

# Zechariah 1:8-17

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*Zechariah receives his first vision. He sees a patrol of heavenly horsemen mounted on horses of various colors. These horsemen report that all the earth is now at peace. The angel who talks to Zechariah reassures him that the LORD is still angry with the Gentile nations, who are at peace but have exploited His people. But He will comfort Jerusalem and restore her fortunes.*

The Suzerain God gave the prophet Zechariah a message of repentance for His covenant people of Judah “in the eighth month of the second year” of King Darius of Persia (vv. 1–6). Then, He provided him with eight visions to reveal what He would do in the future. These visions came “on the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month Shebat,” corresponding to February 15, 519 BC in our modern calendar (Zechariah 1:7–6:8). They are visual representations of God’s will and share the same authority with the divine spoken word. The present section consists of the first vision.

In a nutshell, the vision contains a description of three individuals: a man mounted on a red horse among some myrtle trees in a ravine (v. 8, v. 10), an angel who was talking to Zechariah (v. 9; vv. 13–14), and the angel of the LORD (vv. 11–12). The first and third individuals are likely the same, as the passage will show.

In the vision, Zechariah *saw at night, and behold, a man was riding on a red horse* (vs 8). The verb translated as *saw* is “rā’â” in the Hebrew language. It denotes the experience of seeing something as a totality. In this case, sensation and perception merge. The prophet used the verb to describe the revelation he received from God *at night*. The reference to the *night* is significant because it was the time when supernatural activities often occurred in biblical times (Luke 2:8–14; Acts 5:19; Matthew 14:25).

Zechariah reported that he *saw a man*. Up to this point, he did not know who the *man* was nor from whence he came. The *man* was mounted on a *horse*, an animal often associated with warfare or military conquest. The color of the *horse* was *red*, a term translated from the Hebrew word “’ādem.” The term is used for blood in 2 Kings 3:22; for grape juice in Isaiah 63:2. It refers to a reddish-brown color.

The *man on the horse was standing among the myrtle trees which were in the ravine* (vs 8). A *myrtle tree* was an evergreen shrub with small leaves and scented flowers. It was one of the trees the Israelites used to build booths during the Feast of Tabernacles (Nehemiah 8:15). The *man* mounted on the *red horse* had *red, sorrel, and white horses behind him*.

The term for *red* (“’ādom” in Hebrew) occurs again in this verse. It is a reddish-brown color. The term translated as *sorrel* is “saroq” in Hebrew. It means foxy-red or light red. The term for *white* is “lābān” in the Hebrew text. The three colors used here are in the plural in the Hebrew text, suggesting that perhaps there were several horses for each color. The rest of the text tells us that

there were riders on these horses. They received a mission or assignment from the LORD to patrol the whole earth (vv. 10–11).

Having seen these riders, Zechariah was curious. He wanted to know what was going on, so he asked a question and said, *My lord, what are these?* (vs 9). The Hebrew title translated as *lord* is “adon” in the Hebrew text. It means “master” or “ruler.” The Old Testament uses “adon” over 300 times for an earthly lord and about 30 times for a divine lord. Sarah referred to her husband Abraham as “my lord” (Genesis 18:12). Similarly, the brothers of Joseph, not knowing who he was, addressed their brother as “my lord” and referred to themselves as “your servants” (Genesis 42:10).

Sometimes, however, the Old Testament uses the term “lord” as an expression of respectful courtesy, as in Genesis 31:35. This is the way the prophet Zechariah used it also. He wanted to know the meaning and the purpose of the horsemen. But did Zechariah use the term for an earthly lord or a divine lord?

The rest of the verse makes it clear that Zechariah used the term “lord” to refer to an angel; that is, a divine messenger. As he stated, *And the angel who was speaking with me said to me* (vs 9). At this point, the text also reveals that Zechariah was interacting with an *angel*.

In biblical times, angels not only delivered messages from God but explained their meaning and answered questions about them. A clear example of this phenomenon is in the book of Daniel, where the angel Gabriel interpreted a vision for him (Daniel 8:16). Here in Zechariah, too, the *angel* would interpret the vision for the prophet.

The LORD knew that the prophet Zechariah would not understand the meaning of the vision, so He commanded an *angel* to interpret the symbolism for him. Therefore, the *angel* replied to Zechariah’s question about the nature of the riders and said, *I will show you what these are* (vs 9). To reinforce the message, the interpreting *angel* allowed the actors to speak. The man who mounted on the red horse spoke first. He was the leader of the scouts and *was standing among the myrtle trees*. He *answered and said, ‘These are those whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth’* (vs 10).

The Hebrew term translated as *LORD* is Yahweh, the self-existent and eternal God who revealed Himself to Moses out of the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). It is distinct from the previous term for *lord* [“Adon” in Hebrew], which means “ruler” or “master” (v. 9). The term *LORD* refers to God the Father, the covenant God of Judah who exercised complete dominion over the earth. He was the one who sent these scouts to survey *the earth*.

