

# Perspectives on mission in the book of Zechariah<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The prophetic book of Zechariah is often neglected when studying the mission of God and his church. Zechariah originated during the post-exilic era in Jerusalem and there are many similarities between this community and the post-apartheid community in South Africa. There are several references to “nations” and “peoples” in Zechariah, but most of them refer to God’s judgment against the nations. This article focuses on three key missionary passages namely Zechariah 2:11 (15), 8:20-23 and 14:16. The prophet visualises a faith community where the other nations will come and join them to experience the presence of God. Zechariah 2:11 uses covenantal language and emphasises that many nations “shall be my people.” Churches struggle to attract non-believers in our time. The study of Zechariah can help the church to be more missional so that non-believers will utter the words of Zechariah 8:23: “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.”

**Keywords:** Mission, Old Testament, Zechariah

## Introduction

Christopher Wright (2010:74) says the following on the Old Testament and mission: “The prophets like the historians and the psalmists, focus most of the time on Israel in relationship with God, but when their vision widens to the nations and the earth, the results are sometimes stunning.” The book of Zechariah is one of these prophet books that widens to the nations. Unfortunately Zechariah is often neglected when studying the mission of God and his church. A well-known book like *Transforming Mission* (1991) by David Bosch<sup>3</sup> refers to several biblical texts, but the book of Zechariah does not feature. *Christian missions in Biblical perspective* (Kane: 1976) and *Christian Mission: Old Testament Foundations and New Testament Developments* (Porter & Westfall: 2010) are two books that discuss the biblical foundations of mission, but has no reference to Zechariah. Recent books on the

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<sup>1</sup> An adapted version of this article was published as a contribution in the book “*Perspectives on Mission in the Old Testament* (Wellington: Christian Literature Fund, 2012). The editors gave permission that this revised version could be published in an accredited South African journal.

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<sup>3</sup> One must acknowledge the fact that it was not the intention of Bosch to refer to all mission texts in the Bible.

Bible and mission have merely a sentence or two on Zechariah (cf. Kaiser 2000; Wright 2006, 2010). This article will illuminate some of the neglected missionary perspectives.

Churches all over the world struggle to attract non-believers and the example of the first congregation in Jerusalem is frequently used to encourage the church (Acts 2:43-47). The book of Zechariah can help the church in her missionary task. Zechariah visualises a faith community where non-believers come to worship God, because they have experienced that God is with them. After a few general remarks on the book we shall focus on three key passages that emphasise this message.

## **The literary and historical context of Zechariah**

The book of Zechariah is the longest of the Book of the Twelve Prophets from Hosea till Malachi. Most modern scholars<sup>4</sup> accept the fact that the book of Zechariah can be divided into two distinct units, Zechariah 1-8 and Zechariah 9-14; therefore we shall discuss it separately.

### **Zechariah 1-8**

Zechariah 1-8 originated in the post-exilic community of Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> The texts of Zechariah 1-8 place their historical setting in the second year of Darius, the Persian king (Zech 1:1). Darius's specific interest in detail administration throughout the empire, may have reflected in his concern for the Jerusalem cult. It is also possible that the Persian encouragement to codify laws in the different provinces may have been an impetus for the forming of the books Haggai and Zechariah. The specific circumstances of the Jerusalem community are difficult to tell. We can accept that the post-exilic economy was not strong and bad crops and possible reluctance of the people had impeded progress on the rebuilding of the temple (Meyers and Meyers 1987:xxxix-xxxvii; 510-513; O'Brein 2004:164-166; Wolters 2012:889).

Zechariah 1-8 may be divided into three literary units: 1:1-6: Summons to repentance; 1:7-6:15: Eight visions interspersed with oracles; 7:1-8:23: Features of the time of salvation.

### **Zechariah 9-14**

Scholars are uncertain about the exact dating of Zechariah 9-14, because there are no historical headings like in Zechariah 1-8. There are different dating hypotheses that vary from the eighth century BC until the second

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Boda (2004:38-45); Nogalski (2011:805-815); Hill (2012:110-11); Wolters (2012:889-899); et al.

