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Vision #2: Imminent Destruction

There are various positions theologically for eschatology: Dispensational Pre-millennialism, Historical Premillennialism, Amillennialism, and Post-Millennialism. And one can spend hours in Scripture in order to evaluate these positions with integrity. However, this should not prevent us from studying about them.

However, there is a bottom line as to what must be believed as it relates to the Second Coming of Christ:

- The End of the World is real.

- Christ is coming again.
- There will be a Final Judgment of the living and the dead. Those made righteous in Christ will spend eternity in a corporal existence loving, serving, honoring, and communing with God in a New Heavens and Earth.
- Those who are dead in their sin likewise will be resurrected and spend eternity in hell together with Satan and his demons.
- Etc.

This second vision of Zechariah contains teaching which belongs in the list of things which “must be believed when it comes to the Second Coming of Christ.”

That being said, Zechariah here most certainly is NOT talking about the Second Coming of Christ- as we will see. However, what he says will most certainly impact how we ought to live in this fallen world in which wicked men and women oppose God and His people!¹

The Four Horns, vv. 18, 19b, 21a.

Zechariah 1:18, “Then I lifted up my eyes and looked,² and behold³, *there were* four horns.”

A brief review of redemptive history is necessary to understand what is meant by these “horns.”

Before the world began, it was God’s plan and desire to spend eternity with a people whom He NOT ONLY made BUT redeemed (Ephesians 1:4-5).⁴ And so, in time God approached a man — Abraham — whom the Lord deigned to become the father NOT of a NATIONAL race of people, BUT of a BELIEVING race of people.

Galatians 3:7, 29, “Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham... And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”

Now from the start God deigned to manifest His redemptive plan in the form of a Kingdom! When God created this world, He established it to be a Kingdom over which He and man would co-reign together as caretakers (Genesis 1:26-30). It was this Kingdom that was toppled when Adam rebelled against God (Genesis 3:1-7). And it would be this Kingdom which Jesus Christ would re-establish in His first advent.

Matthew 4:23, “And *Jesus* was going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom...”

This is a major theme in the New Testament! In fact, Christ’s first public message was,

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17b)

Accordingly, a millennium prior to Christ, God organized His Old Testament people into a nation — a theocracy! The purpose of this was NOT to establish a permanent earthly kingdom — that is what God was going to do in Christ (John 18:36; Revelation 11:15). RATHER, the purpose was to foreshadow the coming Kingdom of His Son! As such, God established the Old Testament nation of Israel on a conditional basis. At the creation of the nation of Israel, God gave this warning through Moses to the people of God as they entered into the Promised Land.

Deuteronomy 4:25-26, “When you become the father of children and children’s children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord your God *so as* to provoke Him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you shall surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. You shall not live long on it, but shall be utterly destroyed.”

However, God’s people did NOT remain faithful to God, BUT instead ran headlong into sin! This led to the nation dividing into two separate entities in 931 BC with Israel claiming the northern part of Palestine and Judah claiming the southern part. It wasn’t long after this that we read of their ultimate demise. Israel in 722 BC when God raised up the Assyrians to discipline the nation on account of its rebellion. Judah in three deportations at the hands of the Babylonians in 605 BC, 597 BC, and 586 BC.

It is important to note that each of these nations are separately identified as disciplinary tools in God’s hand (Isaiah 10:5-6; Habakkuk 1:5-11) AND yet both went too far in their discipline (Isaiah 10:7-19; Jeremiah 50:18; Habakkuk 2:2-20) crushing and destroying God’s people mercilessly and needlessly! In addition to Assyria and Babylon, we read of the Edomites and their abuse of the people of God in 586 BC! Recall from Obadiah that when Judah fell, the Edomites piled on the suffering.

Obadiah 14, “And do not stand at the fork of the road to cut down their fugitives; and do not imprison their survivors in the day of their distress.”

