

6. The final section of Zechariah's first burden builds upon the preceding content and brings it to its climax (11:1-17). Though it addresses itself to the houses of Israel and Judah (ref. esp. vv. 7-14), it is nonetheless a part of the larger burden of the Lord concerning the nations (ref. again 9:1-2, 7). The connection of this passage with the rest of the burden is most evident in its emphasis upon the *shepherd* theme. This theme was introduced in Zechariah's prophecy in this first burden, and notably as a point of lament (ref. 10:2-3):
- It was precisely the absence of faithful shepherds that most contributed to Israel's descent into idolatry (10:2). Apostate Israelite shepherds led the people away from Yahweh and the result was that both houses of Israel were sent into exile to be led by pagan Gentile shepherds (2 Kings 17:1-23; Jeremiah 22-23).
  - Appropriately, then, the first mention of shepherds in Zechariah's prophecy was by way of proclaiming the Lord's indignation with them. He was against Israel's shepherds (whether Jewish leaders or Gentile overlords) and was going to judge them and eliminate them as a fundamental component of Zion's restoration.

Thus, with respect to the shepherd theme, the primary emphasis in the first burden is on *false shepherds* as the destroyers of Yahweh's sheep. But precisely because they are *His* sheep, there is a corresponding implicit emphasis on the Lord as the true Shepherd.

- It is as the Shepherd of Israel that He was going to arise against the self-serving, destroying shepherds and liberate and regather His flock to Himself (cf. Jeremiah 13:1-17 with Isaiah 40:9-11; also Jeremiah 31:10-12; Ezekiel 34:1-22; Micah 2:12-13). *Most importantly, Yahweh was going to fulfill this role as Israel's Deliverer/Shepherd in the person of the Branch, David's covenant son* (cf. Jeremiah 23:1-8; Ezekiel 34:23-24, 37:1-24; Micah 5:1-5; cf. also John 10:1-13).
- For this reason, this work would involve purging, renewal and reconciliation, not mere geographical relocation (cf. Jeremiah 50:17-20; Ezekiel 34:23-31, 36:16-38). When Yahweh at last arose as the Great Shepherd of His people, it would be to their genuine and everlasting restoration; in that day, their exile would come to an end and they would become forever the true and faithful flock of His pasture. Then at last Israel's songs of devotion and exultation would speak to what is true (Psalm 23, 78:52-55, 74:1-12, 79:1-13, 80:1-3, 95:1-11, 100:1-5, 119:103-176).

These elements of the shepherding theme comprised the common refrain of the prophets and the Scriptures as they held forth to Israel the promise of Yahweh's coming and the hope of His mercy and faithful love as the covenant God of Abraham and David. And so it was with Zechariah's burden, and the implication ought to be evident: *It is only through the lens of these thematic elements properly woven together that one can discern the true meaning of the present passage.* The very reason it seems obscure and mysterious to many Christians is that they lack the "glasses" needed to read it. Other than finding one clear prophetic connection with Christ (ref. 11:12-13), multitudes have no idea what to make of the substance of this part of the burden (or its relation to the burden as a whole). And for that reason, they cannot discern the full weight of the one piece they do grasp.

Each section of this passage will be treated in its place, but a couple of further introductory observations are helpful before entering into the text itself.

- 1) The first is critically important, and that is that this passage has two horizons, or frames of reference. On the one hand, it speaks to the historical circumstances of Israel's relationship with Yahweh. Those Israelites who received this word from Zechariah would have recognized in it a poignant depiction of their nation's history as the Lord's covenant household, how they came to be in their woeful condition and circumstance and the promise of restoration still held out to them. *But it also pointed to a future reality that would fulfill their present rejection and alienation from Yahweh as well as their hope of reconciliation and restoration.*
- 2) This means that the passage must be interpreted at two levels and from two related perspectives. It must first be read in terms of the historical situation in which the nation of Israel found itself at the time of Zechariah's prophecy. The Lord's terrifying word of slaughter and desolation had been realized in the Babylonian conquest (as also the Assyrian invasion which earlier devastated the northern kingdom of Israel) which left David's royal house and kingdom in ruins and the sons of the kingdom in exile. Nevertheless, in Zechariah's time there remained a prophetic aspect to the Lord's pronouncement; there was yet another day of slaughter appointed for the houses of Israel and Judah. *Thus the prophetic word of this passage must be interpreted in terms of a then-present fulfillment which served as a prototype and presage of a greater fulfillment yet to come.*
- 3) Another day of slaughter lay ahead, but this prophetic pronouncement was joined to the Lord's promise of coming restoration. The significance of this is that judgment, destruction and restoration were going to occur in conjunction with one another. Specifically, Yahweh's return to Israel in His Servant/Shepherd was going to involve Israel's judgment and slaughter at His hand. The Lord wanted the covenant household to know of His abiding commitment to liberate, purge and renew in establishing His kingdom, but the Israelite people also needed to recognize that they were not going to experience this in the way they expected.

They were waiting for the Lord to return and liberate them from their Gentile oppressors and regather them to Himself. But, just as it was with the return of the Judean exiles from Babylon, Israel's future restoration was to be preceded by their rejection of Yahweh and their removal from His presence. *The Lord's coming wouldn't mean the end of Israel's exile as the Jewish nation, but the exacerbation of their alienation from Him.* This truth was the focal point of Jesus' encounter with the Jews in the Nazareth synagogue and they understood all too well what He was telling them: The days of Elijah and Elisha when Israel stood at a crossroads in its relationship with Yahweh and its continuance as His covenant house were now reaching their fulfillment in His coming in His Servant/Messiah. And as Israel had forsaken their Lord and King in those past days, so it would be in Jesus' day (Luke 4:1-30; cf. also 13:22-30 with Matthew 8:1-12, 21:23-46).

a. This final part of the first burden begins strangely with a poem of lamentation (11:1-3). In it the Lord called to the trees of Lebanon and Bashan to wail over their destruction. At first glance this poem appears out of place; it seems to depart from the preceding subject matter and also to be remote from what follows it. But in fact, the poem continues the burden's prophetic emphasis, drawing upon what precedes it and setting the stage for the divine word to follow. This is perhaps most evident in its continuation of the shepherd theme and the Lord's disposition toward them (cf. 11:3 with 10:3, 11:8, 15-17).

