

## NOTES ON ZECHARIAH CHAPTERS 9-14

**9:1-8** Chapters 9-14, different in character and material to 1-8, may be from a much later period towards the end of Z's life, perhaps from around 490 or even 480-479 when Greece (named at 9:13) and Persia (of which Palestine was an outlying province) had begun to confront each other (see Webb Intro 44). They consist of two long prophecies in which the rejection and triumph of the Messiah are clearly foreshadowed. It is not the physical city of Jerusalem and state of Israel that are in view, but the kingdom of God and his final victory over all who oppose his rule. 'Our surest guide to the interpretation of these chapters will be the ways their content is reflected in the fuller interpretation of the coming of God's kingdom in the NT' (Webb).

The text and translation of v1b are problematic. ESV has *For the Lord has an eye on mankind and on all the tribes of Israel* (a reading preferred by Baldwin); this is a major motif in the whole book and serves to link the two sections as a parenthesis. Just as God has taken action in the past against Israel's historical enemies, so too he will personally protect his people in the future. The places mentioned in vv1-4 are to the north of Israel, and had prospered under Assyrian overlordship; those in 5-7 are the Philistine cities to the W near the coast which had been a thorn in David's side; all are now spent forces. 'The prophet here mentions only a few cities known to the Jews, ... that they might feel assured that nothing is so strong and impetuous in the world which God cannot easily subdue and lay prostrate' (Calvin). v8 declares God's personal presence with and close watch over his people.

**9:9-10** This is one of the best known and most loved passages in the OT, seen as fulfilled in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Mt 21:5, Jn 12:15). A *donkey* symbolises non-reliance on weapons of war; Israel's tribes and Jerusalem itself are to depend entirely on their God for victory. For Z, God's return to live in Jerusalem means joy (cf 2:10), justice, salvation and peace (*shalom*). 'Shalom sums up all the blessings of the Messianic age, when reconciliation with God and his righteous rule will ensure a just and lasting peace' (Baldwin). The last two lines of v10 are similar to Ps 72:8 (the whole of Ps 72 is Messianic). *The River* is the Euphrates. Christ's reign, and his mission, are worldwide (Acts 1:8).

**9:11-13** 'When these words were written, many Israelites were still in exile' (Webb); those born in Babylon in 550 would now be 70. The only other place in the OT where the phrase *the blood of the covenant* occurs is Exod 24:8, pledging the people to obedience to the law of Moses. To Christian believers it applies to the new covenant secured by Christ's death. *I will restore twice* (v12) is God's promise in Isa 40:2 and 61:7. The reference to Greece (Javan, v13) is puzzling, as Greece would not be a threat to Israel until the second century BC; it may be a general reference to distant nations, symbolising the opposition of the godless world.

**9:14-17** This section recalls other OT theophanies (manifestations of God in visible form) such as Exod 19:16-19, Ps 18:6-19. *The south* may refer to Mt Sinai, where dust storms are a well-known feature. Calvin comments on this passage: 'Since the Jews might have justly felt a distrust in their own strength, the Prophet continually teaches them that their safety depended not on earthly aids, but that God alone was sufficient, for he could easily render them safe and secure. He also adds, that there would be to them plenty of bread and wine to satisfy them.' It is an ideal picture of the church of Christ, or indeed of a man or woman filled with the Spirit and leading an attractive, victorious life.

**10:1-5** Chapters 10 and 11 are united by a common theme: 'Leadership is a serious business, with high accountability attached to it, and huge consequences (for good or ill) for those who are led' (Webb). *Ask the Lord* (v1) emphasises human cooperation with Divine blessing. If the context is some decades after the heady optimism of chs 1-8, Judah has not grown spiritually strong after the leadership of Joshua and Zerubbabel, and needs to be recalled to its dependence upon God's guidance and provision. *Diviners* had been banned in Deut 18, as prophets would replace them, yet they and other superstitious alternatives to seeking God's will were apparently still around (like astrology today). The *cornerstone*, *peg* and *bow* are symbols of strong leadership (Isa 28:16, Isa 22:23, 2 Ki 13:17)(Baldwin). The *shepherd* metaphor recurs from now on until the final chapters.