<sup>5</sup> Different names are given for this community and its people: Judah; Judahites; Yehud; Yehudites; Jews; Israelites. In the strict sense of the word we are talking about the Jerusalem based post-exilic community living in the Persian province Yehud.

century BC, from pre-exilic times until the time of the Maccabees in 166 BC. We can possibly date chapters 9-14 after Zechariah 1-8 due to the fact that major issues of the early post-exilic are ignored (e.g. the rebuilding of the temple). A possible date is the middle of the fifth century BC in the context of the Persian-Greek wars and also changes in Persian policy towards Jerusalem (O'Kennedy 2008:81-83).

Zechariah 9-14 may be divided into two main literary units due to the use of the Hebrew word *massa'* (oracle): 9:1-11:17 (First oracle); 12:1-14:21 (Second oracle).

### **The context of Zechariah and the context of mission in post-apartheid South Africa**

The book of Zechariah originated in the post-exilic context of the Jerusalem based community in the province of Yehud. There are many similarities between this community and our post-apartheid community in South Africa: (1) It was a time of redevelopment; (2) It was a time of economic, political and religious uncertainty; (3) It was a time of hope and new vision about the future; (4) It was a time when two prominent leaders took responsibility: Joshua the high priest or religious leader and Zerubbabel, the governor or political leader. The rebuilding process of South Africa started on 27 April 1994<sup>6</sup> after the first democratic election in South Africa. In South Africa we had president Nelson Mandela as political leader and bishop Desmond Tutu as religious leader and chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (O'Kennedy 2009:583-591).<sup>7</sup>

God called the prophet Zechariah in specific historical circumstances to encourage his people and a specific biblical book developed. Today God calls his church in South Africa to learn from the past. It is not the intention of this article to work out a detailed missionary program in post-Apartheid South Africa. The intention of this article is to focus on the perspectives we find in Zechariah that can possibly help us in our South African context.

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<sup>6</sup> Technically one can say that the rebuilding process in SA already started on February 18, 1990 after the release of Nelson Mandela out of prison, but the real process started after the election and the appointment of Nelson Mandela as the first president of the new democratic South Africa in 1994.

<sup>7</sup> In the Apartheid years (1970-1974) we had a similar situation when two brothers were the most influential leaders in the Afrikaner community. B.J. (John) Vorster was prime minister (1966-1978) and state president (1978-1979) and his brother J.D. (Koot) Vorster the moderator or chairperson of the Dutch Reformed Church Synod (1970-1974). A big difference between the Vorster brothers and the diarchy of Mandela and Tutu is that the Vorster brothers were not involved in the re-building of the entire South African community.

## References to “nations” and “peoples” in Zechariah

The mission of God is to reach out to the different nations and peoples of the world, not merely the people of God. God empowered his chosen people so that they could be a light to the nations. We find no occurrence of the expression “light to the nations” (cf. Isa 42:6; 49:6; 60:3) in die book of Zechariah, but several references to the different “nations” or “peoples”.

The Hebrew word *goi* (nations) occurs seventeen times in the book: Zechariah 1:15, 21 (2:2)<sup>8</sup>; 2:11 (15); 7:14; 8:13, 22, 23; 9:10; 12:3, 9; 14: 2, 3, 14, 16, 18, 19. Most of these are references to God’s judgment against the nations.<sup>9</sup> Two chapters refer to the coming Day of the Lord. Zechariah 12:3 portrays how Jerusalem shall be like a heavy stone for the nations. Yahweh declares that He will destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem (12:9). Zechariah 14 describes a battle against the nations on the Day of the Lord (14, 2 en 3). Yahweh will collect the wealth of the surrounding nations (14:14) and the nations who do not keep the festival of booths will be punish with a plague (14:18-19). The other “nations” references describe the following: anger of Yahweh against the nations (1:15); Yahweh will strike down the horns of the nations that lifted up their horns against Judah (1:21 [2:2]); God judges his people and scatter them among the nations (7:14).

