

5. As noted above, this final section of Zechariah's second burden opens with a call to the hearers to take careful note of the day that was coming for the Lord (14:1a). Whether or not this is the same "day" as in the previous part of the burden is a matter to be considered later; here, at the outset, the foundational issue is the fact that this "day" is explicitly described as "*for Yahweh*": Whatever historical timeframe, circumstances, events and outcomes were implicated in it, it was first and foremost a "day" unto the Lord – a day that would, in some unique way, serve His purpose and glory. And the first aspect of Yahweh's appointed "day" would be His wrath directed against His covenant people and His habitation (14:1-2).
- a. If chapter 14 is difficult to interpret, the difficulty begins with these opening verses. These verses depict a massive and dreadful assault upon Jerusalem, but the larger burden suggests that it also involved the surrounding region of Judea. This is clearly the case if this invasion is the same one described in 12:1ff. But even if the chapter 12 passage speaks to a different episode, the burden is everywhere concerned with Israel – that is, David's house and kingdom, and not simply the city of Jerusalem. And from a purely practical standpoint, it's impossible that an invading army would focus solely on Jerusalem; the intent of an invasion is to conquer and destroy a nation or community of people, not a physical city. There are two reasons, then, for the prophecy focusing on Jerusalem:
- 1) The first is the most obvious, namely that Jerusalem was the capital city of the Israelite nation. Invading forces could hardly conquer the nation of Israel without destroying Jerusalem. (Could we imagine the conquest of America while Washington D.C. and her people and processes remain intact?) For symbolic as well as pragmatic and strategic reasons, Jerusalem would have to be the primary target of any invasion seeking the destruction of the Israelite nation and kingdom.
 - 2) The second reason is perhaps less obvious, but it's actually the primary reason for the prophecy focusing on Jerusalem. And that is that Jerusalem was the "city of the Great God" – the place of His sanctuary and seat of His throne. *Thus an assault on Jerusalem signifies an assault on Yahweh's person and rule.* True, the Lord would not restore His Shekinah presence to the second temple that was central to Zechariah's prophetic ministry, but it remained that the destruction of Jerusalem – and, by implication, the destruction of Yahweh's sanctuary – signified the destruction of His habitation, throne and dominion (ref. again 14:9, also 14:16-21).
- b. The next thing to note is Zechariah's declaration that this invasion would involve "*all the nations.*" Natural considerations alone show that this cannot be taken to mean every nation upon the earth. So also the broader context argues for understanding this phrase in terms of the nations surrounding Israel – *i.e., those nations having some sort of stake in Israel's existence* (geo-political, strategic, religio-cultural, etc.) (ref. 14:12-14, cf. also 12:2-3 with 12:6).

c. Thirdly, the dynamics of this invasion are significant and have two dimensions:

- 1) On the one hand, the prophecy depicts the absolute powerlessness of the people of Jerusalem to resist the invading forces. The city is captured and plundered – both the people and their goods, and half of the inhabitants are dragged away into exile. Those who remain are not victorious, but left behind by the victors. No explanation is given, but conquering forces typically left a remnant of the people in place for strategic and pragmatic reasons: An empty city is a dead city and so of no value to an imperial power; at the same time, persons deemed useful to the conquering nation would be taken as spoil (cf. Daniel 1:1-7 with 2 Kings 24:1-14).

And because verse 2 serves to clarify the Lord's declaration in verse 1 ("For I will gather..."), it follows that the dividing of the spoil should be understood (as suggested already) in terms of the invaders plundering Jerusalem and her inhabitants. Powerless to resist, the people have no choice but to watch their wives ravished, their homes sacked, their property seized and their family members dragged away in bonds.

- 2) Jerusalem's inhabitants are depicted as utterly defenseless against the invading forces, but the Lord arises in the midst of this hopeless situation to deliver them in a cataclysmic display of sovereign might (14:3ff). Thus the abject powerlessness of the people is set in sharp contrast with the all-sufficient, all-triumphant power of their God.

d. These are the general features of this prophesied invasion, *but what historical circumstance, if any, does it point to?* Here, again, scholars are divided. Among those who associate this part of the burden with Christ's first coming, the most common view is that this passage is a prophetic depiction of the Roman offensive against Judea (66-73 A.D.) This was a retaliation provoked by Jewish rebellion and it resulted in the complete destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

This view has strong scriptural support, not only because both the Old Testament and Jesus predicted this desolation (cf. Daniel 9:24-27; Luke 21:20-24), but also because the Scripture assigns great significance to it: The destruction of Jerusalem – and most particularly the destruction of the temple – constituted Yahweh's poignant, unmistakable witness to both *fulfillment* and *judgment*: fulfillment of all He had promised and so the end of the Old Covenant, Israelite economy with its focal point in the temple (cf. Matthew 5:17-19, 9:1-17, 27:50-53; also Hebrews 7:1-10:18), and judgment upon the house of Israel for its unbelief and failure to embrace the "fullness of the times" (Matthew 23:1-39; Luke 13:23-35, 19:1-44).

