

## **THE ANGEL-RIDER IN THE MIDST OF THE MYRTLES**

**By Paul Penno**

**April 9, 2008**

In Zechariah 1:8 it is the myrtles that are explicitly identified as being by the deep. The Angel-rider is by the deep because he comes and takes up a position in the midst of the myrtles. And that is the main point of this symbolic disclosure. While his people are in the world wilderness facing the satanic deep, while they are in the throes of their historic earthly struggle, Immanuel, mighty God, is present with them.

Myrtles grow to some nine feet and thus as seen here probably stood at the height of the mounted horseman. With their delicate, star-like, white flowers and fragrant, bright green leaves the hardy evergreen myrtle naturally appears in idyllic pictures of the fertility and luxuriance of the earth in the messianic age.

At creation, the glory of the Spirit brought forth paradise out of the primordial deep and darkness to be mankind's dwelling place. The dead deep itself was transformed into the river of Eden that watered the garden with its trees, including the very tree of life, beneath the mountain of the Shekinah presence. From the beginning, luxuriant trees, in association with God's presence by waters, are a conspicuous feature of paradise, and trees of life, flourishing on either side of a river of life.

Paradise by the deep is also found to be an element of the exodus re-creation event. After recording the song of Yahweh's triumph over the deep (Exod. 15:1-21), the narrative hastens to tell of Israel under the directing hand of the glory of the Spirit coming to Elim and encamping there by the twelve springs of water among the seventy palm trees. "And they came to Elim, where were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm trees: and they encamped there by the waters." (Exod. 15:27). As part of the larger Mosaic context in which the exodus wilderness experience is represented as a creation event, and in particular the wilderness is identified with the *tohu*-deep (cf. Deut. 32:10,11), the description of the Elim oasis in Exodus 15:27 at once evokes the paradisaical waters and trees of the garden of Eden.

The myrtles by the deep in Zechariah 1:8 reinforce the other creation and exodus motifs already observed in the imagery of this

vision. They do so by adding the element of the paradise land which the Creator-Redeemer provides as the dwelling for his people and as the site of his glorious presence. In his lordship over the deep the Lord God transforms it into a fructifying source for the arboreal blessings of his holy garden, the homeland of his people.

In Zechariah 1:8, the wilderness is the setting of the myrtles of paradise and the Angel-rider's appearance there. This becomes evident when it is recognized that in the figure of the myrtles there is an allusion to the Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, that graphic memorial of Israel's life in the wilderness.

When the Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated in the days of Israel's return from exile, myrtles were designated along with olive and palm trees as meeting the requirement written in the Law of Moses for the construction of the shelters in which the people lived during the week of celebration (Neh. 8:14ff., esp. 15; cf. Lev. 23:39ff., esp. 40). One criterion in the Law for the selection of trees for this purpose was their practical suitability for constructing the huts; with this in view, trees with broad fronds of leafy branches were specified. The second criterion was ornamental appearance indicated by the phrase, "trees of *hadar* (glory or beauty)."

The Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated at the close of the agricultural year when all the fruit of the land had been harvested and was accordingly called the Feast of Ingathering (Exod. 23:16; 34:22). Tabernacles was thus a typological prophecy of the completion of God's kingdom through the final universal ingathering of the elect of all nations to worship the Lord with joy as the King over all the earth, the Lord of hosts. Agreeably, Zechariah at the close of the book, returning to this theme of his opening vision, declares that in the eternal day the redeemed remnant of all the national families of the earth will from year to year come before God's throne to keep the Feast of Tabernacles (Zech. 14:16). Employing the customary prophetic idiom of Old Testament typology, he thus indicated that beyond the final eschatological conflict (Zech. 14:1ff.) what Tabernacles had adumbrated will be realized.