Six of the seventeen “nations” references describe a positive attitude towards the nations. Zechariah 2:11 (15), 8:22 and 23 refer to many nations that shall come or join the Lord. Chapter 14:16 relates to these passages and refer to “all who survive of the nations that have come against Jerusalem” that will worship Yahweh. Zechariah 8:13 portrays that the house of Israel and Judah was a curse to the nations, but will become a blessing. Zechariah 9:10 refers to the coming king who will command peace tot the nations.

The plural form of the Hebrew term “people” (*‘am*) occurs nine times in Zechariah (Zech 8:20, 22; 10:9; 11:10; 12:2, 3, 4, 6; 14: 12). In one of these instances the Hebrew word *‘ammim* is translated into “nations” (Zech 10:9). In most instances the singular form of “people” (*‘am*) refers to the “people of Israel and Judah” while the plural form refers to the surrounding nations.

Most of these references do not portray the positive mission of God amongst the “peoples”. Zechariah 10:0 focus on Israel that will be scattered among the peoples or nations. The four references in chapter 12 (vv. 2, 3, 4, and 6) refer to Jerusalem as a cup of reeling and heavy stone for all the

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<sup>8</sup> In this article the order of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV) will be used. In certain instances it differs from the order of the Hebrew text (BHS) (e.g. Zech 1:21 = 2:2 and 2:11 = 2:15). Citations are taken from the NRSV unless mentioned otherwise.

<sup>9</sup> Nogalski (2011:899) refers to the judgment texts as the “dominant voice” in the prophetic corpus’ description of the nations.

surrounding peoples. Zechariah 14:12 refers to the plague with which Yahweh will strike all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem.

Three “peoples” references depict the mission amongst the peoples in a positive sense. Zechariah 11:10 focuses on the covenant Yahweh made with “all the nations”.<sup>10</sup> In Zechariah 8:20-23 the words “nations” and “peoples” are used as synonyms or as a word pair (“many peoples and strong nations”) to emphasise that they will come to entreat the favour of Yahweh.

The above mentioned discussion emphasises that there are at least three key passages in Zechariah referring to God’s mission amongst the nations, Zechariah 2:11 (15), 8:20-23 and 14:16 (cf. Kaiser 2000:73).<sup>11</sup> In the next section we shall focus on these passages.

## Key missionary passages in Zechariah

### Zechariah 2:11 (15)

Zechariah 2:1-5 records the third vision of the measuring line followed by an oracle to the exiles (2:6-13).<sup>12</sup> Verses 6-9 focus on God’s salvation and the response expected of the people while verses 10-13 emphasises the presence of God and the response expected of the people (Boda 2004:219; O’Brein 2004:182-184). Verse 11 says the following:

“Many nations shall join themselves<sup>13</sup> to the Lord on that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you.”

The prophets employ the phrase “on that day” frequently to describe a future event when the author does not desire to state specifically the time of the fulfillment. The day to which Zechariah refers is the “Day of the Lord,” the day in which God will bring his eschatological promises to fruition (Klein 2008:249).

<sup>10</sup> According to Hill (2012:233) there is not explicit reference in the OT to a covenant between Yahweh and the nations. This passage may be referring to a covenant of peace by which God promised to protect Israel from the nations (cf. Ezek 34:25, 28).

<sup>11</sup> Nogalski (2011:899) identifies the following texts in the Book of the Twelve that display a more positive attitude towards the nations: Zech 8:20-23; Mal 1:11, 14; Zech 14:16-19 and Jonah. Two of them will be discussed in the next section.

<sup>12</sup> A scholar like Eilliger (1982:119, 142) questions whether this verse and 8:20-23 derived from Zechariah, because he believes it is nationalistic. Redditt (1995:61) argues that there is nothing in these verses inconsistent with Zechariah’s general emphasis on Judah, provided that one assumes the nations referred to here did not include the plunderers.

