

D. The Second Burden

Zechariah's two burdens together form the second half of his prophecy. As seen, the first burden focused on the Gentile nations, though not apart from the people of Israel. So the second burden had Israel as its particular object (12:1), but while also having much to say about the nations. A couple of observations are appropriate in this regard:

- First, the integration of Israel and Gentile concerns within the two burdens – as indeed throughout the overall prophecy – highlights the fact that the Lord's purposes for *Israel* are His purposes for the entire *world of men*. Many contemporary Christians overlook this truth and many others even deny it (particularly those of the dispensational persuasion), holding that God's purposes for Israel are primary and distinct from His dealings with the Gentile peoples. But one need only consider the Abrahamic Covenant to see that Israel's place in God's purposes is woven into His purpose for the world. For the restoration of the entire world was the very reason for Israel's election and calling: God had determined and settled by covenant that all of the earth's peoples would be blessed through the Abrahamic seed. Mankind's (and so the whole creation's) restoration to God was the reason for Israel's existence; *indeed, Israel considered or treated in isolation from the Gentile world is not the Israel of the Scriptures*.
- A second thing to note is that this integration of Jew and Gentile in the divine purpose has its focal point in the person and work of the messianic Branch. This is evident from the Branch's centrality in Zechariah's prophecy (including the two burdens), but it finds a more fundamental support in the relation of this individual to Abraham and the Abrahamic Covenant: The Lord chose Abraham's covenant "seed" to be His instrument of creational reconciliation and recovery, but His design was that this "seed" should find its locus in a unique son of Abraham – a descendent of his through Judah and David. The development of the salvation history recorded in the Old Testament scriptures makes this clear (cf. Genesis 3:15, 4:25-5:29, 9:18-27, 11:10-12:3, 26:1-5, 28:1-15, 49:8-10 with Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1-12, 49:1-7, etc.) and the New Testament affirms that this fulfillment has come in Jesus of Nazareth (Matthew 1:1; Luke 1:26-79, 2:1-32; Galatians 3:1-29).

Thus any prophetic "burden" concerning the Gentiles must implicate the Israelite people and any "burden" for Israel must implicate the other peoples of the earth. And, because of the way Jew and Gentile and their respective destinies are related in God's purposes, any such burden must have its focal point in the Lord's Messiah. In this regard, Zechariah's prophecy (and, more narrowly, his two burdens) is simply one more expression of the revelatory pattern present in all of the prophetic scriptures. All of the Scripture is uniform in testifying to Jesus and there is uniform consistency in the way in which it does so. Though frequently overlooked, this christological dynamic is fundamental to the principle known as *the analogy of Scripture* (Scripture as internally consistent and harmonious, sometimes called the "analogy of faith").

The second burden parallels the first but also *contrasts* it in being positive: it concerns the glorious future appointed for the covenant people. Whereas the first burden focused on the judgment and desolation of Israel and her shepherds, the second one emphasizes that destruction isn't the final word; Abraham's offspring are destined for restoration and glorious exaltation.

The second burden makes it clear that Yahweh had appointed a glorious future for His covenant people, but this is where scholars and commentators part ways. There are all sorts of differences among them, but all such differences seem to be grounded in two primary issues:

- 1) The first involves the way *Israel* is defined and understood. For its part, Reformed Theology has traditionally regarded Old Covenant *Israel* and the New Covenant *Church* as fundamentally the same in the sense that each constitutes God's covenant people, but under the different administrations of the one "covenant of grace." This is the reason for the common practice among Puritan and other Reformed writers of using the terms *Israel* and *Church* interchangeably. One effect of this perspective is the tendency to minimize any Jewish emphases in the prophetic scriptures, which includes this second burden. On the other hand, Dispensationalism interprets the Israelite emphases of the prophetic scriptures in terms of God's purposes for the Jewish people *as such*. Thus dispensationalists typically regard this second burden as setting forth Israel's deliverance and reconciliation in preparation for entering into the so-called millennial kingdom.
- 2) A second point of divergence among scholars (and other Christians) is the *time frame* indicated by the burden. Dispensationalists typically see a definitive break in the two burdens, with the first burden pertaining to Christ's first coming and the latter one to His second coming. They believe that, at the Lord's return, the nation of Israel will be purged and reconciled to God in His Messiah (ref. esp. 12:10-11) and ushered into the glorious kingdom pledged to it and they find these truths articulated in this second burden. Others tie the two burdens together, believing that the "day" spoken of in both of them refers to the same point in history (cf. 11:11 with 12:3-11, 13:1-9). They argue that both burdens were speaking of the cataclysmic events associated with Christ's first coming (from the incarnation to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.). Still others see two fulfillment (and time frame) referents in the second burden, the first associated with Christ's first advent and the second with His parousia at the end of the age.

Another critical observation concerns the orientation and trajectory of the second burden:

- It initially focuses on God's restorative purpose for Judah and Jerusalem, but particularly as those entities represented David's house and kingdom (chaps. 12:1-13:1). Thus the implication: *Yahweh's prophetic word respecting Jerusalem and Judah presupposed and drew upon His covenant oath to David*. What the Lord was here promising was not the restoration of a city and its environs and inhabitants as such, but the fulfillment of His pledge to David to establish his house, throne and kingdom forever.
- The second burden has Yahweh pledging the reestablishment of David's house and kingdom, but the Davidic Covenant associated this realization with David's covenant *son* (ref. again 2 Samuel 7). The Lord was going to raise up David's fallen tabernacle (Amos 9:11ff), but in connection with a regal son from his loins. This son is David's *Branch* – the individual who is the centerpiece of Zechariah's prophecy. Thus it's eminently fitting that the second burden (which closes out Zechariah's prophecy) should focus on the hope attached to Branch's coming, namely the glorious establishment in perpetuity of David's house, throne and kingdom.

- Zechariah pledged the coming of the Davidic Branch and His arrival heralded the Lord's fulfillment of His promise to establish David's kingdom – *which is Yahweh's everlasting kingdom* – in Him. This was the very marrow of Israel's abiding hope and longing, for the “raising of David's tabernacle” meant the end of alienation and exile through the purging of all uncleanness from the covenant household and its regathering to God. It meant the glorious establishment of the kingdom first portrayed in Eden, promised at the time of the fall and man's expulsion from the Lord's garden-sanctuary, covenanted to Abraham and David and continually affirmed through all of Israel's prophets.
- This kingdom – the Kingdom of God – was pledged to Israel as its inheritance, *but because Israel was Abraham's covenant household, this pledge extended beyond Israel to embrace the whole world*. The kingdom promised to Israel was promised to the entire human race because Israel was Yahweh's chosen instrument for mediating His blessing to all the earth's families (ref. again 8:11-13).

Israel's restoration and ingathering meant the restoration and ingathering of all of Adam's offspring; when the Lord reconciled and restored the houses of Israel He would also gather in the nations (ref. Isaiah 11:1ff, 49:1ff; etc.). This is the reason Paul could cite a context like Hosea 1-2 – which deals with the reunification and restoration of the two houses of Israel and Judah – as scriptural proof of God's long-standing design to include the Gentiles in the Abrahamic covenant household (Romans 9:1-26; cf. Galatians 3).

Thus the trajectory of the second burden is *radial* rather than linear. That is, it moves outward like the ripples from a stone thrown into a pond, moving from Judah and Jerusalem in the first instance to embrace the whole earth and all mankind. When the Lord has restored David's house and kingdom in his regal Branch, He will at last have fulfilled His purpose to be King over all the earth, having banished forever the creation's curse (14:9-11; cf. Revelation 21:1-22:6).

The second burden has an all-embracing scope, but its cosmic orientation is situated on an Israelite foundation. Again, the fundamental premise of the salvation history is that God's purpose for the world was to be realized through Israel. Even as eschatology is *christological* (Ephesians 1:9-10; Colossians 1:15-18), so it is pointedly *Israelite*: It is bound up in the One who embodies and fulfills Israel (Isaiah 49:1ff; cf. John 4:19-24; Romans 9:1-5; Galatians 3; etc.).