**10:6-12** *Judah* (v6) represents the two southern tribes, *Joseph* and *Ephraim* the ten northern tribes. Cyrus' decree of 538 had begun the restoration of Judah, but well into the fifth century many other Israelites were still scattered among the nations. *Assyria* (now a spent force) and *Egypt* (vv10-11) represent the lands of exile and the power of the godless world; *Gilead* (balm) and *Lebanon* (strength) are places of comfort and help in God's own land. Promises of God's personal restoration abound. *As though I had not rejected them* (v6) anticipates the justification brought by the death of Christ (Rom 3:24). The passage has an eschatological bearing on the full ingathering of the new Israel by God's Messiah at the Last Day (Webb).

**11:1-11** vv1-3 are still in poetic form and conclude the judgment against Israel's enemies begun at 9:1. *Lebanon*, which in 10:10 stood for strength, here depicts lofty arrogance; likewise *Bashan* (ENE of the Sea of Galilee). Worldly security as symbolised by pastures and rivers (*Jordan*) is replaced by dismay and terror. God's 'strange work' (Isa 28:21) is to use disaster and loss to bring his people to their senses. At v4 the tone becomes more personal as the prophet (or the unrecognised messianic King?) laments first the plundering of the flock by the sheep traders, then the flock's hatred of their own shepherd. v8 *them* refers not to the shepherds but to the flock (Israel) who reject God's rule. In this 'difficult passage' (Baldwin) the flock itself seems to be abandoned by God, as seen in the history of Israel leading up to the Exile. The identity of *the three shepherds* is unclear and may indicate a devilish attempt to supplant the Trinity, which is however doomed (Isa 14:12-15). There may come times when the church suffers from persecution, or from inadequate leadership, or is even unfaithful to Christ's Lordship in some way. The breaking of the shepherd's *Favour* staff may symbolise the uselessness of the Mosaic covenant. But God has not finally abandoned his people (NIV v10 *all the nations* may refer to the tribes of Israel), as we see in Isaiah 54:7-8: 'For a brief moment I ... hid my face from you, ... but with deep compassion I will bring you back.'

**11:12-17** Matthew's Gospel (26:14-16, 27:3-10) sees vv12-13 as fulfilled in the story of Judas' betrayal of Christ. *Thirty pieces of silver* is ironically held to be a *handsome price* – it was the legal value of a slave's life (Exod 21:32). Christ became a rejected slave for us (Isa 53:3, Phil 2:7). v13 The reference to *the potter* is unclear in its context, but Mt 27:6-10 finds its fulfilment in the purchase of the potter's field with the price of Christ's betrayal. The breaking of the staff *Union* symbolises the break-up of the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel, but at a deeper level it shows that 'true unity between people depends on union with God' (Webb). Christ the good shepherd, who did not desert his flock but died for them (Jn 10:15), is contrasted with the *foolish* and *worthless* shepherd who acts selfishly and irresponsibly; the prophet, again ironically, is now commanded to act out this shameful role. Thus chapters 9-11 present a warning and a reassurance: to reject God and his covenant will always lead to disaster; leaders who put their own appetite for pleasure and power before the needs of their subjects will come under God's active displeasure and judgment; but a new beginning is in view when this same God will come as King in the person of his Messiah. But will he too be rejected by the flock (Lk 19:14, Jn 1:10-11)?

In **chs 12-14** the phrase *on that day* occurs some 16 times, marking the final pages of the book as broadly eschatological (i.e. they refer to the Lord acting decisively and climactically at a future time from the writer's viewpoint). Christians can see the fulfilment of these prophecies in the first and second comings of Christ, when judgment takes place, firstly on sin itself at the cross, and then on the Lord's enemies at the final reckoning. At the same time there are echoes of the sieges of Jerusalem that have taken place in history, with language drawn from Jeremiah and Ezekiel (which all Z's readers would recognise instantly).

