

Zechariah 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Zechariah chapter 14. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the mount shall move northward and the other half southward.

And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azel. And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

On that day there shall be no light, cold or frost. And there shall be a unique day, which is known to the Lord, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light.

On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea, and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter. And the Lord will be king over all the earth.

On that day the Lord will be one, and his name one. The whole land shall be turned into a plain from Geber to Rimon south of Jerusalem. But Jerusalem shall remain aloft on its site from the gate of Benjamin to the place of the former gate, to the corner gate, and from the tower of Hananel to the king's winepresses.

[1 : 4 0] And it shall be inhabited, for there shall never again be a decree of utter destruction. Jerusalem shall dwell in security. And this shall be the plague with which the Lord will strike all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem.

Their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet. Their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths. On that day a great panic from the Lord shall fall on them, so that each will seize the hand of another, and the hand of the one will be raised against the hand of the other.

Even Judah will fight at Jerusalem, and the wealth of all the surrounding nations shall be collected, gold, silver, and garments in great abundance. And a plague like this plague shall fall on the horses, the mules, the camels, the donkeys, and whatever beasts may be in those camps.

Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the king, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the feast of booths.

And if any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the king, the Lord of hosts, there will be no rain on them. And if the family of Egypt does not go up and present themselves, then on them there shall be no rain.

[2 : 5 4] There shall be the plague with which the Lord afflicts the nations that do not go up to keep the feast of booths. This shall be the punishment to Egypt, and the punishment to all the nations that do not go up to keep the feast of booths.

And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, holy to the Lord. And the pots in the house of the Lord shall be as the bowls before the altar. And every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be holy to the Lord of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them and boil the meat of the sacrifice in them.

And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day. Zechariah chapter 14 concludes the second of the two oracles with which the book ends. The oracle which runs from chapter 12 to chapter 14 seems to prophesy two sieges of Jerusalem, the first from which the city is delivered, and in this chapter a second one that is successful, overthrowing the city.

The people had mourned over the struck shepherd like a firstborn, much as Egypt mourned the death of their firstborn in the tenth plague at the time of the Passover. The striking of the shepherd and the scattering of the sheep was followed by a pouring out of the spirit of grace upon the house of David and upon Jerusalem, and the opening of a fountain cleansing the people from their sin and uncleanness.

Chapter 14 is, once again, a challenging chapter to interpret, with many mysterious and apocalyptic images of the overthrowing of a world order. However, as we look at these images more closely in the light of wider biblical symbolism, much of this chapter will come into focus.

[4 : 26] At the beginning of chapter 14, we begin the account of the second siege. Once again, nations are gathered against Jerusalem, but this time the city is taken, plundered, and the women violated.

As Peter Lighthouse observes, the description of this in verse 2 is taken from Isaiah chapter 13 verse 16, a passage that concerns the overthrow of Babylon. Their infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes, their houses will be plundered, and their wives ravished.

The imagery and language of that chapter is prominent in other accounts of Jerusalem's overthrow, in Jesus' Olivet Discourse and in the Book of Revelation, where Jerusalem itself is spoken of as Babylon the Great.

The adoption of the language from Isaiah chapter 13 might suggest some implied association between the two. In the overthrow of the city, half are cut off, while the other half remain.

Once again, this is similar to the prophecy in Jesus' Olivet Discourse concerning the events of AD 70, in Luke chapter 17 verses 34 to 35, which also speak of a judgment that strikes half of the people.

[5 : 32] I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left.

Jesus is most likely purposefully alluding back to Zechariah chapter 14 in his words. The city of Jerusalem is overthrown. However, in verse 3, the Lord also fights against the nations that overthrew the city.

Verses 4 to 5 describe a miraculous splitting of the Mount of Olives in two. We might recognize a theophanic motif here. As the Lord comes, the mountains shake and can be removed.

Mountains are brought low and valleys raised up. The Mount of Olives is rarely mentioned in the Old Testament. The Mount of Olives appears in David's departure from Jerusalem during the coup of Absalom in 2 Samuel chapter 15 verse 30.

