

5. The next section of the burden shifts the emphasis from Yahweh's assurance of Zion's triumphal restoration to the general condition in Israel which had brought about its desolation in the first place. And that was the nation's persistent idolatry exacerbated by the lack of faithful, godly leadership. Two related issues stand in the forefront:

- The first is that many of those who were playing an influential role among the sons of Israel were doing so as idolaters and not men attuned to Yahweh and His word and leading. In the vernacular of the context, they were false shepherds.
- The second issue follows from this, which is that the people were effectively serving false gods by following the leading of such men. For these leaders were seeking the guidance of idols and the people were submitting to the counsel they brought. In the final analysis, imaginary deities – gods formed in the human mind – were acting as the shepherds of Israel.

In the preceding context the Lord reiterated again His commitment to arise and deliver His people from their captivity and exile (9:11-12; cf. also 2:6-9, 8:1-6) and here He made clear what exactly He was going to deliver them from. In various ways, Zechariah's prophecy emphasized to the Israelites with him that their political liberation and geographical return to Judea had not ended their exile; both houses of Israel remained in exile because they continued in their alienation from their God. Their exile wouldn't end until Yahweh returned to them and restored them to Himself (1:14-17, 2:1-11, 7:1-8:15, 9:11-17). And because they couldn't effect this turn of events, they remained in a kind of bondage; they were captives until such time as the Lord intervened to set them free.

Return from exile depended upon the captives' liberation from their imprisonment and Israel's captivity was spiritual and relational, not physical. The Jews who had returned to Judea and were rebuilding the temple were just as much prisoners in exile as their countrymen who remained scattered among the nations. Again, Zechariah's larger prophecy (and the historical circumstance in which he prophesied) makes it clear that Zion's exile would not end until Yahweh returned to her. The present section of the first burden (10:1-12) advances that theme by emphasizing the critical truth that Israel's bondage – which reflected her estrangement from God – was a matter of her *idolatry*. From the outset, the covenant household's idolatry had made a separation between them and their covenant Lord (Exodus 24, 32). And to the extent that the people listened to voices other than Yahweh's, they made themselves the sheep of alien shepherds.

Thus this final section of the first burden opens with a transitional passage that functions as a stinging indictment of Israel's idolatry (10:1-2). It is transitional in that it draws on what precedes it while also laying the foundation for what follows.

These two verses refer back to the preceding context by continuing the theme – echoed by many of the prophets – that the Lord's blessing on restored Zion would manifest itself in fruitful abundance (9:17). Zion was to become, as it were, Eden recovered: the splendid, pristine and profuse habitation of Yahweh and His image-sons (cf. Isaiah 35, 51:1-5; Ezekiel 36:16-36; Amos 9:11-15; etc.).

At the same time, these verses look ahead by introducing the subject of Israel's false shepherds. Such individuals were present throughout the nation's history and their perverse influence nurtured the people's idolatry and apostasy from Yahweh – the apostasy which eventually brought divine retribution in exile and captivity.

- a. As a continuation, then, verses 10:1-2 begin with the prophet's exhortation to the people to seek from the Lord the rain which brings the ground's fruitfulness. Treated within the larger context, this exhortation clearly has a *metaphorical* significance: The natural abundance promised in verse 9:17 (grain and new wine) symbolizes Zion's blessedness in her recovery and this understanding must orient the way the plea for rain is interpreted. The issue here, then, is not the provision of literal rain for the sake of crop production, but the obtainment of the Lord's blessing unto Zion's restoration and flourishing (cf. Jeremiah 14:1-22). Simply put, Zechariah was exhorting the exiles of Israel – at Yahweh's own prompting – to seek from Him that which He had been promising all along through His prophets, namely Zion's recovered glory and blessedness.

And *rain* is the perfect metaphor for this provision, for it connotes a resource that is both life-giving and beyond the capability of men to secure. In the context of an arid land, life itself depends upon rain and yet men have no power over it. They must rely completely on forces beyond their control to provide them with the life-giving, life-sustaining resource their existence depends upon. This dynamic is heightened by the concept of the *latter rains*, since these were the seasonal spring rains Israel relied on for their spring harvest. If these "latter rains" didn't come, it meant desolation, hunger and hardship. And so it was with Zion's "life-out-of-death": The children of Israel had no ability or power to bring it about; they could only long and hope for it. Just as they looked to the heavens to provide the rain which was essential to the life and fruitfulness of their crops, so their hope of Zion's renewal and fullness had to reach out to powers beyond themselves.

The sons of Israel couldn't compel the life-giving rains; indeed, they couldn't even muster the storm clouds which give birth to them. It is Yahweh who forms the lightning (10:1) and thus the storm clouds which lightning attends. The implication, then, is that He brings the rain that waters the land and makes it fruitful and so men need to seek it from Him. And what is true of literal rain is true of the "rains" that would bring about Zion's new life and fruitfulness. The children of Israel were to seek Zion's provision from Him and He would abundantly supply it: He would send bountiful rain showers (literally, *rain of the rain-pouring*) sufficient to provide an abundant yield for every man.

- b. Israel was obligated to seek from their covenant God the fulfillment of His promise of Zion's restoration and flourishing (ref. again Jeremiah 14:19-22). He had issued His oath concerning her and He possessed the power and will to fulfill His promise. Nevertheless, the tragic truth was that many among the sons of Israel were looking to other powers to secure what the Lord had pledged; they were directing their longing, hope and petitions to that which is not God (10:2).

