

# Zechariah – Hope through disappointment

Leaders' notes and sample studies

Draft release (feedback welcome!)

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## Background information

### Zechariah and his world

Zechariah was a prophet who began his ministry in the late 500s BC, while the Persian Empire ruled the world. He lived in the wake of Israel's return from exile (we call this the "post exilic" period), a time of great hope for the future (but also quite a lot of disappointment and challenge).

We don't know very much beyond that. His grandfather was "Iddo" (Zech 1:1) who may have been the priest Iddo named in Nehemiah 12:4 who returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel. If this is his grandfather, then Zechariah would have been quite young when he started his ministry.

Zechariah's ministry was, in one important sense, successful. We are told in Ezra 5:1-2 that Zechariah and Haggai were instrumental in motivating people to start rebuilding the temple back in Jerusalem.



### **Date**

Zechariah starts his ministry in around 520BC, and the first part of Zechariah dates from shortly after this time in about 516BC.

We know this because chapters 1-8 are dated during the reign of Darius (they have headings like the "eighth month and second year of Darius": Zech 1:1). Darius was a Persian king who reigned from 522-486BC. The first half of Zechariah (like its sister book Haggai) seems to have been written just in time for the rebuilding of the temple (about 516BC).

Chapters 9-14 are harder to pin down, and may come from a later date. They may even come from a different prophet who, inspired by God, continued Zechariah's ministry. The reason it's hard to say for sure is that no dates are given, Zechariah is no longer named as the first person speaker, and the style and content changes significantly. The later chapters also make sense of later events. Some scholars date chapters 9-11 to a later date in Zechariah's lifetime, and chapters 12-14 to after Zechariah's death, perhaps towards the end of the Persian Empire (or even in the Greek era). If this is true, and Zechariah didn't write the whole of Zechariah, it doesn't diminish the authority or reliability of Zechariah – it just means that future generations believed that God's message to Zechariah was still relevant to the troubles of their own day, and were inspired by God's Spirit to continue writing for our benefit. Sometimes prophecy is a team sport.

(It's worth adding here that Zechariah was also probably edited shortly after 332BC, when it was included in the anthology "The Twelve Prophets" which we'll discuss in a moment).

### **Historical context**

The prophet Jeremiah had warned Israel that God was going to punish them with 70 years of exile in Babylon (see Jeremiah 29). Turns out he wasn't kidding.

In 586BC, Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylon. It was not until 538BC, shortly after the new Persian Empire defeated Babylon that they were allowed to return home (under Cyrus, the Persian king).

It took a while to get things organised, but eventually the temple was completed in 516BC. The first part of Zechariah (and its sister book, Haggai) were probably prepared just in time for the temple's completion. By the way, that's almost exactly 70 years from the destruction of the first temple to the completion of the second. God keeps his promises.

But even after they returned, and the temple was completed, the glory days they were hoping for did not seem to come. Those left behind in the land during the exile had gotten on with life, and so they weren't totally happy about making room for their long lost cousins returning from exile. And their

estranged relatives to the north (who were developing their own brand of Judaism, eventually becoming the Samaritans of Jesus' day) were keen to bring the returning exiles under their political and religious sway. Most importantly, Jerusalem was effectively still a puppet government. Any move to restore the family of David to the throne could well be interpreted as an act of treason against their Persian overlords.

God's promises were as big as ever, but the reality was ... well... small.

## **The book of Zechariah**

Zechariah comes to us in three main parts.<sup>1</sup>

- Chapters 1-6 contain an introduction (1:1-6) followed by eight "night visions".
- Chapters 7-8 is more straightforward prophecy. It provides a bridge between the other two parts, moving from the "now" of the temple rebuilding project to a future age.
- Chapter 9-14 contain two "oracles" (chs 9-11 and 12-14).

These three parts are related, but come in quite different styles and concern different events.

God sends messages in two main ways in Zechariah. "Visions" are highly symbolic visual representations of the truth being communicated, which require a bit of unpacking (for Zechariah and for us!). An "oracle" is a more direct prophetic message.

Zechariah is not a stand-alone work. It comes to us as part of an anthology in the Bible called "The Twelve Prophets" (sometimes also called the "minor prophets") which was finished in the late 400s.

