

ZECHARIAH 14: A DIALOGUE WITH THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION¹

by Al Wolters

A WELCOME TREND in recent biblical scholarship is the increased attention that is being paid to the history of interpretation. An early sign of this trend was the commentary on Exodus by Brevard Childs, which appeared in the Old Testament Library series in 1974.² Next to the application of the standard historical-critical methodologies to the text of Exodus, Childs also highlighted what he called the “theological” meaning of the text, and in this context interacted extensively with some of the great minds in the history of interpretation, such as Augustine, Rashi, Luther and Calvin. Since then, his example has been followed by other commentators, in both mainline and conservative circles. A notable instance is the recent massive commentary on 1 Corinthians by Anthony Thiselton, which deals extensively with what he calls the “post-history” of the text.³ Just as “pre-history” refers to the fortunes of a biblical book before it reached its canonical form (usually reconstructed in a highly speculative manner), so the “post-history” refers to the fortunes of a biblical book in the history of interpretation.

In my judgment, this is a very positive development. Too long has biblical scholarship been dominated by a mentality which dismisses as “pre-critical” the work of master interpreters such as John Chrysostom and John Calvin, or regarded any exegetical work

¹Lecture delivered at Mid-America Reformed Seminary on Nov. 8, 2000.

²Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus. A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974).

³Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

done more than a generation ago as out of date and valueless. The truth is rather that every age has made valuable discoveries in plumbing the riches of Scripture, and the history of interpretation is therefore a rich quarry of exegetical insight which we neglect to our own impoverishment. This is especially true of the so-called “theological” (I would prefer the term “confessional”) interpretation of Scripture, since so much of modern historical criticism has deliberately turned a deaf ear to the voice of God in the Bible. But it is also true of other, more technical, levels of interpretation. It has often been my experience, in my work on Zechariah, to discover that some recently launched proposal with respect to the meaning of a Hebrew word, or the historical reference of a given passage, was anticipated hundreds of years ago—and in some cases was convincingly refuted as well. All of this is not to say that there have not been many modern insights and discoveries which greatly enrich our understanding of Scripture (I think of the recovery of the Akkadian and Ugaritic languages, for example, and the very fruitful application of synchronic literary criticism in recent years). Nor do I mean to suggest that there is not a lot of misleading and unhelpful exegesis that is part of the history of interpretation (I think of a good deal of allegorical interpretation, for example). I am simply pointing out that there is an enormous and largely untapped reservoir of potential exegetical insight in the history of interpretation. Sometimes the value of exploring it may be largely negative. The diversity and apparent arbitrariness of earlier interpretations may alert us to the fact that a given passage has never been satisfactorily explained, and that we need to be modest in our claims to be hearing and proclaiming what God is saying in that passage.

A case in point is the last chapter of the book of Zechariah, which is the subject of the present essay. This chapter has perplexed interpreters down through the centuries. We find a particularly stark example of this exegetical perplexity in Martin Luther, who wrote two commentaries on the book of Zechariah, one in Latin and one in German. The Latin one, published in 1526, stops abruptly at the end of chapter 13.⁴ The commentary contains nothing on chapter 14, and offers no explanation of its absence. The German

⁴Martin Luther, “Lectures on Zechariah. The Latin Text, 1526” in *Luther’s Works, Vol. 20: Lectures on the Minor Prophets III: Zechariah* (ed. Hilton C. Oswald; Saint Louis: Concordia, 1973), 1-152.

commentary, published a year later in 1527, does contain a section on chapter 14, but it begins with the following frank admission: “Here, in this chapter, I give up. For I am not sure what the prophet is talking about.”⁵ In effect, Luther is throwing up his hands in despair. Nevertheless, he does offer some tentative comments on the meaning of the chapter, although they are much less extensive than his comments on the previous chapters of Zechariah. At the conclusion of his scanty remarks he invites other interpreters to do a better job than he has done: “Whoever can do better has sufficient opportunity and leave for that.”

Before we take a closer look at the various approaches which have been taken to the interpretation of Zechariah 14, let us briefly remind ourselves of its content. It is a description of what will happen “on that day” (בַּיּוֹם־הַהוּא), on the Day of the Lord. We can summarize what it says in seven sentences:

1. The Lord will first gather the nations in order to visit the horrors of war on Jerusalem, and then turn around and fight these nations (vss. 1-3).
2. Right through the Mount of Olives, where his feet will stand, the Lord will create a valley of escape from Jerusalem, and then arrive with his army (vss. 4-5).
3. The day of the Lord will have continuous daylight, continuous streams will flow eastwards and westwards from Jerusalem, and the Lord will be king of the whole earth (vss. 6-9).
4. Jerusalem will be lifted high in safety, and the surrounding countryside will be flattened (vss. 10-11).
5. The nations that fought against Jerusalem will be decimated by plague, panic, and the attack of Judah, and their wealth taken (vss 12-15).
6. The survivors of the nations will make an annual pilgrimage to worship the Lord in Jerusalem, and those who don't will be punished (vss. 16-19).
7. The commonest things in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy, and the ungodly will be absent (vss. 20-21).

