

Zechariah

1. Introduction

1. Background

Zechariah ministered at the same time as Haggai. For the background to this period see the notes on Haggai.

Zechariah records the dates on which “the word of the LORD came” to him. The first came in late October 520 BC, the second on 15 February 519 BC, and the third on 7 December 518 BC.

2. Theme: Yours is the Kingdom!

Like Haggai, Zechariah places great emphasis on the reconstruction of the temple. Both prophets regarded the temple as the centre of the earth. For Haggai, the temple was the “world bank” in which the wealth of the nations would be deposited (Hag. 2:7). For Zechariah, the temple was the seat of God’s kingly authority over the nations (Zech. 14:9,16).

Zechariah’s interest in the kingdom of God appears to run against the hard facts of history. In 520 BC there was no king, and there was no kingdom. The kingdom of Judah had come to an end with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian empire in 586 BC. David’s dynasty had disappeared like water running into sand. The last good king, Josiah, had died prematurely in battle (609 BC), and all three of his sons ruled after him: Jehoahaz (Josiah’s second son, reigned 609 BC); Jehoiakim (Josiah’s eldest son, reigned 609-597 BC); and Zedekiah (Josiah’s youngest son, reigned 597-586 BC). Jehioachin (son of Jehioakim) was taken to Babylon in 597 BC and was released in 561 BC.

Darius the Great (reigned 522-486 BC) organised the Persian empire into 20 provinces. The whole of Syria-Palestine west of the Euphrates and south to the Sinai desert was organised as the province “Beyond the River”. A small sub-province of this, centred on Jerusalem was designated “Yehud”. In the year 520 BC, the governor of Yehud was Zerubbabel, probably a grandson of Jehioachin.

There was no king and no kingdom. But Zechariah announced the coming of the King (9:9) and the universal reign (kingdom) of the LORD (14:9,16).

3. Structure and Content of Zechariah

Zechariah message is conveyed not only by the words he uses, but also by the very structure of his prophecy, in which the themes of covenant, temple, a new day for the kingdom, and the coming of the King are prominent. This will be worked out in the notes that follow.

I have assumed that the prophecy contains an introduction and three parts. Commentators sometimes divide the prophecy in two and assign chapters 7-8

either to the first or the second part. However, chapters 7-8 look both ways: back to the disaster of 586 BC and forward to the hope of a new day for the kingdom. Since chapters 1-6 concern “making good the destruction of the past”, and chapters 9-14 concern “the future coming of the king and the kingdom”, I have decided to treat chapters 7-8 as a separate section, which acts as a hinge between Part 1 (ch. 1-6) and Part 3 (ch. 9-14). With this structure, Parts 1, 2 and 3 each conclude with a statement about the temple/kingdom and the nations.

Introduction (1:1-6) ***The covenant relationship still stands***

Part 1 (1:7-6:15) ***Eight visions concerning the rebuilding of the temple***

- A Vision 1: A patrol of the whole earth (1:7-17)
- B Vision 2: Four craftsmen mete out retribution on four horns (1:18-21)
- C Vision 3: God is Jerusalem’s wall and glory (2:1-13)
- D Vision 4: The high priest reinstated (3:1-10)
- D¹ Vision 5: Divine resources for community, priest and prince (4:2-14)
- C¹ Vision 6: The flying scroll – evildoers are cut off (5:1-4)
- B¹ Vision 7: The woman in a basket (‘Wickedness’) removed to Shinar (5:5-11)
- A¹ Vision 8: The patrol compasses the world (6:1-8)

Conclusion: The temple will be built by the priest-king called “The Branch” and the nations, i.e. “those who are far off” (6:9-15)