As well, this view has historical support in that the depiction in verses 1-2 corresponds well with the actual circumstances of Rome's siege of Jerusalem. Various historical accounts confirm this, not least of all the account of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus in his *War of the Jews*.

- e. But if, indeed, the Roman siege of 66-73 A.D. is the historical referent of 14:1-2, it follows that that episode and its outcomes must somehow correlate with what follows in the balance of Zechariah's prophecy (14:3-21). That is, the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome must have been accompanied by Yahweh's miraculous intervention to deliver a remnant and destroy His enemies, eradicate the curse (the "ban") and bring all things into subjection as "holy to the Lord." Establishing this correlation is possible, but it depends upon the premises and approach one adopts.

If verses 3-21 are treated *literally*, it's very difficult to correlate them with the aftermath of the 70 A.D. destruction. Other than the fact that a Jewish remnant was able to flee Judea and escape death at the hands of the Romans (v. 4-5a; cf. Luke 21:20-24), nothing in the subsequent history of Palestine, the Near East or the world matches what is described in Zechariah's prophecy. Rome eventually fell to the Visigoths, but this is far different from the picture of God's universal triumph and His subjugation of all nations painted in verses 12-18. Even more, Rome's eradication of the theocracy and its trappings didn't result in the complete removal of the curse – that is, the purification and consecration of all things as "holy to the Lord" (14:20-21) so that nothing remains "under the ban" (i.e., devoted to destruction – 14:11; cf. Exodus 22:20; Joshua 6:16-18, 7:1-15).

The obvious solution is to treat verses 3-21 *metaphorically*. This is the approach of those who regard 14:1-2 as speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple and the rest of the chapter as depicting the general quality and conditions of the interadvental age. Again, Ken Gentry's commentary above is representative of this interpretation. A metaphorical reading of 14:3-21 addresses the contextual requirement that the things depicted in those verses be an outcome of the assault described in verses 1-2. Moreover, it eliminates the need to decipher every detail of the imagery in verses 3-21. It allows that imagery to remain symbolic.

But if one chooses to treat 14:3-21 in a more literal fashion while, at the same time, interpreting verses 1-2 as a prediction of Rome's siege of Jerusalem, it appears that there are only two reasonable ways to correlate that episode with the outcomes depicted in the balance of chapter 14:

- 1) The first is to allow a *time gap* between the fulfillments associated with 14:1-2 and 14:3ff: If the former was speaking of the Roman offensive against Jerusalem and Judea, the latter speaks to events associated with Christ's Parousia and the end of the age. The obvious problem here is that the text indicates that Yahweh would arise and accomplish these outcomes *at the time of the invasion described in verses 1-2* (note esp. 14:3).

This being the case, it seems that either the literal reading of 14:3-21 must be abandoned or 14:1-2 must be interpreted as predicting a massive, international invasion of Judea and Jerusalem at the close of the present age. Indeed, the latter is precisely the view of dispensationalists whose literal approach discovers here a reference to the "Battle of Armageddon."

- 2) The second option is to assign the *essential realization* of the promised outcomes to the time of the Roman invasion and then allow for full fruition at a point in the future. This is the sort of approach demanded by the principle of “already-but-not-yet.” Under this scheme, 14:1-2 can be a prediction of the events of 66-73 A.D. with the balance of the chapter depicting the general qualities of the present, interadvental age (as Gentry maintains). At the same time, these two dimensions of chapter 14 look beyond the Roman siege and the present state of Christ’s kingdom to the consummation of all things at His Parousia.

Viewed in accordance with the principle of “already-but-not-yet”, the climactic destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 A.D. signified the end of the former order and the inauguration of the “new age” of the new-creational kingdom. At the same time, the present manifestation of that kingdom looks beyond itself: It is the first-fruits of the fullness to come – a fullness that will involve the cataclysmic upheaval of creation-wide purging and renewal in the new heavens and new earth. (Romans 8:1-25)

- f. But if the 70 A.D. episode is not the intended referent of 14:1-2, then any historical fulfillment must yet lie in the future. For no other circumstance in Israel’s history corresponds to the description in these two verses or to the outcomes depicted in the balance of the chapter. And inasmuch as those outcomes are typically assigned to the end of the age and Christ’s Parousia, so also is the assault described in verses 1-2. As previously noted, futurist interpreters most often associate this invasion with the “end-times” Armageddon conflict.

