

Zechariah 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Zechariah chapter 9. The oracle of the word of the Lord is against the land of Hedrach, and Damascus is its resting place. For the Lord has an eye on mankind, and on all the tribes of Israel, and on Hamath also, which borders on it, Tyre and Sidon, though they are very wise.

Tyre has built herself a rampart, and heaped up silver like dust, and fine gold like the mud of the streets. But behold, the Lord will strip her of her possessions, and strike down her power on the sea, and she shall be devoured by fire. Ashkelon shall see it, and be afraid. Gaza too, and shall writhe in anguish. Ekron also, because its hopes are confounded. The king shall perish from Gaza. Ashkelon shall be uninhabited. A mixed people shall dwell in Ashdod, and I will cut off the pride of Philistia. I will take away its blood from its mouth, and its abominations from between its teeth.

It too shall be a remnant for our God. It shall be like a clan in Judah, and Ekron shall be like the Jebusites. Then I will encamp at my house as a guard, so that none shall march to and fro.

No oppressor shall again march over them, for now I see with my own eyes. 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. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the warhorse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations. His rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth. As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope. Today I declare that I will restore to you double, for I have bent Judah as my bow. I have made Ephraim its arrow. I will stir up your sons, O Zion, against your sons, O Greece, and wield you like a warrior's sword. Then the Lord will appear over them, and his arrow will go forth like lightning.

The Lord God will sound the trumpet, and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south. The Lord of hosts will protect them, and they shall devour and tread down the slingstones, and they shall drink and roar as if drunk with wine, and shall be full like a bowl, drenched like the corners of the altar. 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.

[2 : 3 4] For how great is his goodness, and how great his beauty! Grain shall make the young men flourish, and new wine the young women. In Zechariah chapter 9 we begin a new section of the book.

Chapters 9 to 14 contain two extended oracles that are marked out by prophetic formulae. The first part of Zechariah ran from chapters 1 to 6, containing the night visions of Zechariah.

Chapters 7 to 8 transition between those earlier chapters, summing up some of their themes, and leading us to chapters 9 to 14 with which the book concludes. The oracles contained in these chapters are extremely difficult to understand, and there is little agreement to be found among scholars, many of whom date these prophecies to a period later than that of Zechariah.

Determining the events to which these prophecies refer is also difficult, with a considerable range of different positions being held by different scholars, positions that don't map easily onto differences between conservatives and liberals, for instance.

Many of the prophecies of these chapters seem quite vague, others more symbolic. Some of these prophecies, related to Christ in the New Testament, have been taken to be referring specifically to him, whereas there are other commentators who recognise that Christ is being referred to, yet believe that there are more immediate reference in view.

[3 : 52] Given the fact that verse 13 speaks of conflict between the Jews and the Greeks, many commentators think that we might be dealing with the aftermath of the conquest of the land by Alexander the Great.

Our historical knowledge of the relevant periods here is fairly sketchy, and as a result it's difficult to rest too much upon any particular connections that we might make. Looking at the chapter more broadly, it seems to speak of an invasion and conquest of the land.

There are various themes of Exodus scattered throughout as well. In Zechariah chapter 6, in the final one of the night visions, the chariots were sent out from between the two bronze mountains.

The Lord was going to shake things up among the nations. And in this chapter we see the movement of the Lord, starting with Syria, down to Phoenicia and then to Philistia. Moving from north to south, the Lord is acting within the land.

Having discovered an Assyrian stele with a reference to Hadrach, we know that it was one of the cities of the region. The full extent of the boundaries of the promised land that are mentioned in various parts of Deuteronomy and elsewhere include the realm of Damascus, and in the prophecy of Ezekiel, in the idealized division of the land, Tyre, Sidon and the realm of the Philistines are also included within Israel's territory.

[5 : 07] Tyre and Sidon were Phoenician cities, famous for trade, and had long had dealings with Israel over its history, most notably during the reign of Hiram. Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, was a Sidonian princess.

And many of the materials used for Israel's temples were obtained from Tyre and Sidon. Tyre is also mentioned in the prophecy of Amos, chapter 1, verses 9-10. Thus says the Lord, For three transgressions of Tyre and for four I will not revoke the punishment, because they delivered up a whole people to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of brotherhood.

So I will send a fire upon the wall of Tyre, and it shall devour his strongholds. After it was conquered by Alexander the Great, Tyre would indeed be destroyed by fire.

Tyre and Sidon, which had become very rich by their trading, prided themselves upon their wealth and also their security. Tyre seemed impregnable as a city, an Ireland fortress defended by its breakwater.