So while Zechariah began his ministry in 520BC, the final version of Zechariah has been substantially edited and perhaps even expanded, as the message given to Zechariah continued to help later generations understand what God was doing in the world. Sometimes prophecy is a team sport!

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<sup>1</sup> For a slightly different approach to Zechariah's structure, see Barry Webb's excellent commentary, *The Message of Zechariah*, in the Bible Speaks Today series (IVP, 2003).

## How these studies work

- Each study has an observation/interpretation section, and an implications section. Try to leave a good amount of time for the implications.
- I have given you some alternative questions in grey in case you have extra time, a super speedy group, or you don't like the other questions.

## Overview

This series goes for 8 weeks.

Part 1: the night visions

Study 1	Zechariah 1 – 2	The terrifying tradies
Study 2	Zechariah 5 – 6:8	God and sin will not share a roof
Study 3	Zechariah 6:9-15	Enter the branch

Part 2: the oracles

Study 4	Zechariah 7	Beyond religion
Study 5	Zechariah 8	A question of fasting
Study 6	Zechariah 11:4-17	A problem of leadership
Study 7	Zechariah 12 – 13:1	For Jerusalem
Study 8	Zechariah 14	Justice is coming

## PART I: THE NIGHT VISIONS

### Study 1: The terrifying tradies

Zechariah 1 – 2

#### Icebreaker

If you could have dinner with any person in modern history who would it be (and what would you eat?). If the group is new or has newcomers enforce a name amnesty (i.e. everyone gives their name just as a reminder).

#### Where are we headed? (put this in your own words to give the group some context)

*In this study we begin a new series on Zechariah, an Old Testament prophet who arrived on the scene about 500 years before Jesus. God's people had recently been released from 70 years of exile in Babylon as a result of their sin. But now they are back in Jerusalem, and efforts to rebuild the temple and restore the kingship have been slow. Zechariah has a message of encouragement for the faithful: there is hope through disappointment.*

#### Prayer

Invite the group to pray with you for God's help as you read the passage together.

#### Observation and interpretation

Read Zech 1:1-6.

Is God angry with the people of Zechariah's day?

Zechariah reminds his hearers of the history between their ancestors and God. Read Jeremiah 25:2-7. What was Jerusalem guilty of?

Read Jeremiah 25:8-11. What will happen if they don't listen to God?

Knowing this back story, what are some words you would use to describe your impression (1) of God, and (2) of his people? [You may like to use a whiteboard, or slips of paper in a hat, or a low tech twitter wall with hashtags]

"It would be better if God just dictated all the Bible at once, in easy to understand headings." Do you agree or disagree. Why?

Why is God's word so bound up in foreign times and places?

Who do you think is the "they" that repents in verse 6 – the ancestors or the current generation?

Read Zech 1:7-17

- The horses find the whole world at rest. Is this a good thing or a bad thing?
- Why will the Lord return to Jerusalem, and what will that return mean for God's people?

"Zion" and "Jerusalem" are the same place, the most important city in the Old Testament. "Zion" was the name of the fortress that David captured (2Sam 5:7), and then made into his capital (the City of David). So to say "Zion" rather than "Jerusalem" may remind the reader of David's military accomplishments. Regardless, Hebrew writers love to refer to the same thing in two ways, hence "comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem".

Read Zech 1:18-21

- Horns are a symbol of power, and represent the foreign forces that punished Jerusalem. But why do you think it is *craftsmen* (tradies, not soldiers) who terrify the nations? (Clue: look at Zech 1:16 ... what are they rebuilding? Why is it significant?).

Read Zech 2:1-13

- How are these different groups to respond to God's return to Jerusalem?
  - The exiles in general (v6)
  - Those living in Babylon (v7-9)
  - God's city, Zion (v10)
  - The nations (v11)
  - All of humanity (v13)

Read Zech 2:7-10

- How are God's love and his anger connected in this section?

### **Implications**

Is God still angry with you?

Zechariah's call to his generation was to "return" to the Lord, by obeying him, and by rebuilding the temple. In what ways does our generation need to "return" to the Lord?

Read 1 Corinthians 3:16. The task of the craftsmen was to rebuild the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, terrifying the forces opposed to God. Where is the temple now? What is *our* work that we should be getting on with?