The chapter is plainly a prophecy concerning a series of

⁵Martin Luther, “Lectures on Zechariah. The German Text, 1527” in *Luther's Works, Vol. 20: Lectures on the Minor Prophets III: Zechariah* (ed. Hilton C. Oswald; Saint Louis: Concordia, 1973), 153-347 (337).

dramatic future events which God will bring about in and around Jerusalem, but it is unclear what these events are. Are they real events in world history, which inform us about the future history of greater Jerusalem, or are they images projected onto the screen of the apocalyptic imagination, which tell us more about the prophet's own situation and aspirations than about anything that is actually going to happen in Jerusalem and its environs? If we take the former approach, just where in world history do we find the events just described? Have they already happened, or are they still to come? Is the language which describes them to be taken literally or figuratively? And if we take the second approach, just what does this apocalyptic language tell us about the prophet and his outlook?

In my study of the history of interpretation of the book of Zechariah, I have come across seven basic interpretations of Zechariah 14, which can be classified according to the different answers which they give to these questions. I propose to sketch briefly what these seven interpretations are, and to illustrate them from at least one prominent representative. I will also note what to me seem to be some of the weaknesses of each approach. After this survey of the basic interpretations I will suggest some lessons which we can learn from it, and propose a responsible way of appropriating this chapter for our edification today.

It was not until the nineteenth century that biblical interpreters began to question the assumption that Zechariah was predicting real events in world history. It is not surprising, therefore, that five of our seven basic interpretations take this as their starting point. Although they all agreed on this, they disagreed on two other issues: whether or not the historical fulfillment of this prophecy had already taken place (and if so, when), and whether or not its language should be understood literally. We shall deal first with the three interpretations which assume that fulfillment has already taken place—an assumption which is usually paired with the view that the language is to be understood figuratively.

(1) The oldest view, which is that of the commentary ascribed to the Syriac church father Ephraem Syrus, holds that the prophecy of Zechariah 14 (all except the last two verses, which refer to the last days) was fulfilled in the days of the Maccabean Revolt in the early second century B.C.⁶ A similar view was espoused by the

⁶See T.-J. Lamy, "Les commentaires de S. Éphrem sur le prophète

influential Greek church father Theodore of Mopsuestia,⁷ and by the later Syriac father Ishodad of Merv.⁸ In modern times the Maccabean interpretation was defended by J. A. Dathius (1773)⁹ and by the eighteenth-century Dutch Reformed exegete Herman Venema (1697-1787).¹⁰

However, we will take as spokesman for this position another Dutchman, the well-known Hugo Grotius (Huig de Groot) (1583-1645). Grotius, who is best known today as a legal philosopher, was also something of a theologian and biblical scholar (he was an Arminian in theological persuasion), who published a volume on Old Testament exegesis entitled *Annotationes ad Vetus Testamentum*.¹¹ In this work he refers the whole of Zechariah 14 to the Maccabean struggle, citing the books of Maccabees and Josephus to make the historical connections. For example, when verse 2 speaks of the Lord gathering all the nations against Jerusalem, Grotius takes this to refer to the troops attacking Jerusalem under Antiochus IV; when verse 4 says that “his feet . . . will stand on the Mount of Olives,” Grotius interprets this to refer to the feet of Bacchides, the

Zacharie (*fin*),” *RB* 7 (1898): 89-97 (93-97).

⁷See Hans Norbert Sprenger, *Theodori Mopsuesteni Commentarius in XII Prophetas. Einleitung und Ausgabe* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1977), 393-400. Actually, Theodore takes only the first 11 verses of Zechariah 14 to refer to Maccabean times; from verse 12 on this chapter is taken to refer to earlier events under Zerubbabel (Sprenger, *Commentarius*, 396-397).

⁸See *Commentaire d'Isô'dad de Merv sur l'Ancien Testament: IV. Isaïe et les Douze* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vol. 304; Scriptorum Syri, Tomus 129; tr. Ceslas van den Eynde; Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1969), 171-173. Ishodad follows the interpretation of Theodore of Mopsuestia.

