

LESSON 2

Although I am calling them “rules,” it might be better to think of these more as interpretive guidelines.

Rule 2: We should interpret apocalyptic language figuratively unless we are forced to do otherwise.

This is the opposite rule from how we understand most things in the Bible. Usually we take a verse literally unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise. What is an example of when we might be so compelled? How about Matthew 5:29 — “And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee.”

Apocalyptic language is figurative language, and so the opposite rule applies — we understand it figuratively unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise.

Rule 3: Similarity of speech does not imply identity of subjects. (The same image can be used to depict different subjects.)

This is a common pitfall. Often in the study of Revelation you hear someone say that such and such symbol in Revelation could only apply to the end of the world. Really? What if that same symbol is used in the Old Testament to apply to something other than the end of the world?

Rule 4: Dissimilarity of speech does not imply distinctness of subjects. (Different images can be used to depict the same subject.)

As an example, many different symbols are used both in the Old Testament and the New Testament to describe the church.

Rule 5: We should always carefully study how the same symbols are used elsewhere in the Bible, while keeping Rules #3 and #4 in mind.

If we find the same symbol in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, that symbol may or may not have the same subject. We need to examine it carefully.

But if the subject in the Old Testament is something that has already occurred, then it would be very unlikely that the New Testament subject is the same — but the subjects are likely similar, such as Babylon in the Old Testament and Rome in the New Testament.

Rule 6: We must pay careful attention to context.

The surest way to go wrong with apocalyptic language is to atomize the text by looking at one verse at a time without any regard for the verses that precede it, the verses that follow it, the reason those verses were written, and the history in which those verses were written. The context is vital. And we must do more than just say the context is important — we must actually pay close attention to it! And that context includes *historical* context. Apocalyptic language always has historical significance, so we must study history to properly understand the symbols.

Rule 7: We should not add symbols to the text.

We saw this issue when we studied Daniel, where we saw a giant image of a man. Daniel described the man's feet and toes in Daniel 2. Now, almost certainly, the giant man had two feet and ten toes — but the number two and the number ten are never mentioned in Daniel 2. Premillennialists split the fourth kingdom of Daniel 2 into two parts — and they rely heavily on the two feet and the ten toes in making that argument. If two and ten were that important to the meaning of the vision, then don't we think two and ten would have been mentioned? We should not read symbols into the text. Let's stick with the symbols we already have!

Rule 8: We should pay careful attention to any explanations that are given in the inspired text.

In this book we will often see Zechariah asking an angel what a particular symbol means. We should, of course, listen carefully to that answer! We will see the same type of explanations in Revelation.

Rule 9: Sometimes a *literal* person, place, or thing is used as a figure for a similar person, place, or thing.

For example, literal Babylon is used in the New Testament as a figure for Rome. Why? Because both are great enemies of God's people. Egypt, Assyria, and even Jerusalem are sometimes used in the same way.

Rule 10: Sometimes a *literal* number is also a *figurative* number.

For example, the 70 years of captivity was a literal 70 years, but the number 70 denotes perfection and completeness, and so 70 is also used figuratively to show that the period of captivity was the perfect length of time for God to teach his people the lesson he wanted them to learn. And, of course, the number 70 was not just a coincidence. The literal 70 year period was determined by God, and most likely it was chosen by God because he wanted to teach a lesson based, in part, on the symbolic significance of that number.

How is the book of Zechariah related to the book of Revelation?

The book of Revelation quotes or alludes to Zechariah about thirty times, making Zechariah second only to Ezekiel in that regard.

For example, in Zechariah 1:8 we will read: *"I saw by night, and behold a man riding upon a red horse, and he stood among the myrtle trees that were in the bottom; and behind him were there red horses, speckled, and white."* In Revelation 6 we will see what are often called the four horses of the apocalypse: the white horse in verse 2, the red horse in verse 4, the black horse in verse 5, and the pale horse in verse 8 on

whom sat Death. So if the symbols are the same (multi-colored horses in this example), then Zechariah and Revelation must be pointing to the same things — right? Wrong! Remember Rule 3 — similarity of speech does not imply identity of subjects. Just because we unravel a symbol in Zechariah does not mean we don't have to unravel the same symbol in Revelation. How the symbol was used in Zechariah (or elsewhere in the Old Testament) will certainly be helpful to us when we meet that same symbol in Revelation, but it will not be dispositive. We will still have much work left to do.

