

## **The Blood of Righteous Abel to the Blood of Zechariah, Son of Berechiah Matthew 23:35**

**Introductory Note:** The statement by Jesus recorded in Matthew 23:35 has been debated by scholars. There are many men named Zechariah in the Old Testament and also a few in the apocryphal literature. Perhaps the three most prominent are Zechariah, son of Jehoiada (2 Chron. 24:20-21), Zechariah, son of Berechiah, the postexilic writing prophet (Zech. 1:1), and Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist (Luke 1:39-79).

Matthew records "Zechariah, son of Berechiah" when citing the statement of Jesus about the blood of Abel and Zechariah. However, there is no record in the Old Testament or in any extrabiblical Jewish literature that the postexilic prophet "Zechariah, son of Berechiah" was killed. On the other hand, the biblical record in 2 Chronicles does record the murder of "Zechariah, son of Jehoiada." However, this Zechariah was killed during the reign of Joash, some 800 years before the time of Jesus and over 350 years before the close of Old Testament revelation with the Book of Malachi. He was certainly not the last martyr in the timeline of the Old Testament. But in the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible--the accepted text of the Old Testament--some of the books are in a different order than they are in Christian translations, with 2 Chronicles being the last book. So there might be a sense in which "Abel to Zechariah, son of Jehoiada" might refer to the first martyr recorded in the Hebrew canon to the last martyr recorded in the Hebrew canon. But then why would Matthew (or Jesus) call his father Berechiah rather than Jehoiada? These are the issues and questions debated by scholars.

The main article is an excerpt from the commentary on the Book of Zechariah by Ralph Wardlaw (1869). He presents an excellent argument for taking the postexilic prophet Zechariah, son of Berechiah, as the Zechariah meant--exactly what Matthew records. It is of interest that one of my former professors, Gleason L. Archer, takes the same view in his monumental work, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Zondervan, 1982).

The second article is an excerpt from the commentary on the Gospel of Matthew by D. A. Carson in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* series (Zondervan, 1984). He lists five different views on this issue. Although not dogmatic, he favors the view that the martyr intended was Zechariah, son of Jehoiada.

### **The Blood of Zechariah**

**by  
Ralph Wardlaw**

***Then the Spirit of God came upon Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, who stood above the people, and said to them, "Thus says God: 'Why do you transgress the commandments of Yahweh, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken Yahweh, He also has forsaken you.'" 21 So they conspired against him, and at the command of the king they stoned him with stones in the court of the house of Yahweh. (2 Chronicles 24:20,21).***

***"On you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous***

***Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar." (Matthew 23:35).***

A question has been started, which it would be wrong to pass without notice--whether the prophet Zechariah be the same with the "*Zacharias, son of Barachias,*" whom our Lord mentions when he says, "That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar" (Matt. 23:35). There is a *Zacharias* mentioned in the second Book of Chronicles (24:21) as having been slain by the fury of the exasperated populace, or rather at the instigation of king Joash and his princes, for his faithfulness in denouncing their idolatries. But then he was the son, not of Barachias, but of "*Jehoiada the priest,*" who is so specially, honourably, and repeatedly mentioned under that name, without the least hint of another belonging to him, that, although it was common for the Hebrews to have two names, it seems unlikely that he should have been mentioned by our Lord under a different one from that under which he has so honourable a testimony in the history. On the other hand, Zechariah the prophet answers to our Lord's description, so far as the name and the father's name are concerned:--he is "*Zacharias, the son of Barachias;*" but we have no record of his having suffered a violent death.

It may be observed, however, that a mere negation is not enough to disprove the fact of his having so suffered; and especially a negation in such circumstances. For, let it be remembered, that its not having been recorded may arise from the simple fact of there being no inspired history subsequent to the time in which it could have been recorded; that circumstances are, in other places, alluded to which took place subsequently to the date of the last inspired historical record, and which, though not recorded, were well known in the traditionary and apocryphal history of the Jewish people;--such as some of the cases referred to in the Epistle to the Hebrews, of "women who received their dead raised to life again," and of martyrs who were "sawn asunder;" and that, although the spirit of the Jewish people at the very time of the return from Babylon, or even when Zechariah began his prophetic career, may hardly appear such as to warrant the supposition of their shedding the blood of one of the Lord's prophets, yet that Zechariah was, when he began his career, but a youth; that he might live long, and prophesy long, and that by a people so proudly capricious and from first to last so prone to selfish murmurings and rebellions, he might, ere the close of his course, have delivered such expostulations, and reproofs, and predictions of divine vengeance, as might stir them up to blood-thirsting and blood-shedding violence.