The most significant problem with treating Zechariah 14 in a purely futuristic way is the New Testament’s – and Jesus’ – insistence that the Scriptures all pointed toward the “fullness of the times” that had arrived with His coming. For all their diversity, the myriad Old Testament promises coalesced in Yahweh’s overarching pledge to establish His eschatological kingdom – the kingdom covenanted to Abraham and David, *and Jesus repeatedly declared that His presence meant the “in-breaking” of that kingdom and that it would be established by His accomplishment of His Father’s will* (cf. Isaiah 9:1ff, 11:1ff; Zechariah 3:1ff, 6:9ff with Matthew 12:10-28; also Mark 1:14-15; Luke 3:1-4:21; John 18:33-37; cf. also Psalm 110 with Luke 20:41-44 and Psalm 16 and Joel 2:28ff with Acts 2:1-36. Note also the correlation of Isaiah 40-66 with the circumstances and events surrounding Jesus’ incarnation, ministry, sacrificial death, resurrection and ascension.) And what Jesus insisted upon, His apostles and witnesses proclaimed to the world as the “gospel of the kingdom” (cf. Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:1-8).

This means that Zechariah’s prophecy, as all of the prophets, must be interpreted as having its fulfillment in the Christ event. *This doesn’t preclude the possibility of a future global conflict in connection with Jesus’ Parousia, but it does dictate that any such event – and any outcomes of it – must be aspects of fruition flowing from the fulfillment realized in the Christ event and not new arenas of fulfillment.*

As the Parousia is itself the culmination of the *one coming* of Christ and not a “second coming,” so the events surrounding His Parousia contribute to the consummation of the kingdom inaugurated in His first appearing.

- g. Again, some treat the entirety of Zechariah 14 as symbolic and so deny any literal, historical fulfillment of verses 1-2. For them, those verses are a metaphor for the “assaults” of rejection and persecution Christians suffer in the present age (ref. Matthew 5:10-12, 10:16-22; John 15:18-19; Acts 14:21-22; 2 Timothy 3:10-12; etc.). It’s questionable (and certainly a matter of dispute among scholars) whether there’s scriptural justification for interpreting 14:1-2 metaphorically; but it’s equally questionable – and arguably even less defensible – to treat the balance of the chapter in this way.

McComiskey well summarizes the difficulty in his commentary:

“In some ways, chapter 14 reflects the history of the church, the people of the new covenant who endure hostility (vv. 1-2) yet enjoy God’s protection (v. 3). They have a refuge in him (vv. 4-5) and possess spiritual life (v. 8). As spiritual Jerusalem, they drink living waters (v. 8) and dwell securely (v. 10). There are, however, elements in this chapter that urge on us another perspective. The dimensions of the cataclysm of 14:1-3 transcend any of the historical military invasions at which the book has hinted thus far (9:7, 13). The intervention of God into human history, represented by the words ‘the Lord my God will come, all the holy ones with him,’ coupled with the cosmic upheavals that will occur, bespeak a time when the natural order will undergo great changes. That this time is known only to God (v. 7) implies that it is beyond previous human experience. That the Lord becomes king over the whole earth and is without rival (v. 9) does not answer adequately to his present reign over his church.”

In the end, the interpretation of 14:1-2 depends upon how one interprets the balance of the chapter – and vice versa. But the necessary considerations are much broader than that:

- First of all, chapter 14 must be interpreted in the light of the entire second burden as well as Zechariah’s prophecy as a whole.
- But this prophecy must also be situated within the larger Old Testament prophetic witness. For Israel’s prophets – including Zechariah – interacted with and interpreted the unfolding Israelite (salvation) history as being *itself* prophetic and preparatory. This means that they perceived the ultimate significance of their own time and circumstance, and the times and circumstances which preceded them, as residing in the future. Thus the prophets uniformly affirmed and portrayed a coming day of fulfillment which the Israelite history prefigured and presaged.
- But this truth, in turn, implies that all of the prophetic writings – including Zechariah’s prophecy – must be read and interpreted in the light of the Christ event since His coming constituted the arrival of the fullness of the times.