One way in which Revelation and Zechariah are certainly alike is that the initial readers of each were in sore need of comfort and encouragement. The historical situation of God's people was different in Zechariah and Revelation, but the needs of God's people were very similar. That is why we today, in a very different historical situation from both Zechariah and Revelation, can ourselves find comfort and encouragement from both of these books.

We will also see some other similarities between Zechariah and Revelation. Each book was written at a time of great dynastic change and uncertainty. With Zechariah, the dynastic family of Cyrus had just been replaced by the dynastic family of Darius. With Revelation, the dynasty of the Julio-Claudians (which ended with Nero) had just been replaced by the dynasty of the Flavians (which began with Vespasian). (We will later discover from the text of Revelation itself that Revelation was written during the reign of Vespasian.)

Each book is an answer to the same question — how long?

Zechariah 1:12 — *Then the angel of the Lord answered and said, O Lord of hosts, **how long** wilt thou not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which thou hast had indignation these threescore and ten years?*

Revelation 6:10 — *And they cried with a loud voice, saying, **How long**, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?*

Each book involves a judgment that was not immediately apparent. Isaiah had made a prophecy about Babylon long before the time of Zechariah, and yet that prophecy did not seem to have occurred yet, at least not literally.

Isaiah 13:19-20 — *And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation: neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there.*

Likewise, Revelation describes the judgment of the Roman empire — and yet the city of Rome did not fall until AD 476, and the Eastern Roman empire continued on for another 1000 years. How do we explain that? Stay tuned! We will spend a great deal of time looking at that question later.

What does the book of Zechariah say about Jesus?

Zechariah is a difficult book, but difficult or not, there is a very important reason why Zechariah should never be neglected. Zechariah is second only to Isaiah in the number of Messianic prophecies it contains.

It is wonderful to think about the returned exiles listening to Zechariah in 520 BC. They were focused on their current situation and the need to rebuild their earthly temple — and Zechariah was preaching Christ to them! It makes me think of Matthew 12:6 — “But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple.”

Here are some of the key prophecies about Jesus in this short book, and, as I read them, think about the people who first heard them — who they were, where they were, and what they were doing. God lifted the spiritual curtain so that they could have a glimpse of the perfect priest-king who was to come — including glimpses of both his eternal glory and his perfect sacrificial death.

Zechariah 3:8 — *For, behold, I will bring forth my servant the BRANCH.*

Zechariah 6:12-13 — *And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is The BRANCH; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD: Even he shall build the temple of the LORD; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.*

Zechariah 9:9 — *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.*

Zechariah 11:12-13 — *And I said unto them, If ye think good, give me my price; and if not, forbear. So they weighed for my price thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said unto me, Cast it unto the potter: a goodly price that I was prised at of them. And I took the thirty pieces of silver, and cast them to the potter in the house of the LORD.*

Zechariah 12:10 — *And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of*

grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn.

Zechariah 13:7 — *Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones.*

Zechariah 14:8 — *And it shall be in that day, that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem; half of them toward the former sea, and half of them toward the hinder sea: in summer and in winter shall it be.*

Zechariah proclaimed Christ to God's people 520 years before Christ came into this world — and some of the descendants of Zechariah's listeners were ready and waiting when that great day came.

Luke 2:25 — *And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel.*

Why were there faithful Jews in the first century? Why were they in Jerusalem? Why was there a temple in Jerusalem? Because of the faithfulness of the people we are now studying about. Because they understood their place and their importance in the plan of God. And how did they know that? Because of God's prophets, such as Haggai and Zechariah — as well as because of Ezra, Nehemiah, and many others.

What they were doing was vital to the plan of God. Isaiah had already prophesied that the word would go out first from Jerusalem. Daniel had already prophesied

that the temple would again be destroyed. For those prophecies to be fulfilled, faithful Jews had to be living in Jerusalem, and that temple had to be rebuilt.

Their place in the plan of God was vital — and yet the reason why it was vital would not be evident until long after their death. Our place in the plan of God today is to plant the seed — and perhaps we, like them, will not live to see the outcome of that planting. But that should not make us discouraged. Only God can look down through time and see what he is preparing for tomorrow using our faithfulness today.

Is Zechariah one book or many books?

Since at least the seventeenth century, some commentators have argued that Zechariah is really two books — one book consisting of Chapters 1-8 and a second book consisting of Chapters 9-14. Some commentators create a third book by splitting Chapters 9-14 into two books, Chapters 9-11 and 12-14.

