

Zechariah 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Zechariah chapter 13. On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness. And on that day, declares the Lord of hosts, I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, so that they shall be remembered no more. And also I will remove from the land the prophets and the spirit of uncleanness. And if anyone again prophesies, his father and mother who bore him will say to him, You shall not live, for you speak lies in the name of the Lord. And his father and mother who bore him shall pierce him through when he prophesies. On that day every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies. He will not put on a hairy cloak in order to deceive, but he will say, I am no prophet, I am a worker of the soil, for a man sold me in my youth. And if one asks him, What are these wounds on your back? He will say, The wounds are received in the house of my friends. Awake, O sword, against my shepherd. Against the man who stands next to me, declares the Lord of hosts. Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered. I will turn my hand against the little ones. In the whole land, declares the Lord, two-thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one-third shall be left alive.

And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refined silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, They are my people, and they will say, The Lord is my God. Zechariah chapter 13 continues the oracle that began in chapter 12. The preceding chapter ended with a spirit of grace being poured out upon the house of David and the inhabitants of Israel, leading to a great mourning of the households over the pierced one, like a firstborn. The mourning there was akin to the general mourning of Egypt, at the time of the tenth plague associated with the Passover. This is described in Exodus chapter 12, verses 29 to 30.

At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne, to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. And Pharaoh rose in the night, he and all his servants, and all the Egyptians. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. Every Egyptian household lost a firstborn, and so each household primarily mourned for their own loss. However, in Zechariah chapter 12, all of the households of the nations are mourning for one firstborn, the pierced one, the shepherd, the branch, or the servant of the Lord. If chapter 12 involved a sort of Passover, chapter 13 opens with a Pentecost. The opening up of the fountain for sin and uncleanness connects with the pouring out of the spirit of grace at the end of chapter 12. We've already come across imagery that might relate to the opening of such a fountain earlier in the book of Zechariah.

In the night visions, the stone of the high priest had seven eyes, and the seven lamps of the lampstand in chapter 4 were also described as having seven eyes. Considering that the word translated eyes can also be translated as springs, and that the vision of the lampstand and the olive trees in particular explores the theme of the flowing out of power, we might understand the eyes to be springs, from which fuel for the burning lamps proceeds. Here in chapter 13, however, the fountain is principally one for cleansing from impurity, like the water prepared in Numbers chapter 19. We might recall the water that flowed out from Ezekiel's visionary temple in chapter 47 of his prophecy. In Jeremiah chapter 2 verse 13, the Lord describes himself as the fountain of living waters. Joel chapter 3 verse 18, while using a different term, declares, The fountain that is opened up in Zechariah chapter 13 is presumably one that comes from the house of the Lord and is ultimately a fountain of the life of the Spirit. Perhaps we might connect this with the blood and water that proceeds from the pierced side of Jesus in John chapter 19 verse 34, especially in light of the allusion to Zechariah chapter 12 verse 10 in the context, and also to the living water that

Jesus says will come from him in John's gospel. We might also, in light of all of the Exodus themes in the surrounding chapters, relate this to the water that comes from the rock. Passages like Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 25 to 27 might also be in the background here. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you, and I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh, and I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and be careful to obey my rules. The fountain cleanses the land from its wickedness idolatry and uncleanness. Prophecy, presumably false prophecy, is driven out. A flip side of making the people holy is the expulsion of that which is wicked from their midst. The more pronounced the setting apart of the people, the more pronounced is the removal of the wicked. This pattern was already evident in the vision of the flying scroll in chapter 5. The cutting off of a name is elsewhere used to refer to the destruction or removal of a person's posterity. Here, used with regard to the idols, it likely refers to the cessation of their worship. As no one calls upon the names of the idols any longer, their names are extinguished. Prophecy is especially singled out here. While some commentators argue that the text envisages a cessation of all prophecy, as we attend to the descriptions of the prophecy that is cut off, it should be apparent that it is false prophecy that is in view. The prophet in view here speaks lies in the name of the Lord, puts on a hairy cloak in order to deceive, and seems to be inflicting wounds upon himself as a sort of pagan prophetic practice. False prophecy had been a pervasive problem in the history of the people, especially prior to the exile. Even though there was nothing like the same problem with false prophecy after the return, it still persisted in some forms. In Nehemiah chapter 6 verses 10 to 14, for instance, we see that Tobiah and Sambalat used mercenary prophets to deliver false prophecies to scare and discourage Nehemiah and the rebuilders of the wall. False prophets could face the death penalty, as we see in Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 20 to 22. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die. And if you say in your heart, how may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken? When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him. False prophets perverted the word of the Lord, sowing distrust of the word of the Lord among the people. They also pretended divine authority for their own false words in order to serve their personal ends. Deuteronomy cautions about the danger of pity and emotional bonds in such situations. In chapter 13 verses 6 to 8.

