

Zechariah 12 and the “Esther Connection”

By Gary DeMar

ALMOST ANY DISCUSSION of Bible prophecy leads to Zechariah, a book quoted or alluded to in the NT 41 times.¹ Chapters 9–14 “are the most quoted section of the prophets in the passion narratives of the Gospels and, next to Ezekiel, Zechariah has influenced the author of Revelation more than any other Old Testament writer.”² This statistic alone should impress upon us the need to understand this book of the Bible that Jerome portrayed as “obscure” and Philip Carrington described as “confused and difficult.”³ Is it possible that a book that is quoted so often in the New Testament should be so difficult to understand?

The following exposition of Zechariah 12 (an abridgment of a longer and more complete article) argues for a fulfillment after the Babylonian captivity when 50,000 Jews had returned to their homeland to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem.



THE PROPHET ZECHARIAH

HISTORICAL SETTING

The Persian king Cyrus issued a decree around 538 B.C. that opened the way for the Jews to return to their homeland (1 Chron. 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–4). About 50,000 Jewish exiles returned to the Promised Land. In the second month of 536 B.C., they laid “the foundation of the home of the LORD” (Ezra. 3:11–13). But soon thereafter the building stopped. God then raised up Haggai and Zechariah to admonish and encourage them to get back to the task at hand and rebuild the temple.

It’s relatively easy to date Zechariah’s prophecy since he wrote “in the eighth month of the second year of Darius” (Zech. 1:1). Darius’ reign began in 522 B.C. This means that Zechariah wrote in the year 520 B.C. If we follow traditional chronology, the defeat of Haman in the book of Esther takes place in 473 B.C., with the events of Ezra and Nehemiah following two decades later. James B. Jordan follows a shortened chronology, after the tradition of Martin Anstey, Philip Mauro, and a number of older commentators, with the Jews defending themselves against Haman’s plan to eradicate all the Jews around 509 B.C.

There was early opposition to the returning exiles and their building program. The opposition groups are described by Ezra



THE JEWS GOING INTO EXILE

as “the enemies of Judah” (Ezra 4:1). “Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against



ESTHER BECOMES QUEEN

them to frustrate their counsel in the days of Cyrus the king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia” (4:4–5), and “in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem” (4:6; cf. Esther 1:1). Opposition is so great that Haman develops a plan to “destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus” (Es-ther 3:6). What Zechariah 12

prophesies, the book of Esther fulfills.

THE RESCUE OF ISRAEL

We learn from Esther that the Jews were rescued from their enemies in a dramatic and decisive way. First, Haman, “the enemy of the Jews,” is hanged (7:10; 9:25), and his ten sons were later executed (9:7–9). Second, “on the day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, it was turned to the contrary so that the Jews themselves gained the mastery over those who hated them” (9:1). Third, we are



ESTHER BEFORE THE KING

told that anyone who sought the harm of the Jews could not stand before them (9:2). Fourth, “the Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying; and they did what they pleased to those who hated them” (9:5). Fifth, more than 75,000 of those who hated the Jews were killed (9:16). Sixth, what could

have been days of “sorrow” and “mourning” for the Jews were turned into days of “gladness” and celebration

(9:22) because the wicked scheme which Haman devised was returned “on his own head” (9:25). Israel was indeed a “cup that causes reeling” and a “heavy stone for all the peoples around” (Zech. 12:2). Seventh, this rescue of Israel was so significant that it was to be remembered by “every generation, every family, every province, and every city” so that the “days of Purim were not to fall from among the Jews, or their memory fade from their descendants” (Esther 9:28).

ALL THE NATIONS

But how should we understand Zechariah when he writes that “all the nations of the earth will be gathered against” (12:3) Jerusalem, and “it will come about in that day that I will set about to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem” (12:9)? For the dispensationalist, “all the nations” must refer to every nation in the world during the seven-year post-rapture great tribulation period. This interpretation ignores the historical context and the way the Bible uses “all the nations.”

Ahasuerus used warriors from the nations he conquered to expand his kingdom and his fighting force by incorporating their best soldiers into his own army. Rome at the time of Christ was not made up entirely of Romans. By the fifth century A.D., Rome shifted its military capacity “to various Germanic groups, such as the Goths, Huns, Vandals, Burgundians, and Franks. Moreover, when the last battles came, Germans made up the larger proportion of the Roman army as well and in that sense had already supplanted the ethnic Romans.”⁴ Keil, in his commentary on Daniel, makes a similar point: “[T]he Roman kingdom spread its power and dominion over the whole oikoumene⁵ over all the historical nations of antiquity in Europe, Africa, and Asia. ‘There is,’ (says Herodian, ii. 11.7) ‘no part of the earth and no region of the heavens whither the Romans have not extended their dominion.’”⁶

Cyrus, the king of Persia who con-

quered Babylon and under whom the Jews were allowed to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple (Ezra 1:1–4; Isa. 44:28; 45:1, 12, 13), declared, “The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth” (Ezra 1:2; 2 Chron. 36:23). The Persian empire consisted of conquered nations throughout its “127 provinces,” from “India to Ethiopia” (Esther 1:1). When Persia conquered Babylon, it inherited the nations that Babylon had conquered. Nebuchadnezzar thought of himself as “the king to all the peoples, nations, and men of every language that live in all the earth” (Dan. 4:1; cf. Jer. 27:7). Ahasuerus thought of himself in equal terms.