It had withstood lengthy sieges in the past, lasting many years. Playing upon the word for Tyre, Sore, the Lord speaks about Tyre building herself a rampart, a matsaw.

[6 : 16] However, there is an irony here, as the word matsaw is also the word for siege. Tyre was successfully overthrown by Alexander in 332 BC. While he had originally tried to blockade the city and capture it using more conventional means, he ended up having to build a causeway to the city, and then breached its walls.

In addition to Tyre's pride in its security, it took pride in its wealth. It had heaped up silver like dust and fine gold like the mud of the streets. There is again an irony here.

Silver and gold are plentiful, but they are plentiful like the dust and mud of the streets, which are trampled and end up proving worthless. Ezekiel chapter 28 verses 2-5 also speak of these traits of Tyre, particularly its pride in its wealth and its wisdom, and the way that those things would be brought to nothing.

Son of man, say to the prince of Tyre, Thus says the Lord God, Because your heart is proud, and you have said, I am a God, I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas.

Yet you are but a man, and no God, though you make your heart like the heart of a God. You are indeed wiser than Daniel. No secret is hidden from you. By your wisdom and your understanding, you have made wealth for yourself, and have gathered gold and silver into your treasuries.

[7 : 33] By your great wisdom in your trade, you have increased your wealth, and your heart has become proud in your wealth. Tyre's wealth and strength would end up coming to nothing. With the coming of Alexander the Great, it would be entirely overthrown.

Given the power and wealth of Tyre, its defeat would terrify and dismay the Philistines, with whom they were often associated. The Philistines do not seem to have been a great force at this point in history.

Their significance here is probably on account of their lengthy historical conflicts with Israel, rather than on account of their strength at that moment in time. As in Amos chapter 1 verses 6 to 8, there's no reference to Gath here, which appears to have been removed from the list of the major cities of the Philistines some time previously.

After his defeat of Tyre in 332 BC, Alexander had gone down to Gaza, taking that city with the same siege engines with which he had taken Tyre. Taking the city, he had put the men to the sword, taken the women and the children as slaves, and dragged the eunuch who had commanded the city, and refused to kneel to him, around the city behind a chariot while still alive.

Gaza was clearly justified in being dismayed by the news from Tyre. The consequence of the conquest of Philistia is the humbling of its pride, the cutting off of its abominations, and the repopulation of its territories.

[8 : 51] The Jebusites had formerly controlled the territory of Jerusalem, and many of them seem to have been assimilated into the nation of Israel over time. Ornan the Jebusite, for instance, sold the land that became the place for the temple.

Despite the judgment falling upon them, and their loss of nationhood, and their humbling as a people, there is a blessing held out for the Philistines, the prospect of assimilating into the people of Israel that surround them.

Those that remain can also become a remnant for God. They can be like a clan or extended family within the nation of Judah. As this power under his control moves from the north to the south, the Lord will protect his people and his house.

Even in the midst of Alexander's sanguinary invasion, which devastated surrounding powers, they would be spared. We don't know exactly how and why Jerusalem was spared, but there is a fascinating passage at the end of book 11 of Josephus' Antiquities of the Jews, within which he relates the events that followed the defeat of Gaza.

Jadua, the high priest at the time, had heard news of Alexander's victory, and was unsurprisingly greatly dismayed. He and the rest of the people sacrificed to the Lord and sought his help.

[9 : 59] He then received a dream in which he was told that he should open the gates of the city, prepare it for a celebration, get the people to wear white garments, and the priests to dress in their clothes of office.

He should not be afraid. The Lord would protect them. While Alexander and the men following him had originally intended to plunder and destroy the city, when Alexander saw Jadua and the procession that was coming out to meet him, his mind was quite changed.

Josephus writes, For Alexander, when he saw the multitude at a distance, in white garments, while the priests stood clothed with fine linen, and the high priest in purple and scarlet clothing, with his mitre on his head, having the golden plate whereon the name of God was engraved, he approached by himself and adored that name, and first saluted the high priest.

The Jews also did all together with one voice salute Alexander, and encompass him about. Whereupon the kings of Syria and the rest were surprised at what Alexander had done, and supposed him disordered in his mind.

However, Parmenio alone went up to him, and asked him how it came to pass that, when all others adored him, he should adore the high priest of the Jews. To whom he replied, I did not adore him, but that God who hath honoured him with his high priesthood.

[11 : 12] For I saw this very person in a dream, in this very habit, when I was at Dios in Macedonia, who, when I was considering with myself how I might obtain the dominion of Asia, exhorted me to make no delay, but boldly to press over the sea thither, for that he would conduct my army, and would give me the dominion over the Persians.