- The first thing to emphasize about the poem and its interpretation is that it contains figurative language. It doesn't speak to the literal destruction of the forests of Lebanon and Bashan; rather, its imagery is a poetic depiction of a different circumstance of ruination and lamentation.

- Secondly, inasmuch as the poem binds together what precedes and follows it, it provides a sharp contrast to the language of deliverance, restoration and exaltation that marks the tenth chapter. It shifts the emphasis of the burden from the Lord's glorious salvation of His people to a circumstance of destruction involving a flock marked out for annihilation. But because the burden ties together these two emphases in intimate fashion (there is no transition between chapters 10 and 11), they must be interpreted as complementing one another. That is to say, the destruction and mourning highlighted by the poem must somehow condition the deliverance of Zion and her children described in the tenth chapter.

So also, on the other side, the poem must be seen as introducing the scenario and circumstances highlighted in the balance of chapter 11. This means that the destruction of the trees of Lebanon and Bashan must somehow correlate with the annihilation of the flock marked out for slaughter and the corrupt shepherds associated with it.

- Third, it's not clear whether the poem represents the Lord's word to Zechariah or Zechariah's mournful commentary. The phrase, "thus says the Lord my God," which opens the section following the poem (11:4) hints at the latter, though, for various reasons, it's more likely that 11:1-3 represents Yahweh's communication rather than the prophet's. In that case, the introductory phrase in verse 11:4 merely indicates a further word from the Lord – a word which opened up the poem's meaning.

The poem is concerned with Lebanon and Bashan, and particularly the sorts of trees most associated with them. Again, the imagery is symbolic, which means that it was intended to symbolize something else. The question is, what does the symbolism represent? At least two factors seem to be in play here: First, the regions of Lebanon and Bashan were renowned for their cedar, cypress and oak trees (cf. 1 Kings 5:1-10; 2 Chronicles 2:1-9; Psalm 72:16, 104:16; Isaiah 2:13, 37:24; Ezekiel 27:1-6), which trees have a central part in the poem.

But a second reason is suggested by the subsequent message the poem introduces. As noted, that message pertains to Israel and Judah, and Lebanon and Bashan represented the northern most bounds of the land of Israel. Lebanon lay due north of Israel along the Mediterranean coast while Bashan lay to the northeast beyond the Sea of Galilee. The exact bounds of Bashan are disputed, but it is generally acknowledged as extending from Gilead in the south to Mount Hermon in the north. Bashan was thus included in the tribal inheritance given to Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh (Numbers 32:33) and was considered part of the Galilean region of the kingdom of Israel.

Lebanon and Bashan were noted for their cedar, cypress and oak trees, but in this poem such trees appear to symbolize human beings – shepherds in the immediate context (11:3) and perhaps also the doomed flock identified in the subsequent passage. Not only does this symbolism fit this context, it is present elsewhere in the Scriptures (cf. Judges 9:1-20; 2 Kings 14:8-10; Isaiah 1:27-31, 6:9-13; Ezekiel 17:1-17, 31:1-7; Amos 2:9; etc.). Trees as a symbol for people might appear obscure or foreign to the modern reader, but not so for the original audience.

It's also important to note that the wood from these kinds of trees was used in the fashioning of images (Isaiah 44:10-17). As well, such trees were commonly the site of altars and pagan rituals as the children of Israel increasingly adopted the practices of the Canaanite peoples (cf. Deuteronomy 12:1-2 with 2 Kings 17:1-11; Isaiah 57:1-5; Jeremiah 2:1-20; Ezekiel 6:11-13; Hosea 4:13; etc.). *Together these things suggest that the men signified here were associated with idolatry.* This certainly fits with the larger context of the burden and the way in which Yahweh depicted His future work of purging and restoration (cf. 5:1-11, 9:7, 10:1-2). Most importantly, it accords with the fact that the shepherds highlighted in the burden are described as idolaters (cf. 11:3 with 10:2-3).

So also, the parallelism of 11:3 indicates that pride was part of the complexion of these men coming under the Lord's judgment. *Israel's shepherds were arrogant in their idolatry – confident and self-assured and eager to exploit Yahweh's flock for their own advantage and benefit* (ref. esp. Ezekiel 34:1-10). And reflecting the fact that Israel's shepherds were her *rulers*, the poem sets in parallel the sound of the shepherds' wail and the sound of the young lions' roar: The shepherds wailed at the loss of their power and authority; so the young lions (imagery signifying virile, dominating rule) roared because the place of their dominion – in which they greatly exulted (“the pride of the Jordan”) – had been laid waste.

The Lord had marked out the idolatrous kingdom of Israel for destruction together with its apostate shepherd/rulers. The Israelites of Zechariah's generation knew this all too well; they, and the generations preceding them, had lived it out at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians. The poem's proclamation and lament were a reality in their experience, but there was also a prophetic aspect to it that anticipated a future day – a day associated with the coming of David's royal seed, the true Shepherd of Israel; a day that would see His work of conquest, liberation, restoration and triumphal, everlasting reign.