

NOTES ON ZECHARIAH 9:9-13

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Zechariah 9:9-13 is part of a larger section of the book of Zechariah, i.e., chapters 9-14, usually called "Second Zechariah." These chapters do not come from the prophet Zechariah whose speeches and visions make up the first eight chapters of the book, but date from a time perhaps as much as 200 years after Zechariah's ministry.

Zech 9:9-13 begin with a command to rejoice addressed to Jerusalem. The command is repeated in the typical parallelism of Hebrew poetry: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!" The rest of the passage gives three reasons why Jerusalem should rejoice. The first reason begins with "Lo, your king comes to you," and continues through v 10 describing the nature of this king. The reason to rejoice is the return of Jerusalem's king in peace. The second reason begins in v 11 and ends with the first part of v 12: "Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope." The reason to rejoice is the release and return of Jerusalem's prisoners, i.e., exiles. The third reason begins in the middle of v 12 with "Today I declare that I will restore to you double," which ought to be capitalized as the beginning of a new sentence. The reason concludes with v 13 and focuses on the restoration – the re-empowerment, if you like – of Jerusalem and its territories (Judah and Ephraim).

The king who returns to Jerusalem will come in peace, not as a bringer of war. This is implied by the king riding on a donkey, rather than a (war-)horse, and then is stated explicitly in v 10 with language of cutting off the chariot and bow that echoes language in Pss 46:9 and 76:3, psalms that celebrate Jerusalem as the site where God makes an end to war. There is some ambiguity about the identity of this king. The reference to "his dominion shall be from sea to sea," echoes Ps 72:8, which refers to the human king descended from David who rules in Jerusalem, and the entire description of the coming king perhaps also echoes Isaiah 9:4-7. However, in Psalms 46 and 76 it is GOD who makes an end to war, not the human king.

The release of the prisoners described in v 11 and the first part of v 12 is full of echoes from other passages. The reference to the waterless pit recalls the cistern in which Jeremiah was imprisoned, and the pit in which Joseph was thrown by his brothers before being sold into slavery out of his homeland. The language of freeing prisoners occurs in Second Isaiah's prophecies during the exile (Isa 42:7; 49:8-9) to refer specifically to releasing those deported to Babylon from exile. The language of returning to the stronghold (i.e., Jerusalem) suggests that here too the release from prison is reference to release from the marginalization and oppression of exile away from Judah and Jerusalem.

The announcement of Jerusalem's restoration in the language "I [God] will restore to you double" recalls the opening of the prophecies of Second Isaiah, announcing to the exiles in Babylon "that she [Jerusalem] has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins." The restoration of Judah and Ephraim are part of the restoration of Jerusalem because in the ancient world the strength of cities lay in the resources they could draw from their hinterlands. Without Judah and Ephraim Jerusalem was nothing.

If we think carefully about the command to rejoice and the reasons for rejoicing, we can see what they tell us about the situation of the audience of this prophetic speech. Because the command to rejoice is addressed to Jerusalem we can assume both that the audience is in Jerusalem, and that it probably sees little reason to rejoice. That its king is coming implies that Jerusalem has no king and thus must be under the rule and domination of some other power. Moreover, that the king comes in peace and rules in

peace, making war end, implies that war and violence have dogged the audience and made life a harrowing experience. That Jerusalem has exiles who have yet to be released and return implies that the community that looks to Jerusalem as its center is still fragmented and scattered far and wide from its homeland, some refugees, some immigrants, some held in various forms of bondage. That the restoration of its strength is a cause for rejoicing implies that at the time of the speech Jerusalem is weak, and thus at the mercy of the powerful.

This might be the community of God's people in many circumstances, but the reference to Greece in v 13 suggests that this speech addresses the needs of the small population of Jerusalem in the time after the death of Alexander the Great. In short order, Alexander overturned the great Persian Empire in which Jerusalem had seen the hand of God as they had found peace and the beginnings of prosperity, and then at Alexander's death his empire descended into chaos as his generals fought each other for the spoils. In this time Jerusalem was caught between the armies of two of the generals, Seleucus and Ptolemy.

In any case, the speech in every instance places God on the side of the weak, those dominated and oppressed by others, communities scattered from their homeland, and those victimized by war and violence. What that means for our contemporary communities depends on our positions in society. For persons and groups and nations in situations like that of Jerusalem at the time of this speech, the speech can continue to be Good News that God is on their side and is at work to transform the world and their situation. For persons and groups and communities that are the powerful who control and dominate the weak, and who get their way by force, coercion and even violence and war, this passage is a direct challenge, positioning God as calling them to reject their privilege and power and violence in favor of a world at peace where all thrive.