

THE TWO OLIVE TREES OF ZECHARIAH 4 AND REVELATION 11

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In Zech 4, a picture is given of two olive trees supplying oil to a central lampstand (see especially vss. 2-4 and 11-12), whereas in Rev 11:4 the imagery has been varied so that the two olive trees are identified as equivalent to two lampstands. What is the significance of the symbolism, and why is there this striking variation in its use in the Apocalypse as compared with Zechariah?

1. *The Olive Trees and Lampstand in Zechariah*

Perhaps the most common interpretation of the Zechariah passage, as represented in the commentaries, is that the two olive trees represent two leaders among the returned Hebrew exiles after the Babylonian captivity—usually considered to be Joshua and Zerubbabel.¹ What is generally overlooked in this interpretation of the symbolism of chap. 4 is that *contextually* that chapter deals with *only the one* leader, Zerubbabel, just as chap. 3 deals with *only the other* leader, Joshua. To introduce Joshua into the symbolism of chap. 4 incorporates into that symbolism an element extraneous to the entire contextual setting of the chapter.

Another flaw in the Zerubbabel-and-Joshua identification arises, it seems to me, in the way in which adherents of this view tend to interpret 4:14 (“Then he said, “These are the two anointed [lit., “two sons of oil”] who stand by the Lord of the whole earth,”” RSV). It is assumed that the “two anointed” or “two sons

¹Among examples are ICC (see main text below, and n. 2); Keil and Delitzsch (p. 277 in the work cited in n. 4, below); Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London, 1972), p. 125; Christian Jeremias, *Die Nachtgesichte des Sacharja* (Göttingen, 1977), pp. 182-184; and H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Zechariah* (Columbus, Ohio, 1956), p. 95. Other names have also been suggested, such as the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

of oil" are such by virtue of their being anointed. For instance, the ICC refers to them as "Zerubbabel, the hereditary prince, and Joshua, the hereditary high priest, both of whom had been, or were to be, anointed for their offices."² However, one would conclude from the context that rather they are "sons of oil" because they furnish oil, for that is the function of the olive trees with which they are identified in the definition of vs. 12-14.³

An important clue to this entire symbolism of a central lampstand flanked by oil-supplying olive trees comes in vs. 6, a response to the prophet's query in vs. 5, "What are these, my Lord?":

Then he said to me, "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. What are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain; and he shall bring forward the top stone amid shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!'" Moreover the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel" (vss. 6-10, RSV).

The foregoing explanation points to *one specific leader* accomplishing an important task, the strength being supplied by God's Spirit. Inasmuch as oil is symbolic of the Holy Spirit,⁴ it would be logical to conclude that the oil-supplying olive trees (identified later as the "sons of oil") are somehow symbolic of the Spirit or his work. In any event, a connection between the olive trees and the Spirit is explicitly made in vs. 6—"Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts." The Spirit is the *supplier* of the strength for Zerubbabel, just as the olive trees supply the oil for the lamps of the lampstand.

²Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah, ICC (Edinburgh, 1912), p. 165.

³Some commentators, of course, reconstruct the text. Or they seek to distinguish what they consider later additions—e.g., connecting the olive trees to the lampstand by the two golden pipes. There is no justification for such manipulation of the text, which manipulation in fact destroys the very genius of the symbolic portrayal and hence militates against discovery of the real meaning of the message.

⁴Cf., e.g., C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, The Twelve Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1949), 2:267.

The fact that there are *two* trees need not detain us here, inasmuch as the contextual evidence of Zech 4 explains sufficiently what the symbolism means. Nevertheless, it is tempting to call attention to the possible (or perhaps, probable) allusion to, or derivation from, the two pillars of the Solomonic temple, Jachin and Boaz (see 1 Kgs 7:21). These pillars certainly had symbolic significance with regard to unction from God for Israelite leaders. Kings were installed by one of the pillars (see 2 Kgs 11:12-14), and King Josiah also read the book of the law while standing by one of these pillars (2 Kgs 23:1-3).

A further word is in order concerning the lampstand as a symbol for Zerubbabel. In addition to the contextual support indicated above, we may observe that such usage would not be unusual in ancient Israel. Indeed, an earlier administrative leader, King David, was referred to as "the lamp of Israel" (2 Sam 21:17). In the administrative tasks facing Zerubbabel after the exile, would it not be appropriate to consider him as "the lamp of Israel" for that particular time?