In the ancient world, the Persians possessed mounted couriers who used to travel daily to maintain communication throughout the empire. The LORD used the same imagery to reveal His plan for the world. He sent these horsemen like a sort of military patrol and commissioned them to survey the world scene. So, after the leader of the scouts answered Zechariah’s question, *they answered the angel of the LORD who was standing among the myrtle trees* (vs 11). It seems here we have an angelic realm that rules over the political structure of the physical world. This is

consistent with the book of Daniel, that speaks of an apparently demonic “prince of Persia” that contends with Michael, an angel appointed by God to protect His people (Daniel 10:13).

In the Old Testament, the title *angel of the LORD* always refers to a special divine messenger. Sometimes, it may be a manifestation of God Himself (Genesis 16:13; Judges 13:21–22). Other times, it is likely a reference to the pre-incarnate Christ (Exodus 23:23). In our passage, Zechariah revealed the identity of the man who was *riding on the red horse* among the myrtle trees (v. 8). He was *the angel of the LORD*. The picture appears to be of a ruler sending his messengers to scout the earth and report back.

And when the scouts heard his reply to Zechariah regarding their identity, they said, ‘*We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth is peaceful and quiet*’ (vs 11). Just as royal Persian couriers would be reporting to their superior that everything was okay, so the angelic couriers brought their report to the *angel of the LORD*. They confirmed that they had surveyed *the earth* and that it was at peace. The Persian empire was *peaceful and quiet* at this point in history. King Darius secured the throne and extinguished smoldering revolts. That was good news for the Persians but bad news for the Judeans because they lived in a desolate land.

Therefore, *the angel of the LORD* interceded for the nation of Judah and said, *O LORD of hosts, how long will You have no compassion for Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which You have been indignant these seventy years?* (vs 12). The term translated as *host* is “sabaoth” in the Hebrew language. It means “armies” and often refers to the angelic armies of heaven, as in 1 Samuel 1:3.

The phrase *the LORD of hosts* occurs frequently in the prophetic books. Often, it describes God’s power as a warrior leading His angelic army to defeat His foes (Amos 5:16; 9:5; Habakkuk 2:17). Here in Zechariah, the phrase demonstrates God’s power as the supreme warrior who has complete control over all human affairs.

The phrase *seventy years* refers to the time when the people of Judah were in captivity in Babylon (586–515 BC). During that time, the land of Judah lay desolate. The *angel of the LORD* pleaded with God the Father to have mercy on the cities of Judah and Jerusalem. He lamented the fact that the *seventy years* were over, but the land of Judah was still “a place of ruins and an object of horror” (Jeremiah 25:11). *Jerusalem* was the capital city. It was devastated along with the other *cities of Judah*.

The *LORD* listened to the prayer of His special messenger (*the angel of the LORD*). Although it was *the angel of the LORD* who interceded for Judah, the *LORD*’s answer came directly to the interpreting angel so he could relay the message to Zechariah, who would then proclaim it to the people. Thus, the prophet stated, *The LORD answered the angel who was speaking with me* (vs 13).

That the *LORD* answered confirms what the psalmist David says in Psalm 34: “The *LORD* is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18). He always hears the fervent prayers of His servants. As He said in the Psalter, “Call on Me in the day of trouble; I will rescue you, and you will honor Me” (Psalm 50:15). In Zechariah, the *angel of the*

*LORD* called on *the LORD*, and He provided the answer to the interpreting angel. He did so with *gracious words, comforting words* (vs 13).

The message the LORD gave to the interpreting angel contains three parts. The first one speaks of God's love and care for Judah and Jerusalem (also confirmed in Zechariah 8:2). This is clear from the next verse where the interpreting angel commanded the prophet to *proclaim, saying, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion'* (vs 14).

The adjective *jealous* is "qanno" in Hebrew. When used for human beings, it may be a negative reference, and refer to a violent emotion aroused by fear of losing a person or something (Numbers 5:14, 15, 18, 25). This form of jealousy is "as severe as Sheol; its flashes are flashes of fire" (Song of Songs 8:6).

However, when the adjective "qanno" (jealous) is used for the true God, it refers to His zealous protection of His covenant people. and His wrath against His foes. That means that God wants to preserve what belongs to Him, that which He loves (Deuteronomy 5:9; Isaiah 42:8; 48:11; Nahum 1:2). He is zealous for His "holy name" (Ezekiel 39:25), "His land" (Joel 2:18), and *Jerusalem and Zion* (Zechariah 1:14).