**Prayer to close**

Spend a good bit of time praying for us as the church, that we might get on with the work of the temple. Pray also for our city, Sydney, that it might return to the Lord.

Then you might like to spend some time praying for specific things in each other's lives.

**Theological and pastoral notes for leaders:**

- The previous generation Zechariah has in mind is probably the generation that was warned to turn from their evil ways before judgment came. They ignored the prophets, and so in 586 BC Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. Zechariah is speaking to those 66 years later who have returned to Jerusalem.
- The temple was not just a building for worship services. It was the place where God promised to be present amongst his people. When he departs from the temple in Ezekiel 10 that is the beginning of the end for God's holy city Jerusalem. God has given up on them. So the return to the temple is hugely significant. God's presence is what gives Jerusalem security from her enemies (see Psalm 46:5).

## **Study 2: God and sin will not share a roof**

Zechariah 5 to 6:8

### **Icebreaker**

What's the strangest dream you can remember?

### **Where are we headed?**

Last week we read the first two of a series of 8 visions at night. These visions are arranged with neat bookends:

- (1) the horses judge the nations (Zech 1:7-17)
- (2) the horns are removed (Zech 1:18-21)
- (3) Jerusalem reconstructed (Zech 2:1-10)
  
- (4) Joshua the high priest is given new clothes (Zech 3:1-10)
- (5) two Messiahs (Zech 4:1-14)
  
- (6) the flying scroll enters houses (Zech 5:1-4)
- (7) woman in a basket removed to Babylon (Zech 5:5-11)
- (8) four chariots judge the nations (Zech 6:1-8)

The first three visions were about God returning to Jerusalem. We're going to skip to the last three visions now, which are about sin departing from Jerusalem (when God arrives, sin must leave!)

### **Prayer**

Invite the group to pray with you for God's help as you read the passage together.

### **Observation and interpretation**

Imagine your group has been contracted to create the new children's storybook bible. Take one night vision each and draw it (it doesn't have to be an artistic masterpiece), then use your drawing to explain to the whole group what the meaning of the vision is.

- The flying scroll (5:1-4)
- The woman in the basket (5:5-11)
- The chariots (6:1-8)

### **Implications**

These are heavy images. Is it possible for a Christian to fall under God's judgment and be destroyed because of sin?



Read 2 Corinthians 6:16-18.

We know that when God enters our lives, sin must exit stage left. But what types of sin and impurity are the hardest to eliminate?

**Prayer to close**

It might be appropriate to pray in confession as a group.

**Theological and pastoral notes for leaders:**

- The image of the woman in the basket might seem sexist. Keep in mind that in Jewish literature most figurative characters were female – including wisdom (Prov 4:6)
- We are not saved because of our good behaviour, because “while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8) but equally “No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him” (1 John 3:6). In the Christian life we must rest on God’s promise that we have been declared righteous in advance of judgment day, but not fall into the trap of sin. A good tree produces good fruit (Luke 6:43); those who have been saved by grace will produce fruit in keeping with repentance (Luke 3:8).
- Pastorally speaking, you need to be aware of what each person needs to hear. The person struggling with sin, particularly a sin of addiction such as pornography or materialism, may be tempted to despair. You need to encourage them to persevere. They are forgiven. The person who is simply lax and has given up the fight needs to be woken up to the reality (Heb 10:26).

## Study 3: Enter the branch

Zechariah 6:9-15

### Icebreaker

If you were King or Queen for a day, what's one traffic law you would bring in immediately?

### Where are we headed?

In the last two weeks we've started on Zechariah's night visions: God will return to his city Jerusalem, the temple will be rebuilt and sin will be sent packing. So far Zechariah has been "seeing" things happen. Now for the first time he is told to do something.

### Prayer

Invite the group to pray with you.

### Observation and interpretation

Read 6:9-15. This is a very dense passage which we're going to spend some time unpacking. But very quickly...

- What is the symbolic action in this passage?
- What happens to the crown? (v11 and v14)

The branch is code for "Messiah" or "king". What goes in the Branch's job description?

Who is the Branch in this passage? Is it High Priest Joshua, or someone else?

Read Zech 4:6-14. From this passage, who is missing in chapter 6 that you would expect to turn up again in chapter 6?