**12:1-5** v1 presents a universal vision of God the Creator. vv2-3 are a warning to all who would oppose Judah and Jerusalem (signifying God's true people in every age). The southern kingdom, all that was left of the former Israel, 'existed precariously in a pagan world, always under virtual siege from hostile forces, and threatened with extinction' (Webb). v4 possibly recalls 2 Ki 6:18 when the Aramaean army besieging Elisha in Dothan was struck with blindness. v5 reminds us that if the church wins victories, it is not through her own strength or virtue (Acts 4:10). She may have to go through periods of defeat and ignominy, when all she can do is to endure patiently (Rev 13:7-10).

**12:6-9** Alongside the realism of Jerusalem's weakness and disunity the prophet strikes a note of fierce hope, in which God promises to give strong leadership and unity. In Zechariah's day there were tensions between returning exiles and permanent inhabitants, between 'southerners' and 'northerners', and between the city of Jerusalem and the less affluent rural areas of Judah. Here the *clans of Judah* (v6) are promised the same protection and resources as the city of Jerusalem, while Jerusalem itself will be securely established as God's own city. Not only will all the inhabitants, even *the feeblest* (v8), whether of outlying Judah or central Jerusalem, be equally strong and secure; but the *house of David* (the kingly line) will provide the dynamic leadership of *the angel of the Lord* himself (often identified with Christ). From a later perspective the events of AD 66-73, resulting in the total destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by the Romans, may seem to negate these promises; but for Christians they are clearly fulfilled in Christ and God's people who trust in him (Mt 2:6 'my people Israel', Rom 9:6-8 'the children of the promise'). The message of 12:1-9 is that the Church of God is strong, not in itself or in its leaders, but in Christ and in the part played by every member (Eph 4:16, 1 Pet 2:9) in revealing the glory of God to the world.

**12:10-14** However, there are deeper issues that need resolving, if the troubled relationship between God and his people is to be properly healed. Z stresses how the sins of the people have pierced the very heart of God. When they see this, true mourning takes place, pictured as the grief poured out when *an only child* has been lost, affecting the whole family and the whole nation. In v10 the prophet again takes on the persona of Christ (as in 11:8, 12); this is a breathtaking pre-echo of the cross and the *piercing* of Jesus' body by the nails and the spear (it is quoted at Jn 19:37 and Rev 1:7, and paralleled in Ps 22:16 and Isa 53:4-5). It touches on themes of prayer, repentance for sin, the Spirit freely given, the uniqueness of Christ and the two natures within the Godhead. For the *pouring out* of the Holy Spirit resulting in a deepened work of God within us see Acts 2:33 (the promise fulfilled), Jn 16:8 (awareness of sin and judgment), Joel 2:28-32 (saving prayer), Tit 3:6 (rebirth and renewal), Ezek 39:29 (knowledge of God), Isa 32:15 (fruitfulness). v11 In Canaanite popular superstition the storm-god *Hadad* mourned for his lost son. *Rimmon* is a Canaanite deity (2 Ki 5:18). *Megiddo* is the plain where king Josiah died in battle (2 Ki 23:29). vv12-13 *Nathan* and *Shimei* were members of David's family.

**13:1-6** V1 has always been identified as Messianic and fulfils the New Covenant promise of 'cleansing from sin' (Jer 31:34, Ezek 36:25). 'The *fountain* is a metaphor for overflowing, never-failing, inexhaustible supply' (Webb). Religion by itself cannot cleanse: both prophet and priest (Joshua in ch 3) are all too conscious of their impurity and deceit. But the Lord has promised to remove their sin 'in a single day' (3:9). The Cross deals with the vicious circle of idolatry (which breeds false prophecy) and untruth (which breeds *garment of hair* idolatry). The (v4) stands for the self-advertising asceticism of the pious fraud (Mt 23:28, Lk 18:11). In v6 the repentant prophet is asked how he (not *they* as NIV) received 'the wounds between his hands' (Hebrew) and replies *at the house of my friends* (LXX 'in my beloved house'). This is either a lame excuse for the false prophet's self-inflicted scars (as in 1 Ki 18:28), or is a pre-echo of Jesus' betrayal by Judas (see Jn 13:18). Z is, as usual, baffling and ambiguous; but in this final section of the book the messianic stratum outcrops with startling frequency.