<sup>13</sup> The Niphal form of the verb may be translated either as a passive “be joined” or as a reflexive “join themselves” (Klein 2008:125). The verb join is used in the Niphal form suggesting that it is Yahweh who joins the nations to Himself as an act of grace (Merril 2003:114). They also come as an act of their own will complementing the process of salvation initiated by Yahweh (Zech 8:22-23).

The words “many nations” refer to the widespread recognition of God’s sovereignty. The concept recurs in Zechariah (cf. 4:14 and 6:5 “Lord of all the earth”) where it likewise contributes to the idea of God’s universal rule (Meyers and Meyers 1987:168). The phrase “many nations” does not refer to the exilic community living among the nations, but to the nations themselves (cf. Isa 14:1; 56:3, 6; Jer 50:5) (Boda 2004:238). It is unclear which nations are included. According to Stead (2009:123) “many nations” refers primarily to Babylon. This may be true, but one can perhaps say that the many nations include all the different surrounding nations mentioned in the book of Zechariah.

Zechariah 2:10-13 uses covenantal language. Verse 10 presupposes both the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, while verse 11 draws exclusively on the Abrahamic covenant, showing how this covenant will be fulfilled when the nations are joined with the Lord (Klein 2008:125). The use of the verb “join” strengthens the relationship with covenant and echoes Isaiah 56 and Isaiah 14. When the verb *lawah* (join) is used to describe some sort of linkage between parties, the word “treaty” or “covenant” also occurs (Petersen 1984:181; Stead 2009:120). The phrase “be joined” is used with another important covenantal phrase “and shall be my people” which is used throughout the Old Testament to typify the people’s status in their relationship with God (Jer 31:33; 32:38) (Meyers and Meyers 1987:169; Boda 2004:238). They are not the people of any other earthly ruler or other god; they are the people of Yahweh, the only God of heaven and earth. They are equal in their status before Yahweh.

The phrase “I will dwell in your midst”<sup>14</sup> replaces the normal complement “I will be their God” of the preceding covenant expression (cf. Jer 31:33; 32:38). God’s role as party to the covenant is equivalent to the sovereignty He exercises from his earthly dwelling place in the Jerusalem temple (Meyers and Meyers 1987:169).

Zechariah 2:11 (15) closes with the words “And you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you”. The divine name Yahweh Zeba’ôt refers to Yahweh as the God of all earthly and heavenly powers. He is God Almighty, mightier than any other god or power. He is the One that is sending his prophet to his people and other nations.<sup>15</sup>

### **Missionary perspectives**

The missionary perspective in verse 11 is important for Zechariah, but was not a key message in all the post-exilic texts. Unfortunately, this perspective was not

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<sup>14</sup> Besides Zech 2:11 (15) there are only two other passages where one finds the combination of the “covenantal formula” and the promise of God’s dwelling amidst his people (cf. Ezek 37:26-28 and Lev 26:11-12) (Stead 2009:120).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. O’Kennedy (2007:77-99) for a detailed discussion of the use of this divine name in the books of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

shared by all who worshipped Yahweh, as can be seen in the exclusive approach recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah (Petersen 1984:181; Wright 2006:497).

Zechariah 2:11 does not address the nations in the first place. This passage focuses on the special role for God's people in the future. The text provides encouragement for the Yehudites to complete the rebuilding of the temple so that it could serve the glorious purpose for which the Lord intends it (Klein 2008:127). Judah and Zion have a special place in Yahweh's plan, which has now become a plan for all nations.

Wright (2006:498) believes that this text emphasizes at least two things concerning the nations: (1) The nations will join themselves to Yahweh, not merely the people of Israel. They will not be subordinates of Israel. They will belong to Yahweh just as Israel does; (2) The nations will enjoy the same covenantal relationship with Yahweh that Israel does. This new covenant relationship is not an exclusive relationship with Israel and Judah alone. God is forming a new people for Himself (cf. Petersen 1984:183; Boda 2004:243). In the New Testament we read that the church is God's "new people." It is a community of Jews and Gentiles or other nations (Eph 2:11-16), and it witnesses the presence of God in their midst (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16; 1 Tim 3:15) (McComiskey 2009:1065).