During the devastation of Babylon’s destruction of Jerusalem, there were Jewish survivors who escaped. Those that went south were greeted by their Edomite brethren. But rather than help their brethren, the Edomites killed some and culled the rest, bringing them to the Babylonian army to be killed or enslaved!

Then there is Persia — the pagan nation that conquered Babylon in 539 BC. You will recall that Jeremiah called upon the people of God in exile to build homes, live their lives, and bless the nation that was over them (Jeremiah 29) — which they did such that when the Persian King Cyrus allowed God’s people to return to Palestine, few went. Life in Babylon had become comfortable!

Yet that didn't mean it was easy! During the time when Persia ruled, God's people suffered many abuses — epitomized by the book of Esther! Read the book and you will get a glimpse of Jewish life in Persia at this time (~458 BC).

All of this brings us to “the four horns” of Zechariah's prophecy! What were they? And who were they? The word for “horn” (קֶרֶן [qeren]) is used both literally and figuratively in the Bible.

- Literally, the word was used of the horns of an animal — like a ram (Genesis 22:13; Daniel 8:3, 6, 7, 20), goat (Daniel 8:5, 8, 9, 21), sheep (Ezekiel 34:21), oxen (Deuteronomy 33:17; Psalm 22:22; 92:11), or even the tusks of an elephant (Ezekiel 27:15). It also was used of any instrument constructed from the horn of an animal — as in a trumpet (Josh. 6:5) or a container for anointing oil (1 Samuel 16:1, 13; 1 Kings 1:39).
- Figurately, the word could denote the authority of God and so the mercy of God in the context of forgiveness in which four horns were used in the construction of the Altar of Burnt Offering. Here the sacrifice would be placed, and the horns could be used to bind the offering.⁵ These horns also were the spot where blood was smeared in Israel's atonement.⁶ They also could be grasped by a guilty person seeking leniency.⁷

As the horn was an animal's offensive weapon against its predators, the word ALSO was used to designate an entity's strength⁸, sovereignty, or power.

Psalm 18:2b, “The Lord is... my shield and the horn [the strength] of my salvation, my stronghold.”

Speaking of Joseph's power, Moses wrote:

Deuteronomy 33:17a, “As the first-born of his ox, majesty is his, and his horns are the horns of the wild ox; with them he shall push the peoples...”

In Zechariah 1, “horn” is used as in the latter; it denotes invincible strength, sovereignty, and power.⁹

The fact that there were “four” of them speaks of totality — which is how Zechariah uses the number “4” throughout this prophecy — as in four craftsmen (Zechariah 1:20), four winds (Zechariah 2:6; 6:5), four chariots (Zechariah 6:1), and four spirits of heaven (Zechariah 6:5).¹⁰ As that is the case, that Zechariah references here “four horns” he is talking about all anti-God forces everywhere and at all times!^{11,12}

That being said, it is clear from the text that these “four horns” represented Kingdoms

as we read three times that these horns “scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem” (vv. 19b, 21a & c). In fact, at the end of this vision, the text says, “...these *craftsmen* have come to terrify them, to throw down the horns of the nations who have lifted up *their* horns against the land of Judah...”

There is much debate as to which Kingdoms *INITIALLY* are in mind here. As my historical overview reflects, I think the horns *initially* referred to Assyria, Babylon, Edom, and Persia. But that is speculation on my part for sure. For there have been many other suggestions throughout Church history.^{13,14}

Regardless of what nations you think might initially represent the four horns, there is little question that this second vision is addressing God’s judgment against any and all who would attack, harm, or humiliate His people! In this regard, notice the humiliation of God’s people.

The Humiliating of God’s People, vv. 19b, 21b.

Zechariah 1:19, “So I said to the angel who was speaking with me, ‘What are these?’ And he answered me, ‘These are the horns which have scattered¹⁵ Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.’”

As I just referenced, Zechariah uses “scattered” three times in this text. The word is זָרָה (*zarah*) and is translated variously as disperse, scatter, spread, or winnow. It is this last usage which illustrates the connotation of this word. In Proverbs 20 we read...