⁹See the note by John Owen on page 406 of his translation of Calvin's commentary on Zechariah: *A Commentary on the Twelve Minor Prophets. Volume 5: Zechariah & Malachi* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986). J. A. Dathius (Dathe) is the author of *Prophetæ minores ex recensione textus Hebraei et versionum antiquarum latine versi notisque philologicis et criticis illustrati* (Halle, 1773).

¹⁰See J. C. de Bruïne, *Herman Venema. Een nederlandse theoloog in de tijd der Verlichting* (Franeker: Wever, 1973), 129, referring to Herman Venema, *Sermones academici vice commentarii ad librum prophetiarum Zachariae* (Leeuwarden, 1787). De Bruïne points out that Venema also sees the Maccabean period as foreshadowing modern European history.

¹¹Hugo Grotius, *Opera Omnia Theologica*, 3 vols. (London: Moses Pitt, 1679), 1.563-565.

general of the Greek forces; when that same verse speaks of the Mount of Olives being divided, Grotius understands this of a trench which was created by the Greeks when they removed soil in order to make siege ramps against the walls of Jerusalem; when verse 10 says that Jerusalem was lifted high, Grotius takes this to refer to its lofty towers and walls; when verse 21 says that no Canaanite will any longer be in the house of the Lord, Grotius understands the word to mean “merchant,” and refers it to those who sold vessels and supplies to the priests in the temple.

Grotius’s interpretation is extremely ingenious, and even manages to take much of the language in a literal sense. However, he is compelled to depart from the literal sense in some places. For example, in verse 17, he takes “rain” to be a metaphor for divine favor. Moreover, it is extremely forced to take “his feet” in verse 4 as referring to the feet of anyone but the Lord, who was the subject of the previous sentence.

(2) A much more common interpretation is that which sees Zechariah 14 as referring in general to the period of history which runs from the New Testament to the Second Coming. In this view, the capture of Jerusalem which is described in the first two verses is usually taken to refer literally to the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70, but in the rest of the chapter Jerusalem is taken as a type or symbol of the New Testament church. We find this view already in the commentary of the fourth-century Greek church father Didymus the Blind, which was rediscovered a few decades ago in the sands of Egypt.¹² But it has also been popular in modern times, being adopted, for example, by Luther in the sixteenth century,¹³ and the conservative Lutheran exegete Leupold in the twentieth,¹⁴ as well as a whole series of Reformed commentators, including Lambertus Danaeus in the sixteenth century,¹⁵ the annotators of the Dutch *Statenvertaling*¹⁶ and

¹²*Didyme l’Aveugle, Sur Zacharie*, 3 vols. (Sources Chrétiennes, 83-85; ed. L. Doutreleau; Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1962), 3, 977-1087.

¹³Luther, “Lectures on Zechariah. The German Text,” 337-347.

¹⁴H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Zechariah* (PLACE: The Wartburg Press, 1956), reprinted Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), 258-277.

¹⁵Lambertus Danaeus, *A Fruitfull Commentarie upon the twelve Small Prophets* (tr. John Stockwood; London: John Legate, 1594), 1093-1115.

¹⁶The *Statenvertaling* was for centuries the standard Dutch Protestant Bible translation, comparable to the King James Version in English. It was

George Hutcheson in the seventeenth,¹⁷ the Dutch Reformed preacher J. Van Andel in the nineteenth,¹⁸ and the *vrijgemaakt* writer P. Lok in the twentieth.¹⁹

For our purposes we shall take Luther as representative of this interpretation. He reads the first two verses as referring to the destruction of the literal Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but from then on the chapter refers to the spread of the gospel and Christendom. The going forth of the Lord against the nations in verse 3 is interpreted to mean that “Christ will go forth and by means of the gospel fight against those nations.” The Lord standing on the Mount of Olives in verse 4 means that Christ began his gospel fight against the nations when he stood on the Mount of Olives at his ascension. The splitting of the mountain refers to the dispersion of the disciples who were with Christ into all the world. The valley created by the splitting (verse 5) refers to “the abandoned deserted synagogue, or Jewry.” The streams flowing out from Jerusalem (verse 8) represent the Holy Spirit which flows through the gospel from the spiritual Jerusalem. The flattening of the countryside around Jerusalem (verse 10) means that all under Christ will be the same, and there will no longer be “those factions, sects, and differences.”²⁰ It is not necessary to go on. It is clear that this interpretation applies the imagery of this chapter in quite a free way to the life of the church between the first and second coming of Christ.

Luther’s interpretation is certainly not without its weaknesses, as he himself was quite prepared to grant. It seems arbitrary to espouse a literal interpretation at first, but then to switch to a symbolical one later. The interpretation of the Mount of Olives as representing the disciples, and of the new valley running through it as representing the deserted synagogue, seems not only very forced, but also mutually exclusive.

commissioned by the Synod of Dort in 1619, and published (with extensive *kanttekeningen* or marginal notes) in 1637.