This principle points toward one further introductory observation, which is that this burden presents its message in Israelite terms. It pertains to the entire world of men – indeed, to the whole created order, but it speaks in the language and forms of the Israelite kingdom. There are two primary reasons for this:

- 1) The first was just mentioned, namely the fact that God's purpose and accomplishment respecting His creation are bound up in Israel as the Abrahamic people.
- 2) The second reason flows out of the first, which is that the Israelite kingdom was the prototype of the kingdom of God. Yahweh had pledged a kingdom to Abraham and his seed, and this promise enjoyed its first fulfillment in the kingdom of Israel as it was fully realized under David (cf. Genesis 15:1-21 with 1 Chronicles 29:23 and 1 Kings 4:1-24).

In the physical sense, the Lord fulfilled His promise to Abraham in David, but His subsequent covenant with David projected the promise of the Abrahamic kingdom into the future, thereby showing that the kingdom of Israel realized under David was not ultimate: *The Abrahamic promise looked to a future kingdom beyond David – a kingdom to be established under the rule of an elect son of David; the everlasting kingdom of God which David’s kingdom only prefigured and in which it would find its own fulfillment.*

These things explain why Zechariah’s burden employed the language and forms of the Israelite kingdom to express realities that transcend that kingdom and its subjects. This revelatory pattern – *the pattern followed by all of the prophets and the entire Old Testament scripture* – is as intentional and necessary as it is consistent, and yet many Christians fail to rightly discern it.

- Some, in the name of a “literal hermeneutic,” miss it altogether, insisting that the form and substance of the Lord’s promises are identical. For them, prophecy is history recorded in advance: *That is, in order for the Scripture to be “true,” the things it promises must be fulfilled in exactly the form and manner in which they are presented.*
- Others accept that *form* and *substance* must be distinguished, but they see that distinction as a matter of metaphor or allegory. From this perspective, the substance of what God has promised has no essential relation to the form He adopted for articulating those promises. The forms are chosen simply because they are effective vehicles of communication and must not be confused with what is being promised. In terms of the present concerns, this means the Israelite (Davidic) kingdom and its form and structures had no essential correspondence with the kingdom of God to come in connection with the Davidic Branch. But this is to deny that the Israelite kingdom and its features and characteristics in any way *fulfilled* the Abrahamic promise of a kingdom – something the Scripture itself insists upon (cf. Genesis 15:1-21 with Exodus 3:1-17, 6:1-8).

One final consideration in approaching this second burden (and all of the prophetic scriptures) is the principle of scriptural *promise/fulfillment as christological*. Jesus Himself insisted that all of the Old Testament scriptures spoke of Him and His coming and work (Luke 24; John 5:39) and so His disciples proclaimed Him and His gospel from “all the Scriptures” (Acts 2-4, 10, 13, 17, 18, 24, 26). The implication is that all of the scriptures have their *substantial* fulfillment in the “Christ event.” All subsequent developments in history leading up to and including the parousia and consummation are simply the outworking (fruition) of the fulfillment realized in Christ’s coming. This means that, whatever Zechariah’s second burden may reveal about the end of the age and the consummation of God’s purposes for the world, its first and primary concern is with the “ends of the ages” and the “fullness of the times” associated with the coming of David’s Branch and the establishment of His new-creational kingdom promised in all the Scripture.

At bottom, rightly discerning the Old Testament’s message and promises depends upon recognizing the way in which it “speaks.” And this precludes either a literalistic or metaphorical approach. The Lord was entirely consistent in the way He articulated His purposes: He presented them in an unbroken chain of promise and fulfillment with each point of fulfillment building the case for and clarity of what He was going to accomplish in Eve’s man-child. Every era and movement of the salvation history looked to and proclaimed the great day of Yahweh’s victory.