Proverbs 20:16: “A wise king winnows the wicked, and drives the *threshing* wheel over them.”

This language comes from farming. In ancient times, as in our day, harvesting involved four elements:

- Reaping where the plants were cut down in the field (cf. Ruth 2).
- Threshing which loosened the grain from the rest of the plant.
- Winnowing which separated the grain from the chaff (cf. Isaiah 30:24; Jeremiah 15:7).
- Sieving which separated the grain from almost all remaining waste material (Amos 9:9; Isaiah 30:28).

The process involved the use of a “sledge” or “threshing wheel”¹⁶ which consisted of heavy boards or “a wheel” embedded with stones or metal and which was then dragged over the grain by oxen (Deuteronomy 25:4; 33:17; 2 Samuel 24:22; 1 Chronicles 21:23).¹⁷

Picture this as you think of the nations “scattering Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.” The word in this context speaks of the horrendous treatment perpetrated against God’s people by foreign powers involving such things as forced labor, enslavement, torment, torture, maiming, rape, and murder. In fact, notice God repeats v. 19 BUT then adds a significant statement:

Zechariah 1:21b, “And I said, “What are these coming to do?” And he said, “These are the horns which have scattered Judah, so that no man lifts up his head...”

The latter expression is vivid, speaking of total and complete subservience (cf. also Judges 8:28). In the ancient Near East, defeated captives were made to lie down with their heads under the foot of the conquering king to reflect two things: what they were and what the king would do if they rebelled! That is the idea of the text here! Not being able “to lift up one’s head” speaks of the evisceration of power as well as complete dominance and subservience!

In this regard, understand that we are dealing with God’s people here, it was their “heads placed under the feet of multiple nations.” Now it is true Israel and Judah needed to be disciplined for each had run headlong into sin. Yet it was NEVER God’s intention at this time or any time to decimate/humiliate the *individual* who stood in a covenant relationship with Him! Yet that is what happened when these nations interacted with Judah/Israel. God’s people whom God loves and to whom He has bound Himself were mercilessly and cruelly treated!

Now brothers and sisters, you have to know, God takes this personally! In his third vision, Zechariah would say this:

Zechariah 2:8b, “...[God] has sent me against the nations which plunder you, for he who touches you, touches the apple of His eye.”

That is what we are learning here in this second vision! Because each of us, individually, are special to God, the Lord takes very seriously and personally any attack on you and me! And so, the humiliation that was perpetrated against God’s people — on the part of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Edomites, Persians, or any other people or nation — placed them under the judgment of God. That brings us to the coming horror of all who oppose God and His people.

[The Coming Horror of All who Oppose God and His People, vv. 20-21a, 21c.](#)

Zechariah 1:20-21a, “Then the Lord showed me four craftsmen. And I said, ‘What are these coming to do?’...”

There is a lot of debate regarding who or what these “four craftsmen” are- which is why George Klein aptly said, “...Zechariah does not ask who these craftsmen are, a point

modern interpreter should take to heart.” (Klein, 2007, p. 110)¹⁸

In terms of what kind of “craftsmen” they were, the text likewise does NOT tell us! In fact, the word behind “craftsmen” is *צַרְרָן* (*charash*) and can refer to any kind of worker¹⁹ as in an artisan, blacksmith, carpenter, farmer, craftsmen, engraver, jeweler, mason, or blacksmith (the context determines the type of trade involved).²⁰ But again, it would be speculation to say what kind of “craftsmen” they were in the text before us.

However, the text does indicate that the “four craftsmen” were NOT standing there as if in a static pose (like in a picture), BUT RATHER were dynamic — they were moving!²¹ Notice v. 21a.

Zechariah 1:21a, “And I said, ‘What are these coming to do?’...”

The language is vivid... Zechariah sees four craftsmen with tools in their hands approaching the four horns in order to devastate them! Iain Duguid wrote:

The identity of the coming craftsmen is left deliberately vague. The key point is not who they are, but what they are coming to do.” (Duguid, 2010, p. 87)

In this regard, notice what they were coming to do.