¹⁷George Hutcheson, *A Brief Exposition on the Twelve Small Prophets*, 3 vols. (London: Ralph Smith, 1657), 3: 396-405.

¹⁸Jan van Andel, *De Kleine Profeten* (Leeuwarden: Amsing, 1881) 360-365.

¹⁹P. Lok, *The Minor Prophets* (London ON: Inter-League Publication Board, 1989).

²⁰Luther, “Lectures on Zechariah. The German Text,” 337-347

(3) The third interpretation which takes the prophecy of Zechariah 14 as already fulfilled is that of John Calvin.²¹ According to him, the period in which the predicted events occurred is the time from Israel's return from exile to the New Testament. Remarkably, this interpretation appears to be unique to Calvin. As far as I have been able to discover, Calvin had neither predecessors nor followers in this matter.

According to Calvin, the various calamities which the chapter describes as falling on Jerusalem refer not to specific events, but to "a series of evils from the time the city and the temple began to be built till the coming of Christ."²² At the same time, however, he sees the events of this period in the history of God's Old Testament people as prefiguring those of the New Testament church. Thus he writes on verse 13, which he takes to refer to the Jews fighting among themselves, that it also has a secondary reference to later Christians:

But this passage deserves special notice, as here is described to us the condition of the Church, such as it is to be until the end of the world; for though the Prophet speaks here of the intermediate time between the return of the people and the coming of Christ, yet he paints for us a living representation, by which we can see that the Church is never to be free or exempt from this evil—that it cannot drive away or put to flight domestic enemies.²³

In other words, Zechariah 14 refers *directly* to Israel after the Exile, but *indirectly* to the Church after Christ.

Although Calvin understands the prophecy of Zechariah 14 to refer in general to the historical vicissitudes of post-exilic Israel, he does occasionally identify a specific historical event which demonstrates concretely the fulfillment of the prophet's words. Thus he writes the following on the words "Judah shall fight against Jerusalem" (verse 14):

At what time this happened, it is well known; for under Antiochus we know that both the city and the whole land were full of trai-

²¹John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Twelve Minor Prophets, Volume 5: Zechariah and Malachi*, tr. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849; reprinted Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 405-455.

²²Calvin, *Commentary*, 405.

²³Calvin, *Commentary*, 436-37.

tors.... It was not then without reason foretold by Zechariah, that the Jews would become cruel enemies to their own brethren.²⁴

In other words, Calvin here also sees a reference to the time of the Maccabees, but only incidentally, as one of a long series of historical fulfillments in the roughly five centuries preceding Christ.

Despite this example of a specific and fairly literal historical identification, Calvin generally emphasizes the figurative nature of the prophet's language. A striking example of this is his interpretation of verse 4a: "And his feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives." For Calvin this is simply a vivid way of portraying the power of God. He writes:

He continues the same subject, that God's power would be then conspicuous in putting enemies to flight. He indeed illustrates his discourse by figurative expressions, as though he wished to bring the Jews to see the scene itself; for the object of the personification is no other but that the faithful might set God before them as it were in a visible form; and thus he confirms their faith, as indeed was necessary; for as we are dull and entangled in earthly thoughts, our minds can hardly rise up to heaven, though the Lord with a clear voice invites us to himself. The prophet then, in order to aid our weakness, adds a vivid representation, as though God stood before their eyes.²⁵

For "vivid representation" the Latin original here uses the Greek expression *hypotyposis*,²⁶ a technical term from classical rhetoric for "a Rhetorical figure by which a matter was vividly sketched in words."²⁷

The difficulty with Calvin's interpretation is similar to what we have noted with the first two. Not only is there a certain arbitrariness in deciding what is and what is not to be taken as "figurative," but the category "figurative" seems to allow for very few exegetical controls. If the phrase "his feet will stand on the

²⁴Calvin, *Commentary*, 439.

²⁵Calvin, *Commentary*, 411.

²⁶For the Latin text, see *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia. Volumen XLIV (= Corpus Reformatorum. Volumen LXXII)* (Brunsvigae: Schwetschke, 1890) 364. Note that the sixteenth-century Reformed exegete Lambertus Danaeus also speaks of *hypotyposis* in connection with Zech 14:4 (*A Fruitfull Commentarie*, 1096).

²⁷LSJ s.v.

Mount of Olives” has no other meaning than “he will be a powerful defender,” then language has been large deprived of its semantic specificity, and the interpreter has almost unbridled freedom.

