

Who was the prophet Zechariah in the Bible?

The prophet Zechariah is just one of over thirty men named Zechariah in the Old Testament. His name means “Yahweh has remembered,” which might also be a good summary of the prophetic work that bears his name. We know little about Zechariah personally except that he was a priest as well as a prophet and was a contemporary of Zerubbabel and the prophet Haggai.

Zechariah lived during the time of Judah’s restoration, when the exiles had returned from Babylon and were rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, around 520 to 470 BC. Zechariah 1:1 introduces him as the son of Berekiah, the grandson of Iddo. However, Ezra 5:1 and 6:14 identify him as the son of Iddo. This is not a contradiction, as son can simply mean “descendant.”

According to Nehemiah 12:4, Zechariah’s grandfather Iddo returned with Zerubbabel from exile in Babylon. Nehemiah 12:16 lists Zechariah as the head of the priestly family of Iddo. His ministry was among those who returned from the exile and their descendants as they resettled the land. Zechariah calls them to repentance and spiritual renewal in a time when they seemed to be despairing, spiritually apathetic, and tempted to continue some of the sins of their forefathers before the exile. The prophecies in the book of Zechariah cover about two years’ time, but it appears that Zechariah continued to have a ministry among the people until the temple was rebuilt, even though no prophecies are recorded from that time period (Ezra 5:1-2).

The Old Testament gives no indication about how Zechariah might have died. However, in Matthew 23:34-36, Jesus mentions Zechariah in His condemnation of the first-century Jewish leaders: “I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will

kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.” If this is a reference to the prophet Zechariah, then we know how Zechariah died—he was murdered in the temple courtyard.

Some scholars assume that Jesus was referencing another Zechariah, who, Scripture says, was killed 300 years prior to the prophet Zechariah in the temple environs. This other Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada the priest, denounced the rulers for their sin, so “they plotted against him, and by order of the king they stoned him to death in the courtyard of the Lord’s temple” (2 Chronicles 24:21). Since this Zechariah is the last martyr mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (as the book we know as 2 Chronicles is the last book in the Hebrew arrangement), many think that Jesus must be referring to this Zechariah (Jesus’ mention of “the son of Berekiah” is explained as a reference to a grandfather). But it is much more natural to assume that Jesus did indeed refer to Zechariah the prophet, since Jesus specifies that he is the “son of Berekiah.” The two martyrs Jesus mentions in Matthew 23, Abel and Zechariah, are the first and last martyrs, chronologically, in the Old Testament period.

Zechariah the prophet ministered to the Jewish people, supporting their task of rebuilding the temple and challenging their spiritual condition until the temple was completed. At some time after Zerubbabel’s temple was finished, it seems that Zechariah continued to ruffle feathers until some of his hearers could take it no longer and killed him in the very temple that he had urged the people to complete.