

E. Fifth Night Vision – The Lampstand and Olive Trees

Zechariah's fourth vision is challenging to interpret because it contains so many components and images. And yet it is critically important since it forms the hinge that binds together the entire series of night visions. It has the high priest Joshua as its central figure and his cleansing and commission form the framework for the vision's meaning. He symbolized a restored priesthood which was to find its historical realization in the Branch of David – the covenant son and Melchizedekian king-priest who would fulfill both David's own kingship and the kingdom of God over which David presided as Yahweh's chosen shepherd. And being David's covenant son, the Branch would build Yahweh's house and, in that way, bring about Zion's restoration and the ingathering of her countless children (ref. again 2:4-6, 10:11).

The restoration of the Lord's sanctuary is a central theme in Zechariah's night visions (as it is in the broader Old Testament prophetic witness) because those visions are concerned with Yahweh's promise to return to Jerusalem/Zion. The Lord's return was prophesied to be a multi-dimensional phenomenon (involving judgment, destruction, liberation, mediation, cleansing, ingathering, etc.), but the rebuilding and reconsecration of His sanctuary was foundational and absolutely critical to it. *How could Yahweh return if He had no dwelling to return to?* (cf. 1:16 with 2:4-5, 11 and 3:7). This was precisely the reason the recovered exiles made the rebuilding of the temple their first priority. (Granted, they had abandoned the work for a season because of opposition and disillusionment, but now they'd returned to the task, spurred on by the Lord's exhortation and promise through His prophets.)

The matter of Yahweh's house hasn't been in the forefront to this point in the visionary episode, but that changed with the fifth vision. This vision had the sanctuary as its singular concern, *but a concern that looked beyond the physical temple then under construction to its ultimate significance and role in the Lord's restorative purpose*. It was vitally important that the temple be rebuilt and Yahweh sent Zechariah and Haggai to make sure the people completed the work. But these Judeans also needed to understand that success in their labors wouldn't mean the fulfillment of the Lord's promise regarding His sanctuary and His return to it. A new temple on Mount Zion was necessary in Yahweh's plan of restoration, but it wasn't ultimate in itself; the rebuilt temple was not to be the last word, but only a further word of promise.

The fifth vision began as the others with Zechariah being drawn to a scene unfolding before him (4:1-2). Here the prophet recorded that the angel appointed to speak with him *returned*, which could mean either that he turned toward Zechariah or returned to him after walking out to meet the second angel during the third vision (2:3). Either way, the angel had to rouse him as if from his sleep. It's important to note that Zechariah didn't say he *had* fallen asleep (which his active involvement in the preceding vision argues against; ref. 3:5), but only that the angel roused him the way one would rouse someone who was sleeping. Keil argues – probably correctly – that Zechariah was so moved by what he'd seen thus far (so much so that he couldn't restrain himself from participating in the preceding vision) that he was spiritually and emotionally exhausted (cf. Daniel 8, esp. v. 27 and 10:1-11; also Ezekiel 1:1-2:2). It's likely he was overcome to the point of being stupefied and so the angel had to “snap him out of it” and redirect his attention to the new scene playing out before him (“What do you see?”). And when Zechariah raised his eyes he saw a lampstand with two olive trees framing it on either side.

1. Zechariah described the lampstand in some detail (3:2), but his Hebrew terms and expressions are not entirely clear (at least to the contemporary reader). His depiction of the lampstand's form and appearance leaves room for interpretation, but its general structure and relation to the accompanying olive trees is not in doubt.

- a. First of all, scholars are divided as to whether the lampstand resembled the one in the temple's outer room (the "holy place"; ref. Exodus 25:31-37). Some argue that this was the case, while others believe Zechariah's description better depicts a common form of ancient Near Eastern lamps.

If the former view is correct, then the lampstand Zechariah saw had a central bulb (bowl) at the top with a set of three matching bulbs on either side forming a symmetrical, linear pattern of seven individual lamps each with its own wick and oil. If the latter is correct, this lampstand was possibly a pedestal stand with a large central bowl at the top with seven fluted lips arranged symmetrically around the brim of the bowl. The one bowl contained the oil which was drawn into the seven individual wicks set in the fluted depressions around the perimeter.

- One argument for the sanctuary lampstand view is Zechariah's use of the Hebrew noun *menorah*. With only one clear exception in the Hebrew scriptures (2 Kings 4:10), this term characteristically denotes the sacred lampstand (sometimes referred to in the plural as indicating the seven individual lamps on the stand; ref. 1 Kings 7:48-49; Jeremiah 52:18-19).
- On the other hand, the Hebrew expression "seven and seven pipes" (or flutes) possibly indicates a total of forty-nine individual lights. The arrangement could then be seven bulbs each having seven flutes (and wicks) fed from a single oil receptacle, or a single large bowl/receptacle at the top with forty-nine fluted lips around its perimeter. Another possibility (though unlikely – ref. v. 12) is that Zechariah saw each of the seven lamps having seven individual pipes or tubes through which oil was flowing into them. In other words, the lampstand contained only seven individual lamps but each lamp was fed by seven oil tubes.

One important consideration in making a determination is the *symbolism* embodied in the lampstand. The angel's interpretive commentary shows that the visionary lamp signified something other than itself, and so its meaning in the vision could require the conclusion that it was patterned after (and so represented) the lampstand in Yahweh's sanctuary. This issue will be considered in due time.

- b. The second thing Zechariah saw was a pair of olive trees situated on either side of the gold lampstand (3:3). These trees weren't explained until later in the vision, at which time the angel noted that they provided oil for the lampstand (4:11-12). Taken as a whole, the visionary scene presented branches from the two olive trees feeding oil through pipes into the bowl (or bowls) of the lampstand which, in turn, supplied oil to the individual lights.