A curious feature of the Feast of Tabernacles is that while its place in the annual and agricultural calendars made it a sign of the consummation of the kingdom, the situation to which it pointed as a historical memorial and which it dramatized by the peculiar manner of its observance identified it with an earlier, emphatically pre-consummation stage in the redemptive process. This intriguing

combination of contrasting concepts finds expression in the two names of the festival—Ingathering and Booths. The former, as we have seen, speaks of the final harvesting into the heavenly assembly (cf. Rev. 14:14-16). The latter refers to the pre-consummation condition of God's people. The name Booths reflects of course the requirement that during the festival the pilgrims were to dwell in structures of leafy branches in imitation of the Israelites' mode of life while they were on the move in the wilderness between the salvation event at the Egyptian sea and their entrance into Canaan, the prototype of the Sabbath-paradise to come (Lev. 23:43). The rough simplicity of the booths underscored the unsettled, impermanent character of the wilderness situation. The huts occupied during the Tabernacles festival were only a temporary arrangement, like the booths that used to be set up in the fields by harvesters.

The transient nature of Israel's experience in the wilderness was further reflected in the kind of dwelling the Lord prescribed for himself at Sinai. As a gracious expression of his Immanuel-Presence with his people, the Lord adopted a form of residence similar to their own.

A wilderness-like, impermanent state of affairs continued all the while God's dwelling place retained its temporary tent-form, until this very time when the Lord was arranging through covenant with David for the constructing of a temple-house by David's son (2 Sam. 7:13).

Of course even under Israel's theocratic kings the kingdom of God did not yet attain its true permanence. After all, Canaan was not the true Sabbath land but only a prototype, and Jerusalem was not the heavenly city but only a foreshadowing of it. Celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles in those days would have been a reminder of this. There in Jerusalem, on the roofs and in the open court of the city of the Great King, the Israelites had to set up and reside in the temporary booths—a declaration that this was not the eternal city itself and this was not the time or place for the saints' everlasting mansions of glory. From the Fall until the inauguration of the world to come at the Consummation, life for the people of God is always a pilgrim journey through an alien wilderness under the shadow of death. So it was in Zechariah's day. So it is in ours.

Two different moments in the redemptive journey are symbolized in the Feast of Tabernacles, signified by the two names, Booths and Ingathering. It reminded God's people that they were pilgrims and aliens in this world (Booths) and simultaneously promised them that they were the heirs of heaven (Ingathering).

Crude in form, hastily set up, and thus apt symbols of the impermanence of the wilderness era, the booths were nevertheless designed to be replicas of the theophanic Glory itself. Materials prescribed for construction of the booths are described in Leviticus 23:40-42 (cf. Neh. 8:15) by terms that call attention to their likeness to the Glory-cloud. Trees of splendor (*hadar*), or majestic trees, were to be used. The term *hadar* is a synonym of *kabod*, “glory”. The myrtle trees of the Zechariah 1:8 vision were all the more a natural symbol to evoke the Feast of Tabernacles and in particular the booths, revealing behind them a more fundamental level of symbolism in the trees of Eden and so illuminating their nature as replicas of the divine Glory, for such were the trees of the garden of God.

The picture that emerges in the Tabernacles festival is then one of the Glory-Spirit re-creatively overshadowing the redeemed Israelite community in the wilderness, fashioning them in his own glory-likeness. Consequently, the exodus typology depicts the mission of the coming Christ as a work of new creation, especially the creation of the new humanity in the image of God, a transformation perfected at last in their glorification and reception into the heavenly tabernacle.

A foretaste of the ultimate restoration of the Glory-image and at the same time a dramatic exposition of the meaning of the Tabernacles festival along these lines was given in the episode of our Lord’s Transfiguration. The Transfiguration was a wilderness event, apart on a high mountain. Reminders of the wilderness too were both the visitors seen with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. The mention of the booths, which Peter suggested be constructed for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, recalls the wilderness shelters of the Israelites and the imitative reconstructions thereof prescribed in the Feast of Tabernacles.