Something weird is going on here! To get some clues, we're going to need to do some hunting. Divide these passages between the group:

- 2Sam 7:12-17
- 1 Chronicles 3:1-24 (zoom in on verse 17-19 and skim the rest)
- Ezra 5:1-2
- Zech 3:8-9
- Zech 4:6-9

Based on this information, what reasons can you think of for a priest, Joshua, being temporarily given the crown – and not an actual Davidic king? Where does this leave God's promises?

**Implications**

Verse 15 makes God's promise conditional: "if you diligently obey the Lord your God". What good are God's promises if humans can spoil them?

Read Matthew 16:15-22. How does Jesus think he fulfils Zechariah's prophecy? How do we fit into the story?

Here Jesus identifies himself as the Christ, the fulfilment of Old Testament expectations about the temple-builder King. Jesus is the final and greater Zerubbabel who will build his temple (the church) by his Spirit.

Read Zech 4:6 and 4:10. What encouragement do these words hold for Christians in 2014 in Sydney?

**Prayer to close****Theological and pastoral notes for leaders:**

- Zerubbabel, one of the last in David's royal line, suddenly disappears from the picture after recommencing building of the temple. This raises all sorts of theories. Darius, the Persian king by this stage, spent a lot of time and energy squashing rebellions all around Jerusalem. Zerubbabel's temple building may have come to the attention of the Persian empire and been interpreted as an act of independence and therefore treason. It is possible he was imprisoned for a time, we just don't know. But either way Chapter 6 is something of a transition point, where the focus shifts from Zerubbabel's temple building to a future, perfect Messiah who will build God's house and God's people.

## **PART II: THE ORACLES**

### **Study 4: Zechariah 7**

#### **Icebreaker**

Would you rather eat nothing for three days or eat the same meal for 3 months?

#### **Where are we headed?**

Chapter 7 of Zechariah begins a new section – the situation has changed and the rebuilding is under way, but he begins with the same call to repentance followed by reassurance of God’s concern for his city.

#### **Prayer**

Invite the group to pray with you.

#### **Observation and interpretation**

Read Zech 7. (You might like to break the reading up between the group). What’s interesting, difficult to understand or challenging?

Prophecy is God’s interpretation of history, so it is helpful to know what events this prophecy is speaking into. Look up these passages and place them on a timeline with post-it notes.

- Zech 1:1
- Zech 7:1
- Ezra 4:24-5:2
- Ezra 6:14-15

Read 7:4-6. According to Zechariah, what’s wrong with religious practices like fasting?

Read 7:8-10. Is true religion a private matter of the heart?

Read 7:11-14. Two years after his first prophecy, why do you think Zechariah is reminding the people of this backstory again?

#### **Implications**

Read Matthew 6:16-18. What is the place (if any) for religious traditions like fasting during Lent in the Christian life?

How can we (as a church, or as individual Christians, or as a nation) be more Godly when it comes to social issues of justice, mercy, compassion?

**Prayer to close**

Pray for the things we have just spoken about, particularly for the oppressed in our society.

**Theological and pastoral notes for leaders:**

- Bethel is a town 20km to the north of Jerusalem, whose inhabitants were formerly part of the Northern Kingdom. This community probably remained in the land during the exile and kept fasts related to the destruction of the temple. Now the temple rebuilding is well and truly under way, they want to know if they should keep fasting. But Zechariah's answer isn't what they bargained for!

## Study 5: Zechariah 8

### Icebreaker

If you had to leave Sydney for good, what city would you settle in (assume no visa or cost limitations)?

### Where are we headed?

As progress on rebuilding the temple gets underway, people had asked Zechariah whether they should keep fasting. His answer to their question continues in chapter 8. Not only are they to build a temple fit for the Lord, they are to become a people fit for the Lord to dwell amongst.

### Prayer

Invite the group to pray with you and then read the passage together.

### Observation and interpretation

Read Zechariah 8. What questions, comments or thoughts strike you?

What are God's promises to the inhabitants of Jerusalem?

What obligations are on the people of Jerusalem? Is it enough just to build the temple, or does God require more of them?

Why does God seem to favour this one tiny city over the whole world?  
Doesn't God care about anyone else?