Some point to Matthew 27:9-10, which we discussed earlier, in which Jesus attributes to Jeremiah some language that is similar to Zechariah 11:12-13, and they say that the second half of Zechariah was really written by Jeremiah. (We can't rule that out entirely, but it is certainly not necessary to explain Matthew 27 as we discussed earlier.)

Zechariah 9:13 seems to anticipate a conflict between Israel and Greece, which leads some (at least some who don't believe in predictive prophecy) to conclude that Chapter 9 was written later than either the time of Jeremiah or Zechariah.

Others point to the mention of Ephraim (the northern tribes), Assyria, and Egypt to argue that the second half of Zechariah was not written later but instead was written earlier, prior to the exile.

Why do so many argue for multiple books? They do so because of the numerous differences between the first and second halves of Zechariah.

- Chapters 1-8 contain prophetic visions, while Chapters 9-14 contain two poetic oracles.
- Vocabulary and syntax that we find in Chapters 1-8 are not found in Chapters 9-14.
- We frequently see personal names and dates in Chapters 1-8, but we do not in Chapters 9-14.

But nothing they point to requires us to split the book into pieces or requires us to date the second half of the book differently than the first half. For example, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel (earlier than Zechariah) speak of the reunification of Israel (Ephraim) and Judah after the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 BC. Isaiah and Hosea both refer to Assyria and Egypt as images for enemies of God's people even though they had ceased to be much of a threat by the sixth century. (Later we will see Revelation do the same thing with Babylon and Jerusalem, even though both had ceased to be a persecutor by the time Revelation was written.)

But what about the reference to the Greeks in Chapter 9? First, Zechariah is a prophet, so we should not be shocked when a prophet describes something that had not yet occurred. That's what prophets do. Second, Greek traders and mercenaries had been active in the area for centuries prior to the time of Zechariah. (Recall that we saw some Greek words in the book of Daniel.) The role of Greece was growing, and it did not take a prophet to see that they would soon be a serious threat to God's people.

What about all of the linguistic differences? The first and second halves of the book have different purposes and were written at different times. That alone could explain any differences in syntax. But we can go further than just explaining the differences — we can point out that there are numerous similarities and dependencies between Chapters 1-8 and 9-14.

- Both discuss the salvation of Jerusalem.
- Both discuss the return of the exiles
- Both discuss a cleansing from sin.
- Both discuss the salvation of the nations.
- Both refer to a promise of fertility.
- Both discuss a renewal of the covenant.
- Both discuss the outpouring of God's spirit.
- Both describe the coming of a triumphant Messiah.
- They have numerous themes in common.
- They also have words and phrases in common, including one word in 7:14 and 9:8 that appears nowhere else in the Hebrew Old Testament.

In my opinion, the book of Zechariah is one book, and Zechariah is the one author of every word in that one inspired book.

What is the structure of the book of Zechariah?

Although Zechariah is a single book, there is no denying that a significant change in tone and structure occurs between Chapter 8 and Chapter 9. Here is a brief outline of what we are about to study:

- A call to repentance (1:1-6)
- Vision #1: The Rider Under the Myrtles (1:7-17)
- Vision #2: The Four Horns (1:18-21)
- Vision #3: The Measuring Line (2:1-13)
- Vision #4: Joshua (3:1-10)

- Vision #5: The Lampstand (4:1-14)
- Vision #6: The Flying Scroll (5:1-4)
- Vision #7: The Ephah (5:5-11)
- Vision #8: The Four Chariots and the Crowning of Joshua (6:1-15)
- Chapter 7 will address a question about fasting.
- Chapter 8 will describe future blessings for Jerusalem.
- Chapters 9-11 will describe a burden upon Hadrach.
- Chapters 12-14 will describe a burden concerning Israel.

CHAPTER 1

Zechariah 1:1-6

In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, came the word of the LORD unto Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet, saying, 2 The LORD hath been sore displeased with your fathers. 3 Therefore say thou unto them, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Turn ye unto me, saith the LORD of hosts, and I will turn unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. 4 Be ye not as your fathers, unto whom the former prophets have cried,

saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Turn ye now from your evil ways, and from your evil doings: but they did not hear, nor hearken unto me, saith the LORD. 5 Your fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live for ever? 6 But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not take hold of your fathers? and they returned and said, Like as the LORD of hosts thought to do unto us, according to our ways, and according to our doings, so hath he dealt with us.

