zechariah surely suggest that Zechariah has presented an alternative to or a revision of the notions of restoration present in Ezek. xl-xlvi.

III

In summary, one may contend that Zechariah was, in and through the vision reports, speaking from within the context of normative Israelite religious traditions, and explaining how Yahweh was again to interact with his chosen people. That was, for Zechariah, no easy task. The covenant curses had been called in, the people and the land were now unclean. Yahweh had left his holy place; the community had been disbanded. Further, there was an alternative proposal available, that of Ezek. xl-xlvi. Moreover, the visions of Zechariah are not, as some have contended either general expressions of salvation to the newly agglomerated post-exilic com-

¹⁸ See the standard commentaries and Jeremias, pp. 176-88.

munity, nor are they, as others have maintained, directly linked to a cleansing or rebuilding ritual. Haggai may have been fired to propose immediate action in response to the poetry of Deutero-Isaiah or to the program of Ezekiel. Not so Zechariah. He provided the theological prolegomenon to restoration, a theological warrant for the more mundane work of restoration to follow. Zechariah provided a theological perspective relevant to a new situation, that of a Yahwism without independent territorial state.