Whence it is that, having seen no other in that habit, and now seeing this person in it, and remembering that vision, and the exhortation which I had in my dream, I believe that I bring this army under the divine conduct, and shall therewith conquer Darius, and destroy the power of the Persians, and that all things will succeed according to what is in my own mind.

Josephus goes on to record that the high priest and the other priests showed Alexander the references to him within the book of Daniel. As a result, Alexander granted the Jews special favours within the empire.

If this account of Josephus is even partially true, then Alexander's campaign very neatly fits the initial things foretold within this chapter. Verses 9 to 10 are commonly related to Christ, as they refer to the triumphal entry within the book of Matthew and elsewhere.

However, in the more immediate context, they may refer primarily to the figure of Alexander the Great. According to Josephus' account, Alexander the Great enjoyed a peaceful, triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem, coming not with the violence of warhorse and chariot, as he had at Tyre and Gaza, but in peace and with celebrations, as a welcome deliverer.

[12 : 41] The description of the king that is coming might also recall Genesis chapter 49, verses 10 to 11, and the blessing upon Judah. The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

Binding his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine, and his vesture in the blood of grapes. There is also here an allusion to the messianic Psalm 72, verse 8.

May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth. This would very naturally be fulfilled in the figure of Alexander. However, it looks forward to a figure that's even greater than Alexander.

Alexander is a world emperor. We have an even greater world emperor, of course, in the figure of Christ. As Christ enters into Jerusalem in his triumphal entry, he is having an even fuller fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah.

He may not be the immediate and initial referent of the prophecy, but he is the one in whom it finds its fuller realization. The book of Daniel prophesies into the intertestamental period, particularly in chapter 11, concerning the events that will happen following the defeat of the empire of Persia.

[13 : 54] The period in question is described with symbolic language. As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

This would strongly evoke the memory of the figure of Joseph in Genesis chapter 37, verse 24. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty. There was no water in it.

There is a similar waterless pit within the story of Jeremiah, who also ends up being taken down into Egypt against his wishes. The prophecy of verses 11 to 13 might look forward to a time beyond the conquest of Alexander, to the period when the land was under the control of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the brutal king of the Greek Seleucid dynasty, who sought forcibly to Hellenize the Jews and to defile their worship.

The conflict between the traditional and the Hellenized Jews led to civil war. This civil war escalated when Antiochus entered on the side of the Hellenizers. The events of this period are described in the books of the Maccabees.

The Maccabean revolt was a near miraculous success, leading to Jerusalem being recaptured in 164 BC and the temple rededicated. By the 140s BC, Israel had secured semi-independence of the Seleucids under the rule of the Hasmonean dynasty, who were ethnarchs or kings and also high priests.

[15 : 14] The Jews would later achieve independence and the Hasmonean kingdom would expand to include much of the surrounding region. The conflict described in verse 13 seems to refer to a joining together of the faithful people in opposition to some other force.

Judah refers to the people of the south and Ephraim the people formerly associated with the northern kingdom. They are joined together like a bow and an arrow. The conflict between the sons of Zion and the sons of Greece might, as Peter Lighthouse observes, not primarily be the conflict between the external forces of Greece and the Jews, but rather the conflict between the faithful traditional Jews and the Hellenized Jews, those who had allowed the worship of the Lord to become corrupted.

The Lord would empower them in their struggle. He had bent Judah's bow and made Ephraim his arrow, and his arrows would go forth like lightning. We see a rapid cycle of images in verse 15.

Lighthouse notes the movement from devouring or eating, presumably referring to the power of the sword, to treading down the slingstones, the weapons of the adversaries. Treading down slingstones is, however, a strange image, and Lighthouse suggests that it is most likely because it transitions from treading down the weapons of the adversaries to an image of treading out grapes in a harvest.

Elsewhere in the scripture, the image of treading out grapes is used for victory in battle, and this victorious wine pressing leads to the Jews drinking and roaring as if drunk with wine.

[16 : 41] They become full like a bowl, which might be an image of wine, but also an image of blood, and it is such a transition from an image of wine to an image of blood that seems to inform the final image of this verse, drenched like the corners of the altar.

The import, then, is that this would serve as a sort of purification of the land. The corners or the horns of the altar represent all the extremities of the land. Those would all be sacrificially cleansed, sacrificially cleansed through victory in battle.

The Lord's hand would be demonstrated in all of this. He would save his people as his own flock, setting them apart as his special possession, like precious stones or jewels in a crown.

This would lead to joy and celebration in the goodness of the Lord and the flourishing of the people. A question to consider, as we reflect upon the original context and meaning of the one entering Jerusalem, how might it help us better to understand the ways in which the Gospel writers are using this prophecy?