Part 2 (7:1-8:23) ***Q&A concerning fasting: a new dawn for the Kingdom***

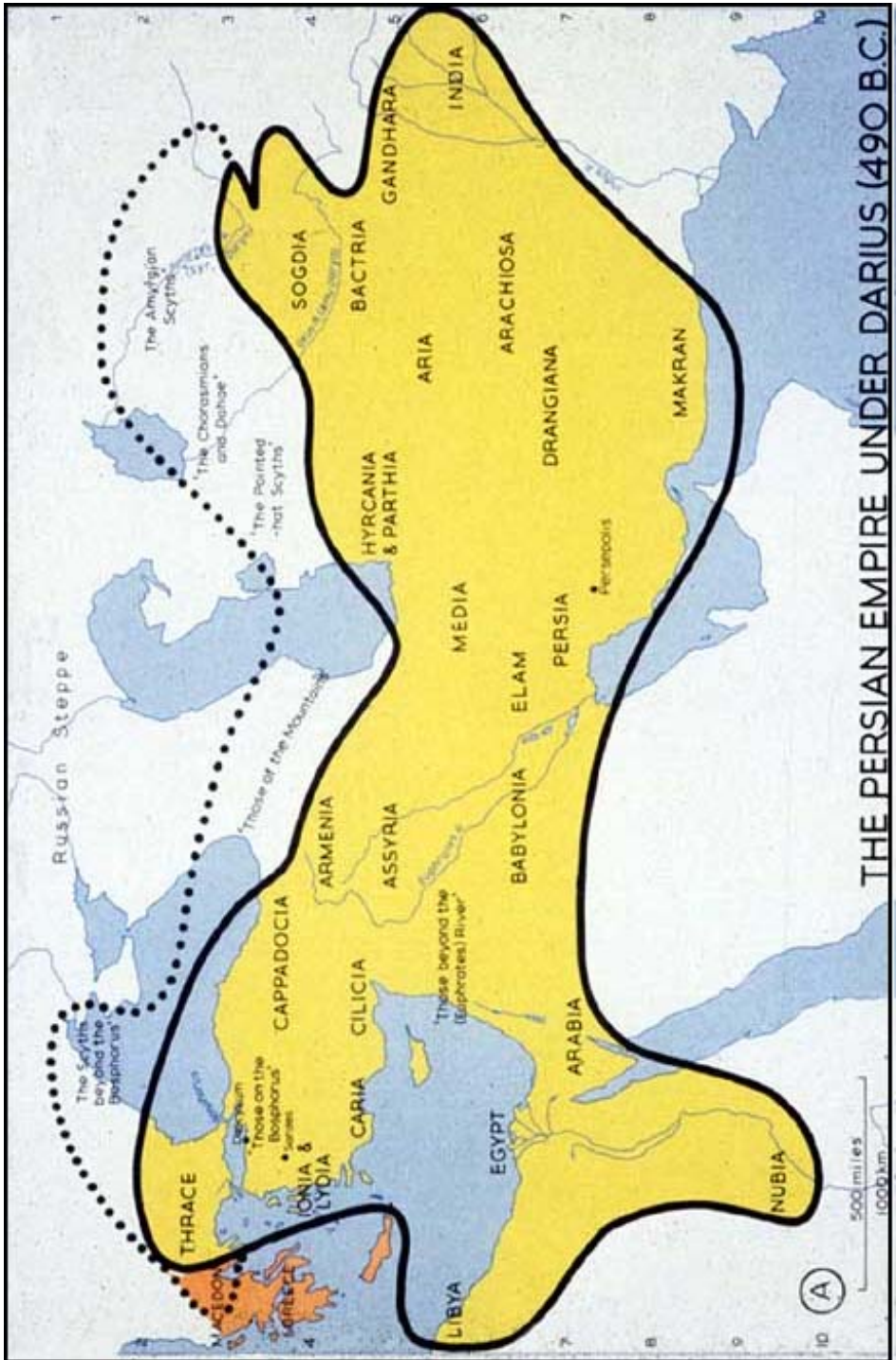
- A The question: should we continue to fast? (7:1-3)
- B First answer: fasting in the light of past failures and disaster (7:4-14)
- B¹ Second answer: promise of restoration, repopulation, rebuilding (8:1-17)
- A¹ Final answer: fasting becomes feasting in Kingdom’s new day (8:18-19)

Conclusion: The nations’ longing to join in the renewed Kingdom (8:20-23)