Peter’s suggestion about the booths was made as Moses and Elijah were departing (Luke 9:33a). So far as it made sense at all (cf. Mark 9:6; Luke 9:33c), the idea apparently was that these two might be persuaded to stay on, continuing this “good” arrangement, if only shelter were made available—a thought possibly prompted by the darkening threat of the approaching fearful cloud. In any case, the cloud overshadowed them while he spoke (Matt. 17:5; Luke 9:34) and thus the booths of Peter’s recommendation and the Glory-cloud, the proposed man-made shelter and the divine covering, were brought into closest proximity. In this combination of booths and the divine cloud, the Transfiguration answers to the Israelite booths and the

Glory-cloud in the wilderness and to the imitative commemoration of that wilderness situation in the Feast of Tabernacles.

The physical glorification of Jesus was a fashioning in the likeness of the bright theophanic cloud (cf. Matt. 17:5) that overarched the holy mountain. This majesty of Jesus was a revelation of him as the Son, the image-likeness of the Father, as the voice from the majestic Glory declared (cf. 2 Pet. 1:16, 17). In the case of the first Adam, likeness to the Glory-Spirit was never completed, the component of physical glory not having been attained. But the glory-image is perfected in the second Adam, as the first-fruits of a new humanity, and that ultimate consummating of the reproduction of the divine image in man was anticipated in the Transfiguration.

As a result of his approach to the overshadowing Glory on Sinai, the countenance of Moses was transfigured. And Elijah, who had his own close encounter with the Glory on the mountain of God, also experienced a remarkable foretaste of physical glorification in his deathless exodus, borne aloft by the fiery chariots and horses of Glory. These two who participated in the Transfiguration with Jesus were the only two in the history of Israel qualified by both these credentials of theophanic encounter and physical transformation for appearance at this antitypical event of glory replication.

So Peter spoke better than he knew in introducing the Tabernacles motif of the booths into the Transfiguration episode. Of course the Son from heaven was here and it was therefore not a time for earthly symbols but for the heavenly reality.

We have found that the Feast of Tabernacles as a harvest festival was a promise of the final ingathering, the hope of ultimate glorification, and that its requirement to live in rustic booths simultaneously reminded worshippers of the wilderness-like, not-yet-arrived nature of their life in the present world. These very same booths were designed, however, to be replicas of the theophanic Glory and so were affirmations of the Creator's redemptive renewal of his people in his image, a re-creation that begins here and now during the wilderness journey, even if the perfecting of the Glory-likeness awaits arrival at the heavenly destination. By symbolizing the believers' present participation in the heavenly glory in the Spirit, the booths indicate that their life on earth, awaiting the future consummation of glory, is already in measure one of realized eschatology.

What is true of the Tabernacles booths will also be true of the imagery of the myrtles in Zechariah 1:8. The myrtles by the deep recall the Elim oasis in the wilderness and like it give promise of the glorious paradise inheritance at the end of the journey. As a promissory sign of the restoration of paradise at the Consummation, they correspond to the prophetic ingathering aspect of the Feast of Tabernacles. But they also correspond to the booths as symbolic replicas of the Glory-covering.

So perceived, the myrtles by the deep emerge as signs of God's redemptive re-creating of his image in the new humanity. Like the booths of Tabernacles, the myrtles teach an already/not yet eschatology of the anticipation of heaven in the course of the earthly pilgrimage of the redeemed, a realized eschatology of the Spirit's renewing of the glory within before the parousia of the Glory without. They tell of a glory experienced by God's children even while laboring on through the wilderness over against the deep.

In the case of the equivalent symbolism of the myrtles in Zechariah 1:8, that reality of the divine presence took visible form in the appearance of the Lord of Glory in the figure of the Angel of the Presence, the rider of the red horse, seen by Zechariah as accompanied by the other agents of the divine council and stationed in the midst of the myrtles. This presence of the Lord himself among his myrtle-people is the glory of the covenant, the secret of all life and beatitude, a guarantee that the Glory within will be followed by the Glory without. For the people of God, the bearers of the Father's image, this Presence is an earnest of the transfiguration change awaiting them in the Sabbath-land beyond the wilderness at the Parousia-revelation of God's Glory.

