

Zechariah 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[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?

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.

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, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. Judah had failed to respond properly to that word, and now the same word is addressed to them again, but now attended by the cautionary example of their fathers before them. The Lord's focus in this charge is particularly upon the need for justice within the life of the people and their society. The perversion of justice, especially in the case of the weakest and most vulnerable and dependent within the society, is frequently a matter for which the Lord condemns his people within the prophetic literature. The Lord is the guardian and defender of the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, and the poor, marginal figures who depend heavily upon the justice, the mercy, and the kindness of the people in the society more broadly. Where they are mistreated, the Lord will act against their oppressors. The response of the people to the Lord's warning prior to the exile was stubborn refusal to listen. It wasn't as if it was hard to hear. The Lord sent many former prophets by his spirit, each bearing the same message, but the people hardened their hearts against him, preparing themselves for judgment as a result, and provoking the Lord's wrath. For their refusal to hear, they received poetic justice. The Lord called to them by his prophets, and they refused to hear. So when they call upon him, he will refuse to hear. The Lord then came like a whirlwind upon them, scattering them among the nations, devastating and desolating the land that he had given them.

A question to consider, where else in the scriptures would we go to find teaching concerning appropriate fasting?