We turn now to those interpretations of Zechariah 14 which consider its prophecy to be not yet fulfilled. In principle these might look for its fulfillment any time in the future, but in practice they all focus on the last days, the eschatological future associated with the rise of the Antichrist, the return of Christ, and the last judgment. There are many commentators who have adopted this eschatological interpretation of the chapter, but they are divided on the issue of whether the language of the prophecy should be understood as literal or not. Although the first three basic interpretations also have differing emphases with respect to the literalness of the prophet’s descriptions, this issue does not serve to divide these first three views as sharply as the next two.

(4) Of these next two, the commonest view is that the language is not literal. The prophet is understood to be depicting the end times in figurative language which allows for considerable latitude of exposition. This appears to have been the prevailing view in the Middle Ages, and both Luther and Calvin find it necessary to define their own position in opposition to it.²⁸ However, it was adopted by the sixteenth-century Reformed commentator Oecolampadius,²⁹ and has commanded a large following in the last two centuries. Among those who have adopted it are C. F. Keil,³⁰ A. Köhler,³¹ C. H. H. Wright³² and E. B. Pusey³³ in the nineteenth century, and H.

²⁸See Luther, “Lectures on Zechariah. The German Text,” 337. Calvin, *Commentary*, 454.

²⁹J. Oecolampadius, *In minores quos vocant prophetas* (Geneva, 1558), 216-220.

³⁰C. F. Keil, *Minor Prophets*, Volume 10.2 in C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 400-421.

³¹August Köhler, *Der Weissagungen Sacharjas zweite Hälfte, Cap. 9-14* (Erlangen: Deichert, 1863), 247-296.

³²C. H. H. Wright, *Zechariah and His Prophecies* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1879, reprinted Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1980), 446-522.

³³E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets, with a Commentary Explanatory and Practical. Vol. 2: Micah-Malachi* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1885), 447-459.

Veldkamp,³⁴ A. van der Woude³⁵ and Thomas E. McComiskey³⁶ in the twentieth. I have chosen the Dutch Reformed exegete Jan Ridderbos as the representative of this position.³⁷

With reference to the attack on Jerusalem described in verses 1 and 2, Ridderbos writes the following:

. . . we must not look upon this prophecy as the concrete prediction of a historical conquest of Jerusalem (the last part of verse 2 does not apply to the conquest of A.D. 70), but as a description of the last things in an Old Testament manner—that is, a manner in which the final and fiercest manifestation of the enmity of the world against the church of the Lord (cf. Rev 20:8f.) is described in the guise of a battle of the nations against Jerusalem.³⁸

In his detailed exegesis of verses 3-5, with its description of the Lord standing on the Mount of Olives, and the creation of a valley of escape through the midst of it, and of verses 12-15, with its description of the horrible fate of the former assailants of Jerusalem, Ridderbos gives a straightforward elucidation of the plain sense of the text, but when he speaks about the fulfillment of these verses at the conclusion of his treatment, he explains them rather differently. He writes: “we see . . . in the Lord’s action against the nations (vss. 3-5; vss. 12-15) a representation of the divine display of power by which the church is delivered and her assailants are judged.”³⁹ Something similar is true of the reversal of the natural order which is described in verses 6-11. The exegesis explains the literal meaning of the text, but the conclusion says something different. There Ridderbos writes: “The description of the changes in nature and of Jerusalem’s elevation above the Judean countryside (vss. 6-11) will be fulfilled in a way which is much more glorious

³⁴H. Veldkamp, *De twee getuigen (Haggai en Zacharia)* (Franeker: Wever, 1939), 216-219.

³⁵A. S. van der Woude, *Zacharia* (POT; Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1984), 251-270.

³⁶Thomas Edward McComiskey, “Zechariah,” in *An Exegetical & Expository Commentary on the Minor Prophets. Vol. 3* (ed. T. E. McComiskey; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 1226-1244.

³⁷Jan Ridderbos, *De Kleine Profeten III: Haggai, Zacharia, Maleachi* (Tweede druk; Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift; Kampen: Kok, 1952).

³⁸Ridderbos, *Kleine Profeten III*, 183-84. The quotations from Ridderbos are in my translation.

³⁹Ridderbos, *Kleine Profeten III*, 188.

than the words can give any inkling of when the new earth comes and the heavenly Jerusalem descends from God out of heaven.”⁴⁰ There is apparently a dramatic disparity between what the prophetic words lead one to expect, and the even more glorious reality of their fulfillment.

