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Which Zachariah?

J.M. Ross

The purpose of this inquiry is to discover who was the Zachariah referred to in Matt.23. 34-36 and Luke 11.48-52.

These two passages, although differing in detail, are basically identical and must originate from a common source, probably the Lord Jesus himself, because the sayings are in his characteristic style and are not the kind of thing the early church would have invented: they are largely Jewish in conception and reproach the Jews for their misdeeds in the past, not for the sufferings of Christ.

Each of these passages is a combination of two sayings which may have been originally uttered independently but may have been conjoined by an editor, probably the compiler of Q; but to find out what Matthew and Luke at least thought to be their meaning, they have to be considered together. They cannot be interpreted at all points with certainty. but some inferences are more probable than others.

The first of these two sayings is a quotation from a Jewish source described by Luke as the Wisdom of God (which may be the title of a lost book, or may only mean "God in his wisdom has said"); this quotation states that God will send to his people various emissaries whom they will either kill or subject to various punishments. The emissaries are described in Matthew as prophets, wise men and scribes; in Luke as prophets and apostles. The second saying consists of a comment (apparently by Jesus himself) that this maltreatment of God's emissaries will be paid for by this generation, from which will be exacted according to Matthew all the righteous blood shed on earth from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zachariah, or, according to Luke the blood of all the prophets shed from the foundation of the world to the blood of Zachariah. Matthew identifies Zachariah as "the son of Barachiah"; both versions add that this Zachariah was killed between the temple and the altar.

Possibly both of these sayings originally described the maltreated emissaries simply as "prophets", not in the strict sense of divine spokesmen and writers of canonical books, but in a wider sense including Abel and all righteous persons martyred after the cessation of prophecy properly so called. This interpretation is made explicit in Matthew's version, which may well go back to the Jewish original and alludes in a very Jewish manner to three phases of Jewish history -- (a) the period of prophecy, ending with Malachi; (b) a subsequent period in which wise men wrote the Wisdom books such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes; (3) a third period in which the scribes clarified and commented on the Law. Luke replaces this with a description of the martyred emissaries simply as "prophets and apostles", which looks like a modification introduced to make the saying applicable to the Christian Church. (The prophets here are not Christian prophets; had they been, they would have been placed after the apostles, as at 1 Cor. 12.28 and Eph.4.11)

We are now in a position to consider who this Zachariah was. Out of the numerous Zachariahs (it was a very common name) there are four candidates for our attention.

1. The first possibility is the prophet Zachariah son of Barachiah, author of the canonical book that bears his name. Matthew describes him as the son of Barachiah, from which it can be inferred that he identified the Zachariah of the dominical saying with the canonical prophet. He could have done this on the ground that the context requires a long succession of martyrs, and since these were all prophets, the final Zachariah must be looked for among the later prophets. But according to the context in Matthew the martyrs were not confined to prophets in the strict sense. It is therefore more likely that Matthew added "Son of Barachiah" to give more precision to the reference without asking himself whether the identification was correct. It is in fact unlikely that this was the Zachariah referred to by Jesus, for there is no tradition that Zachariah the prophet was put to death.

2. A second possibility is that the reference is to Zachariah, the son of Jehoiada, the priest, who, according to 2 Chronicles 4.21 stood above the people and threatened them with punishment from the Lord because they had forsaken him; consequently, by command of the king (Joash) he was stoned to death in the court of the temple. In favour of this identification is the close correspondence of the description of the place of Zachariah's death. It has often been argued that this Zachariah was selected as the last of the martyrs because in Jesus' time 2 Chronicles the last of the "Writings" (Part 3 of the scriptures) was the last book of the sacred scriptures, and the sequence "Abel to Zachariah" meant the sequence from one end of holy writ to the other. The case for this identification is argued in detail by Roger Beckwith on pp211-222 of his recent book "The OT Canon of the NT Church" (SPCK 1985). The argument is an integral part of his thesis that the tripartite Jewish canon of scripture was established before the Christian era but there are weighty reasons for doubting that the Zachariah in question is the son of Jehoiada.

(a) There is no solid evidence that the tripartite Jewish Canon was settled before the end of the first century AD. Beckwith admits as much at the top of page 212; his argument for an earlier date at page 222 rests on conjecture. In the New Testament the canonical scriptures are referred to simply as "the Law and the Prophets", except for Luke 24.44 which adds the Psalms, implying that these were the only inspired writings outside the Law and the Prophets; the Hagiographa (including Chronicles) were not yet sacred scripture. Nothing outside the law and the Prophets is quoted in the NT as sacred scripture except that at 1 Cor.3.19 a quotation from Job is introduced by the words "it is written". It is therefore unlikely that in Jesus' earthly lifetime, or even when Q was compiled, the expression "from Abel to Zachariah the son of Jehoiada" would be readily understood as referring to all the martyred prophets recorded in holy scripture.

(b) The context requires a reference to a long line of victims; Luke's version says that the blood of all the prophets would be required of this generation: to cut the

list short in the reign of Joash in the ninth century BC would be inappropriate. Nor was Zachariah the last prophet to be murdered: this was Uriah, the son of Shemiah, who was put to death under King Jehoiakim several centuries later (Jer.26.20-23).

(c) Matthew apparently did not think this Zachariah was the son of Jehoiada, for he calls him the son of Barachiah. Beckwith on pages 217-220 of his book gives examples of rabbinical homiletic identification of people bearing the same name, but it is doubtful if this practice goes back as early as the first century AD.

3. Josephus (Jewish War 4.5,4) mentions a Zachariah son of Bareis who was killed by Zealots within the temple in AD 70 shortly before its destruction by the Romans. But if this is Zachariah now in question, the saying cannot have been dominical but must have been constructed by the compiler of Q or of the Woes which form the basis of Matthew 23 and Luke 11, not long before the gospels of Matthew and Luke took their present shape. This seems highly unlikely.

4. The context requires a reference to the otherwise unknown Zachariah who had been put to death in the temple not long before Jesus' day. In view of the difficulties attending the other three identifications, this seems to stand as the most probable explanation.

Mr J.M. Ross is a distinguished Elder of the United Reformed Church who has contributed numerous articles and reviews to learned journals.