Lastly one must acknowledge that the missionary perspective in Zechariah 2 does not promote universalism. The prophet predicted that the nations will become God's people, but they must do so on Yahweh's terms. Those who desire to worship God must come to the temple in Jerusalem and worship God alone and according to his righteous law (Klein 2008:126).

### **Zechariah 8:20-23**

The final phrase of Zechariah 1-8 prophesies closure to a key issue introduced in the beginning of the book. In Zechariah's initial sermon (1:3), God called his people to return to Him so that He might return to them. Zechariah 8:20-23 portrays the ultimate response of the community to the summons of Yahweh. Their obedience will introduce a new era in which Jerusalem will fulfill its original purpose as the place of divine presence on earth. God's rule will extend over the cosmos and to which all nations will worship Him (Boda 2004:398).

Zechariah 8:20-23 forms the last literary unit of Zechariah 1-8. These verses focus on the future glory of Jerusalem that was described in chapter 8:1-8. According to verse 7 the "others" were exiled Judeans while in verses 20-23 they are from other nations (O'Brein 2004:228). Zechariah 8:20-23 echoes a theme introduced in Zechariah 2:11 (15) and reflects a strong tradition in the prophetic movement in which the nations are drawn to Jerusalem to seek Yahweh (Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-5) (Boda 2004:397; Phillips 2007:186):

(20) Thus says the Lord of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, the inhabitants of many cities; (21) the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, "Come, let us go to entreat the favor of the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts; I myself am going." (22) Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of the Lord. (23) Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God<sup>16</sup> is with you."

Like in Zechariah 2:11 (15) the divine name "Lord of hosts" is used to strengthen the authority of these words. The word "many" indicates that it is not merely a few individuals but a stream of witnesses. In Zechariah 8:20 "many" is used together with "cities" while in Zechariah 8:22 "many" is used with "peoples." This emphasises the theological belief that Yahweh is ruling the whole world from his earthly locus in Jerusalem where He dwells in the temple (Meyers and Meyers 1987:168).

The plural "peoples" (*ʿammîm*) occurs in verse 20 and 22. The question arises as to the population indicated by the use of the plural form. Many scholars assume that "peoples" here is equivalent to "nations" and represents foreign political entities. Meyers and Meyers (1987:436) believe that "peoples" in these verses represent groups culturally akin to those of Yehud and "nations" are specified in verse 23 in terms of their language uncommon to that of the Yehudites.

The language in verse 20 is extremely passionate, using Hebrew doubling techniques for the verb ("let us go at once") and the pronoun (I myself) (Boda 2004:397). The Hebrew word *halah* appears twice in this passage (8:21, 22), both times in the context of describing those who will come to Jerusalem to entreat Yahweh's favor. These verses can be linked to Zechariah 7:2 where a delegation from Bethel came to "entreat the favour" of Yahweh. It is possible that the Bethelites' recognition of the authority of Yahweh and the Jerusalem community may be seen as the beginning of a larger influx of people (O'Brein 2004:228).

The reference to the number ten in verse 23 is not literal, but rather symbolizes the totality of humanity. The symbolic use of the number ten to symbolizes the totality of humanity occurs in several other Old Testament passages (cf. Gen 31:7; Lev 26:26; 1 Sam 1:8) (Boda 2004:398; Klein 2008:249).

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<sup>16</sup> The use of the term *ʿelohîm* (God) at the conclusion of Zech 1-8 is climactic. This term is used only three times in Zech 1-8 (6:15; 8:8, 23) and eight times in Zechariah 9-14 (9:7, 16; 10:6; 11:4; 12:5, 8; 13:9; 14:5). The word Yahweh is used 125 times in Zech 1-8 alone (Meyers and Meyers 1987:442).



