

Chapter 14 forms the last major section of the second burden and also brings Zechariah's prophecy to its climactic close. Appropriate to its role, the chapter is filled with spectacular images and descriptions which emphasize the glory and full fruition of the Lord's purpose and accomplishment respecting His creation. And given its eschatological subject matter, manner of presentation and place within the larger burden, it's not at all surprising that this passage, too, has been variously interpreted.

The following is a basic overview of the chapter:

- The Lord has appointed a day for Himself (the expression in Hebrew is "a day is coming for the Lord," not the more common phrase, "the Day of the Lord") in which He will gather the nations against Jerusalem (Zion). They will ravage the city and its inhabitants, plunder their persons and wealth and take many of them captive (14:1-2).
- But in the midst of this assault, Yahweh will arise against the invading nations and, in a spectacular and cataclysmic act of intervention, provide escape for His faithful and punish the invaders with fearsome, destroying plagues (14:3-5, 12-15).
- After that, Jerusalem will dwell everlastingly in peace and safety as Yahweh is at last enthroned as King over all the earth and all of its nations and peoples (14:9-11, 16-21).

At the level of this basic content, there is little disagreement among scholars and commentators. But beyond that the differences are numerous and significant. However, these differences can be categorized in terms of three basic premises and approaches:

- 1) The first is that this chapter, together with the entire burden, is speaking about the time of Christ's Parousia. Dispensationalists generally hold this view, but in a particular sense. Dispensationalism maintains that the Old Testament promises regarding the kingdom of God pertain to the Jewish people as such and to the physical land of Canaan and the city of Jerusalem. This conclusion results from two factors: The first is Dispensationalism's insistence that the Scripture be read in a strictly literal manner to the extent that the text can support such a reading; the second is the application of this interpretive principle to the Israelite terminology and forms employed by the Old Testament scriptures in speaking about the coming kingdom. In a word, Dispensationalism characteristically fails to distinguish between the *form* of biblical prophecy and its *substance* in fulfillment. Stated differently, Dispensationalism regards prophecy as history recorded in advance: The fulfillment takes the exact form of the promise. Vos' observations are helpful here:

*"A distinction must be made between the substance and the form of revelation. The substance is eternal principles embodied in the forms as we know them. These peculiar forms are used because they are the most suitable forms of the time in which the prophecy was given. So far as God's intent was concerned, the whole apparatus is symbolical. Only the embodied ideas are to be fulfilled. Now, from God's standpoint, the prophecy and its fulfillment cover each other. But this is not absolutely true from the standpoint of the recipients of the prophecies. It is inevitable that they would be inclined to take the form and substance as a whole and project them into the future."*

From this perspective, then, Zechariah's second burden is interpreted as prophesying Christ's Parousia and, with it, the fulfillment of God's ancient promises to the nation of Israel culminating with the inauguration of the so-called millennial kingdom.

*"The prophecy of Zechariah is to the Old Testament what the book of Revelation is to the New. It is the Apocalypse of the Old Testament which portrays God's future dealings with His chosen people Israel . . . . The book of Zechariah, especially chapter 14, stands as a continual corrective to all those theories which deny the literal, future restoration of Israel, after a period of chastening, in her own land, over whom the Messiah will reign in Zion."* (Hobart E. Freeman)

Accordingly, the first part of chapter 14 is viewed as another prophetic representation of the Battle of Armageddon which dispensationalists believe will bring the present age to a climactic and determinative close and usher in the 1000-year millennial age.

*"The Old Testament mentions Megiddo often but principally in connection with the death of Josiah, the king who attempted to oppose the king of Egypt (2 Kings 23:29, 30; 2 Chronicles 35:20-24). The extent of the future conflict at Armageddon is made clear by the fact that 200 million soldiers alone crossed the Euphrates River from the east adding to the millions already there (see Revelation 9:16). It is by all odds the greatest war of all history. Because such an army seems impossible, some people believe they are actually demons, though there is no proof for that interpretation. The Orient with more than one billion people in population could provide such an army."*

*"Though it is common for Bible teachers of prophecy to picture this war as one of nuclear character, most of the evidence points to traditional warfare with the armies sweeping north and south across Israel (see Daniel 11:40-45). Zechariah 14 pictures house-to-house warfare, which is not compatible with nuclear war. The king of the south, namely the African forces, opposes the king of the north, who apparently is the Antichrist (and includes all the military power of Europe and the former Soviet states). But the battle is not resolved until the day of Christ's second coming."* (John Walvoord)

- 2) A second approach to this passage follows the same pattern of assigning one timeframe to the entire second burden, but it holds that the burden speaks to events associated with Christ's *first* coming, not His Parousia at the end of the age. Among those who embrace this general perspective, it is frequently argued that the first part of chapter 14 speaks to the Roman siege and destruction of Jerusalem and Judah in 70 A.D. (a view held by many early church fathers), while the balance of the prophecy addresses in metaphorical terms the general character of the kingdom of God in the present age, but with a view toward the Parousia and the consummation of the Lord's new creation in the new heavens and new earth. Woudstra's comments are representative:

*"From the mixed character of the imagery employed, referring now to cataclysmic upheavals, now to regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem, it seems to this writer that no such literal interpretation of the passages is intended. The prophecy has in view various aspects of the gospel age with particular emphasis on its conclusion."*

Interpreting this chapter in terms of the present, interadvental age has proven especially attractive to, among others, those of a postmillennial persuasion. For Postmillennialism emphasizes the transforming design and power of the gospel (cf. Isaiah 2:1-4, 11:1-12; Daniel 2:29:45 with Matthew 13:31-33, 28:18-20; etc.) and so anticipates the global triumph of the kingdom of God in this age climaxing with Christ's Parousia and the establishment of the eternal state. Viewed through this lens, Zechariah's triumphal images seem to coincide well with the postmillennial expectation for the present age.

