

Brief Commentary on the Book of Zechariah

The book of Zechariah is called the apocalypse of the Old Testament. Written in 520 BC to the Jews returning from the Babylonian exile, Zechariah encourages and exhorts God's people by laying out before them the future of Israel.

The visions within the book can be divided into two sections: chapters 1-8 and 9-14. The first division deals with issues more contemporary to Zechariah's day. For the purpose of our study, I will briefly summarize the second section which contain prophecies concerning Israel's final years, Armageddon, and the millennial kingdom.

Israel's Return and Restoration

In Chapter 10, Zechariah prophesies that God will someday return Israel to the land and bless the nation greatly.

Zechariah 10:6-9

"I will strengthen the house of Judah, And I will save the house of Joseph, And I will bring them back, Because I have had compassion on them; And they will be as though I had not rejected them, For I am the Lord their God and I will answer them. 7 "Ephraim will be like a mighty man, And their heart will be glad as if from wine; Indeed, their children will see it and be glad, Their heart will rejoice in the Lord. 8 "I will whistle for them to gather them together, For I have redeemed them; And they will be as numerous as they were before. 9 "When I scatter them among the peoples, They will remember Me in far countries, And they with their children will live and come back.

Zechariah 10:12

12 "And I will strengthen them in the Lord, And in His name they will walk," declares the Lord.

Although Israel was returned to the land from 538BC to AD 70, Zechariah's prophecies speak of a future return that will be permanent and faithful. The rule of prophecy is that the immediate fulfillment is temporary and partial; the long-range fulfillment is permanent and complete. The first return from exile was incomplete and far from being millennial. Recall that Isaiah prophesied of two returns from dispersion (Isaiah 11:11), and Daniel prophesied of a second exile and destruction of Jerusalem (Dan 9:26).

The glorification of Israel in the millennial kingdom must, therefore, follow a second exile and return. As we know, Israel began her second return in 1948 when she once again became a nation. This return may be the one that ushers in the times of Jacob's troubles, the arrival of the anti-christ and, ultimately, the coming Messianic kingdom.

Israel's Judgment Continues

Chapter 11 turns to the message of judgment upon the returning exiles. This is striking because the exiles have just returned from a period of judgment; but, like Daniel's prophecy, Zechariah's prophecies foretell another destruction and exile. The Jewish community that Zechariah shepherded

was a “flock doomed to slaughter” and left to die (11:4, 9). The three shepherds that were removed from Israel were most likely the office of prophet, priest and king. The ancient shepherds would carry two staffs--one as a weapon, the other to rescue. Both staffs are broken because the sheep will no longer be shepherded by the Lord.

Zechariah 11:4-9

4 Thus says the Lord my God, “Pasture the flock doomed to slaughter. 5 “Those who buy them slay them and go unpunished, and each of those who sell them says, ‘Blessed be the Lord, for I have become rich!’ And their own shepherds have no pity on them. 6 “For I will no longer have pity on the inhabitants of the land,” declares the Lord; “but behold, I will cause the men to fall, each into another’s power and into the power of his king; and they will strike the land, and I will not deliver them from their power.” 7 So I pastured the flock doomed to slaughter, hence the afflicted of the flock. And I took for myself two staffs: the one I called Favor and the other I called Union; so I pastured the flock. 8 Then I annihilated the three shepherds in one month, for my soul was impatient with them, and their soul also was weary of me. 9 Then I said, “I will not pasture you. What is to die, let it die, and what is to be annihilated, let it be annihilated; and let those who are left eat one another’s flesh.”

The reason for God’s displeasure was their indifference toward Him. Here we read the famous prophecy of Christ betrayal for 30 pieces of silver:

Zechariah 11:12-13

12 I said to them, “If it is good in your sight, give me my wages; but if not, never mind!” So they weighed out thirty shekels of silver as my wages. 13 Then the Lord said to me, “Throw it to the potter; that magnificent price at which I was valued by them.” So I took the thirty shekels of silver and threw them to the potter in the house of the Lord.

Matthew 26:15

15 and said, “What are you willing to give me to betray Him to you?” And they weighed out thirty pieces of silver to him.

Matthew 27:9-10

9 Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one whose price had been set by the sons of Israel; 10 and they gave them for the Potter’s Field, as the Lord directed me.” (See Matthew 27:1-8)

In the immediate context, the 30 pieces of silver was offered to Zechariah as compensation for His prophetic ministry. Since 30 pieces of silver was the price of a slave, this act demonstrated the people’s contempt for the Lord and the Lord’s work. How can this text be used as a Messianic prophecy? In the day the prophecy was given, no one would have understood that this event in Zechariah’s life would be repeated in the life of the Messiah. Nevertheless, events in the lives of God’s people foreshadow events in the life of the Messiah. This principle of prophecy demonstrates the unity between the Lord and His people (Jn 15:20). What happens to the Lord’s people, happens to the Lord and vice versa. (See also Psalm 22 which in its immediate context refers to events in the life of David.)