### Implications

Read Luke 19:41-44. What has happened to these promises? Has God given up on Jerusalem?

As Christians, should we support the Jewish inhabitants of Israel in their bid to secure Jerusalem against surrounding nations?

Read Hebrews 12:22-24. The New Testament claims to have found the fulfilment of the entire Old Testament in the Messiah Jesus. What does it mean for us to be citizens of this heavenly Jerusalem? What are the equivalents of temple building (v9) and truth and peace loving (v19) for us?

### Prayer to close

Pray for the inhabitants of current day Jerusalem, that they might embrace their Messiah Jesus.

Pray that we can live out our calling as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem.

**Theological and pastoral notes for leaders:**

- Hebrews 12:22-24 makes clear that the increasingly huge promises about Jerusalem are fulfilled in a heavenly Jerusalem of which we are now citizens.
- From 18:18-23 on we start to hear about “those days” – an undefined future time in which amazing promises will come to fruition. Human sin keeps getting in the way (it seems) of the promised blessings unfolding in normal history, meaning that nothing short of divine intervention in history can bring the kingdom about. The stage is set for Jesus.

## Study 6: Zechariah 11:4-17

### Icebreaker

Think of your best boss ever. What was good about them?

### Where are we headed?

We've been studying Zechariah's message for a people about to complete the temple. We move now into a later period, where things are again not looking so good for Jerusalem. The old problems of human sin and bad leadership are back.

### Prayer

Invite the group to pray with you and then read the passage together.

### Observation and interpretation

What are the two roles that Zechariah symbolically performs? Who does each role represent?

What is the consequence of rejecting God's leadership over Jerusalem?

Are the flock helpless *victims* at the hand of their leaders?

What do the two broken staffs represent?

Is 30 shekels of silver, in the context, a large or a small amount? See Exodus 21:32.

### Implications

Divide into groups and take one of these passages from the New Testament. How does Jesus' story fulfil the expectations in this passage?

- John 4:1-26
- John 10:1-18
- Matthew 26:14-16, 27:3-10.

What are the implications for our leadership

- a) in the church (whether as staff or volunteers),
- b) in business environments, and
- c) in politics?



**Prayer to close**

Pray for our leaders in all spheres of life, that we might have good shepherds.

This passage may refer to an unsuccessful attempt by Zechariah to reunite the Northern and Southern kingdoms under a common leadership (bringing God's kingdom back together would have been a long term dream). But by this time Samaria was quite happy with its independence, and so such a reunification would have been politically very difficult (hence the opposition between Samaritans and Judeans in Jesus' day). Hope for a reunified kingdom went out the window, postponed to a heavenly future. See John 4:19-26.

## Study 7: Zechariah 12-13:1

### Icebreaker

What's the most trouble you ever got into at school?

### Where are we headed?

We have seen throughout Zechariah a tension – God is passionately protective of his city (his beloved “daughter” Zion: Zech 9:9), but also that his people are still hopelessly rebellious. This tension begins to unfold here as God’s judgment of Jerusalem’s enemies is followed by mourning at the consequences of her people’s rebellion.

### Prayer

Invite the group to pray with you and then read the passage together.

### Observation and interpretation

Why do you think Zechariah introduces the Lord as the one “who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the human spirit within a person” (verse 1)?

Read Zech 12:1-9. Is it right for God to be so violent in his defence of Jerusalem?

By this time, “Judah” can refer to the region in which Jerusalem was found, but it can also more traditionally refer to one of the 12 tribes of Israel. Either way, the idea is that God’s people in surrounding areas are drawn in and included in God’s plans. These plans still centre on Israel, but the others won’t miss out either (hence the comment in verse 7 about the glory of Jerusalem will not be greater than that of Judah). God has not forgotten his long-standing promises to bless the nation of Israel.

Read Zech 12:10-13:1. If “that day” is a good time, when God returns to defend Jerusalem, then why are God’s people mourning?

Who is the “one who they pierced”?

The motif introduced in this passage is one of salvation through disaster: Jerusalem is surrounded by enemies, but God intervenes just as defeat seems inevitable. But while God saves them from all external threats, he also deals with their internal problems: their sin. God changes their attitude and makes them want to seek him.