Kenneth Gentry exemplifies this way of interpreting Zechariah 14: *"In the latter part of verse 5, the coming judgment upon Jerusalem, which disperses the Christians over the Roman Empire, is ultimately God's coming in angelic judgment ("holy ones" are angels). The destruction of Jerusalem by Rome is providential destruction by "his armies" (Matt. 22:7). It leads to darkness and woe upon Israel (Zech. 14:6-7; cf. Acts 2:20, 22; Matt. 24:29). Yet, as Jerusalem collapses and Christianity is loosed from her Jewish chains, the waters of life begin flowing out into all the world (v. 8). The Lord's kingdom overflows the limited borders of Israel so that the Lord becomes the King of all the earth (v.9). The subsequent topographical and liturgical references are figurative images of the ethical and spiritual changes that occur under Christ's spiritual administration as His worship spreads through the earth (vv. 10ff). Even Jerusalem and the Jews shall be nourished by the waters of life eventually (vv. 10-11; cf. Ezek. 47:1ff; John 7:38-39). The enemies of God's people will either be vanquished (vv. 12-13, 14), converted (vv. 16, 20-21) or reduced to insignificance (vv. 14, 17-19)."*

- 3) A third approach treats chapters 12-13 as speaking to Christ's first coming while chapter 14 refers to the time of His Parousia. This view has apparent support in the conspicuous shift from the phrase, "in that day," (ref. 12:3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 13:1-4) to "a day is coming for the Lord" which opens the chapter. (The phrase, "in that day," recurs in chapter 14, though in relation to the "day" indicated in 14:1 – which may or may not be the same "day" indicated in chapters 12-13). Beyond that, the strongest support for this view is the chapter's language and depictions which suggest the Parousia and the consummation of Christ's kingdom rather than the kingdom as it exists in the present age (ref. 14:4, 9-11, 20-21). A variation of this approach has Christ's first coming as the timeframe of the first part of chapter 14 and His Parousia as the referent of the latter part.

The challenge of determining the timeframe indicated by this closing chapter is compounded by the difficulties inherent in Zechariah's language and expressions. At some points his language is ambiguous; at other points it is mysterious and vague. And overarching all of that is the critically important issue of whether his imagery in this context should be taken literally or figuratively, and that in whole or in part. Martin Luther's own admission regarding chapter 14 well spotlights the interpretive difficulty it poses: *"In this chapter, I surrender, for I am not certain of what the prophet treats."* So also Matthew Henry observed in his commentary, *"These verses are dark and hard to be understood,"* and David Brown added, *"The whole context of this passage is highly figurative, and involved in difficulty, as is evident from the diversities among commentators..."* In the end, the immense challenges posed by this chapter is about the only thing scholars and commentators agree on and those challenges have scattered interpretation in all directions – with respect to fundamental matters as much as particular details.

The interpretive challenges are significant, but this doesn't mean the passage is veiled in complete and hopeless obscurity. Treated in context and within the larger Old Testament prophetic witness and the interpretive grid the New Testament provides, it is possible to make sense of this chapter, even if some of the details remain unclear. Toward that end, it's worthwhile to begin with some initial observations:

- 1) The first has already been touched on, namely that the chapter consists of a series of events and outcomes that together comprise a "day" that is *for* the Lord. The implication is that the things detailed in chapter 14 were going to come about in accordance with Yahweh's will and goal. Obviously the same may be said of the more common phrase, "the Day of Yahweh," but this alternate expression underscores this truth by making it explicit: *The "day" detailed in this chapter belongs to the Lord and comes on His behalf, for, in it, He fully realizes His good purpose for His creation and thereby exalts Himself supremely in the sight of all of His creatures.*
- 2) This "day" was to be unique among all of the Lord's "days" in serving His purpose and glory (ref. 14:7), and thus the recipients of the burden were called to take careful note of it ("*Behold!*") and discern it as a time Yahweh uniquely appointed in His own behalf.
- 3) Zechariah's Judean audience was charged with discerning the purpose and outcome of this coming "day," and this was all the more important given what it was going to entail. For, in the first instance, it would involve Yahweh *pouring out His wrath upon Jerusalem and her children* (ref. 14:1-2). He was going to bring the nations against them and then, when the work of His wrath was accomplished, turn His hand against those assailants, destroy them and liberate and restore His people and His habitation. This general scenario correlates well with the depiction in 12:1-9, suggesting that the entire second burden might indeed address one and the same "day." At the same time, there are significant distinctions within these two accounts which suggests that they are different episodes associated with different "days."
- 4) One other thing to note is that this "day" sees the Lord's *absolute and complete triumph* such that the creational curse is eliminated and His comprehensive kingship is established (vv. 9-11). This would seem to clearly point toward the Parousia and the consummation of the kingdom at the end of the age. But, once again, one must guard against jumping to this conclusion. For the prophets – including Zechariah – spoke of Messiah's day with this sort of absolute language and the New Testament upholds this manner of speaking about the Christ event: Jesus *did* overcome the curse and death, evident in His resurrection, and He ascended to take His throne as ruler over all creation (cf. Romans 6:1-11; Hebrews 1:3, 2:14; 1 Corinthians 15:20-27; Ephesians 1:18-23). Again, absolute language is appropriate because all has been accomplished *absolutely*; what remains is the progress of the creation's participation in this absolute work.
- 5) This "day" would see the elimination of the creational curse, which has its substance in *death* as the all-encompassing and determinative principle of the post-fall creation (cf. Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-20). Thus the eradication of the curse implies the recovery of *life* for the creation, and that, too, is a fruit of this particular "day" (14:8; cf. Ezekiel 47:1-9).