

# Zechariah 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 27 September 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Zechariah chapter 7. In the fourth year of King Darius the word of the Lord came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Kislev. Now the people of Bethel had sent Shereza and Regen-Milek and their men to entreat the favour of the Lord, saying to the priests of the house of the Lord of hosts and the prophets, Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years? Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, Say to all the people of the land and the priests, when you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves? Were not these the words that the Lord proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous, with her cities around her, and the south and the lowland were inhabited? And the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another. Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart. But they refused to pay attention, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears that they might not hear. They made their hearts diamond hard, lest they should hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the Lord of hosts. As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear, says the Lord of hosts. And I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and the pleasant land was made desolate. After an initial prophecy delivered shortly after the people started rebuilding the temple, following the word of Haggai, the first six chapters of Zechariah are mostly concerned with the eight naive visions of the prophet, a section introduced with the superscription of chapter 1 verse 7. Those visions were most likely all received near the end of the second year of Darius, the year in which the temple rebuilding work was taken up again. Chapters 7 to 8 serve as a bridge between those visions and the oracles of chapters 9 to 14. They are a unity starting with a new superscription and the questions of verses 2 and 3 which are addressed at the end of chapter 8. However this chapter also continues themes of earlier chapters. Mark Boda and other commentators have observed ways in which chapters 7 to 8 can be read as a recapitulation and digest of the earlier chapters of the book of Zechariah and even also the book of

Zechariah's companion prophet of Haggai. The prophecies of chapter 7 come two years into the rebuilding project which started in 520 BC and would be finished in 516 BC in the sixth year of Darius, 70 years after the temple of Solomon had been destroyed. While the prophets prior to the exile had largely dated their messages relative to the reigns of the kings of Judah and Israel, now the dating is relative to a Persian king. The Jews are under the reign of the Persian empire and the dating reflects this situation. The prophecy is introduced with a brief narrative section. The city of Bethel was formerly within the northern kingdom of Israel and a key site of its idolatry. Jeroboam I, the son of Nebat, had set up a rival sanctuary there to that in Jerusalem. It was now part of the Persian administrative province of Yehud or Judah as we see in Ezra chapter 2 verse 28 where men of Bethel and Ai are listed among the returnees to the land. The people of Bethel had sent an official delegation to Jerusalem seeking the Lord's favor and also inquiring of the priests and prophets of the Lord concerning the continued observance of the fast of the fifth month. Bethel does not seem to have been the same center of false worship after the return from exile. Now they largely seem to share the same worship as the rest of the people centered upon Jerusalem. Although the temple had not yet been completed, it was already a site of sacrifice. The altar had been set up again the better part of 20 years previously and the rebuilding was already well underway so perhaps other parts of the temple and its complex were in use at this time. Almost 70

years previously, in 586 BC, the temple had been destroyed. After its destruction and the fall of the kingdom of Judah, it seems that the people had observed a ritual fast in the fifth month, which according to 2 Kings chapter 25 verse 8 was the month that the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. Two months later, in an event grimly reminiscent of the story of the brothers' betrayal and selling of Joseph, Gedaliah, the Jewish governor that the Babylonians had established, was assassinated, spelling an end to the possibility of Jewish autonomy within the Babylonian empire. The fast of the fifth and the seventh months commemorated the devastation of the first temple and the death of Gedaliah, events that together marked the utter ruin of the nation. Both of these fasts continue to be practiced by Jews today, Tisha B'Av and Somm Gedaliah. The people of Bethel, however, were unsure of whether they should continue the fast of the fifth month, now that the temple was being rebuilt. Was it time to leave that fast behind them? Presumably the leaders of Bethel need clarity on the matter as they determine whether or not that fast would be observed in the following year. The word of the Lord that Zechariah receives is addressed not merely to the delegation from Bethel, but to the priests and all the people of the land. The message interrogates the practice of the fast, exposing its real motives. Although the narrative concerning the delegation from Bethel only mentions the fast of the fifth month, Zechariah's message also speaks of the fast of the seventh, the fast commemorating the assassination of Gedaliah. In the prophecies of Jeremiah and Daniel, the period of Babylonian hegemony is given as 70 years. In 2 Chronicles chapter 36 verses 20 to 22, the 70 year period is related to the period of Babylonian dominance, but also to the period of the lands lying desolate. In Zechariah chapter 1 verse 12 and 7 verse 5, the 70 years seem to extend over two decades beyond the period of Babylon's dominance to relate to the time of the temples lying in ruin. This period would end very shortly, as the temple would be completed in 516 BC, 70 years after its first destruction. The Lord wants the people to examine the motives that drive their fasting. In Isaiah chapter 58 verses 3 to 5, we find another example of the prophetic questioning of the practice of fasting, fasting that has bad motives or is otherwise displeasing to God.

[ 6 : 54 ] Why have we fasted and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves and you take no knowledge of it? Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?

Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord? Zechariah's prophecy challenges the people to ask themselves whether their fasting was really a mourning of their sins, a turning away from their iniquity and a setting of their whole hearts upon seeking the Lord and his mercy. Or was their fasting merely hypocritical, perhaps mourning the devastation that was the consequence of their sins, but not the sins themselves, nor truly addressing themselves to the Lord. Their fasting, the message implies, has been self-serving, as have their feasts. Their religious rituals mask the fact that their hearts are still not set upon the Lord. As a consequence, their religious rituals are illegitimate and indeed offensive to the Lord. It is unclear whether verse 7 belongs more with the verses that immediately precede it or those which follow. It might fit with either, highlighting the consistency of the word of the Lord through Zechariah with the messages delivered through the earlier prophets.

Prior to the exile, during periods when Judah enjoyed a prosperous and independent existence in the land, the Lord had addressed Judah by his prophets, warning them of the importance of practice that was congruent with their profession and their religious performance, as we see in verses 5-6.

Alternatively, if we take verse 7 in relation to the verses that follow, it underlines the consistency between the message of the Lord prior to the exile and now following the exile. Although verses 9 and 10 might initially be read as words addressed to the people after the exile, verses 11 and following focus primarily upon the response of the people prior to the exile and the way that the exile was a consequence of their rejection of the Lord's word. Looking back at places like Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 5-7, we can see what Zechariah is picking up upon here.

For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place,

