

The Angel That Talked

February 1976

His parents were Jewish refugees, they were in Babylonia. He was born there. His father was a priest. In 537, his folks were allowed to return to their ruined village. The village was called Jerusalem. They brought the baby along. Seventeen years later, in 520 B.C. to be exact, this young Jewish repatriate published his first prophecy. He may have been only 17 or 18. He may have been the Old-Testament's first – last – and only teen-age prophet. His name was Zachariah. In English, that means "God remembers."

But history hasn't remembered him. Not too well. Children, trying to remember the books of the bible, recall him vaguely as a second at the end of the O. T. list. Gen. – Ex. – Lev. – ... "Haggai, Zachariah, Malachi – Phew!!" Otherwise, he'd been largely forgotten.

+Why not? Why remember, 2500 years later, the first publication of an adolescent repatriated Jew, a son of a priest, caught up in a pacification project (to use our own Vietnam expression) that was obviously failing all around him? Why recall those urgent adolescent visions he had in the midst of a culture so ruined no sensible adult thought it could ever be reconstructed? Why rehash this strange youth's gothic "might" dreams; Jewish dreams of "the flying scroll," and of "wickedness" as a woman carried out of town in a basket; Persian dreams too of "the Satan who oppose virtue, and of "the angel that babbled," and, night after night, whispered in his dreams: "I will show thee..." a bit disturbed – eh what?

No – better not remember young Zach. He was a bit too far out even for his own time. So only fragment of his apocalyptic madness survived – small pieces of his dreams, bits of his poetry + drama. And, even for us, accustomed as we are to extravagant writing, he's a bit too wooly, too new jargon too avant guard – too off-Broadway ... He'd provide a hey-day for the analysts. Better forget him, then.

But his name was "Zachariah," and, as his name says, "God remembers." And I am sure God does remember him, this young, admittedly half-mad prophet of his, for God knows all his prophets are a bit mad, slightly deranged, speaking as they do + as they must from the other side of the mountain, from the antipodes of the mind, from reality's far side. And how else can one of God's poets speak,

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except in such visions, for there are some truth that can't be caught otherwise. Not in any other net. And if the practical think prophets are only foolish and out chasing otherworldly butterflies and better settle down + earn a living, that is their loss. "For the poets – ye shall have with ye always."

By all his strange visions, Zachariah was saying something, something "God remembers," and we would do well to ... especially we weary ones, we worn ones, and we sad middle-agers, we with the sagging faces + the slack jaws – especially we discouraged, we despairing, we disparaging olden-agers.

Zachariah as a youth was exasperated, as only the young can be exasperated, with the disillusionments that had gripped the older generation. He was weary with the old folks' fear that their little world was not in the best working order. He was tired of hearing them say the re-settlement of Jerusalem was a mistake, that the pacification project of the mighty Persians, in helping them re-build their ruined homeland was a colossal blunder, that progress was at a standstill, that peace, justice and freedom were further away than ever – unrealized and unreachable, therefore unreal. These elderly at 35, some of my most elderly friends are 35, these oldster at 40 and 56, these "fathers" of the community, while holding on to the ritual of the faith, "hand me a candle, son" had lost the faith's reality, it's vitality – it's hope for tomorrow, it's help for today, it's abiding joy – all dead, quite dead to the old folks at home. Their dulled, their cynical spirit did not exactly spark religion in the young. They were not the good examples they thought themselves to be. + then they had the temerity to wonder why the young were not religious –

With senior citizens like these – so depressed and so depressing – no wonder the young had to dream their own new dreams, see strange new visions. For behind their fathers' eyes, they could see that the God of their fathers had already died, was no longer alive to their fathers, no longer made any difference to the older generation, no difference at all. The only things that mattered to them were the grain market, the building lag, the food supply, the high cost of existence – – all important things – but no confidence in nation or religion, no sense of wonder, and no joy in the morning. Pfft!

So Zachariah, "God remembers," dreamed his own young-man's dream. He heard angels talking in the morning "the angel who talked to me." It was couched in strange figures, odd enough to make his elders waggle their beards, and mark him off as an odd one. But Zach's dream was a dream of justice, a dream of peace, and, above all, a dream of God still alive in the midst, God so alive in the midst, no man need study war any more. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord." The boy didn't believe in war. He'd had enough of that. He'd seen what it had done to his fathers. It had put that look, that hopeless, that helpless look, on their faces. So he didn't believe in that. He

believed in the Spirit, spelled with a capital S – the Spirit of Justice spelled with a capital J – bringing peace. And he sang of it –

Since it was a dream, a Jew-boy's dream, a son of a priest, out of the ghetto, the ghetto of the new Jerusalem, still a rubble. But it was an honest dream, full of faith, loving even. It was a view from the top – from a better world.

It was comfort and encouragement from the young to the old. "Hold up you head, old man. Struggle on old woman. God is not dead, not now, not ever. So, steady as you go. There's another generation coming on. Never fear, the faith isn't going to die with you. Here they come. The young! They have a strong, new faith of their own. All is not lost in them. Far from it. Who knows? May be there is God that talks to them.

"Thus says the Lord, I am returned unto Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and Jerusalem shall be called a city of truth ... there shall yet old men and old women dwell ... and the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing ... and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in truth and righteousness ... therefore love the truth and peace (and) we will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you" (2:8)

Let us pray:

O Lord Christ, we trust in thee and a new generation to be all that we were not – and are not, or will not, or cannot be – a new people – free of greed and fear and guilt, free to be just, free to be kind, free to be good, free to be living.

In God's name - may it be so.

Amen