The Battle of Armageddon

Chapter 12 begins a new “burden of the word of the Lord concerning Israel.” This prophecy foretells the nations of the world coming up against Jerusalem and the Lord’s miraculous deliverance.

Zechariah

12:2-7

2 “Behold, I am going to make Jerusalem a cup that causes reeling to all the peoples around; and when the siege is against Jerusalem, it will also be against Judah. 3 “It will come about in that day that I will make Jerusalem a heavy stone for all the peoples; all who lift it will be severely injured. And all the nations of the earth will be gathered against it. 4 “In that day,” declares the Lord, “I will strike every horse with bewilderment and his rider with madness. But I will watch over the house of Judah, while I strike every horse of the peoples with blindness. 5 “Then the clans of Judah will say in their hearts, ‘A strong support for us are the inhabitants of Jerusalem through the Lord of hosts, their God.’ 6 “In that day I will make the clans of Judah like a firepot among pieces of wood and a flaming torch among sheaves, so they will consume on the right hand and on the left all the surrounding peoples, while the inhabitants of Jerusalem again dwell on their own sites in Jerusalem. 7 “The Lord also will save the tents of Judah first, so that the glory of the house of David and the glory of the inhabitants of Jerusalem will not be magnified above Judah.

It is reasonable to question the chronological jump between chapters 11 and 12. Chapter 11 ends with the annihilation and rejection of post-exilic Israel, and chapter 12 begins with all nations attacking Jerusalem (a likely reference to Armageddon – See Rev 16:14-16). There is no direct prophecy of a second Jewish exile and an intervening 2000 years. It is, therefore, easy to assume that the annihilation of the post-exilic Israel spoken of in chapter 11 is brought about by the armies that surround Israel in chapter 12. If this is the case, chapter 12 refers to the siege and destruction of Israel by Rome in AD 70. This would be an anti-chiliasm interpretation which sees Israel’s prophetic existence ending in AD 70.

However, chapter 12 does not foretell destruction, but divine intervention and victory for Israel. This is hardly the outcome of Rome’s siege in AD 70. Jesus foretold of the coming AD 70 siege on Jerusalem, her complete destruction and exile; but this would only continue until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. Another Jewish return and siege is still to come (Daniel 9:27; Rev 16:16).

Luke 19:43-44

43 “For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, 44 and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.”

Luke 21:24

24 and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

The siege spoken of in Zechariah 12 “when the siege is against Jerusalem” is one in which Jerusalem is delivered. In AD 70 the zealous Jews did not heed the Word of Christ, but rather assumed Zechariah 12 was being fulfilled in their day. Following the word of Zechariah, they believed the Messiah would come at the last minute and save the city. It was their spiritual confusion that hastened their undoing. On the other hand, the Christian community in Jerusalem heeded the words of Christ and fled the city. (See The Annals of Josephus Fled to the town of Pella in the Decapolis, beyond the Jordan – king Herod Arippa II gave them safe asylum.) This is a sober reminder that prophecy can both lead the righteous to deliverance while deluding the self-righteous and leading them to judgment.

The chronological ambiguity of the prophecies of Zechariah should not disturb us. This is the nature of Old Testament prophecy--“A little here, a little there,” so that those who hypocritically profess Yahweh may “go and stumble backward, be broken, snared and taken captive” (Isaiah 28:10). Those who truly walk with Yahweh understand the proper application of prophecy in the day of its fulfillment.

One additional note: The amillennialist views the siege of chapter 12 as referring to the conquest of Jerusalem in AD 70, and the ensuing victory should be understood with spiritual insight as referring to the spiritual victory and growth of true Israel, the church. The premillennialist considers the language of Zechariah too tangible to spiritualize, such as “I will strike every horse with bewilderment and his rider with madness” and “I will destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem.” The pattern of prophecy is not that its final fulfillment is not less physical, but more. As in the case of Messianic prophecies, the Messiah was literally born of a virgin; He literally healed the people’s infirmities; He was literally pierced.

Chapter 12– 13 The Conversion of Israel

Zechariah 12:10-14

10 “I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn. 11 “In that day there will be great mourning in Jerusalem, like the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the plain of Megiddo. 12 “The land will mourn, every family by itself; the family of the house of David by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself and their wives by themselves; 13 the family of the house of Levi by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the Shimeites by itself and their wives by themselves; 14 all the families that remain, every family by itself and their wives by themselves.