**13:7-9** V7 is explicitly applied by Jesus Christ to himself at Mt 26:31 and Mk 14:27, in the context of Gethsemane when the disciples forsook him and fled. *My shepherd ... the man who is close to me* anticipates Jesus as the good Shepherd (John 10) and as the Son uniquely close to the Father's heart (Jn 1:18). But why should God turn his *sword* upon his chosen companion and his *hand against the little ones* of the flock? We have already (12:10) seen the identification of the pierced Shepherd with the Lord himself; his piercing, his wounds are for our healing (Isa 53:5). The twin clues are the remnant language of v8 (recalling Isa 10:21, cf Rom 9:27) and the covenant language of v9 (recalling Jer 31:33). The prophet is aware that for God's plan for his people to work, for them to be truly set free from sin, there must be a covenant ratified with blood (see 9:11) and a *refining* through *fire* which brings holiness. The Cross must deal with both the guilt and the power of sin; in Pauline terms, Christ Jesus has become for us our righteousness, holiness and redemption (1 Cor 1:30). In *Little Gidding* T S Eliot writes of 'the choice of pyre or pyre – to be redeemed from fire by fire.' The theme of 'refining by fire' is strong in the OT, eg in Mal 3:3; though painful, it is not going to harm us (Isa 43:2) but instead leads to answered prayer and a humble assurance that the Lord is indeed *our God*.

**14:1-5** Almost half the references to the *day of the Lord* occur in the final chapter, bringing the book to an eschatological climax. The language is vivid, symbolical, allusive and (on the face of it) highly obscure. We have spent long enough with Z to know that he is not giving us a literal trailer for historical events to come so much as a reference point for our faith whatever those events may bring. Our God is big enough to see us through, despite our weakness and helplessness. vv1-2 paint a grim picture indeed: unlike 12:1-9, this siege of Jerusalem is catastrophic and painful. Unlike the events of 587 where the invaders are Babylonian, it is an attack by *all the nations* on the Holy City. The church of Christ may come under severe strain from the unbelieving world, but God is in control, as he was at the Exodus (Exod 14:10-15), and ultimate victory is assured (vv3, 9; cf Dan 7:21-22). Paul's ministry was similarly desperate yet triumphant (2 Cor 6:4-10). vv4-5 envisage the splitting of the *Mount of Olives* (the long ridge to the E of Jerusalem) to enable the survivors of the siege to escape to *Azel* (unidentified). When God intervenes even nature is reconfigured (prayer can 'move mountains,' Mk 11:23). The *earthquake in the days of Uzziah* occurred in about 750 BC, traditionally at the moment the king was struck by leprosy, bringing a double disaster upon the city; yet some were able to escape with their lives. For Christians, v5 points to the second coming of Christ, attended by his *holy ones* (1 Thess 4:14-17). Jesus at his Ascension left the earth in the vicinity of the Mount of Olives (Lk 24:15), but the NT does not commit itself to any locality, figurative or actual, for his return; it will be public and worldwide, and in person ('every eye will see him,' Rev 1:7).

**14:6-9** Once again in his descriptions of *that day* Z is being thoroughly eschatological, with as it were one foot in the old creation and one foot in the new. Themes of light, living water and universal kingship link directly with the NT vision of Jesus as Lord of all. The phenomenon of vv6-7, very strange from a natural viewpoint, finds fulfilment in the city of the new Jerusalem where the glory of God is the one source of *light* (Rev 21:23-25). Jesus anticipates this at the Feast of Tabernacles, saying 'I am the light of the world' (Jn 8:12). To reject that light is to choose endless darkness and irreversible judgment (Jn 3:36). Again, v8 is actualised in the healing river of the new city which flows all year round (Rev 22:1-2, cf Ezek 47:8, 12); it may be this place in Z that Jesus is recalling in his promise of the Spirit's 'rivers of living water' (Jn 7:38 and see on Zech 14:16-19). The *Dead Sea* may stand for stagnant, lifeless forms of worship, while the *Mediterranean* represents the Gentile world: formal religion and godless unbelief will be things of the past. v9 matches Isaiah's vision of an earth 'full of the knowledge of the Lord' (11:9) in the messianic new creation. Meanwhile the invitation of Jesus is to come to him 'while you have the light' (Isaiah's 'day of salvation', 49:8 with 2 Cor 6:2).