The description of one “pierced” is a difficult verse in the original language. It seems to refer both to “me” and to “him” being pierced. This takes on special significance in Jesus, who is both “was with God and ... was God” (John 1:1).

Jesus is the final referent of this prophecy. But like many prophecies, it works on multiple levels. It looks back to 2 Chronicles 35:22, where (on the plains of Megiddo) King Josiah was pierced in battle. So the piercing of the mysterious figure in Zechariah 12 is being compared to another infamous day of national disaster – a day when when something on par with losing an only son took away their only hope for the future. Their mourning is not just sadness that he is dead, but also a recognition of their responsibility for the bad things that have happened. These are tears of repentance. Tribe by tribe, they mourn.

### **Implications**

What makes someone an enemy of God's city? What should our attitude be towards them?

Read John 19:33-37. What does Zechariah 12 help us understand about Jesus' death?

Israel's sin leads to the death of their Messiah, Jesus. But in a mind-blowing twist, this is the very way that God heals them and brings the "fountain...to cleanse them from sin" (Zech 13:1).

Read Revelation 1:7. Why does the world mourn when they see Jesus coming again? Will it be a happy day or a sad day for us?

### **Prayer to close**

Pray in thanks and praise for Jesus, the one who was pierced for our sins.

### **Theological and pastoral notes for leaders:**

- The imagery in these passages is confronting – they are intended to shock us with an image of apocalyptic destruction for those opposed to God. We have moved beyond history into the "apocalyptic", the end times when good will finally defeat evil, ushering in the Kingdom of God.
- There is a very strange resolution here – one which will not completely make sense until we meet Jesus (foreshadowed in chapter 9). Jerusalem will be once again threatened with extinction, but opposition to God will finally be defeated. The problems within Israel will be resolved. This will be good news for his people, but also somehow for the whole world. All this will be accomplished through a suffering good shepherd, who is pierced, mourned for, and then brings cleansing from sin.

## Study 8: Zechariah 14

### Icebreaker

What's the best apocalyptic film of all time?

### Where are we headed?

This is the last study in this series on Zechariah. We have seen the resolution of the problem of God's people's sin in the "pierced" shepherd. Now we get an apocalyptic vision to tie off the loose cords. It's startling imagery in parts, and not for the faint hearted, but it shows that God is still in control of history, and justice is coming for all the bad that is done in the world.

### Prayer

Invite the group to pray with you and then read the passage together.

### Observation and interpretation

Read Zech 14:1-15.

How does this kind of imagery of war then peace make you feel?

In chapter 14:1-15, how many times is "on that day" repeated? Is that day good news or bad news for Jerusalem?

Read Zech 14:16-21. What is the future for these other nations? Does God care about them?

### Implications

Has this day already happened or is it still to come? Is it something to look forward to, or something to fear?

What makes someone an enemy of God's city?

How can you prepare for "that day"?

Recognising that this is apocalyptic imagery meant to strike us as severe, is it right for God to punish the nations of earth?

How can we love people who we know are opposed to God and therefore under his judgment?

**Prayer to close**

Pray for those who are still enemies of God in their hearts.

**Theological and pastoral notes for leaders:**

- The imagery in these passages is confronting – they are intended to shock us with an image of apocalyptic destruction for those opposed to God. We have moved beyond history into the “apocalyptic”, the end times when good will finally defeat evil, ushering in the Kingdom of God.
- In one sense, the things spoken of in “that day” have arrived Jesus, and in the destruction of Jerusalem (AD69). But the final “day” hasn’t happened yet (2Thes 2:2). We live now in an “in between time”, the “now” but “not yet”, the “last days” (Acts 2:17) before the ultimate “day of the Lord” (2Peter 3:10). The kingdom which was inaugurated (begun) by Jesus will finally be consummated (made complete) when Jesus returns.

**Recommended Resources**

\* Barry Webb, *The Message of Zechariah (Bible Speaks Today series)* (Nottingham: IVP, 2003)

**Other books consulted**

George Athas, *Zechariah* (Moore College OT4 Hebrew Elective Notes), 2012.

David Cook and Grant Thorp, *12 Books to Change your Life: Teaching the Minor Prophets* (SMBC, 2009)

Michael Stead, *Zechariah*, forthcoming.