Another feature of Ridderbos’s treatment, which is characteristic of the fourth basic interpretation in general, is that he does not rule out the possibility that parts of the prophecy may refer to partial fulfillments before the last days. In other words, there is some overlap with the second basic interpretation. Thus Ridderbos adds to the exegesis of verses 1-2 cited above: “This is not to say that the attacks which are inflicted upon the church of the Lord throughout the ages are not already initial fulfillments of our prophecy.”⁴¹ Similarly, the prediction of the nations making an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem in verse 16 is said to be “a shadowy prediction of the coming of the Gentiles in the days of the new covenant,”⁴² a fulfillment which took place long before the eschaton.

It is clear that this interpretation too has its palpable weaknesses. It is not fully consistent, since not every part of the prophecy can be said to refer to the last days, and the gap between the prophetic word and the eschatological reality which it purports to describe is quite dramatic. It is of course true that the fulfillment of a prophecy may well be more *glorious* than the prophetic words initially indicate, but may it also be almost unrecognizably *different*?

(5) It is undoubtedly these difficulties which have provided the primary rationale for our fifth basic interpretation. This interpretation is like the preceding one in referring the words of the prophecy to the last days, but unlike it in insisting that these words be interpreted literally. Although this view apparently had some antecedents in early Jewish exegesis, it is very largely a modern phenomenon, beginning in the nineteenth century with the work of J. N. Darby. Today it is the standard view of dispensationalists. Prominent representatives of this fifth interpretation are David Baron,⁴³ Charles L. Feinberg,⁴⁴ and Eugene H. Merrill.⁴⁵

⁴⁰Ridderbos, *Kleine Profeten III*, 188.

⁴¹Ridderbos, *Kleine Profeten III*, 184.

⁴²Ridderbos, *Kleine Profeten III*, 188.

⁴³David Baron, *The Visions & Prophecies of Zechariah: “The Prophet of*

Surprisingly, it is also held by the Reformed preacher James Montgomery Boice.⁴⁶

In the popular rhetoric of dispensationalists, the literal interpretation of Zechariah 14 is a kind of litmus test of orthodoxy. Permit me to quote from the popular radio preacher J. Vernon McGee, who has this to say about our chapter:

I believe that this is a very, very important passage of Scripture, because it demonstrates the difference between literal interpretation of Scripture and that which spiritualizes or mysticalizes it, making it mean practically nothing at all. Such interpretation merely makes this passage something that is allegorical or something that is mythical or something that actually can be dissipated into thin air. It is an attempt to explain it away rather than to explain it.

Let me make a suggestion that is really a mean one. If you are wanting to know the position of a pastor whom you're not sure about, if you really want to know what he believes, take the fourteenth chapter of Zechariah to him and ask him to explain it to you. You will find out what a man really believes when he deals with this chapter.⁴⁷

One of the most respected Scripture scholars in the dispensationalist movement was Merrill F. Unger, who wrote a commentary on Zechariah entitled *Zechariah: Prophet of Messiah's Glory*.⁴⁸ I will take him as a representative of the literal eschatological interpretation of Zechariah 14. Unger begins his discussion of this chapter with a hermeneutical preface, and states unequivocally: "Chapter 14 is *wholly prophetic* from the standpoint of the present age, and the only method of interpretation that will unlock its

Hope and Glory." *An Exposition* (London: Hebrew Christian Testimony to Israel, 1918), reprinted as *Commentary on Zechariah. His Visions and Prophecies* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1988), 487-532.

⁴⁴Charles L. Feinberg, *God Remembers. A Study of Zechariah* (Fourth edition; Portland OR: Multnomah Press, 1979), 192-205.

⁴⁵Eugene H. Merrill, *An Exegetical Commentary: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 341-367.

⁴⁶James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets: An Expository Commentary. Vol. 2: Micah-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 220-225.

⁴⁷J. Vernon McGee, *Zechariah* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 191.

⁴⁸Merrill F. Unger, *Zechariah: Prophet of Messiah's Glory* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963).

meaning is the *literal*.”⁴⁹ Somewhat confusingly, however, he then also speaks of the necessity of “dealing discriminatingly with figurative language as a graphic vehicle for presenting such literal truth.”⁵⁰

Accordingly, he interprets the siege and fall of Jerusalem (verses 1-2) as referring to the literal battle of Armageddon as described in Revelation 16.⁵¹ Similarly, the account of the Lord’s feet standing on the Mount of Olives is explained as follows: “How can the Lord’s (Jehovah’s) feet stand on the Mount of Olives? Because they are the feet of His resurrected humanity, which ascended to heaven from the same locality, and because ‘*this same Jesus* who was taken up . . . into heaven shall *so come in like manner*’ as the disciples witnessed Him ‘go into heaven’ (Acts 1:11).”⁵² In other words, Yahweh will appear in the person of Jesus at his second coming, and his feet will stand on the same place from which Jesus ascended to heaven.