The city called '*Jerusalem*' was the capital of Judah. It was the site of God's presence (Psalm 9:11; Zechariah 8:3). In Isaiah, it is called "the holy city" (Isaiah 52:1). To be "holy" is to be set apart for a special purpose. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. Later, the Roman army destroyed it in AD 70. The place called *Zion* (or Mount *Zion*) is in the southeastern part of the city of Jerusalem, which is in the southern kingdom of Judah. Mount *Zion* is called "the city of God" because it is one of the hills upon which Jerusalem is built (Isaiah 8:18). In our passage, *Zion and Jerusalem* represent their inhabitants. The LORD used them to tell His people that He loved them and cared for them. Since they reflect His people and His name, God is *exceedingly* interested in the city's status and reputation.

The second part of the divine message speaks of God's wrath against the Gentile nations: *I am very angry with the nations who are at ease* (vs 15). The Suzerain God of Judah was not pleased with the Gentile nations for how they mistreated His covenant people. While they treated God's covenant people brutally, they were at ease, meaning they felt confident and secure (Amos 6:1). Although the LORD used the Gentile nations to discipline His people, they still lived in pride, and used their power to exploit other nations.

They were cruel, and extracted from others to satisfy their insatiable appetites, like lions (Nahum 2:11-12). They went too far in their oppression. For while God *was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster* (vs 15). They went beyond what God had commanded them to do. Therefore, God's wrath aroused against them.

The third part of the divine message speaks of the LORD's blessings on His covenant people. Once again, the interpreting angel used the prophetic expression *Thus says the LORD* to confirm the divine source of his message (v. 14). Then, he let his audience hear from God directly.

Thus, God said: *I will return to Jerusalem with compassion; My house will be built in it* (vs 16). And before completing the sentence, the interpreting angel inserted the expression *declares the LORD of hosts* to reiterate the source of his message. Then, he added, *And a measuring line will be stretched over Jerusalem.*

In ancient times, people used a *measuring line* to prepare a construction site before the actual work begins. It is the first step in the construction process (Jeremiah 31:39). God stated that He would restore His fellowship with the people of *Jerusalem* and would have compassion on them. There in *Jerusalem*, He would build His house and *stretch a measuring line* over the city, a promise that the construction project would begin, and the completion of the task would follow.

This prophecy was fulfilled in the near term, when Zerubbabel led the reconstruction of Solomon's temple (Ezra 6:15-16). It may also refer to a future time when Ezekiel's temple will be constructed, during the thousand-year reign (Ezekiel 40-44).

The interpreting angel closed the section by asking Zechariah to *proclaim again*. Before telling the prophet what to proclaim, the angel inserted the prophetic expression *Thus says the LORD of hosts* to confirm the divine source of his message. Then, he gave Zechariah the message: *My cities will again overflow with prosperity, and the LORD will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem* (17).

The word *again* occurs four times in this verse. The repetition stresses the certainty of the LORD's intention to restore the fortunes of His covenant people and bless them beyond measure. The message provided hope for the returned exilic Judeans who were saddened by the desolate condition of their land. The LORD reminded them that He would restore their blessings and replace their sadness with happiness. He would *choose Jerusalem* as the site of His presence, as it once was (Psalm 9:11; Joel 3:17).

This was consistent with His covenant promise, that although Israel would be disciplined for breaking their covenant commitment to follow God's commands, they would not be forsaken. God never rejects His people.

The people of Judah suffered at the hands of the Babylonians for many years. Although they returned to their homeland after the captivity, they were still sad when they looked at the difficult condition of their land. But God sent comforting words to His covenant people through the interpreting angel. He told them He would restore all their fortunes.

Human beings can only provide *comfort* to a certain extent. But only God can provide lasting comfort because He is "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3). He reiterated His love and care for Judah and Jerusalem. He will completely fulfill all these promises when Jesus Christ returns and establishes His kingdom upon the earth. At that time, "there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4b).

## **Biblical Text**

**<sup>8</sup> I saw at night, and behold, a man was riding on a red horse, and he was standing among the myrtle trees which were in the ravine, with red, sorrel and white horses behind him. <sup>9</sup> Then I said, “My lord, what are these?” And the angel who was speaking with me said to me, “I will show you what these are.” <sup>10</sup> And the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered and said, “These are those whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth.” <sup>11</sup> So they answered the angel of the LORD who was standing among the myrtle trees and said, “We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth is peaceful and quiet.” <sup>12</sup> Then the angel of the LORD said, “O LORD of hosts, how long will You have no compassion for Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which You have been indignant these seventy years?” <sup>13</sup> The LORD answered the angel who was speaking with me with gracious words, comforting words. <sup>14</sup> So the angel who was speaking with me said to me, “Proclaim, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, “I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion. <sup>15</sup> But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster.” <sup>16</sup> Therefore thus says the LORD, “I will return to Jerusalem with compassion; My house will be built in it,” declares the LORD of hosts, “and a measuring line will be stretched over Jerusalem.”’” <sup>17</sup> Again, proclaim, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, “My cities will again overflow with prosperity, and the LORD will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.”’”**