

B. Historical Context

The historical context of Zechariah's prophecy consists in the national and historical circumstances in which Israel found itself at that time. But history is more than an endless stream of individual events, people, and circumstances. History is *His story*: It is the playing out of the divine purpose and work toward God's predetermined goal. This means that history isn't simply the time-space context in which divine revelation occurs; *history is itself revelatory*. Three considerations prove the point:

- First, *God's sovereignty* proves it. God isn't simply watching and responding to historical events and circumstances; He is overseeing and ordering them. This is not to say that God has fatalistically predetermined every detail and motion of this world's history. Natural laws and principles play their part in the movement of history and human beings always do precisely what they please for their own reasons. And yet God administers all natural contingency and human freedom unto the full realization of His purposes (cf. Isaiah 10:5-19; Jeremiah 51:11-26; Acts 2:22-23, 4:23-28; Ephesians 1:9-10; etc.).
- Secondly, *Jesus Himself* insisted that all of the Scripture testifies of Him (Luke 24:25-27, 44-48; John 5:39-47), and the Scripture is an historical account (albeit narrowly focused) of the progress of human history. The Old Testament is a sweeping panorama of people, events and circumstances, and yet, by divine design, it reveals and points to Jesus Christ.
- More precisely, history is revelatory because of the prophetic vehicle of *typology*. Typology is the primary species of prophecy in the Scriptures, and it functions, not by direct pronouncement of divine truth, but by *divine interpretation of historical content*. That is, God ordained historically real people, places, things, events, circumstances, etc., to signify future spiritual counterparts associated with the person and work of Jesus Christ. (It's important to note that this divine interpretation may be *implicit* – that is, disclosed by the Scripture's own structure, orientation and message – rather than explicit.) A biblical *type* functions as prophetic promise to be fulfilled in a corresponding *christological antitype*. Obvious examples include the Passover event (not merely the Passover lamb) and the persons of Moses and David, but numerous other persons, things and events in biblical history served a typological role including the Persian king Cyrus, the nation of Israel, the land of Canaan, Jerusalem, the temple and the priesthood.

Biblical history is revelatory and provides prophetic insight into God's purposes for His creation – purposes to be realized through the nation of Israel, but as Israel was ordained to have its own embodiment and fulfillment in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Biblical history is thus the history of salvation (or *salvation history*) which anticipated, advanced toward and has now found its meaning in the *Christ event* (which encompasses Jesus' incarnation, life, death, resurrection and enthronement) and the new creation in Him. This means, among other things, that one must know the biblical history in order to truly understand the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and the purpose and outcome of His work. And as Zechariah's prophecy was situated within the biblical history, so it must be read and understood in light of its place within and contribution to the salvation history. That is to say, Zechariah's prophecy must be read eschatologically in terms of Messiah the King and the everlasting kingdom of God.

1. In considering the historical context of Zechariah's prophecy, the place to begin is with a survey of Israel's history.
 - a. Israel's history began in Eden with God's pledge to crush the serpent's head and restore life to His creation through a descendent of Eve (Genesis 3:15). That "seed promise" established the fundamental thread of the biblical storyline so that, in the book of Genesis, ten "generations sections" supply the basic structure of the account, with the narrative advancing through Eve's son *Seth* (4:25-26) to *Noah* (5:1-29), Noah's son *Shem* (9:18-27) and finally to *Abram* (11:10-27).
 - b. From that point forward Abram served as the foundation in God's enduring promise of a restoring seed. God chose and called Abram and established His covenant with him that in Abram and his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed (12:1-3, 22:18, 26:1-4, 28:10-14). The Edenic promise of creational restoration was now bound up in Abram, and thus the Lord changed his name to *Abraham*: "father of a multitudinous people" (17:1-7).
 - c. From Abraham the covenant and its promise passed to Isaac and then to Jacob whom God later renamed *Israel*. Taking into account the term's ambiguity, this name expresses the concept of one who prevails with God because God prevails. Israel fathered twelve sons and, in these twelve men and the families descended from them, the Abrahamic Covenant was corporatized, moving from individual persons to an entire covenant nation (Genesis 48-49; Exodus 1:1-3:10, 4:22-23).
 - d. God had sworn to Abraham that four hundred years of exile and enslavement would precede the reception of the promises pledged in His covenant (Genesis 15). And though Abraham's descendants departed from Yahweh during those long centuries, Yahweh never forgot them or His covenant oath. At the appointed time, the Lord raised up Moses to bring His people out of their bondage in Egypt. This Exodus served as the foundation for Israel's covenant life and relationship with Abraham's God: *Israel was Yahweh's elect son, born out of His own intervention in power to destroy the subjugating enemy, liberate the captives and regather them to Himself in His sanctuary land and so establish His kingdom* (Exodus 15:1-18). Most importantly, this historical event became the paradigm for understanding how it was that God would fulfill His ancient promise in Eden: The Egyptian Exodus was the initial prototype of future deliverances which would culminate in a great and final Exodus at the hand of another Moses (ref. Deuteronomy 18:9-19; cf. also Isaiah 51:1-16 and 61:1-3 with Luke 4:14-21).
 - e. From Egypt the Lord led Israel to Sinai to ratify His relationship with the nation as the Abrahamic seed. The Sinai Covenant (Law of Moses) was not a departure from the Abrahamic Covenant, but the formal ratification of that covenant with Abraham's covenant descendants. Yahweh had explicitly identified the *man* Israel as the heir of the covenant (Genesis 28:10-15), and so it was with the *corporate* Israel descended from him (Exodus 19:1-8, 20:1-3). The Law of Moses defined Israel's covenant sonship and its responsibilities as Abraham's seed.