2. *The Two Olive Trees and Lampstands in Revelation*

In Rev 11:4, as noted earlier, although we still have two olive trees, we find the lampstands increased to two and also equated with the olive trees. The meaning of the symbolism in Rev 11:4 has been dealt with at some length in a previous article,⁵ and need not be reiterated here. Suffice it to say that several lines of evidence converge to indicate that the *two lampstands* = *two olive trees* symbolism reflects a two-witness theology that is broadly evidenced in the Apocalypse itself as well as elsewhere in the NT. This two-witness theology affirms that there is unified testimony of the OT prophetic forecasts and the NT apostolic confirmation—or as referred to in the Revelation, "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9; see also 1:2 and 20:4, and cf. 6:9, 12:17, and 14:12).

Thus, in the Apocalypse a symbolic representation derived from Zechariah has been varied and utilized in another scripturally relevant way. Whereas in Zechariah the one lampstand refers to

⁵Kenneth A. Strand, "The Two Witnesses of Rev 11:3-12," *AUSS* 19 (1981): 127-135. For interpretations generally given, see my discussion on p. 127 of that article, including the references called to attention in nn. 1 and 3 on that page.

Zerubbabel, in Revelation the two lampstands refer to God's word in its twofold aspect of OT prophetic forecast and NT confirmatory proclamation. In this connection, it may be noted that Scripture not only designates an administrative leader of Israel as "lamp," but also gives that designation to God's word (see Ps 119:105; cf. vs. 130).

As to the two olive trees—the part of the symbolic representation that has remained the same in Zechariah and Revelation—, I would suggest that the meaning has also remained constant, referring to the Spirit's work. In fact, through use of the two-olive-trees symbol and especially by equating the two trees with the two lampstands, the book of Revelation sets forth an important element in NT theology—namely, the Holy Spirit's role in providing the word of God, in both the OT and NT aspects. The close identification may be seen, for instance, in the Apocalypse itself, where the message to each of the seven churches is introduced as testimony from Jesus but summarized as "what the Spirit says to the churches" (see 2:1, 7, 8, 11, 12, 17, 18, 29; 3:1, 6, 7, 13, 14, 22). One further NT reference may be called to attention here (others are noted in my earlier article⁶), 1 Pet 1:10-12, which beautifully illustrates the Holy Spirit's part in *both* the OT and NT revelations:

The *prophets* who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by *the Spirit of Christ within them* when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things which have *now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven* (RSV, emphasis mine).

Thus, the OT prophets and NT apostles were inspired by the same Holy Spirit, who gave God's message through them.

3. Conclusion

The similar symbolic portrayals of Zech 4 and Rev 11:4 provide *timely* messages. In each instance, the constant part of the

⁶Ibid., pp. 131-134. It is interesting to notice, as well, that in patristic usage the term "prophetic Spirit" or "Spirit of prophecy" appears quite frequently as a synonym for "Holy Spirit." See *ibid.*, p. 134, n. 13.

symbolism—the two olive trees—indicates the presence of the Holy Spirit in his effective power for the occasion at hand. The variable part of the symbolism—the one lampstand flanked by the olive trees in Zechariah, and the two lampstands equated with the olive trees in Revelation—relates to the specific situation itself. In Zechariah's portrayal, the *one* lampstand supplied with oil from the olive trees fitly represents Zerubbabel receiving the Spirit's unction for the task before him. He was "the lamp of Israel" for that occasion. In the Apocalypse, at a time when a two-witness theology of OT prophetic prediction and NT confirmatory testimony was very much to the foreground in the experience and evangelistic mission of the early church, the symbolism of *two* lampstands provided a fitting manner in which to portray this basic theological motif. The identification of these lampstands with the olive trees aptly depicts the Holy Spirit's central role in providing both the OT and NT divine messages.

In short, John's fluid use in Rev 11:4 of symbolism drawn from Zech 4 holds constant the significance of one side of the symbolism while altering the other side. This new portrayal highlights an important NT theological theme which was indeed a vital existential dimension in the life of the early Christian community, just as the original portrayal in Zech 4 itself spoke hope and courage for a real situation faced by the administrator Zerubbabel and the returned Hebrew exiles.