When the Lord returns to save Israel in the battle of Armageddon, His appearance produces a great repentance among the Jews. We should understand 12:12 to be speaking of a literal visual event, “They will look on Me whom they have pierced.” This event is referred to in the book of Revelation: “every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him” (Rev 1:7). Of course, this true repentance is not merely the result of the visual, but it will be brought about by a special moving of the Holy Spirit within the hearts of the Jews (12:10). The veil will be lifted off of their hardened hearts, and they will turn to Christ (See 2 Cor 3:14-15).

This event raises the question of who will enter into the earthly millennium. Apparently, these newly repentant Jews, and even other families of humanity, will be entering into the millennium; few though they may be, for Isaiah prophesies that in the day God “will make mortal men scarcer than pure gold (Isaiah 13:12) (See also Isaiah 66:16; Revelation 6:8; 9:18). Zechariah prophesies that only 1/3 of the Jews will be saved through the fire of tribulation (Zech 13:8). This may be referring to the entire scheme of Israel history but most likely to the final day of Lord itself. To put this into perspective, there are currently 15 million Jews in the world; the future sufferings under the anti-christ will not be unlike the 6 million Jews who perished under Hitler. It happened once; there is no reason to believe it cannot not happen again.

We know that the resurrected saints will be in the millennium (Dan 12:13; Rev 20:4), and we know that mortal men will also be living in the millennium (Isaiah 65:19-21). Pretribulationists teach that all believers are raptured to heaven before the tribulation, and those survivors who place their faith in Christ during the tribulation will be those mortals populating the millennium. This includes the 144,000

Jewish prophets (Rev 7:3-8), Gentile converts, and the final Jewish converts described in Zechariah 12. Pretribulationism argues that if Christians receive their glorified bodies at Christ's coming (1 Cor 15:51; 1 Thess 4:17), and if the coming takes place at the end of the tribulation, then there will be no mortal believers to populate the millennium. It is furthered argued that there must be mortal believers on earth, for only the righteous will enter the millennium (Is 1:27-28; Is 65:11-12; Ezekiel 20:38; Mal 3; Mt 13:38-43; Mt 25:31-32)

These Gospel texts cited as teaching that only the righteous will enter the millennium, in context, appear to be references to the Great White Throne judgment following the Millennium (Rev 20:11). The complete separation between the saved and unsaved occurs at the end of the age, "when the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will throw them into the furnace of fire," (Mt 13:48-49) and in the day the wicked "will go away into eternal punishment" (Mt 25:46).

The tribulation judgments and Armageddon may be what these Old Testament texts have in mind when they speak of the judgment that will come upon sinners in the last days.

Micah 5:15 "And I will execute vengeance in anger and wrath On the nations which have not obeyed."

Isaiah 13:9 Behold, the day of the Lord is coming, Cruel, with fury and burning anger, To make the land a desolation; And He will exterminate its sinners from it

Joel 3:2 I will gather all the nations And bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat. Then I will enter into judgment with them there

Malachi 4:1 "For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the Lord of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch."

Rather than an individual judgment by which only born again Christians enter the millennium, it may be that all the surviving remnant of mankind, who did not take the Mark of the anti-christ, will come under the rule of Christ in the Millennium. Zechariah 14:16 states, "any who are left of all the nations." We certainly know that in the millennium there will be an unbelieving population. The Psalms read, "because of the Greatness of Your power, Your enemies will give feigned obedience to You. All the earth will worship you, and will sing praises to You" (Ps 66:3-4; See also Zechariah 14:17, Revelation 20:8). In our text before us, Zechariah 12:10, there is allowance for unbelievers to turn to Christ even after the visible return of Christ. In Zechariah 13:4-6 we even read that the former false teachers will be present in that day, but they will be quite ashamed of their former occupation.

The Mid-tribulationist and Post-tribulationist view all believers as glorified when Christ returns either at the very end or at some point in the midst of the tribulation. This includes the church age believers, the initial 144,000 Jewish elect (Rev 7), and the those newly saved during the tribulation. All of these will appear in heaven as the ones who have come out of the Great tribulation (Revelation 7:14). If there are to be any mortal believers to enter into the millennium, they will come from the great repentance prophesied by Zechariah (12:10-14; 13:1-2). Zechariah's prophecy is the Mid and Post-tribulationist's answer to who will populate the Millennium.