The gesture “take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment” occurs only here and in 1 Samuel 15:27. This important nonverbal communication indicated supplication and submission (Klein 2008:250). By taking hold of the garment, the non-believer signifies his willingness to accept the supremacy of the God of Israel (Meyers and Meyers 1987:441-442).

### **Missionary perspectives**

Zechariah 8:20-23 may be labeled as the highlight of Zechariah’s prophetic message. God’s salvation will not be restricted to the Jews. The nations are drawn to the restored community, because this is the place where God’s presence dwells, the intersection of heaven and earth. Jerusalem will be the center, but God’s grace will include all the nations of the world. The salvation of the people of Yahweh and his blessings upon them will have implications for the other nations. The nations are included in Israel’s vision, an emphasis already mentioned in the promise to Abraham (Gen 12). God’s goal is to create a new community on earth that is not typified by hatred and division. To create this community God starts with Israel by introducing a new relationship. The extent of Yahweh’s grace and the uniqueness of this relationship with his people is so great that even the gentile nations will experience this and go to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh (Zech 8:20-23). The change of the fasts into feasts, the fertility of the land and the general blessings of Yahweh lead the nations to seek Yahweh. The zeal of the nations go even further; therefore they want to be totally identified with the people of God (Fourie 1991:270; Boda 2004:402).

Israel was called to be God’s witness to the nations. God’s glory was to be seen in his chosen people. This does not mean that they did not use words. They were also called to witness these truths in words (Kaiser 2000:74). The text of Zechariah 8 does not portray where the nations heard of God. It is possible that some individuals experienced that personally while being in Jerusalem, but it is also possible that the Judeans themselves shared this good news about God.

Today our constitution in South Africa emphasizes that we must have mutual respect for different religious beliefs or religions. Some people argue that Christians cannot claim that their God is the only God. Zechariah does not share the modern view of inclusion as the equal sharing of and respect for all traditions. The book of Zechariah claims the radical particularity of Israel’s faith (O’Brein 2004:229).

In our missional work we are forced to listen to the voices of the non-believers or outsiders. Zechariah 8:23 portrays the voice of outsiders attracted to God’s presence in the midst of his covenant community. This text reminds us that the people of God (or the church) does not merely exist for herself. God has called us to a mission beyond ourselves.

Zechariah 8 prophesies a close link between ethics and mission. The people of God are summoned to demonstrate the righteousness, truth and peace of God, because they are His covenant people (cf. 8:16-19). Their ethical way of living will draw the other nations closer to God.

One can say that there is not only a link between ethics and mission, but also between holiness and mission. The holy community in the holy city of Jerusalem had an impact on the surrounding nations. This connection continues into the New Testament. The book of Peter spirals between these two twin themes, drawing on the Old Testament witness. The call to holiness, supported by quotations from the Old Testament (1 Pet 1:16; 2:9-10; 3:8-12) is linked to the witness of the church (1 Pet 2:11-12; 3:12-17). This holiness should not be confined to private categories of personal piety, but needs to extend to the social realm (cf. Zech 7-8) (Boda 2004:402-407).

It may be argued that the prophetic vision of the new Jerusalem seems like daydreaming, but the prophet Zechariah stated in chapter 8 verse 6:

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the Lord of hosts?”

A church without a vision for the nations is a church who does not believe that God can do the impossible. We believe that nothing is beyond God’s ability, but on the other hand we acknowledge that there are things that may be beyond the abilities of some humans to perform (Stuhlmüller 1988:112; Kaiser 2000:74; McComiskey 2009:1139).

## **Zechariah 14:16**

Zechariah 14 can be seen as an explanation of the final verse of chapter 13 with its covenant formula (v. 9). Chapter 14 explains how that renewed relationship between God and his people will come about, what the nature of the relationship will be, and what consequences it will have for the nations of the earth (Achtmeier 1986:165). Zechariah 14 may be structured as follows: verses 1-2 (War against Jerusalem); verses 3-5 (God defends the city); verses 6-11 (Promises for Jerusalem); verses 12-15 (Yahweh’s punishment of the nations); verses 16-21 (Inclusive holiness, for the nations and for Jerusalem) (O’Brein 2004:276). In verse 16 we read:

“Then all who survive of the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the festival of booths.”