Those powers were the *teraphim* and their assistance was being sought through divination. The text doesn't state this directly, but it is clearly implied: Zechariah was exhorting those hearing his burden to petition Yahweh for the blessing of Zion's renewal, *and the reason he gave was that teraphim utter false and empty words through diviners whose dreams and visions are a lie*. Some among the recovered exiles were not seeking the Lord regarding Zion's future good; instead, they were directing their petitions to other gods.

The term "teraphim" occurs frequently in the Old Testament and is a general designation for pagan household idols (cf. Genesis 31:19, 34-35; Judges 17:5, 18:14-20; 2 Kings 23:24; Ezekiel 21:26; Hosea 3:4; etc.). Teraphim took the form of physical images and were used in ancient Israel as instruments of divination. That is, the physical image served as the interface between the "worshipper" and the supposed deity whom the image represented. By interacting with the tangible image, the diviner hoped to receive instruction and material blessing from the god behind the image. This is the idea in the present context: There were evidently some among the Jews in Judea who were using diviners to inquire of idols with the hope of learning what the future held for them and their nation.

These Israelites were seeking from teraphim what the Lord had spoken of and pledged to them. It was bad enough that they were looking elsewhere for words of hope and promises of blessing; worse yet was the fact that they were looking to entities that have no life. Though images are constructed with the conviction that they embody immaterial "gods," such supposed deities don't really exist; they aren't actual beings and so cannot provide what men seek from them (cf. Isaiah 40:19-20, 44:1-19, 46:1-7; Jeremiah 10:1-5; also 1 Corinthians 8:4-6; Galatians 4:8). In the language of this passage, the teraphim have no power over the lightning, storm clouds and rain; they cannot bring a blessing. So also they cannot speak, so that their message to their inquirers is nothing more than the empty musings of the diviner himself. And because the teraphim's words are a fiction, so is their promise of aid and blessing; their "speech" is an evil delusion.

Teraphim represent imaginary beings whose utterances originate in the minds of men. Thus it follows that the diviners who inquire of them and pass along their supposed instruction are themselves empty and perverse. Such men are the source as well as the promoters of the lies of false gods; they "see lying visions and recount false dreams" and are thus chargeable for them. And because their words and promises are empty, so is the comfort they bring to their hearers (10:2b).

In terms of the orientation of this particular burden, these diviners of teraphim function as *shepherds* of the Lord's sheep; they present themselves as men fit to instruct and guide His people, but they are pretenders who deceive and harm and only serve and profit themselves. Asserting themselves as trustworthy leaders, they lead people astray, even as they themselves are deceived. The outcome is that God's flock is left to wander without direction or care; in that sense they are sheep without a shepherd (10:2c; cf. Ezekiel 34:1-22; John 10:1-13).

And so this transitional passage serves three important functions in the burden:

- 1) First of all, as an indictment it highlights the true nature of Israel's broken relationship with God and so the true nature of the nation's exile, imprisonment, and oppression. Yahweh had forsaken His people because they had forsaken Him for other "lovers," namely the gods of the nations. Their idolatry was spiritual adultery (cf. Deuteronomy 4:1-28 and Joshua 23:14-16 with Ezekiel 16, 23 and Hosea 2:1-13) and their idol paramours had "loved" them by leading them into desolation, exile and bondage. What spectacular folly, then, in looking to these "lovers" for their future blessing.
- 2) Secondly, because Zion's spiritual adultery in pursuing other gods had incurred its exile and captivity, it followed that liberation and ingathering would come when Zion's adulterous children were delivered from their idolatry and reconciled to their covenant Father (Deuteronomy 4:25-31, 30:1-10; cf. Isaiah 57; Ezekiel 16, 36:16-38; Hosea 2:1-23; etc.). In this way, Zechariah bound the covenant household of Israel together with the *nations*, showing that both shared the same plight and a common future in the Lord's purposes. Like the Gentile peoples, the children of Israel were idolaters alienated from the one true God and they, too, would experience recovery and ingathering along with the nations when He purged them of their idolatry (ref. again 9:7; cf. Isaiah 49:1-22; Jeremiah 3:1-17).

*In the end, all of Adam's race suffered the same disease and lot before their Creator-God and all were to be restored to Him in the same way through the same remedy and same exercise of divine will and power; all were to be gathered in, healed, nurtured and led by one and the same Shepherd.*

- 3) The third function of this transitional passage is suggested by the preceding statement, and that is that it introduces new imagery to the Lord's promise of deliverance, restoration and ingathering: the image of a *shepherd*. Though new to Zechariah's prophecy, this imagery only elaborates on the Branch symbolism that is central to the prophecy.
  - For the Branch is the Branch *of David* – the Davidic king promised by Yahweh in His covenant with David. The Branch is the son of David in whom his house, throne and kingdom would be established forever (cf. again 2 Samuel 7 with Isaiah 11:1-12; Jeremiah 23:1-8, 33:12-18; etc.). Thus the Branch is the fulfillment of David's kingship, and therefore the fulfillment of David as the *Lord's chosen shepherd of His sheep* (cf. 2 Samuel 7:8 with Ezekiel 34:20-31, 37:15-28 – ref. esp. 34:23-27 and 37:23-25 in light of Zechariah 9:17-10:2.)
  - This means that the unique shepherd identified and spotlighted in the last section of Zechariah's first burden (the third hinge – 11:1-17) corresponds to the Branch (the Davidic king-priest) who is the focus of the other two hinge passages (3:1-10, 6:9-15).