In the Exodus 3 anticipation of Sinai, the bush in which the flaming theophany appears must then represent God's people. What depicts the afflicted condition of the Israelites is not the fire in the bush, but the nature of the bush itself: a lowly desert shrub.

But the key question of interpretation concerns the great wonder that the bush is aflame, yet not consumed by the flames. It turns out that the main problem was not how the Israelites could manage to endure in the face of the world tyrant. Rather, the fundamental issue was the ultimate religious question of how sinners can survive in the Parousia-Glory presence of God and his consuming holiness. Israel's election to privileged covenant relationship, by bringing the Glory of the Lord into their very midst, seemed to threaten them with fiery

destruction. Yet they were not consumed. That was the wonder, a mystery of redeeming love and grace. They expressed it in fearful amazement: "Behold, Yahweh our God has showed us his Glory and his Greatness and we have heard his voice from the midst of the fire. We have seen today that God can speak with man and he can still live" (Deut. 5:24)! The Glory-flame descends upon the bush but does not consume it. The bush still lives. This miracle of grace was not to be presumed upon as a covenant guarantee regardless of Israel's covenant keeping or covenant breaking. Alert to the continuing threat of the holy Presence, the Israelites hastened to request some distancing of themselves from it through the provision of a mediator. They plead: "Why should we die? This great fire will consume us" (Deut. 5:25).

Present in the midst of the myrtles, the Angel-Commander of the fiery horses of heaven promises life and peace, vindication over against the satanic forces of the deep, and exaltation from wilderness existence into the glory of the consummated city of God. Like the burning bush, these myrtles are aflame with the presence of divine glory, but they are not consumed. This wonder seen by Zechariah is a sign confirming God's faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham and his seed, the covenant of promise not disannulled by the Law (Gal. 3:17). It speaks of the Immanuel-mystery, which is most fully revealed in the new covenant, whose mediator is the Glory-Angel become God-man, the incarnate rider on the red horse.

### **State of the World Report**

We have found that the sea symbolized the mighty forces of disorder and satanic hostility which the Lord overcomes in working out his creative kingdom purposes in the history of his covenant people. In Zechariah's vision, the deep represented the world power which had subjugated Israel and terminated the Davidic dynasty. Dispatched to this deep of the nations, the heavenly horsemen were to discover whether the imperial powers were now in compliance with the rule of Yahweh as sovereign of heaven and earth; more specifically, whether they were assuming a proper stance with respect to the nation of Israel, at that time God's kingdom on earth.

Yahweh is Judge of all the earth. A prominent element throughout Zechariah's prophecy, the theme of the sovereignty of Israel's Lord over all the nations emerges in his opening vision. The scope of the heavenly horsemen's reconnaissance "to and fro through the earth" (1:10) which is reflected in their earth encompassing report (1:11)

manifests the universal authority of him who sent them on their judicial mission.

At the same time, however, the horsemen's report gives rise to an urgent theological question which becomes the central issue of this vision. It concerns the perplexing absence of penal enforcement of God's holy will against those who scorn his claim to universal sovereignty. For the scoffer this provides an occasion to call that claim in doubt. For the people of God this translates into a soul-trying postponement in the realization of the promised goal of their salvation, the coming of the kingdom in glory. In all ages until the end of their pilgrimage through this fallen world, eschatological *delay places the patience of the faithful under severe strain*. This is a very real and emotion issue. When the report of the horsemen brought this matter into focus, the divine Angel was at once stirred up to *pastoral intercession*, pleading, "*How long?*"