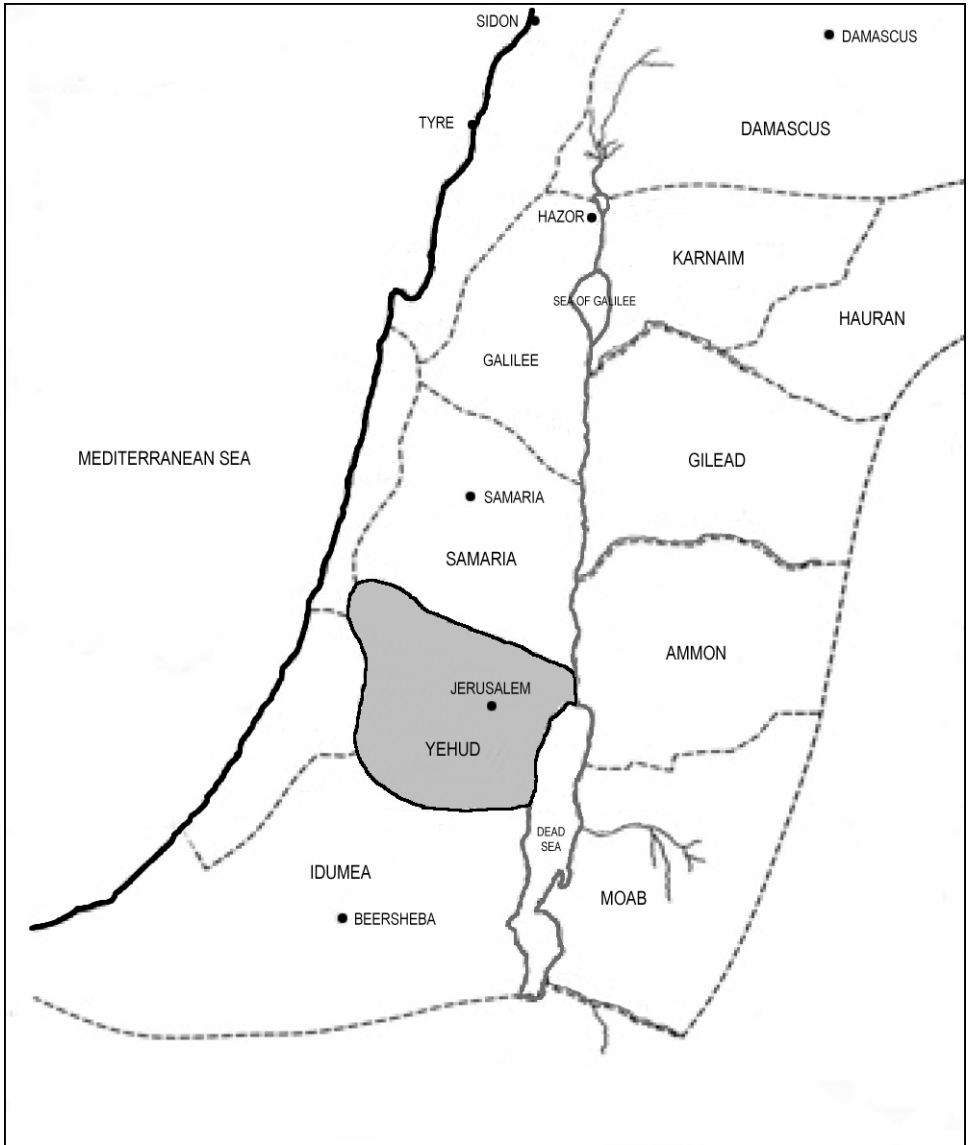
Part 3 (9:1-14:21) ***Two oracles about the King’s 1st and 2nd comings***

- A. The first coming of the Shepherd-King: his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, rejection, and death; the re-establishment of the covenant (9:1-13:9)
- B. The second coming of the King, the LORD of Hosts: conflict and the final defeat of his enemies (14:1-15)

Conclusion: Submissive nations are gathered into the renewed Kingdom; obdurate nations are punished; the whole of Jerusalem is “holy to the LORD” (14:16-21)



THE PERSIAN EMPIRE UNDER DARIUS (490 B.C.)



The sub-province of Yehud

Zechariah 1-6

2. Not by Might, Nor by Power, but by My Spirit

All is not lost! The Babylonian exile had been a very great disaster – but Zechariah opens his prophecy with a genuine offer: “Thus declares the LORD of hosts: ‘Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts’” (1:3).

The free offer of the Gospel means that there is hope – not only can each of us individually be saved, but we can play our part in the building of the Kingdom.

The temple in Jerusalem was the seat of God’s rule – the centre of the Kingdom of God. The eight visions reported in Zechariah 1-6 are about God’s programme for its building: “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel [the temple builder]: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts” (4:6).

1. Reasons for building the temple (visions 1 and 8)

The first and last visions are about patrols of horsemen throughout the earth, to “the four winds of heaven” (6:5) – hence Jerusalem is at the centre of the earth.