Zechariah 1:21c, “...but these *craftsmen* have come to terrify them, to throw down the horns of the nations...”

From this we understand the role of these craftsmen. It was twofold, first it was:

- to terrify: *צָרַד* (*charad*); the word means “to shake vigorously” as when God’s people stood before Mount Sinai and were traumatized on account of God’s shekinah glory which “shook” the mountain (Exodus 19:18)! The word came to be used figuratively of trembling or shaking in abject fear!²²

When I think of this word in relation to judgment, I think of the men and women on the Last Day who in terror on account of the glory of God, beg for the mountains to crush them.

Revelation 6:15-17, “And the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?’”

Family of God, this is what it means to be “terrified” by God! In the Hiphil form (which

it is here) the language is causative and so carries the idea of “causing something to be terrified” as in a community being terrorized by a wild animal (cf. Deuteronomy 28:26; Is. 17:2; Jeremiah 7:33). Yet the “craftsmen” also were raised up in order:

- to throw down: יָדָה (yadah); the root literally means “to throw” or “cast” as in stoning an individual (cf. Lamentations 3:53).²³ Here the word is used to denote the opposite of something being “lifted up” in arrogance (as in the “horns” of the nations referenced in v. 18). Those nations or peoples who have lifted their horn/strength against God’s people will be brutally cast down!

Together the picture is one of devastation- emotional, spiritual, physical! However, in this vision the “craftsmen” have *YET* to do this. Again, the picture is dynamic with the four craftsmen arriving on the scene with tools in hand ready and prepared to engage in this work! It is reminiscent of the words of John the Baptist:

Matthew 3:10, “And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

This is the position of every nation, people, or individual who oppose God by opposing or attacking His people! They just are NOT storing up judgment, BUT the gallows are being built, the fire is being stoked, the axe is being raised!

This is part and parcel of what is meant by “The Imminency of Christ’s Return.” Do you understand what the expression means? Listen to the last warning in the book of Revelation:

Revelation 22:20a, “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming quickly.’...”

So many have misunderstood this statement and other such promises (Revelation 2:16; 3:11; 22:7) as if Christ was saying that He was coming quickly as in time. Now clearly, He was delayed which means either the writers of Scripture got it wrong, or Christ is a liar! That’s what liberals say and teach. The reality is that Christ did NOT have chronological time in mind. He was NOT saying, “*I am coming in just a couple of months!*” What Christ was saying is “quickly” as in the word “imminent” which speaks of that which is next! It does not necessarily mean immediate. Christ is NOT talking here about the passing of time on a clock, BUT that which is next in God’s eschatological program — which raises the question: what is next for this world? It is NOT:

- The rebuilding of a temple in Jerusalem.
- The appearance of an antichrist figure.
- The creation of a one world government.
- A war against Israel.

Rather, the next thing eschatologically is the Second Coming of Christ! That is what is denoted when Christ said, "I am coming quickly!" And so, the eschatological time clock for this world currently reads, "11:59:59:59 ad infinitum"! We see this is how Paul taught the Second Coming of Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:51-52a, "Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment [that is the imminency of Christ's return], in the twinkling of an eye..."

The expression "twinkling of an eye" is the time it takes for light to pass from the perimeter of the eye to the cornea! Truly, Christ's return will NOT come with any other build up than what is going on right now in this world. Paul writing to the Thessalonians about the non-Christian world said this:

1 Thessalonians 5:3, "While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape."

It is this that is pictured in our text with the "four craftsmen" approaching the peoples and nations of this world! That means to any and all attacking God's people, they are just a moment away from judgment! The axe currently rests at their feet (Matthew 3:10)!

How ought we to respond to this message? Let me give you two responses. First we must wait upon the Lord in trust and confident hope!

Romans 12:19, "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."