Zechariah 9-14 concludes with a similar scene to 8:20-23. According to 14:16 the survivors of the nations that assembled against God will be required to go to Jerusalem annually at the festival of booths to worship God. This idea is comparable to Isaiah 56:3-8, but is not as wide ranging as

the thought in Isaiah 19:19-25 which visualised Assyrians and Egyptians worshipping God in their own land (Redditt 1995:143).

Several of the other sayings in chapter 14 begins with the formula “on that day”. Verse 16 introduces the saying without this formula (Petersen 1995:154). However, the word “then” refers to the Day of the Lord.

The word “nations” occurs twice in chapter 14 (vv. 2 and 19) and the related “peoples” in verse 12. The identity of the nations is not specified. Verses 2 and 12 refer to the nations who have attacked Jerusalem; therefore one may say that they represent Israel’s historical enemies, especially the eastern empires that approach Jerusalem from the north-northeast (Meyers & Meyers 1993:464). Egypt is singled out in verses 18-19 as a nation that will receive that plague of the Lord if they do not go to Jerusalem for worship. This is not a surprise, because it was the nation in the past that had suffered the most from plagues from God’s hands (Redditt 1995:143).

God’s sovereignty over the entire world is signaled by the designation of Yahweh as the “King, the Lord of hosts.” The combination of king (melek) with Lord of hosts (Yahweh zeba’ôt) is unique in the Old Testament, although there are some instances of the close juxtaposition of these terms, like “Lord of hosts, he is the king of glory” (cf. Ps 98:6) (Meyers and Meyers 1993:466). The nations will come to worship Yahweh as king affirming the sovereignty already declared in Zechariah 14:9 (“And the Lord will become king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and his name one”).

Specific mention is made of the feast of booths also known as Sukkot or the feast of tabernacles. The feast of booths is one of the three pilgrimage festivals of ancient Israel, celebrating God as Creator and Redeemer. God is the one who provides the full harvest of grain and wine (Deut 16:13-15) and also the God who rescued his people from Egypt (Lev 23:39-43) (O’Brein 2004:280). This festival was open to all, including the “stranger” and continued in importance during the post-exilic period (Ezra 3:4; Neh 8:14-18) (Baldwin 1972:206).

God’s sovereignty is also acknowledged by the obedience of the nations. The significance of their recognition of Yahweh also relates to the reconstruction of the temple that played such an important role in Zechariah 1-8. The sacrifices presented by the nations to Yahweh at the festival of booths signify the full restoration of the temple to its role as the holy center for all creation. Zechariah 14 represents the full completion of the temple anticipated by the prophet in the first part of the book (Sweeney 2000:705).

The Hebrew verb translated into “worship” refers to an action directed toward a divine figure who is recognized as being in a position of honour and authority. It may entail falling to one’s knees, in front of which one places the hands to the ground (Fretheim 1997:43). Zechariah 14:16 does not merely refer to the nations that are curious and will come to see what is

happening in Jerusalem. The text portrays that the nations will bow down in adoration serving Yahweh as the only King of heaven and earth.

It is interesting to note that this vision tend to “force” the nations to come and worship Yahweh. Any of the nations that failed to worship would suffer from drought (v. 17) and Egypt is singled out within the nations (vv. 18-19).

### **Missionary perspectives**

We can quote the important words of Mark Boda (2004:537):

“In Zechariah 14 God purifies his community and establishes them as a holy community through which the nations enter into communion with God. God brings the nations to their knees through his sovereign acts of power, but then draws them into the life of his holy community for worship before his throne.”