The “earth remains at rest” (1:11). This is an arrogant rest; having destroyed Israel (1:15), the nations sit back – they think they are in charge. They have forgotten the Kingdom of God – but God has not (1:16-17). Jesus said, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

But the Kingdom is built not just for judgement on the nations – it is built for their salvation. God’s Spirit finds “rest in the north country” (6:8), and “those who are far off shall come and help to build the temple (6:15). Jesus commanded the apostles to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19).

2. Reassurance about building the temple (visions 2 and 3)

But the nations are very strong (the “four horns” of vision 2). How can the temple be built? By mere craftsmen (1:20). The task of Kingdom building is performed by very ordinary people. But remember that the craftsmen who built the tabernacle (the prototype of the temple) were filled with wisdom and skill by the Spirit of God. So “ordinary” believers living godly lives are actually far from ordinary!

We may say that “we need to build the walls first”, i.e. we need to prioritize our own security – that is the point about “the young man with the measuring line” in Vision 3. In contemporary terms, he wanted to build the programme of church activities in order to secure the success (the future) of his congregation. But God wants us to focus on the main things: the preaching of the Word and prayer. Security (the wall of fire, v. 5a) and success (glory within, v. 5b) are God’s doing.

3. Resources for building the temple (visions 4 and 5)

Visions 4 and 5 are at the centre of the set of 8. They take us to the heart of temple-Kingdom building. God provides everything we need for life and godliness.

First, he provides for the forgiveness of sin – only forgiven people can engage in the building of the Kingdom. Joshua the high priest was clothed in filthy garments and the accuser (Satan) stood at his right hand. But the LORD himself turned away the accusations and provided Joshua with clean clothing. The “stone with seven eyes” may actually be a “stone with seven wells” (the Hebrew words for “eyes” and “wells” are almost identical) – this seems appropriate because God says, “I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day” (3:9).

Secondly, God provides the gift of the Holy Spirit – only regenerate people can engage in building the Kingdom. Zerubbabel was faced with mammoth task – he lacked physical strength and manpower. But God says to him, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts” (4:6). The vision of the Lampstand is a picture of the community engaged in the rebuilding of the temple. But just as a lamp cannot produce light without oil, so the community cannot build without the Holy Spirit. Jesus said to the disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

4. Repentance and building the temple (visions 6 and 7)

In chapter 5 Zechariah returns to the theme of repentance with which he began. The community engaged in the building of the temple cannot afford to return to the covenant breaking patterns of the past. (Actually, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah show that a generation after Zechariah’s ministry, that is what they did!)

The flying scroll represents the curse against everyone who breaks the two great commandments to love the LORD and to love one’s neighbour. The curse will consume the house of the covenant breaker so that it falls.

The woman in a basket is “Wickedness”. She is taken away from God’s land to the land of Shinar where Babel, the city of the Kingdom of Man was built (Genesis 11:1-9). Light can have no fellowship with darkness. The distinction between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Man becomes sharper and more pressing with each generation, and the conflict between them will come to a climax at the end of history (Zechariah 14).

So, if we want to engage in Kingdom building we must live repentant, godly lives. We are “the temple of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:16), and God says to us, “Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you” (2 Cor. 6:17).

5. The royal builder of the temple (Conclusion)

This section closes with a prophetic action: Zechariah makes a crown and sets it on the head of Joshua, who symbolizes the coming Priest-King called “the Branch” (6:12-13). God had always required Israel to keep priesthood (temple, Joshua) and royalty (kingdom, Zerubbabel) separate. But in “the Branch” he will unite them – “the Branch” is the Priest-King who will build the temple-Kingdom.

This is Jesus Christ. Having made purification for sins (as priest) he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (he is King) (Heb. 1:3). He has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18) and is building his church (Matt. 16:18).

Zechariah 7-8

3. *I am Jealous for Zion*

Some of John's disciples asked Jesus, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" (Matt. 9:14). Jesus replied, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?" (Matt. 9:15). The bridegroom signals a new beginning, new hope. It's like the question and answer in Zechariah 7-8, which looks first to the past and then to the future – the coming of the King, bringing the Kingdom, marks a new beginning for the people of God.

1. **The question: should we continue to fast?**

The question in 7:1-3 is about fasts that commemorated the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. These fasts had been observed for 70 years. But now that the temple was well on the way to being finished (compare v. 1 with Ezra 6:15), the question was, was this fasting still appropriate?