Understand that as we sit here this morning, God's judgment when it comes to every sinner is in process! As I speak, the "four craftsmen" are coming with tools in hand! So let us NOT be burdened as if God were deaf or uncaring. God sees all and is readying this world for its judgment!

With illumined minds, let us therefore view the persecutor and adversary with mercy and compassion! In the words of Elihu's exhortation to Job.

Job. 36:20-21, "Do not long for the night, when people vanish in their place. [In the context of persecution and worldly opposition the temptation is to long for judgment. Yet God here says...] Be careful, do not turn to evil; for you have preferred this to affliction."

It is natural to rejoice in the biblical message of Judgment (cf. Revelation 10:10a). But

let that rejoicing quickly turn to prayer and efforts to herald the good news of Christ before it is too late!

It is on account of this that brothers and sisters throughout church history did NOT cry and plead for mercy when facing the executioner, BUT rather prayed for their soul! For from this text, we know what really is going on right now in this world!

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End Note(s)

¹ “While in the first vision report Yahweh expressed his anger towards ‘the carefree nations’ who had ‘increased the disaster’ (1:15), no consequences for these nations were provided. The second report reveals the active outworking of this anger.” (Boda, 2016, p. 155)

² “Four of Zechariah’s visions begin with the phrase, ‘Then I looked up’ (see 2:1; 5:1; 6:1). The expression transitions from Zechariah’s contemplation of the angelic message in the previous vision to the new revelation now given to him.” (Klein, 2007, p. 108)

³ “The scene in this second vision report is far simpler than that found in the first vision report. In this way it is closer to the vision reports of the earlier prophets found in Amos 7:7–9; 8:1–3 and Jeremiah 1:11–13; 24:1–3, where one element is presented to the observer before its significance is illumined.” (Boda, 2016, p. 157)

⁴ And why was this God’s plan? Ephesians 1 could not be clearer. It was “to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (v. 6) As we were made to delight in God, through Redemption we are enabled to delight not only in His Transcendent Attributes, but also His Kind Attributes- that we might be ones who would “...praise the Lord on account of the weightiness of His grace”!

⁵ See *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:163. Cf. also Exodus 27:2; 29:12; 30:2, 3, 10; 37:25, 26; 38:2; Leviticus 4:7, 18, 25, 30, 34; 8:15; 9:9; 16:18; 1 Kings 1:50, 51; 2:28; Psalm 118:27; Jeremiah 17:1; Ezekiel 43:15, 20; Amos 3:14.

⁶ Cf. Leviticus 4:7, 12, 18, 25, 30, 34; 8:15; 9:9; 16:18.

⁷ Exodus 21:14; 1 Kings 1:50; 2:28–34.

⁸ cf. also 1 Samuel 2:1, 10; 2 Samuel 22:3; 1 Chronicles 25:5; Psalm 75:5, 6, 11; 89:18, 25; 112:9; 132:17; 148:14; Jeremiah 48:25; Lamentations 2:3, 17; Ezekiel 29:21).

⁹ “The people of the East have always been a predominantly pastoral people. Therefore, noting that the strongest animals in a herd were furnished with horns, horns became for them a natural symbol of power and pride. To lift up the horn was to be proud or even arrogant about one’s strength and position. To have horns coming out of the hands was to have power in the

hands, and so on.” (Boice, 2006, p. 496)

¹⁰ “It is tempting to try to identify the horns which have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem in terms of four particular nations, as patristic commentators did, but ‘four’ here represents the totality of opposition, just as it represents all directions in the eighth vision (see Introduction, p. 75).” (Baldwin, 1972, pp. 110-111)

¹¹ “...the horns represent all of the world powers that have raised themselves up against the Lord’s people at whatever period of history—hence the inclusion of the scattering of ‘Israel’ in 722 BC together with the historically distinct scattering of ‘Judah ... and Jerusalem’ in 586 BC.” (Duguid, 2010, p. 86)