It is consistent with this overall approach that Unger assumes a future geological upheaval in the area around Jerusalem, so that the Mount of Olives will actually split in two, and the Judean hill country (with the exception of Jerusalem) will drop several hundred feet in elevation, leaving the capital perched high atop a promontory. From that elevated position two literal streams will flow, one to the Dead Sea, and one to the Mediterranean. This will be during the time of the millennium, a literal thousand-year period of peace and prosperity.

It is striking, however, to see how Unger explains the last words of the chapter, which state that “there will be no more Canaanite in the house of the Lord of hosts.” He writes: “The term *Canaanite* is best taken as a figure of a morally and spiritually unclean person.”⁵³ It seems that the term “Canaanite” is not, after all, to be taken literally.

The weaknesses of the dispensationalist approach to Zechariah 14 are not primarily exegetical, but hermeneutical. As a literal interpretation of the plain sense of the text, Unger’s commentary does a competent job. But it is the hermeneutical assumption that

⁴⁹Unger, *Zechariah*, 239 (Unger’s emphases).

⁵⁰Unger, *Zechariah*, 239.

⁵¹Unger, *Zechariah*, 242.

⁵²Unger, *Zechariah*, 245 (Unger’s emphases).

⁵³Unger, *Zechariah*, 270.

Old Testament Jerusalem (and Israel) cannot, indeed must not, prefigure the New Testament church, that is the great Achilles' heel of his interpretation. The entire edifice of dispensationalist hermeneutics stands and falls with this assumption, which seems to be contradicted by many passages in the New Testament. It is for this reason that the dispensationalist interpretation occupies a rather isolated position in the history of the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament.

In addition to this fundamental point, it is of course also true that even Unger does not consistently maintain a literal interpretation of Zechariah 14. As we saw, even he accepts a figurative interpretation of "Canaanite" in verse 21.

All of the preceding five basic interpretations assume that the prophecy of Zechariah 14 does have a fulfillment in world history, whenever that may have been or will yet be. This has been the shared assumption of the vast majority of Christian interpreters. However, there are two further positions, associated with modern historical criticism, which reject that assumption. Instead, they claim that the prophecy failed—or else is not to be taken seriously as an actual prediction.

(6) The first of these is a bit of an oddity in the history of interpretation, and is restricted to a small group of critical scholars in the nineteenth century. Until 1880 it was considered to be one of the assured results of historical criticism that chapters 9-14 of Zechariah were pre-exilic in origin, written by a prophet or prophets who lived long before Zechariah. (After 1880 critical opinion veered to the opposite extreme, and judged that these chapters were written by a prophet or prophets who lived long after Zechariah.) Assuming a pre-exilic date, a number of German scholars, including Bertholdt, Hitzig, Ewald, and Bertheau, interpreted Zechariah 14 as the work of a prophet who foresaw the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C., and predicted that God would intervene on Israel's behalf after an initial defeat.⁵⁴ Unfortunately, although the predicted fall of Jerusalem did happen, the predicted divine intervention did not.

The weaknesses of this position, both from a historical and a

⁵⁴See Köhler, *Weissagungen*, 294-295. Of the authors mentioned, I have been able to consult only Hitzig; see Ferdinand Hitzig, *Die zwölf kleinen Propheten* (Dritte Auflage; Leipzig: Hirzel, 1863), 384-391.

confessional point of view, are too obvious to require elaboration. No one is tempted to hold it today.

(7) However, there are many today who hold the seventh and last position, which takes Zechariah 14 to be an example of apocalyptic language—a kind of language which in the nature of the case tells us nothing about the future. It is interesting, not as a clue to what God is revealing about the future, but as a clue to what scholarship can reveal about the prophet who wrote the prophecy.

This is the standard approach of critical scholarship today. Of recent commentators we could mention Paul D. Hanson (1975),⁵⁵ Wilhelm Rudolph (1976),⁵⁶ Carol and Eric Meyers (1993),⁵⁷ Paul Redditt (1995),⁵⁸ David L. Petersen (1995),⁵⁹ and a host of others.

Perhaps Hanson has been the most influential of these; he can serve as a fitting representative of the seventh basic interpretation. Very briefly: he argues in his widely read *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (1975), that Zechariah 14 is “An Apocalypse Structured Upon the Ritual Pattern of the Conflict Myth and Reflecting Bitter Inter-Community Conflict”—to quote the heading of the section of his book devoted to this chapter. He believes he is able to date Zechariah 14 to the middle half of the fifth century B.C. (475-425), and to identify quite precisely the socio-religious party within Israel which produced it. His interest in the chapter is wholly that of the historian trying to reconstruct the development of literary patterns in Israelite prophecy, and the sociological tensions within post-exilic Israel which the prophetic literature reflects. Not once does he even raise the issue of the possible fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah 14 after it was first delivered. To ask that question is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of apocalyptic literature.