- f. Israel went on to inhabit the covenant land of Canaan just as the Lord promised (cf. Genesis 13:12-18, 15:18-21 with Exodus 3:1-10 and Joshua 24:1-13). But all was not well; the twelve tribes remained divided in heart and they wandered away from Yahweh just as He had warned (Deuteronomy 31:14-21). Inter-tribal enmity expressed covenantal enmity; whatever its outward conformity, Israel was an unfaithful son and the early centuries in Canaan saw a tragic pattern of apostasy, judgment, subjugation, repentance, deliverance and restoration only to repeat the cycle again (ref. the book of Judges). Though the Abrahamic seed was settled in the sanctuary land, the Edenic and Abrahamic promises remained unfulfilled.
- g. The era of the Judges ended with God giving Israel a king – first a king after *their* hearts and then one after *His*, namely David (1 Samuel 8-16). But David failed to fulfill his calling as Yahweh’s son-king and the result was that the Israelite kingdom he had unified was split into the two sub-kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The subsequent era of the divided kingdom saw the emergence of the writing prophets who proclaimed a two-fold message: a call to repentance and the pledge of impending judgment, desolation, exile and captivity for both houses of Israel.
- h. God had promised exile and captivity to His unfaithful covenant “son” and His word did not fail. The Assyrians conquered and decimated the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C and Judah’s conquest and exile followed in 586 B.C. at the hands of the Babylonians (ref. 2 Kings 17:1-23, 24:1-25:21).
- i. For its part, the sub-kingdom of Israel was to enjoy no near-term recovery; its exile would continue until the coming of the new David. This king, like his namesake, would reunify the two houses of Israel *and also take possession of the Gentiles* (Isaiah 11:1-13; cf. also Jeremiah 31-33; Ezekiel 34, 37; Hosea 1-3).

On the other hand, Yahweh promised that the kingdom of Judah would see the release and return of a remnant after 70 years of desolation (ref. Jeremiah 25:1-12, 29:1-10; cf. Daniel 9:1-19). But Judah’s destiny was bound up with Israel’s: *Judah’s exile would not end until Yahweh returned to His people in the person of His Servant-Messiah, reunited the two houses of Israel and established His everlasting kingdom* (cf. Ezekiel 10-11 with 43:1-8; also Daniel 2:44-45, 7:1-27 and 9:20-27 as God’s answer to Daniel’s petition in 9:1-19; cf. also Amos 9:11-15; Micah 4:1-5:5; Haggai 2:1-9; Zechariah 6:9-15, 13:1-14:21; Malachi 3:1-5).

- 2. Zechariah lived and prophesied in the immediate post-exile period when the first Judean exiles had returned to Canaan and begun rebuilding the temple. Those first exiles departed Babylon around 538 B.C. (Ezra 1:1-4) and they initiated the rebuilding process soon after arriving in Jerusalem. But the work was intermittent and half-hearted and only moved forward in earnest under the prophetic exhortation and encouragement of Zechariah and Haggai (cf. Ezra 3:1-4:5 with Haggai 1:1-2:9 and Zechariah 4:1-14).

Zechariah was a *post-exilic* prophet along with Haggai and Malachi, and these three prophets were united in proclaiming a two-fold message to the recovered exiles:

- a. They first emphasized the fact that Yahweh had shown Himself faithful to His word by liberating His captive people and restoring them to the covenant land.
- b. But they also insisted that this restoration didn't fulfill His promise. The recovery of the Judean exiles only *prefigured* God's promised restoration (which was to embrace the whole creation as first pledged in Eden) and *attested* its certainty by demonstrating His faithfulness and power. The God who'd kept His word to restore His people and see His sanctuary (and later Jerusalem) rebuilt (cf. Isaiah 44:24-28 with Ezra 1:1-4) would surely fulfill His oath to restore all things.

In that way, the prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi all served to project the Lord's promise of restoration out into the future. And they did so particularly by connecting the future fulfillment with the advent of Yahweh's Servant-Messiah. This connection is especially prominent in Zechariah's prophecy, as will be seen.

C. Salvation-Historical Context

Again, it's critically important to recognize that the Old Testament scriptures aren't a compilation of independent writings, but components in an organic and coherent story. For all their diversity of genre, historical context, content, and emphasis, all of the Old Testament writings fit together to compose and tell a single story. In a word, *the various texts form a Text*. And, as seen, this singular Text not only tells its story, it interprets it to the reader by means of the two primary literary components of narrative and commentary. Behind the human narrators, the Spirit of God is the author of the story and He provides the story's interpretation through His inspired commentators. This is what is really meant by the principle that *Scripture interprets Scripture*: Individual texts have their meaning in the overall Text. Two implications follow:

- The first is that, while the Text (the entire Old Testament) determines the meaning of individual texts (passages or books), this is the case only to the extent that the reader properly configures and interacts with the Old Testament corpus. In other words, *the meaning of a given part resides in the whole, but the whole must be properly ordered and perceived for what it is in order for the meaning of any of the parts to be disclosed*.

So, for example, the meaning of a steering wheel is discovered by considering the entire car, but only as the car consists of the individual parts rightly assembled. If the parts are assembled in an incorrect or haphazard way, all of the constituent components of the car may be present, but one doesn't have a *car*. And not having an actual car, one cannot determine the meaning of any of its assembled parts.

- The relationship between the Text (the organic whole) and individual texts (the parts) also implies what is known as the *hermeneutical circle*. This interpretive principle recognizes and interacts with the fact that the *whole* determines the meaning of the *parts*, but the *parts* comprise the *whole*. In terms of the Scriptures, this means that the reader must read individual texts with a view to how they fit into and contribute to the whole scriptural storyline. Conversely, one's growing awareness of the overall storyline must condition how individual texts are read. The parts and the whole are mutually informing.