The fasting was backward looking. Looking back on the past can be good and necessary (e.g. to learn lessons) – but it can also be unhealthy, e.g. ruminating on failures, disappointments and offences can prevent healing and moving forward.

2. **First answer: fasting in the light of past sins and disaster**

Zechariah's first answer (7:4-14) is to look at the fasts in the light of past sins. First he asks the people to examine their motives for fasting – were they really concerned about their relationship with God (vv. 5-6). Then he reminds them that what God is concerned about is covenant faithfulness: justice, steadfast love, compassionate care and rejection of every form of oppression (vv. 9-10). Then he explains that the destruction of "the pleasant land" was a result of the failure of the people of Judah to practice these (vv. 11-14).

The outward forms of repentance are meaningless unless there is a change of heart leading to a change of life. John the Baptist said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:7-8).

3. **Second answer: promise of restoration**

Zechariah moves to his second answer (8:1-17) abruptly. God graciously puts the past in the past and confesses his "great jealousy" for Zion (v. 2). God's jealousy is frightening ("I am jealous for her with great wrath"), but also comforting – God refuses to let go of his people (Solomon 8:6-7).

The promise of restoration is comprehensive:

- God will *return* to Zion (vv. 1-3) (he'd departed before the temple's destruction, see Ezekiel 10), dwell in Jerusalem, and change the moral quality of the city (the disobedient people of 7:11-13 will become faithful and holy, v. 3).

- God will repopulate the city (vv. 4-8). The new population of the city will be a covenant people, faithful and righteous (v. 8).
- God will reward the temple builders (vv. 9-13). They will be both blessed and a blessing (v. 13).

All of this because of God's good purpose (vv. 14-15). This is sheer grace!

But it makes demands which remind us of 7:4-14, i.e. speak the truth, love justice, turn away from every form of evil. The body of Christ is built up when, turning away from "human cunning...craftiness in deceitful schemes", we "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:14-15).

4. Final answer: fasting becomes feasting in Kingdom's new day

In his final answer Zechariah returns to the question about fasting (8:18-19). He doesn't say, "Just forget about the past." Rather, he says, "Let the grace of God transform your understanding of the past, so that what was an occasion for fasting becomes an occasion for feasting."

But how can we look at our pasts, with all our sinful failures, without collapsing under a burden of guilt and shame? Only by looking at the past through the lens of the Cross of Christ. The death and resurrection of Jesus has changed our relationship with our past sins – by the grace of God they have been forgiven, and we must not think of them apart from the atoning blood of Christ – to do otherwise would be to allow them to strip us of our joy in the Lord.

Jesus has come, like a bridegroom, bringing a new day, a new beginning, the new creation. "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?" (Matt. 9:15). Of course not!

5. Conclusion: The nations' longing to join the renewed Kingdom

Zechariah's conclusion (8:20-23) brings us full circle. Why the fasting? Because the nations had destroyed the kingdom and devastated Jerusalem. What then will complete the feasting? When the nations join in the restored kingdom and come up to Jerusalem to seek God.

The picture sets Jerusalem in the midst of the nations once again. Those that go up are not a few, but "many peoples", not the weak but "strong nations". They are not coerced – they long for this honour (v. 23). "The vision of the nations seeking God completes the purpose of the call of Abraham (Gen. 12:3), that in him all the nations of the earth should be blessed" (Baldwin, p. 166).

Jesus, the King endowed with all authority in heaven and on earth, sent his apostles to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18-20). The fulfilment of this promise is seen in the closing vision of Revelation: "By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it...They will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations" (Revelation 21:22-26).

The Gospel Era is not a time for fasting but for joy.

Zechariah 9-13

4. Behold, Your King is Coming to You

Zechariah's message is about the coming of the Kingdom. The final part of his prophecy (chapters 9-14) comprises two oracles which foretell the King's first and second comings.