⁵⁵Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic. The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Revised edition; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 369-401.

⁵⁶W. Rudolph, *Haggai-Sacharja 1-8—Sacharja 9-14—Maleachi* (KAT 13/4; Güterloh: Gerd Mohn, 1976), 230-241.

⁵⁷Carol L. and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9-14* (AB 25C; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 407-507.

⁵⁸Paul L. Redditt, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 137-144.

⁵⁹David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9-14 and Malachi* (OTL; Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 133-161.

Again, the weaknesses of this position are not difficult to pinpoint. Quite apart from the confessional issue of methodologically excluding the possibility of predictive prophecy, Hanson's approach is speculative in the extreme. The sociological reconstruction which he bases on what he takes to be the post-exilic prophetic texts of Israel (including "Trito-Isaiah") is a very fragile house of cards, and has been severely criticized even by scholars who share many of his methodological and confessional assumptions—for example R. P. Carroll.⁶⁰

Having concluded our survey of the seven basic interpretations of Zechariah 14 that have been put forward over the centuries, it is time to ask what lessons can be learned from our (admittedly schematic) overview. The first lesson is that it behooves us to be modest in our assertions about this enigmatic chapter. There is nothing approaching a consensus among interpreters of Zechariah 14—not even among interpreters of the same confessional persuasion. It is remarkable, for example, that Reformed exegetes of unimpeachable orthodoxy have opted for basic interpretations 1 (e.g., Herman Venema), 2 (e.g., Lambertus Danaeus), 3 (John Calvin), 4 (Johannes Oecolampadius), and even 5 (James Montgomery Boice). We cannot afford to be dogmatic in choosing the interpretation which we favor.

If we leave aside the last two interpretations, which clearly stand outside the tradition of historic Christian hermeneutics, it is also very instructive to note that there is a certain amount of fluidity in the positions we have outlined, such that proponents of one view will often admit the partial validity of other views. For example, Ephraem Syrus basically follows interpretation 1, but supports interpretation 4 for the last two verses. Calvin adopts interpretation 3, but *indirectly* also supports interpretation 2. Ridderbos opts for position 4, but acknowledges that this does not rule out aspects of position 2. At least one of the proponents of interpretation 1 (Herman Venema) also connects this with elements of interpretation 2. Of the traditional Christian positions, only number 5 seems to insist on the exclusive rightness of its own basic interpretation, although I suspect there may have been some softening of this hard line in recent years.

Does this mean that we must throw up our hands in despair, as

⁶⁰R. P. Carroll, "Twilight of Prophecy or Dawn of Apocalyptic?" *JOT* 14 (1979): 3-35.

Luther did in his initial outburst when confronting this chapter? Does it mean that we cannot preach on this portion of Scripture, or that we cannot appropriate it for our religious edification? I believe the answer to these questions is no. Zechariah 14 teaches us a great deal about who God is and how he relates to his people and his world. It teaches us about his providence, his sovereignty, his severity and his mercy, his ways of acting in history, and his control over nature. The mistake that interpreters have made, in my opinion, is to correlate these teachings too exclusively with a narrowly defined set of events in history. The prophecy of Zechariah 14 is fulfilled in subsequent history, but not only in certain phases or events of subsequent history. It is fulfilled in every phase of the history of Jerusalem, both the history of Jerusalem as the geographical capital of the Old Testament nation of Israel, and the antitypical prolongation of that holy city in the New Testament church of God in every phase of its history from Pentecost to the eschaton. It finds its fulfillment in the Maccabean struggle in the second century B.C., and in the persecution and deliverance of Christians in the Sudan today, and in the time of the Antichrist and Christ's return. In a sense the first five interpretations are all right, but they are also all wrong to the extent that they deny the validity of the others.

It will be clear that my position bears a close resemblance to that of Calvin, with the difference that he did not want to include the eschatological interpretation, and was quite wary of entertaining a literal fulfillment of parts of the prophecy. My own position would be that a literal interpretation is certainly possible, referring to events either in the last days or in world history before the Second Coming. A literal interpretation is *possible*, but certainly not *necessary*. We need to reckon with the possibility that apocalyptic language allows for a whole range of kinds of fulfillment. Perhaps the dramatic descriptions of Zechariah 14 are best understood as examples of *concrete universals*, imaginative constructs which demonstrate their truth in a wide variety of specific historical embodiments. As such, we can wholeheartedly embrace the teaching of the prophecy of Zechariah 14, without needing to specify a limited number of possible fulfillments or actualizations.