**14:10-15** 'Much of the final chapter's picture is wildly metaphorical' (Goldingay), and this section is no exception. *Geba* and *Rimmon* mark the N and S boundaries of Judah; the *Arabah* is the Rift Valley whose lowest point, the Dead Sea, is 1285 feet below sea level, the lowest exposed point on the world's surface. Thus Jerusalem will be *raised up high* in comparison with the surrounding territory (Isa 2:1-4), and the mountains round it (Ps 125:2) depressed as they are no longer needed for its security. Its features (lovingly named, but partly unknown to us) mark out the city on the four points of the compass. The promise of v11, though historically unfulfilled in the case of the destruction under Titus in AD 70, brings comfort to any tiny and beleaguered church fellowship whose security is in the Lord. The *plague* of v12 (alluded to in 15 and 18 as well) recalls the destruction of Sennacherib's besieging army in 2 Ki 19:35. The translation of v14a is uncertain but may refer to civil war in *Judah*. The general application of the section seems to be that however powerful may be the attacks of evil (Eph 6:12), God's people will emerge stronger; 'the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church' (Tertullian).

**14:16-19** The worship of the nations at the Festival of Tabernacles. This passage is uncharacteristically repetitive, perhaps to insist upon 'the supreme importance of worship' (Baldwin). The seven-day *Festival of Tabernacles* or Booths (Deut 16:13-15) celebrated the autumn harvest and recalled the Israelites' living in makeshift shelters on their way to the Promised Land. The *survivors* (v16) are no longer the remnant of Israel, but all those in *the nations* (the traditionally unbelieving and hostile Gentile world) who *go up to Jerusalem* (like the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8:27) to express gratitude to the Lord of the whole earth (see v9). The severe sanctions on those who do not go up (penalties for failure to attend compulsory chapel or assembly?!) underline the stark nature of the choice between faith and unbelief: *no rain* symbolises the dryness of the unsatisfied soul. As in the previous section, Jesus may have been drawing on these verses in his dramatic proclamation at the festival for 'anyone to come to him and drink' (Jn 7:37-39); he told parables like The Great Banquet (Lk 14:15-24) to make the same point. 'Z's vision of the coming kingdom of God is wonderfully inclusive: it embraces people of all nations. But it is not universalist in a sentimental, truth-evading way....The kingdom of God will come, and that means there are decisions to be made' (Webb).

**14:20-21** The call to holiness. The book ends as it began, with an invitation to belong fully to God. Aaron the High Priest had *HOLY TO THE LORD* engraved on his turban (Exod 28:36); but now even everyday objects such as *horses' bells* and *cooking pots* (large, plain cauldrons used for family meals) are to be as consecrated as the costliest vessels on the *altar* in the Temple. 'There will be no distinction between sacred and secular' (Baldwin); but there is a huge difference between clean and unclean, as Isaiah insists in his vision of the Way of Holiness (Isa 35:8-10). We are to be 'instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work' (2 Tim 2:21). The ban on *Canaanites* or merchants reminds us of Christ's cleansing of the Temple (Jn 2:13-17). We should expect him to take a similar attitude to unworthy things we allow to operate in our bodies, which are 'temples of the Holy Spirit' bought with a great price (1 Cor 6:19-20).

Webb's comment on chapter 14 ('language stretched to breaking-point to describe the indescribable') may apply to the whole book of Zechariah. Only the coming of the Messiah in historical reality, and the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, can open the reader's eyes to the full meaning of these visions and prophecies, which it was not given to the prophet himself to understand (1 Pet 1:10-12). But the repeated motifs of the Lord's protection for his people, his call to repentance and holiness, and the invitation to the nations to drop their strife and join in the praise going on at Jerusalem, are his words for the church and the world today. They generate an unquenchable desire and hope.