Another significant reference to the Mount of Olives, albeit not explicitly by name, is found in Ezekiel chapter 11. In Ezekiel chapters 8 to 11, the prophet Ezekiel is brought in a vision to Jerusalem where he sees the abominations that are being committed in the temple area.

[6 : 37] In his vision, the Lord's throne chariot rises up from the house and comes out to judge the idolaters and the wicked of the city before the Lord departs from the temple altogether. In chapter 11 verses 22 to 23 we read, The feet of the Lord standing on the Mount of Olives should recall the glory of the Lord standing on the Mount of Olives in Ezekiel's vision.

Given the similarities with 2 Samuel and more importantly Ezekiel chapter 11, this seems to indicate that what is happening here is a departure or an exodus from the city.

The Lord is leading an exodus from Jerusalem as he departs from it, much as he had once led the exodus out of Egypt. In the Gospels we also see the interplay between the temple mount and the Mount of Olives.

In the events of Holy Week and the crucifixion and what follows, there is a sustained opposition between the temple mount and the Mount of Olives as Jesus symbolically moves out of the city and acts over against the city from the Mount of Olives.

In this we might see Christ enacting the departure of the Lord from Jerusalem. The imagery here is designed to recall the earlier exodus, just as the waters of the Red Sea were divided in two to create a passage for the people to pass through on dry land, so the division of the Mount of Olives is the creation of a valley path between two great mountainsides, enabling the people to flee.

[8 : 10] In the story of Lot and Sodom, there was a window of escape provided, so that Lot could flee from the city prior to its destruction. The same thing is happening here, as the faithful are given an avenue of flight.

The earthquake in the reign of Uzziah that's referenced here was obviously an important event in the people's memory. It's a key date in the prophecy of Amos, for which it seemed to provide an initial confirmation.

Even a few centuries later, the people still seemed to be speaking about it. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus foretells the existence of a small window of opportunity during which those who heeded his word might flee from the city, in Matthew chapter 24, verses 15 to 20.

So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place, let the reader understand. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house. And let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant, and for those who are nursing infants in those days, pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath.

[9 : 19] The early Christian writers Eusebius and Epiphanius both relate a tradition in which the Christians of Jerusalem forewarned about the destruction of the city, fled to Pella, where they escaped its overthrow.

In Revelation chapter 18, verses 4 to 5, the Lord summoned his faithful people out of the condemned city. Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues, for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.

Lighthouse makes the intriguing suggestion that we might think of the Mount of Olives as the veil of Jerusalem. The Mount of Olives stands before Jerusalem, obscuring the city. However, that veil, as it were, is going to be torn in two, and a passage provided through it.

With texts like Matthew chapter 24 and 25, and the book of Revelation, this chapter foretells the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70, while also portraying, with the book of Revelation, the two-sided character of that destruction.

As the old Jerusalem is being destroyed, a new Jerusalem is being established. The escapees from the old, condemned Jerusalem will become a glorious, transformed new Jerusalem.

[10 : 33] Although the siege against Jerusalem was successful and the city was devastated, the concluding half of the chapter speaks of a radical reversal and transformation. The formerly besieged Jerusalem will dwell in safety.

The city that was overthrown rises up anew and transformed. The plundered city will be a place to which the wealth of the nations will be gathered. The nations that came up against Jerusalem to war against it will gather there in order to worship the Lord in her.

As Lighheart notes, the remnant that escapes the death and overthrow of the stricken city becomes living waters flowing out to give life to the world. This occurs as a new light comes at the evening time, a dawn breaking at the descent of the night.

The final night vision of chapter 6 had described the chariots coming out from between the two bronze mountains, which were associated with the bronze pillars of the temple, mountains being symbolically connected with pillars.

The chariots were coming out from between the mountains in order to bring the Lord's judgments out into the world. Here, with the division of the Mount of Olives, two mountain sides form a threshold to the city, much as Jachin and Boaz, the two bronze pillars of the temple, are for the house of the Lord.