An inscription of Xerxes found at Persepolis and translated in [Ancient Near Eastern Texts] (p. 316) enables us to read his own testimony: ‘I am Xerxes, the great king, the only king, the king of all countries which speak all kinds of languages, the king of this big and far-reaching earth...’⁷

Edward J. Young writes that the “Assyrian and Babylonian kings regarded themselves as kings of all the earth, and in their inscriptions were accustomed thus to speak of themselves. This practice was also in vogue among Persian rulers.”⁸ Consider that when a communique was sent out by the king, it had to be translated into “the scores of languages spoken throughout the empire.”⁹ A variety of languages meant a variety of nations. “Herodotus says sixty nations were under Persian rule.”¹⁰ The armies that came up against the Jews, and this would have included Jerusalem, came from “all the nations.” For further support, consider these all-inclusive language passages:

- “Then the fame of David went out into all the lands; and the LORD brought the fear of him on all the nations” (1 Chron. 14:17).
- “And many were bringing gifts to the Lord at Jerusalem and choice presents to Hezekiah king of Judah, so that he was exalted in the sight

of all nations thereafter” (2 Chron. 32:23).

- “And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, “Thus says the LORD, “Even so will I break within two full years, the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all the nations”” (Jer. 28:11).
- “All nations surrounded me; In the name of the LORD I will surely cut them off” (Psalm 118:10).
- “Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men, from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5).
- “But now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith” (Rom. 16:26).

As these examples show, “all nations” does not usually refer to every single nation of what we know of the world today.¹¹ There is no need to follow the dispensationalist interpretation since the Bible does not require it.

JUDAH AND JERUSALEM

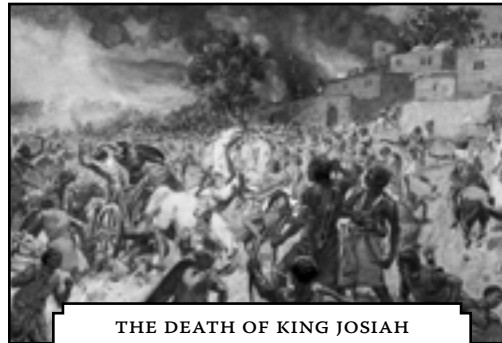
An argument that will be raised against the above interpretation is that while Zechariah 12:1–9 describes the failed siege as against Jerusalem and Judah (12:2), the book of Esther makes no mention of Judah and Jerusalem. First, Esther is written from the perspective of the Persian-dwelling Jews. There is little reference to anything particularly religious in the book. God is not mentioned. Nothing is said about Jewish laws, feasts, or customs.¹² Individual Jews may have practiced Judaism, but Esther is silent on the subject.

Second, since it was Haman’s goal to



MORDECAI RECEIVES RING WHICH HAD BEEN GIVEN TO HAMAN

“destroy all the Jews... throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus” (Esther 3:6), Jerusalem would have been a prime target even though the city is not mentioned by name. How do you rid the world of Jews if you don’t slaughter the 50,000 that reside in the Jewish State? We know that there were Jews who were “assembled in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus” (9:2). This must have included Jerusalem. Notice what Esther 9:16 says: “Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king’s provinces assembled to defend their lives and rid themselves of their enemies, and kill 75,000 of those who hated them. . . .”



THE DEATH OF KING JOSIAH
AT MEGIDDO

returned to Jerusalem after a period of exile (12:7; cf. Jer. 30:10, 18), the southern kingdom of Judah is the main population center (Zech. 12:4, 6, 7, 8), the people still know their tribal identities (12:5, 10, 12, 13), the “glory of the house of David” is still recognized (12:7, 8, 10; cf. Neh. 3:15; 12:24, 36, 45), and the death of Josiah by Pharaoh Necho at Megiddo (2 Kings 23:29–30; 2

Chron. 35:22–27) is still remembered as being a national tragedy (Zech. 12:11).

These historical events would not be significant to Jews living in Israel in the twenty-first century. Today’s Jews would recall events related to the holocaust, the

1967 Six-Day War, and on-going battles with the “Palestinians.” A post-exilic people who just recently returned to their homeland would still know enough of their recent history to recall the tragic events mentioned by Zechariah.

CONCLUSION

Zechariah 12 has its own interpretive clues to help us identify the time of fulfillment: battles are fought by men riding horses (Zech. 12:4), those in captivity have

Notes

1. “Nestle and Alan list 41 New Testament citations or allusions to Zechariah’s book (Eberhard Nestle and Kurt Aland, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*. New York: American Bible Society, 1950, pp. 670–1).” F. Duane Lindsey, “Zechariah,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1545. Also see Robert G. Bratcher, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament* (London, England: United Bible Societies, 1967).
2. Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 59. Also see Philip Carrington, *The Meaning of the Revelation* (London: SPCK, 1931), 268–271.
3. Carrington, *The Meaning of the Revelation*, 268.
4. Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 130.
5. The Greek word *oikoumene* is most often translated “inhabited earth” and refers, at least when used in the New Testament, to the known world or the Roman empire (Matt. 24:14; Luke 2:1; Acts 11:28).
6. C. F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, trans. M. G. Easton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 268.
7. Joyce G. Baldwin, “Esther,” *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, eds. D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer, A.M. Stibbs, and D.J. Wiseman, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 413.
8. Edward J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 97.
9. John C. Whitcomb, *Esther: Triumph of God’s Sovereignty* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 43.
10. F. B. Huey, Jr., “Esther,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988, 4:792).
11. I’ve dealt with the issue of limited geography in biblical interpretation in Gary DeMar, *Surveying the Prophetic Landscape* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2004). Chapters available on request.
12. John H. Walton, *Covenant: God’s Purpose, God’s Plan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 52–54.

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