[7 : 21] If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son or your daughter, or the wife you embrace, or your friend who is as your own soul, entices you secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known, some of the gods of the people who are around you, whether near you or far off from you, from the one end of the earth to the other, you shall not yield to him, or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him. Here in Zechariah's oracle, even the father and mother of the false prophet will rise up against their son and put him to death. Whereas formerly false prophets had enjoyed prominence and security, greatly outnumbering true prophets, and doing their work in the open, as we see in the days of Ahab, for instance, now the false prophet will have to act as secretly as possible, hiding himself, not dressing as a prophet, and trying to explain away the wounds that he had presumably sustained as part of his false prophetic rituals. To understand the wounds of the prophet described here, we should probably think of the prophets of Baal who cut themselves as they called upon Baal in their conflict with Elijah on Mount Carmel. The short chapter ends with a further part of the oracle containing words that Jesus refers to himself in Matthew chapter 26 verse 31.

Then Jesus said to them, You will all fall away because of me this night, for it is written, I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. In the oracles from chapters 9 to 14, shepherd and flock imagery is common, especially in chapter 11, where Zechariah performed a prophetic sign act representing the Lord as the good shepherd of his people, rejected for the foolish shepherds. The oracle here seems to look back prior to the events described in the verses that precede it, referring to the death of Christ, the shepherd of the Lord, which precedes the mourning of the people and the opening of the fountain in Pentecost and the time that follows. The shepherd is described by the Lord as the man who stands next to me, as one intimately associated with him. This is the Davidic branch, and specifically Jesus Christ. When the shepherd was struck, the flock will be scattered. In 1 Kings chapter 22 verse 17, Micaiah the prophet foretold that, as King Ahab was struck, all Israel would be scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. When the people lost their leader, they would lose their unity and all flee in different directions. Without a shepherd to go before them, they would be thrown into great disarray. The sword that strikes the shepherd here is mysteriously commanded by the Lord himself, striking the very man who is at his right hand, the man so closely associated with him.

At this point, we discover the key event that will later lead to the mourning of the people over the one that they pierced. They are the ones who are like the sword that strikes the shepherd, unwittingly enacting the Lord's purpose, being the means by which the blow is delivered, even while in rebellion against him. We might recall the words of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, in Acts chapter 2, verses 22 to 23.

Men of Israel, hear these words. Here Jesus, of course, is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. The Lord would then purify his people, cutting off the wicked and refining the righteous. The division of the people into thirds should draw our minds back to Ezekiel chapter 5, verses 1 to 4.

And you, O son of man, take a sharp sword, use it as a barber's razor, and pass it over your head and your beard. Then take balances for weighing, and divide the hair. A third part you shall burn in the fire in the midst of the city, when the days of the siege are completed. And a third part you shall take and strike with the sword all around the city. And a third part you shall scatter to the wind, and I will unsheathe the sword after them. And you shall take from these a small number, and bind them in the skirts of your robe. And of these again you shall take some, and cast them into the midst of the fire, and burn them in the fire. From there a fire will come out into all the house of Israel. Ezekiel's sign act depicted the preservation and refining of a remnant of one of the thirds. In Zechariah's prophecy we see something similar, although it is a whole third, and not just a remnant of a third that is preserved and refined. It shouldn't be difficult to find reminders for Isaiah chapter 53 in the description of the Lord and his shepherd in this chapter.

[11 : 59] Anthony Pettison writes, The figures in Zechariah and Isaiah are presented as humble and gentle. Zechariah chapter 9 verse 9, Isaiah chapter 42 verse 2. They bring blessings to the nations. Zechariah chapter 9 verse 10, Isaiah chapter 42 verse 1, 4 and 6, and 49 verse 6. They release captives from the pit or dungeon.

Zechariah chapter 9 verses 11 to 12, Isaiah chapter 42 verse 7, and 61 verse 1. They gather those who have been scattered from Israel. Zechariah chapter 9 verse 12, Isaiah chapter 49 verses 5 to 6.

Significantly they are struck. Zechariah chapter 13 verse 7, Isaiah chapter 53 verse 4, and pierced. Zechariah chapter 12 verse 10, Isaiah chapter 53 verse 5. They are associated with shepherd imagery.

Zechariah chapter 13 verses 7 to 9, Isaiah chapter 53 verses 6 to 7. Though the servant is likened to a sheep rather than a shepherd. The figures in Zechariah and Isaiah are rejected by the people.

Zechariah chapter 12 verse 10, 13 verse 7, Isaiah chapter 53 verse 3. They are connected with the pouring out of a spirit upon people. Zechariah chapter 12 verse 10, Isaiah chapter 44 verses 3 to 5.

[13 : 16] Contrary to Peterson's assessment, they are said to suffer by Yahweh's intent. Zechariah chapter 13 verse 7, Isaiah chapter 53 verses 6 and 10. And their deaths result in forgiveness for the sins of the people.

Zechariah chapter 13 verse 1, Isaiah chapter 53 verses 5 to 6. In addition, the people later mourn over them. Though the mourning in Isaiah is implicit. Zechariah chapter 12 verse 10, Isaiah chapter 53 verses 4 to 12. There is also an echo of Isaiah chapter 53 verse 12 in Zechariah chapter 14 verse 14 with the spoil that is divided as a result of the servant's death. These similarities seem too numerous to be coincidental. A question to consider. How might we start to piece together an account of the atonement from Zechariah's oracles of the Lord, the people, and of the Lord Shepherd?