According to their report all the earth was living quietly at rest. That verb describes *regions and peoples experiencing prosperous security, free from civil strife and warfare*. In God's promises to his people this word depicts the happy conditions they would enjoy when he brought them home from exile. "Therefore fear thou not, O my servant Jacob, saith the LORD; neither be dismayed, O Israel: for, lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall return, and shall be in rest, and be quiet, and none shall make him afraid." Jer. 30:10; (46:27); and the peace of the messianic era (Isa. 14:7; 32:17). It is precisely in connection with these cherished prospects that the report of the horsemen posed a problem. Their reconnaissance disclosed that *what had been promised to God's people as distinctly their blessed future was being enjoyed instead by the other nations*, the nations symbolized by the deep. Is not the sea supposed to be restless? But strangely, according to the findings of the heavenly patrol, *it was not the land of Israel but the sea of the wicked nations that was peacefully calm*. In contradiction of the hope of Israel, the deep was undisturbed.

Though the Persian empire was of central interest, the mission of the horsemen was of global scope and their report not restricted to the state of Darius' reign. The *focus of concern is the myrtles by the deep—God's covenant people in relation to the world*. In the history of the redemptive program Israel had been established as God's own nation, a unique holy kingdom of priests set apart from the common nations.



The world reconnaissance of God's patrols was to discover *what the world powers were doing* in the second year of Darius by way of *helping or hindering the Israelites in their efforts to reestablish themselves in their land and to restore the temple-cult of Yahweh in Jerusalem*. Measured in terms of their special obligations, the *nations were found wanting. They showed no inclination to fulfill the commitments that had been made by Cyrus to provide subsidies from the Persian treasury for restoring the Jerusalem temple* (Ezra 1:1ff. and 6:1ff.). Opposition to the restoration of Jerusalem from various quarters had brought initial efforts to rebuild the temple to a halt (Ezra 4; cf. Hag. 1:2) and in the interval the Persian officials had in fact become ignorant of the very existence of the earlier grants (Ezra 5). Moreover, whatever aid of this sort Persia rendered at one time or another, their imperial dominion over the Lord's covenant community was not relinquished. Any attempt to restore the Davidic dynasty and independent sovereignty would have been totally unacceptable to the Persian overlord.

The *point of the patrol's report* was not that there was a lull in the incessant international strife and warfare but rather that the *world powers were manifesting their defiant indifference to the God of heaven and earth by failing to assist his covenant people in their struggle to recover from the devastation of the Babylonian exile and to rebuild the sanctuary where he placed his name*. This indictment of the nations as guilty of hostile disregard for the honor of God's name and for the plight of his people is repeated in the Lord's own description of them as "I am very sore displeased with the heathen that are at ease" Zech. 1:15.

What was disclosed by the horsemen's survey of the deep corroborated the portrayal of the great sea in Daniel's night vision. It was the spawning place of beast kingdoms, hostile to the kingdom of the Son of Man, animated by the spirit of antichrist (Dan. 7; for symbols of Persia see 7:5 and 8:3, 4, 20). *Not only were the nations arrogantly ignoring their obligations to Israel and Israel's God, they were doing so with apparent impunity. The proverbially restless sea was at rest.*

Haggai foretold a total reversal of the present subservience of God's people under the world power. As divine warrior the Lord would launch holy war against the enemy nations. They would be overthrown amid cosmic convulsions and their treasures would be appropriated as battle spoils to adorn God's temple. Here again the

prophecy was cast in the prophetic idiom, pointing beyond the typical level to the messianic antitype. Certainly no such total reversal of positions occurred before the new covenant order replaced the old. Moreover, the shaking of the nations prophesied in Haggai 2:6 is interpreted in Hebrews 12:26-29 in terms of the kingdom inheritance still anticipated by believers under the new covenant. "For thus saith the LORD of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts." Haggai 2:6, 7.

Isaiah had also foretold this ultimate spoiling of the world power. "The abundance of the sea will be overturned on you; the wealth of the nations will come to you" (Isa. 60:5).

