

Zechariah 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Zechariah chapter 10. Ask rain from the Lord in the season of the spring rain, from the Lord who makes the storm clouds, and he will give them showers of rain, to everyone the vegetation in the field. For the household gods utter nonsense, and the diviners see lies. They tell false dreams and give empty consolation. Therefore the people wander like sheep. They are afflicted for lack of a shepherd. My anger is hot against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders. For the Lord of hosts cares for his flock, the house of Judah, and will make them like his majestic steed in battle. From him shall come the cornerstone, from him the tent peg, from him the battle bow, from him every ruler, all of them together. They shall be like mighty men in battle, trampling the foe in the mud of the streets. They shall fight because the Lord is with them, and they shall put to shame the riders on horses. I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph. I will bring them back, because I have compassion on them, and they shall be as though

I had not rejected them. For I am the Lord their God, and I will answer them. Then Ephraim shall become like a mighty warrior, and their hearts shall be glad as with wine. Their children shall see it and be glad. Their hearts shall rejoice in the Lord. I will whistle for them, and gather them in, for I have redeemed them, and they shall be as many as they were before. Though I scattered them among the nations, yet in far countries they shall remember me, and with their children they shall live and return. I will bring them home from the land of Egypt, and gather them from Assyria, and I will bring them to the land of Gilead and to Lebanon, till there is no room for them. He shall pass through the sea of troubles, and strike down the waves of the sea, and all the depths of the Nile shall be dried up. The pride of Assyria shall be laid low, and the scepter of Egypt shall depart. I will make them strong in the Lord, and they shall walk in his name, declares the Lord. The oracle that began in chapter 9 of Zechariah continues into chapter 10. Chapter 9, I argued, foretold the coming of Alexander the Great, and then looked forward to the period of the Maccabees. The conflict between the sons of

Zion and the sons of Javan, or the sons of Greece, relates to the conflict between the Hellenized Jews and the traditional Jews within that period. Chapter 9 contained allusions back to the story of the patriarchs, and to the Passover and the Exodus, in details such as that of the waterless pit that recalled the pit into which Joseph was thrown. Such Exodus themes continue, and become more prominent in chapter 10. From the waterless pit in chapter 9 verse 11, to the reign of verse 1 of chapter 10, we might see a deliverance from drought. This recalls Deuteronomy chapter 11 verses 13 to 17, verses that promise the rains in their season, if the people obey the Lord. Verse 2, which speaks of the futility of the household gods, or the teraphim, and the lies of the diviners, seems a little out of place within the historical context. After the Jews returned from exile, there do not seem to be the same problems with idolatry as there were prior to it. Indeed, the reference to household gods and diviners might recall an earlier period of Israel's history. The teraphim, of course, are most associated with the story of Jacob and Laban, Jacob's teraphim or household gods being taken by Rachel.

The character of Micah in Judges chapter 17 also has household gods. Perhaps, as with the reference to the waterless pit in the preceding chapter, the people's failures in the area of idolatry are being described in a way that is designed to bring to mind these earlier stories of Israel's history.

It is also possible to see the reference here as referring back to the reasons why they were sent into exile in the first place, rather than to sins that would happen later in the nation's history.

[3 : 52] Such a statement would certainly be reminiscent of prophecies such as that of Jeremiah. In verse 16 of the preceding chapter, the Lord had described his people as a flock. On that day the Lord their God will save them as the flock of his people, for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land. Flock, sheep and shepherd imagery becomes more prominent within this oracle, especially in the following chapter, but also here, where the Lord speaks about the people wandering like sheep, lacking a shepherd. The shepherd that they lack here might be a reference to a Davidic ruler or another sort of good king. This figure should be distinguished from the shepherd's plural that are mentioned in verse 3, the ones against whom God's anger is hot.

Those shepherds are most likely the leaders of other nations. They are related to the leaders, or more literally, the he goats. In places like Ezekiel chapter 34, the Lord speaks against the false shepherds of his people. Here the false shepherds are most likely referring to the Seleucid rulers.

The Lord will rise up against those false shepherds as the true shepherd of his people. He will make Judah the ruling tribe that represents the whole, like a majestic steed in battle. In the preceding chapter, he described making Judah his bow and Ephraim his arrow. Once again, the Lord is going to act with power, not just for his people, but through his people, equipping them as a weapon of his warfare. As the Lord's majestic steed, they would put to shame the riders on horses that are mentioned in verse 5. The riders on horses are most likely the Seleucid kings and their armies.

The Lord acting as the shepherd of his people to restore them and re-establish them, placing faithful shepherds over them, is also described in places like Jeremiah chapter 23, verses 3 to 5. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.

I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. Verse 4 of Zechariah chapter 10 also describes the establishment of new rule within the nation. Here, however, the governing metaphor is architectural. The ruler is compared to the cornerstone from which the building is built up, the tent peg that gives security. The Lord would also make Judah, as in verse 13 of the preceding chapter, his battle bow. Where formerly Judah had been harassed and oppressed, Judah would subdue their enemies and trample them underfoot. Former oppressors would be crushed, receiving the consequences of their wickedness. The northern kingdom of Israel had been removed from the land in 722 BC by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom had finally been overthrown by the Babylonians in 586 BC.

[6 : 45] The great division in the kingdom, first a judgment for the sin of Solomon, and a consequence of the arrogance and hubris of his son, continued for many years where the nations warred against each other and sometimes enjoyed a fragile peace. However, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel foretold a time when the two nations would no longer be separate. There was already a sense in which this was coming to pass after the return, when the people were defined not so much by tribal identities, but as Jews, all entering more fully into the status of Judahites. However, in the time of Zechariah, the people who had returned to the land were only a small number relative to the numbers that formerly existed there. Their territory was limited, much of the former land had been lost to them, and they were also under the rule of the Persians. The overwhelming majority of Jews still existed in exile communities outside of the land. Here the Lord seems to be speaking of a greater restoration still to come. He will re-establish his people, not just as a small territory within the former region of Judah, under foreign rule, but as an independent nation, enjoying something nearer to the extent of its former boundaries. It would be as if they had never been sent into exile in the first place.

As the nation enjoyed its new independence and its boundaries extended, the land would be dramatically repopulated. The people had been sown among the nations, dwelling in exile communities for a few centuries, and yet as the Lord whistled for them, as a shepherd might whistle for his flock, many would return to the land. The Lord speaks of bringing them from Egypt and from Assyria.

A number of different waves of refugees from Judah had gone down to Egypt at various points in history. One of the most notable of these waves of refugees is described for us in the book of Jeremiah as people fled after the assassination of Gedaliah, the governor of Judah. Egypt, of course, was the place from which the original exodus had come up. Assyria no longer existed as an empire, but the Assyrians were the ones who had removed the people from the northern kingdom and settled them in territories far from the land. While the Assyrians were no longer a power, the consequences of their historic actions remained. The Lord speaks of bringing his people to the land of Gilead and Lebanon.

Gilead in the region of the Transjordan and Lebanon in the far north represent some of the furthest extremities of the land of Israel. As the Lord brought back the people and repopulated the land, it would also recover territory that had long been lost. The Lord describes his paving of the way for this using imagery taken directly from the story of the exodus, passing through the Sea of Troubles, striking down the waves of the sea, and all the depths of the Nile being dried up. Foreign rulers would also be humbled as the Lord restored his people. Perhaps the Assyrians here are standing in part for the Syrian Seleucids, who will be humbled through the Maccabean revolt and the subsequent rise of the Jewish nation under the Hasmonean dynasty. A question to consider, looking closely at this chapter, how can you see the theme of strength and strengthening being played out within it?