[11 : 47] Out from the city flow living waters into the world. This flow is not merely a wadi, through which waters would flow only in the rainy season, but it's a continuing river. At the beginning of the preceding chapter, a fountain had been opened up for the house of David and for Jerusalem for cleansing from sin and uncleanness.

Now, however, the waters of this fountain are flowing out into the wider land and world. Ezekiel's visionary temple also had such a fountain, from which a great river of living water came to heal the land, something which Ezekiel describes in chapter 47 of his prophecy.

In John's Gospel, we have several references to the opening of a fountain and the flowing out of living water, in passages that are almost certainly purposefully alluding to this Old Testament background.

Perhaps the greatest image of the flowing of living water out of the city is given to us in Revelation chapter 22 verses 1 to 2. Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city, also on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month.

The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. This description from Revelation should also remind us that the image of the river flowing out is an image from Eden. As at the end of Revelation, there are two closely associated portraits of Jerusalem, one of a wicked and condemned city being destroyed, and the other of a renewed and transformed city being glorified.

[13 : 21] Earlier in Zechariah's night visions, he saw visions both of a glorified Jerusalem that would be inhabited without walls, and of a sort of perverted parody of the Ark of the Covenant, containing an image of a woman of wickedness that was being separated from the purified city and brought to Shinar, the place of Babylon, where a new temple was being formed for it.

Here we see something similar. Even as Jerusalem is being engulfed by death, a glorious and transformed Jerusalem is being established, and torrents of life are flowing out from it.

We should recognize that the two images belong closely together. The torrents of life flowing out from Jerusalem should be connected with the people fleeing from the condemned city between the mountains.

From one perspective, they may look like desperate escapees, refugees from a calamity. However, we are granted a different perspective, from which it becomes apparent that they are really the chariots of the Lord proceeding to do battle against the nations, as in the final night vision of chapter 6, bringing the nations under the Lord's rule.

They may look like they are just fleeing from death, but they are an outflow of life. What may look like the breaching of the city's defences that allow the enemies to flood in is the opening up of once damned life-giving waters, now permitted to flow out.

- [14 : 40] The result of all of this will be the establishment of the Lord's kingdom, as his throne is over all of the earth, his uniqueness as Lord recognized among all peoples, who will all call upon the name of the Lord, the only name from which true deliverance will come.

There is doubtless an allusion back to Israel's confession in the Shema from Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4 to 5 in verse 9. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Here, as at other points in the prophets, particularly in the prophet Isaiah, the expectation is that monotheism is a truth that will be eschatologically demonstrated, as the sovereignty of the one creator God is manifest over all of the earth and against all other pretenders to his rule, every other name named among men being humbled before him.

The radical recreation of Jerusalem described in this passage continues. The mountains were opened up, the night was turned into day, a river of living waters came forth from the city, and in verse 10, Zechariah speaks of yet further transformation.

Formerly elevated parts of the land will be brought low, while Jerusalem, here defined by landmarks that functioned as some of its boundaries at its prime, will stand as a sentinel of divine blessing over the whole land, waters flowing out from it to water all of the region, which is now entirely below it.

- [16 : 06] The imagery here is closely related to that which we see in places like Isaiah chapter 2, or in Psalm 48 verses 1 to 2, which reads, Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great king.

This new Jerusalem will be inhabited and will dwell in security, never again to be destroyed in a like manner. In thinking about this new Jerusalem, we should recall the description of the Jerusalem inhabited without walls, a description of a secure people, but also a description that might suggest a city that exceeds any single location.

Besides raising up this new Jerusalem, the Lord will judge all of the nations that wage war against it. A deathly plague will cause them to rot even while they are on their feet.

The old Jerusalem was earlier described as a sort of Egypt, with a passage of escape from it being provided by the division of the Mount of Olives. Here the nations that oppose Jerusalem suffer plagues much as Egypt once did.