2. The angel directed Zechariah's gaze to the vision before him and asked him what he saw. The prophet responded by describing the scene and then asking the angel to explain it to him (3:4). The angel's response (v. 5) can be interpreted as astonishment (*Do you really not know what these are?*), in which case the angel evidently believed that Zechariah should have understood what he was looking at. But the change in wording from Zechariah's question perhaps suggests something else. Zechariah asked, "What are these?" to which the angel replied, "*These things*, do you not know what they are?"

Even if the visionary lampstand resembled the one associated with the sanctuary, Zechariah's description indicates that it had features not found on the latter. This, along with the presence of the olive trees and oil pipes, was sufficient to provoke the prophet's question. *It's not that Zechariah had no idea what he was looking at, but that he wasn't sure what to make of the things he saw.* And if the lampstand before him reminded him of the one in Yahweh's sanctuary, there was all the more reason to be curious about it.

The change in language in the angel's response could point toward astonishment, but it could also serve to shift the emphasis from "what am I seeing?" to "what does it mean?" If this is correct, then the angel's concern was that Zechariah grasp the meaning of the scene before him rather than merely obtain an explanation of the various images.

- a. But whatever the exact meaning of the interchange between Zechariah and the angel, the angel addressed the prophet's confusion in an unexpected way. That is, he didn't directly answer Zechariah's question about the lampstand and the two olive trees, but answered with a word from Yahweh for Zerubbabel (4:6-7).

Zerubbabel was key to the vision's meaning and importance because of the role he played among the first exiles who returned from captivity. He acted as the governor of the people and thus fulfilled the role of *ruler* in parallel with Joshua who served as high priest. And, as the exiles' governor, Zerubbabel oversaw the rebuilding of the temple which was the first community project the people undertook upon their return to Judea (Ezra 2-3). The Lord addressed Zerubbabel because His message pertained to the temple project and Zerubbabel was the man most responsible for it and its completion.

Before considering the Lord's word to him, it's also important to recognize Zerubbabel's *typological* role. Zerubbabel was a key figure in David's line of descent (Matthew 1:1-12; cf. Luke 3:27) and prefigured *Branch*. The previous vision introduced this individual, but in relation to Joshua, the high priest. Here the Branch is connected with David's covenant heir, albeit indirectly. *And the point of connection is the work of building Yahweh's house:* Zerubbabel was the son of David charged with rebuilding the Jerusalem temple; the Branch was the Davidic seed promised in the Davidic Covenant – the son who would build Yahweh's enduring house, even as David's house, throne and kingdom were to be established in him forever (cf. Haggai 2:20-23). Together, Zerubbabel and Joshua represented the two aspects and roles (priestly and regal) of the coming Branch, which were soon to converge in the central hinge vision (cf. also Ezra 5:1-2).

It is through this lens that one must interpret Yahweh's word to Zerubbabel. And that word consisted of two related proclamations. The first part was an assertion regarding His *Spirit* (4:6). In itself, the statement is sweeping and non-specific and so its relation to the visionary scene is not immediately evident. But viewed within the overall vision and the divine commentary on it, it's clear that Yahweh was speaking of His Spirit in relation to the work of building His sanctuary: *The accomplishment of that task depended, not on might or power, but on His Spirit.*

And in that this proclamation contrasts the concepts of might and power with the Spirit, it follows that Yahweh was referring to power and might, not as divine qualities and operations, but in terms of human capacity and resource. Thus His meaning: *As the one leading the people in rebuilding the temple, Zerubbabel needed to be assured that that task would be completed (cf. v. 9). And the basis for that assurance was the effectual work of Yahweh's Spirit (cf. Haggai 2:4-5).*

He'd pledged to David that a son from his loins was going to build His house, even as He was going to build a house for David by establishing his throne and kingdom forever. Yahweh was going to build David an everlasting house through Branch, and the implication was that the house Branch was going to build for Yahweh would also endure everlastingly. Thus, while Solomon was the first referent of the covenant promise (cf. 1 Chronicles 28; 2 Chronicles 1-6), he was not the ultimate referent. For the sanctuary he built had been torn down, which was precisely the reason for the reconstruction taking place under Zerubbabel.

The Lord's Spirit had been with Solomon as he oversaw the first temple's construction. In the same way, the Spirit's enablement and leading – not human power or might – would see the present rebuilding project through to completion. At the same time, the Spirit's involvement in constructing Yahweh's sanctuary looked beyond the temple project in Jerusalem to something ultimate and enduring: It was good and necessary that the temple be rebuilt and Zerubbabel needed to know that God's Spirit would bring the work to completion. *But that project only prefigured the sanctuary promised to David – the sanctuary that was to be the ultimate, everlasting and supremely glorious fruit of the Spirit's work.*

And that is precisely what the second part of Yahweh's word to Zerubbabel hinted at (4:7). Even though the overall proclamation was directed to Zerubbabel, here the Lord's word to him took the form of a challenge to a "great mountain." This mountain is not specified because it is metaphorical. It represented an immovable and insurmountable obstacle – *in this instance, an obstacle which opposes the Lord's purpose regarding His sanctuary.* But even the most imposing and insurmountable obstacle or opponent is powerless against Yahweh's Spirit. Just as no natural power or strength would *secure* the completion of the Lord's house, so no natural entity or power would be able to *preclude* it. The Lord's Spirit would see to the sanctuary's completion and nothing would prevail against Him (cf. Isaiah 40:1-5). Even the greatest obstacle was going to fall before Him, and when the final stone was laid it would be to shouts of "*grace, grace to it!*"