Boda emphasises that there is a definite relationship between a holy community and mission. People find it difficult to believe in a Holy and Almighty God if they do not see that in the lives of believers. Zechariah 8:20-23 already referred to this holy community that will draw people to Jerusalem and ultimately to God. Zechariah 14 takes it a little further and even closes with references to a Holy God and holy cooking pots (cf. 14:20-21). In our missionary calling it is important to create a vibrant holy community into which non-believers are invited to experience God. One of the classical examples in mission history is that of the German Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760). Zinzendorf established on his estate the well-known missionary community we today know as the Moravians. He believed that one had to create a flock of holy believers united with their Saviour so that one may point to these people when one wants to invite others (DuBose 1979:289-300).

The question may be posed: Did the nations experience real conversion? It is significant that the nations are not depicted as submitting to circumcision, nor even to keeping the law of Moses. The point is that they worship one King and one God (Baldwin 1972:206). We have already mentioned that the Hebrew word for “worship” is a strong word that may be seen as true worship and true conversion.

There is ample reason to link Zechariah 14 to the final and eternal state of heaven described at the end of the book of Revelation. The prophet employs the descriptions of verses 16-19 not to provide details of the day to come, but to convey the absoluteness of the reign of God and the worship He receives (Phillips 2007:320-321). Zechariah 14 does not refer to a specific Davidic king that will reign forever. Even the New Testament portrays the death of king Jesus from the house of David and part of its final vision consisted of God’s battle against his enemies (cf. Revelation). But the New Testament knows the

resurrection of the Messiah. In that triumph it sees the promise of God's final kingship and victory (Achtemeier 1986:168).

## **The church as a sign and foretaste of God's kingdom**

Zechariah speaks about the post-exilic community as the people of God. The people of God is portrayed as a covenant people where God will dwell in their midst and where they will join Him (cf. Zech 2:11 [15]). The New Testament witnesses that the church of Jesus Christ is the people of God. We believe that the church must be an agent and instrument in the kingdom of God. It is God's mission but the church serves as co-workers in the kingdom of God. We also believe that the church must be a sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God.<sup>17</sup> Daniel Guder (1998:101) says the following: "As a sign represents something else and as a foretaste represents something yet to come, the church points away from itself to what God is going to complete."

Usually we speak about the New Testament (especially Ephesians) when we refer to the sign and foretaste. We can say that the prophet Zechariah had the same vision in mind. He visualises a faith community where the barriers between Jews and Gentiles are broken down and a new community is formed before one God. God brought unexpected visitors into their faith community. Zechariah 14:16 speaks about Israel's enemies, the nations that made war against them, but will come to worship God.

If the faith community in Jerusalem remained closed for foreigners and other nations the mission of God could not be fulfilled. God opened the self-centered community to become a real witness. The influence that this faith community in Jerusalem had on the non-believers represents a foretaste of something yet to come. They do not experience the kingdom of God in its fullest sense, but already have a foretaste of it. According to Zechariah this faith community did not center around religious practices; it centered around God (cf. Zech 8:23). The "outsiders" experience something of God and feel the need to worship the King over all the earth (Zech 14:16).

Finally, one must acknowledge that the faith community in Jerusalem was not the main agent in the whole process. The nations firstly heard about Yahweh, the only God of the faith community in Jerusalem. God is still the "main agent" in the whole process.

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<sup>17</sup> These images of the church were often used by the well-known scholar Leslie Newbigin. The triad sign, foretaste and instrument first appeared in his book "The household of God" (1953). Cf. Goheen (2000:172-175) for a detailed discussion of Newbigin's use of these images.

## Conclusion

The prophetic book of Zechariah is often neglected when studying the mission of God and his church. The book Zechariah originated during the post-exilic times in Jerusalem and speaks about different nations and peoples. The prophet visualises a faith community where the other nations will come and join them to experience the presence of God.

This book has a definite message for the church's missional calling. One cannot separate mission from a holy worshipping community. It is our missional dream that non-believers will say the same about the Christian church today as what the nations said about the faith community in Jerusalem: "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you" (Zech 8:23).

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