As they fight against the transformed new Jerusalem, they will die. The gathering together of the nations for judgment, is a motif of a number of prophecies, perhaps most notably in Jesus' Olivet discourse in Matthew chapter 25.

- [17 : 25] While commentators more typically regard Christ's division of the nations like a shepherd separating sheep from goats, as an event belonging to the final day of judgment, it seems more likely to me that it refers primarily to the judgment that goes out to the nations as the new Jerusalem is established and the old Jerusalem destroyed.

The ascended Jesus Christ is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and his rule goes out into all of the earth by means of his people. Those who bless his people will be blessed with the healing water of life, by the powerful river of the Spirit that flows out in and through them, while those who wage war against them or mistreat them will suffer a living death, nations being overthrown by Christ and his might, the plague of the Lord afflicting the entirety of their nations.

As they left Egypt in the Exodus, the children of Israel plundered the Egyptians. The chapter began with the old Jerusalem being plundered by its enemies, but now the wealth of the nations is being gathered as they fight against the renewed Jerusalem.

Reading this passage, we should probably think of Psalm 46, with which much of its imagery resonates. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

[18 : 46] There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved. God will help her when morning dawns.

The nations rage, the kingdoms totter, he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress. Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the end of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the chariots with fire. Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations.

I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Whereas the nations had once come up to Jerusalem to attack her, now the nations will assemble to the new Jerusalem to worship the Lord of hosts, the Lord judging any who do not do so.

Whereas holiness had once been narrowly focused in the old Jerusalem, holiness pervades the new Jerusalem. In Exodus chapter 28, verses 33 to 38, we read the following description of the garments of the high priest.

[19 : 55] On its hem you shall make pomegranates of blue and purple and scarlet yarns around its hem with bells of gold between them, a golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate around the hem of the robe.

And it shall be on Aaron when he ministers, and its sound shall be heard when he goes into the holy place before the Lord, and when he comes out so that he does not die. You shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it like the engraving of a signet, holy to the Lord.

And you shall fasten it on the turban by a cord of blue. It shall be on the front of the turban. It shall be on Aaron's forehead. And Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts.

It shall regularly be on his forehead that they may be accepted before the Lord. What had once been peculiar features of the high priest garments, the bells and the engraved plate reading holy to the Lord, would now be found even on the horses in the city.

Given the way that horses are used as symbols of the Lord's army and people elsewhere in Zechariah, perhaps we should see the horses here as possibly being symbols of the people of the Lord from all nations, all of them now enjoying holy status.

[21 : 07] As God cleanses things, there will no longer be found that which is common. Another image of this is seen in the vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation, which has the dimensions of a cube as a sort of magnified holy of holies, the whole city enjoying a holy status once exclusive to the Lord's throne room.

The trader that is excluded from the house might bring to our minds Jesus' cleansing of the temple in the Gospels. The merchant might be a reference to the Canaanites, as the word is elsewhere used with that sense.

However, it seems to me that we are to reason from the dramatic extension of holiness that the opportunistic merchant who formerly would have sold items for sacrifice to pilgrims is now unnecessary.

Zechariah's oracle here is one with many resemblances to that of Isaiah chapter 2, verses 2 to 4. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be lifted up above the hills and all the nations shall flow to it.

For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations and shall decide disputes for many peoples and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Lightheart suggests that the Feast of Tabernacles continues a sequence of festal allusions within the oracle of chapters 12 to 14. The oracle begins with Passover allusions, the opening feast of the festal calendar.

[23 : 23] We might think of the Feast of Tabernacles as the final feast of the festal calendar and as a feast of dwelling in assembly with the Lord, as the eschatological feast. It is a feast associated with prayers for rain and the gift of living waters from the Lord, after covering has been made for the iniquities of the land on the Day of Atonement shortly beforehand.

Finally, the Feast of Tabernacles was, as James Jordan notes, a feast with subtle associations with the nations, as 70 sacrifices, corresponding to the number of the nations in the table of the nations in Genesis chapter 10, were sacrificed over the course of the feast.

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