The Descent of Christ

Zechariah picks up again on the subject of chapter 12:2-3--the nations coming up against Jerusalem. The siege against Jerusalem will initially be successful—half of the city will be exiled; but before the battle is over the Lord will appear to fight against these nations. The apostle John describes this event

in the Revelation.

Zechariah 14:2-3

2 For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city will be captured, the houses plundered, the women ravished and half of the city exiled, but the rest of the people will not be cut off from the city. 3 Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations, as when He fights on a day of battle.

Revelation 16:14-16

14 for they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them together for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty. 15 (“Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame.”) 16 And they gathered them together to the place which in Hebrew is called Har-Magedon.

Revelation 19:19

19 And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies assembled to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army.

Zechariah 14:12-15

12 Now this will be the plague with which the Lord will strike all the peoples who have gone to war against Jerusalem; their flesh will rot while they stand on their feet, and their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongue will rot in their mouth. 13 It will come about in that day that a great panic from the Lord will fall on them; and they will seize one another’s hand, and the hand of one will be lifted against the hand of another. 14 Judah also will fight at Jerusalem; and the wealth of all the surrounding nations will be gathered, gold and silver and garments in great abundance. 15 So also like this plague will be the plague on the horse, the mule, the camel, the donkey and all the cattle that will be in those camps.

Christ will descend upon the Mount of Olives even as He ascended from the Mount of Olives forty days following His resurrection. The word of the angel to the disciples will be fulfilled literally; He “will come in just the same way” (Acts 1:11)

Zechariah 14:4

4 In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south.

Acts 1:11

11 They also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.”

In that day there will be cosmic signs (14:6) and the topography of the land will be changed (14:8,10); but most importantly “The Lord will be king over all the earth in that day” (14:9), and the curse will be lifted (14:11). This is most likely a reversal of the curse on the ground spoken of in Genesis 3:17. With Christ present there is no longer any need for the curse to discipline men toward godliness; and with the curse lifted, the deserts will literally blossom (See Isaiah 35:1-3)

The prophecy concludes with the obedience demanded of the nations during Christ’s earthly reign. In that day, even the least significant item will be holy and for the Lord (14:20)

The Millennium and the Feast of Tabernacles

Zechariah 14:16

Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths.

It has been speculated that the yearly pattern of Jewish Holy Days is a type of God's prophetic calendar, even as the seasons of the year reflect the seasons of life. There were three major holidays in which the Israelites were to return to the temple in Jerusalem with an offering (Deut. 16:16). Each of the three major holidays followed the agricultural harvests:

1. The Passover, followed by the Fast of Unleavened Bread, celebrated the ripening of the barley sown in the winter months (14, 15-21 of Nisan; March or April)
2. The Feast of Pentecost celebrated the wheat harvest (6 of Sivan, May or June)
3. The Feast of Tabernacle, or Ingathering, celebrated the final harvest (October)

Each of these feasts had an agricultural significance; but more importantly, God gave them spiritual significance. God's plan for the ages is harvesting of the souls of men (See Jer 8:20; John 4:35; Rev 14:15). Jesus Christ Himself is the first fruit of God's harvest (1 Cor. 15:20,23). Prophetically, the holidays of Israel appear to represent the following:

1. The Passover pictures Christ's first coming.
2. The Feast of Pentecost pictures the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the church age, and it is no coincidence that the church began at this feast (Acts 2).
3. The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) on the 10th of Tishir (September) represents Christ's second coming and the final cleansing of Israel (Zech 13:1).
4. The Feast of Tabernacle represents the Millennial age (15-21 Tisher, Sept. or October).

The early and the latter rains spoken of by Joel may correctly represent the work of the Holy Spirit at both the commencing of the church age and the millennium (Joel 2:23). However, all of these types should not be pressed too hard, and one should not try to track the length of God's prophetic timetable by the exact divisions of the year. Nevertheless, there are some fascinating parallels between the agricultural feasts of Israel and God's timetable for the world.

Zechariah's exclusive mention of the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) within the millennium demonstrates that some parallel exists between the feasts and the prophetic calendar. The Feast of Tabernacle celebrated the incoming of the final harvest; the work was over and now it was time to rest and enjoy the fruit of one's labor. In the same way, the millennium is preceded by God's harvest of the world, and the people of God enter into the millennial rest (see Rev 14:13-15). Although the harvest was over, in the Feast of Booths the Israelite was called upon to remember the transient nature of his dwelling on earth. For the seven days of the feast, the people were to live outdoors in tents constructed of branches. Such a holiday would be appropriate for the nations during the earthly millennial kingdom since the New Heaven and the New Earth are still to come (Rev. 21).

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