1. The specifics: how the Gospels use Zechariah

The events of Passover Week are so clearly portrayed that chapters 9-14 are the most quoted section of the prophets in the passion narratives of the Gospels. The Gospels cite Zechariah when they speak of:

- Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey (9:9, c.f. Matt. 21:1-5).
- The amount of money for which he was betrayed (11:12, c.f. Matt. 26:14-16).
- The use to which the 30 pieces of silver were put when Judas returned them to the temple authorities (11:13, c.f. Matt. 27:3-10; note that although Matthew names Jeremiah, the citation in Matt. 27:9 is from Zechariah 11:13).
- The piercing of the body of Jesus and the mourning that accompanied his execution (12:10, c.f. John 19:33-37; Luke 23:27,48).
- The flow of water and blood from Jesus' body (13:1, c.f. John 19:34).
- The striking of Jesus, the shepherd, and the scattering of the sheep, his followers (13:7, c.f. Matt. 26:31,56).

2. The significance: how we interpret Zechariah

Much of what Zechariah writes is difficult to understand (Jerome called the prophecy "that most obscure book of the prophet Zechariah"). Interpretation without any reference points in historical fulfilment would be arbitrary.

The vividness, accuracy and number of Zechariah's prophecies about the coming of Jesus to Jerusalem, and the circumstances of Jesus' rejection and death, allows us to earth our interpretation in real history.

That the events of Passion Week are the backbone to this section of Zechariah's prophecy suggests that everything in chapters 9-14 is meant to be understood in the light of the coming of the King and the coming of the kingdom. This is generally true of all the prophecies of the Old Testament. So when Jesus began his public ministry, he announced, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

From the perspective of the Old Testament the coming of the kingdom can look as though it would happen in a short period of time. That is why John the Baptist was confused about the ministry of Jesus which lacked the acts of judgement he had expected (compare Matthew 3:7-12 and Matthew 11:2-6). But the New Testament makes it clear that the coming of the kingdom has not happened all at once –

which is why Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come”. So there are predictions in Zechariah 9-14

- which have been fulfilled (the events of Passion Week);
- others which have multiple fulfilments (the opposition of the nations to Zion, which may be interpreted in terms of ongoing opposition to the Church);
- and still others which are yet to be fulfilled (especially chapter 14 and the events of “the day that is coming that belongs to the LORD”).

3. The salvation: how we apply Zechariah

Despite the many difficulties in understanding Part 3 of Zechariah’s prophecy, the central message is clear: the King has come with salvation. “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (9:9).

We can pick out some of the central themes of this message:

- The failure of the shepherds The people are the flock of God (9:16). But the shepherds (the leaders) have failed to care for them (10:2-3; c.f. Matt. 9:35-36). Indeed, even this is God’s judgement on the faithless nation (11:4-17).
- The identification of the LORD with the Saviour The prophecy oscillates between speaking about the LORD and speaking about the King (Zech. 9); between Zechariah the shepherd and the LORD the shepherd (11:7-13); between the LORD as the one pierced (12:10) and the shepherd who is struck (13:7). This suggests that the coming King/Shepherd who will be rejected and killed is none other than the LORD (Matt. 1:21-23; 27:54).
- The death of the Saviour Zechariah clearly portrays the events of Jesus’ death (see point 1). His death accomplished salvation by opening up a fountain to cleanse from sin and uncleanness (13:1) – compare this with the promise of 3:9, especially if the “eyes” of the stone in 3:9 are actually fountains.
- The repentance of the people God calls for repentance from the beginning of the prophecy (1:3-6; 7:9-10; 8:16-17). Now we see that repentance is his gift to the people (12:10-14, c.f. Acts 5:31; 11:18).
- The re-establishment of the covenant The covenant relationship is God’s great concern. It had been violated by the people – hence the destruction of Solomon’s temple and the exile (7:11-14). But the great work of salvation which God promises will re-establish the covenant (13:9). Compare Matthew 26:27-29 and Hebrews 10:11-18.
- The eschatological aspect of salvation The theme of conflict between the nations and Zion which runs through Zechariah 9-13 (e.g. 9:13; 12:1-9) finds its climax in chapter 14 with the final coming of the King and his victory over the nations. Compare Matthew 25:31-32 and Revelation 20:11-15.

Zechariah 14

5. The LORD will be King Over All the Earth

The two oracles with which Zechariah (9-11 and 12-14) closes concern the first and second comings of the King. The second coming is the subject of chapter 14. This brings us to the “Day of the LORD”. The Day is announced in a way that emphasises the LORD to whom the Day belongs: “Behold, a day is coming for the LORD.” How appropriate – this chapter is about the LORD the King!