What is our time frame? The word of the Lord came to Zechariah in “the second year of Darius.” Darius the Great began to reign in 522 BC, which means that this word came in the year 520 BC.

Who were Berechiah and Iddo? We discussed them earlier. They were Zechariah’s father and grandfather. Why are they listed here by name? One reason is that it was important to establish Zechariah’s prophetic and priestly credentials. Iddo, it seems, was a very well known priest. It is not clear whether the phrase “the prophet” in verse 1 refers to Zechariah or to Iddo. If it refers to Iddo, then Iddo was both prophet and priest.

Another possible reason their names are listed here may be because those names give us the theme of the entire book!

- Zechariah's name means "God Remembers."
- The name of his father, Berechiah, means "God Blesses."
- His grandfather's name, Iddo, means "in time."

Put them together and you have the theme of Zechariah: *God remembers and blesses his people at his set time.* And Zechariah will tell these people about God's greatest blessings, which would not come until much later — about 520 years later to be exact.

Why is God "sore displeased" in verse 2? The people had returned from their exile with permission by the decree of Cyrus. They had almost immediately begun to rebuild the temple. But their neighbors had caused all sorts of problems for them, including sending false reports back to the Persians. Even in the face of this opposition, the rebuilding project had continued — but by this time it seems that the rebuilding project had instead become projects directed at building large houses for themselves (Haggai 1:4). The work on God's house had come to a complete halt. The people had returned to a land that was in ruin because of their disobedience — and the land remained in ruin. In fact, they could see that ruin all around them, and it should have reminded them of why that ruin had occurred in the first place. The ruin should have been a warning — but they seemed to have missed it.

Haggai was the first prophet to encourage the people to restart their work on the temple. His message came in the sixth month of 520 BC — two months before this word came to Zechariah. Both Zechariah and Haggai had the same message for the people — rebuild the temple! But the Holy Spirit caused the two prophets to convey that message in very different ways.

Verses 3-6 are a call to repentance. In verse 3, God says "turn ye unto me." The Hebrew simply means "return." Yes, they were being called upon to repent, but the first step of repentance is to return.

One phrase is repeated three times in verse 3, which immediately tells us that it is a very important phrase — “saith the LORD of hosts.” This word from the prophet is not the prophet’s own word. We know that from 2 Peter 1:20-21, but we also know that from verse 3 right here. This word is from the Lord of hosts! It is a word from God — from the eternal, universal king who has the heavenly army at his beck and call. Yes, they were a small seemingly insignificant group in a small backwater town — surely just a footnote, if even that, to the great historical events that were occurring all around them — but things were not what they seemed. This little group had the attention of the Lord of hosts! Of all the people in the world, it was to this group that God sent his word by the mouths of Haggai and Zechariah. It was to this group that God lifted the curtain so that they could see the Messiah who would come in about 500 years to bless the entire world.

With the command to return comes a gracious promise in verse 3 — “I will turn unto you.” The verb here is the same verb found in the earlier phrase “turn ye unto me.” When we read verse 3, we see that the parable of the prodigal son is not just a description of God under the new covenant. We see that same loving father here in verse 3 written under the old covenant.

Is the God of the New Testament different from the God of the Old Testament? Only to those who don’t understand the Bible. Those who understand God’s word know that God has *always* been a loving father.

In verse 4, the people are told not to be like their fathers who did not listen to or heed God’s word. And what was the outcome of that failure? All these people had to do was open their eyes to see the outcome — a ruined city and a destroyed temple. It was all around them.

But, the people might have responded, that is all just ancient history. Our fathers and those prophets have all passed from the scene. We are different! Well, God has a response for that argument! In verse 6, God responds, “but my words and my

statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not take hold of your fathers?” Literally, the verse asks, did not the word overtake the fathers? Their fathers also thought they could escape, but the word of God is inescapable. The word pursued them and caught them — as it will do to everyone. These people were no different from their fathers no matter how loudly they might proclaim otherwise.

But hadn't some of their fathers returned and recognized that what they were suffering was nothing more than what they deserved? Yes, but by then it was too late to save the city and the temple. The punishment had already occurred before the fathers finally understood what had caused it. Thus, the warning of verse 4 remained — be not as your fathers! Yes, they returned, but they did so too late.

And with that introduction Zechariah now recounts the first of his eight visions.