There is one consideration which has been regarded, and not, I think, without a good deal of force, as favoring this supposition. I give it in the words of Scott:--

Especially let it be considered, how far it might have been previously expected, that the murder of one who suffered before the persecuting reigns of Ahaz, Manasseh, and Jehoiakim (during which more innocent blood was shed and more prophets were slaughtered than in all preceding ages) should be mentioned as the last of the righteous persons whose blood would be required of the generation which crucified the Messiah? The blood shed *after* the death of Zechariah, son of Jehoiada, especially filled up the measure of national wickedness, and brought on Judah the Babylonish captivity:--yet, on this supposition, it is wholly passed over by our Lord. But if Zechariah the prophet were meant, and if he were murdered after the captivity, as the other

Zechariah had been before; the whole appears natural; and probably he might be the last eminent person who thus suffered.

This is strong; and I think it is further strengthened by remarking, that in taking the sweep of time during which the blood had been shed for which an avenging God was to "make inquisition," our Lord must be supposed, from the very energy of his style of denunciation, to have given it *all* its extent; that in *going back* he goes to the furthest possible point--"the blood of righteous Abel;" and that in *coming down* he *must* be conceived also to have come down to the nearest case on record,--which the one in Chronicles certainly could not be.

The mere silence of Josephus as to the fact is very far from being decisive against it; seeing it is by no means the only case in which Josephus has slurred over what was not to the credit of his country-men. Nor is it very likely, though possible, that there was still a later Zechariah, with a father too whose name was Barachias, who had come to a violent death at the hands of the unbelieving Jews. Though not, therefore, a matter of certainty, it seems not without some considerable amount of probability, that our prophet was the martyr to whom Jesus refers.

This excerpt was taken from Ralph Wardlaw, *Lectures on the Prophecies of Zechariah*, ed. J. S. Wardlaw (his son), 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: A. Fullarton & Co., 1869).

## Summary of Views

by  
D. A. Carson

Abel is the first victim of murder in the Scriptures (Gen. 4:8); but the identity of this "Zechariah son of Berekiah" is problematic. Principal possibilities include:

1. It could refer to Zechariah the father of John the Baptist, but there is no evidence he was martyred.
2. It could be Zechariah son of Baris or Baruch or Bariscaeus (MSS vary), who was murdered by two Zealots in the temple (Jos. War IV, 334-44 [v.4]). But there is no evidence he was a prophet or a martyr; and, though he was killed ἐν μέσῳ (*en mesō*, "in the midst") of the temple precincts, it is unlikely he was killed between the actual sanctuary and the altar unless he was a priest; and there is no evidence for this.
3. It could be a reference to the OT prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah (Zech. 1:1). But there is no account of his being killed.
4. It may be a Zechariah of whom we have no knowledge (Albright and Mann). This is possible but without proof.
5. Another possibility is Zechariah the son of Jehoiada (2 Chron 24:20-22). His murder took place in the courtyard of the temple and is related toward the end of what was probably the

last book in the Hebrew canon. The sweep runs (to use Christian terms) "from Genesis to Revelation." The problem is the patronymic. There is a possible solution. Just as Zechariah the prophet is alternately given his father's patronymic (Zech. 1:1) or his grandfather's (Ezra 6:14), so it is possible Jehoiada was the grandfather (not father) of the Zechariah of 2 Chron 24--a suggestion that Jehoiada's living to be 130 years old (2 Chron 24:15) makes more plausible, since Zechariah's ministry immediately followed Jehoiada's death. An otherwise unknown Berekiah would therefore have had time to sire Zechariah, live to a good age, and die before the death of his own father gave him opportunity to serve as chief priest. That would allow time for a father named Berekiah. But we do not know. Substantive text-critical uncertainties in the relevant traditions (esp. LXX) complicate the problem. For literature and discussion, cf. Gundry, *Use of OT*, pp. 86-88; Garland, pp. 182-83.

This excerpt was taken from D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, vol. VIII in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).