The imagery used in this chapter is apocalyptic. Apocalyptic language portrays awesome events using heightened and intensified language (e.g. the splitting of the Mount of Olives in half to create a valley for escape; the plague which rots the flesh of the enemies of Jerusalem even while they stand on their feet).

1. The nations gather for war at Jerusalem, vv. 1-15

Zechariah 9-13 has shown that conflict between the nations and the Church is ongoing. Chapter 14 brings this theme to its final phase: this is the last battle.

“All the nations” are gathered to Jerusalem to fight against it. The Church is a thorn in the side of the “world-in-rebellion”. “This is an ideological conflict to remove a non-co-operative element that blocked the way to an international world order” (Baldwin, p. 215-6), i.e. the Babel project revisited. The aggression of the nations is overwhelming and seems to succeed.

But notice: in v. 2 God says, “I will gather all the nations...” The LORD reigns over the affairs of men even in tumultuous rebellion (Psalm 93:3-4). Having gathered them, God fights in Jerusalem against them (v. 3). He stands on the Mount of Olives (the first time the hill east of Jerusalem is named in Scripture) and it splits in two, creating a valley through which the survivors escape.

The picture of the hill being split in two is reminiscent of the division of the Red Sea for the deliverance of Israel. The language is apocalyptic – but the ascension of Jesus from the Mount of Olives and the promise of his return “in like manner” (Acts 1:11) points to the significance of the prophecy.

The return of the King the “game changing”: “the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him” (v. 5). It happens “on that day...On that day...a unique day...On that day” (vv. 6-9), i.e. on the day that “is coming for the LORD” (v. 1).

The great consequence of “that day” is that the LORD becomes King over all the earth. This is the event of which Paul writes in 1 Cor. 15:24-28, when God has subjected all things to Christ, and then Christ is subjected to God, and so God becomes all in all. It is not that God has ever been less than King – rather, his kingship is now established in a new way, through the work of Christ.

The result is that Jerusalem (the people of God) is made eternally secure (vv. 10-11), while the “world-in-rebellion” is in rout (vv. 12-15). The wealth of the nations is brought into Jerusalem (c.f. Revelation 21:24,26).

2. The nations gather for worship at Jerusalem, vv. 16-21

The conclusion to the prophecy echoes the conclusions to Part 1 (6:15) and Part 2 (8:20-23), i.e. submissive nations are gathered into the renewed Kingdom; while obdurate nations are punished; the whole of Jerusalem is “holy to the LORD.”

The Feast of Tabernacles (v. 16) unites the nations in the worship of the LORD. This is significant at a number of levels:

- It was a reminder of the pilgrimage of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land, i.e. a reminder of the care of God for his people during the period between the first and second comings of the King.
- Foreigners were welcome to partake of the feast (Deuteronomy 16:13-15).
- It celebrated the goodness of the Promised Land. By the time of Jesus it included an elaborate ceremony in which water was drawn from the pool of Siloam and brought in festal procession into the temple where it was poured out at the base of the altar. Jesus spoke on this occasion of the promise of the Holy Spirit (John 7:38-39). We have already seen that the promise of the Holy Spirit is important to Zechariah (4:6). Compare Revelation 22:1-2.
- The Law was read publicly at Tabernacles (Neh. 8:14-18). Thus it was an occasion of covenant renewal. Again, this is a theme at the heart of Zechariah, e.g. 1:3 and 13:9.

So the nations (no longer in rebellion) are united with Israel (also no longer in rebellion). They are united in their thanksgiving, their participation in the gift of the Holy Spirit, and their covenant commitment to the LORD.

This is the grace of God! But there is judgement too (vv. 17-19), c.f. Rev. 21:8,27.

The result is that holiness is no longer restricted to the temple (the temple courts were designed to reflect increasing levels of holiness as one approached the central Most Holy Place). Compare Revelation 21:22-23; 22:4.

“Zerubbabel’s temple has given way to the reality it symbolized: God the King in the midst of his saved people – forever” (Webb, p. 183).

3. Conclusion

This is the great end promised in the Bible from beginning (Eden) to end (Eden restored) and for which we hope.

But we’re not there yet – our experience is still that of Part 1 – the daily struggle of the four craftsmen against the four horns; the need to prioritize the building of the temple rather than the building of the walls; the need for cleansing; the need for the Holy Spirit and the fulfilment of the promise, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD” (4:6).

And so our prayer remains, “Your kingdom come”. “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 21:20).