¹² “...the difficulty of determining which kingdoms Zechariah intended could suggest that he may not have intended specific kingdoms at all. Thus, the prophet’s reference to four horns portrays the entirety of opposition to Judah, with foes attacking the nation from every side.” (Klein, 2007, p. 109)

¹³ Some believe that the four horns represent only two animals and therefore refer initially to Assyria and Babylon. And so, Joyce Baldwin wrote, “So the prophet saw four single horns, presumably on the heads of living animals, because they were capable of being terrified (verse 21).” (Baldwin, 1972, p. 110) As also Mark Boda, “Since animals connected to herding or harvesting all had two horns, the presence of four horns suggests two animals. While one would not expect a herd consisting of merely two animals, one would expect a pair of draft animals (1 Kings 19:19; Deuteronomy 22:10). This suggests that the four horns represent two large oxen who have been involved in the larger agricultural process of harvesting grain, which began with threshing and ended with winnowing.” (Boda, 2016, p. 160)

¹⁴ “Commentators who seek individual kingdoms in vision two cannot agree about which empires Zechariah envisioned. One ancient interpretation understood the empires to be Assyria, Babylon, Media, and Persia. Barker draws this same conclusion because he thinks that the verb ‘scattered’ suggests that these ‘horns’ have already persecuted God’s people. However, as we have observed previously, Old Testament authors sometimes employed the Hebrew past tense in future contexts, blunting the force of Barker’s argument. Jerome, along with other church fathers, suggests a different identification, understanding the horns as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome, paralleling Daniel’s famous visions (chapters 2 and 7). Unger reaches a similar conclusion based on his conviction that the scope of the night visions “extends through the centuries and on to the establishment of the kingdom over Israel” inaugurated at the second advent of Christ.⁹³ Certainly, the identification of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome has evidence to commend it. However, the text fails to demonstrate the certainty of this interpretation, so dogmatic confidence is not justified.” (Klein, 2007, p. 109)

¹⁵ “Implicit in the use of this word is not only the effect of the nations’ assault on God’s people, but also the reason for it. In Leviticus 26:33, God threatened to ‘scatter’ (zārâ) the Israelites among the nations as a punishment for breaking the covenant. The horns are thus depicted as God’s covenant agents of judgement who have devastated his people on his instructions.” (Duguid, 2010, p. 86)

¹⁶ Cf. Proverbs 20:26; Is. 41:15–16; 2 Samuel 24:22; 1 Chronicles 21:23; Amos 1:3.

¹⁷ Or other bovine animals- ass in heifers (Jeremiah 50:11; Hos. 10:11; cf. Micah 4:12-13) or even horses (Isaiah 28:27-28).

¹⁸ “Probably, if the horns are symbolic (representing any and all world powers), then the craftsmen are also symbolic. It would be Zechariah’s way of saying that whatever the power raised against God’s people, God also has his power and representative to oppose it and throw it down.” (Boice, 2006, p. 496)

¹⁹ For example, it is used in Scripture of craftsmen who work in stone (Exodus 28:11; 2 Samuel 5:11), wood (2 Samuel 5:11; 2 Kings 12:12; 22:6; Is. 44:13; Jeremiah 10:3; 1 Chronicles 14:1), or metal (1 Samuel 13:19; Is. 40:19; 41:7; 54:16; Jeremiah 10:9; Hosea 13:2).

²⁰ “The four smiths clearly correspond to the four horns. The word translated ‘smiths’ is a general term meaning ‘workman’; the context determines the trade intended.” (Baldwin, 1972, p. 111)

²¹ “The verb is an active participle in Hebrew, indicating that what they were doing was now in process: the craftsmen were in the process of destroying the four horns. ‘The craftsmen are coming to terrify [the four horns]’ (v. 21c).” (Jr., 2002, p. 319)

²² As in a military force in a panic (1 Samuel 14:15)!

²³ Ironically, in the context of worship the word is used of a person throwing/casting their sins down and so is translated as “confess.”