The condition of the nations discovered by the agents of the Angel-rider was in stark contrast to that eschatological hope. *Seismic upheavals overturning the nations and emptying out the glory of their treasures into the holy city were nowhere to be detected.* Not a tremor registered on the seismograph of heaven. All the earth was at rest. The great deep was calm. "Here is the patience and the faith of the saints" (Rev. 13:10).

The depressed condition of the covenant nation was the correlate of the ease of the dominant world nations reported by the horsemen. *Upon receiving that report, therefore, the Angel of the Lord was constrained to make intercession for Jerusalem and the cities of Judah* (v. 12).

As the basis for his petition Israel's advocate referred to a completed period of seventy years. This was an allusion to an earlier divine promise given through Jeremiah. *The Angel was thus appealing to the integrity of the Lord of the covenant as he sought prompt action on behalf of Judah.*

Some two decades earlier Daniel, still in exile, had made a remarkably similar prayer-claim (see Dan. 9). It was the first year of Darius the Mede (that is, Cyrus), the year the Medo-Persian empire had overthrown Babylon (Dan. 9:1). Study of two prophecies of Jeremiah concerning a seventy year period of exile (viz., Jer. 25:9-14 and 29:10-14) had convinced Daniel that the time for restoration had arrived (Dan. 9:2). The first passage dated to 605 B.C. (cf. Jer. 25:1), the year Jerusalem's captivity began and Daniel himself was taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 1:1). In it Jeremiah indicated that the end of the seventy years appointed for subservience to the king of

Babylon (25:11) would be marked by the fall of Babylon (25:12). Implicit in Jeremiah 25 was the promise of the return of the captives at the completion of the seventy years and that promise became explicit in the second passage (see Jer. 29:10). Having witnessed the fulfillment of Jeremiah 25 in the fall of Babylon to Cyrus, Daniel proceeded in the first year of Cyrus (538 B.C.) to plead for the fulfillment of Jeremiah 29. His prayer-claim was that the promised restoration of the holy city and temple had been joined to Babylon's fall as a twin indicator of the end of the allotted seventy years (Dan. 9:3-19; cf. 2 Chron. 36:22) and should, therefore, shortly come to pass.

Of course, the Lord was going to honor his prophetic promise and in the vision of the seventy weeks (Dan. 9:24-27) he assured Daniel that restoration of the typological cultic order would begin at once and be satisfactorily completed, in spite of certain difficulties (v. 25). That very year Cyrus issued a decree authorizing the return (2 Chron. 36:22, 23; Ezra 1:1-5) and the Israelites soon were availing themselves of the privilege. However, the troublous times of which the Lord forewarned had followed (cf. Ezra 4). Indeed, the *restoration of Jerusalem and its temple progressed so slowly and relationships with the world powers remained so little improved that twenty years later* (in 520 B.C.) *the Angel of the Lord, as seen in Zechariah's vision, had to reiterate the plea of Daniel.* He appealed to the fact that the returned captives were the ones "against whom you had indignation those seventy years," that is, the period of exile predicted by Jeremiah. The debt to divine justice had been fully met, and *surely now, these twenty years later, it was time for a more conspicuous display of God's restoring mercies.* This was the contention of the Angel advocate.

But how disappointingly slow had been the progress in restoring the theocratic community and its temple. Still scarred by ruins, Jerusalem remained without walls for defense. Scarcely any headway had been made on the temple since the original efforts had been interrupted by vociferous foes. The land was unproductive. Recovery of independent national self-rule and reinstituting of the Davidic dynasty were nowhere in sight. How long was this to continue? Had not the Lord promised in a prophecy of Haggai just two months before Zechariah's night visions that from that day onward, the day of the community's taking up afresh the task of building God's house, he would bless them (Hag. 2:19)?

“How long?”—the cry of the Angel—is a familiar introduction to prayers that lament intolerable circumstances and express yearning for relief. They are characterized by calls for divine mercy and deliverance from adversaries.