

## CRUSY OLD PROPHET TURNS OUT TO BE NICE GUY

Hardly anyone ever reads the old prophets any more, the ones with the impossible to pronounce names which are strung out at the end of most editions of the Jewish scriptures.

They are popularly thought of as crusty old goats who made a career of scolding people for their sins. Or some would picture them as ivory-tower visionaries, cut off from the real world, rubbing their crystal balls for a glimpse or two into the future.

Not so, folks! True, some of the ancient Hebrew spokesmen pronounced a heap of judgment, and some painted fantastic pictures of the future. But by and large the old prophets were quite realistic and down to earth. And some of their collected writings were rather skillfully put together.

Try paging through the book of Zechariah, for example. It opens with a series of eight out of the ordinary visions. It ends with several chapters of predictions about the future that are almost too good to be true.

(By the way, many scholars think the last half of the book, from chapter 9 on, was written long after Zechariah himself had left the scene.) But those visions and futuristic insights won't detain us right now.

Zero in on chapters 7 and 8. At first glance this section doesn't look too exciting. It starts out with a rather picayune question about observing a traditional day of fasting.

But from that rather unpromising beginning the chapters branch out into a touching plea for social ethics, and an encouraging promise of future peace, before returning to solve the fasting issue.

Here's the story. After the Babylonian armies had sacked Jerusalem and torched the temple, the Jews who survived held an annual day of fasting and mourning on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the 5<sup>th</sup> month, the anniversary of the debacle. (Make that around the end of July on modern calendars.)

Years later the descendants of those survivors were able to return to Jerusalem, and after a few false starts they were allowed to rebuild their temple. One of the men who encouraged their construction project was Zechariah, a priest who doubled as a prophet.

So, according to Zechariah 7:1-7, this was their problem: Now that the second temple is being rebuilt, is it proper to keep on mourning the downfall of the first temple?

The prophet's answer is enigmatic. Whether you feast or whether you fast, he reminds them, you do it for your own benefit, not for the Lord's benefit.

Then he switches the subject. What's really important is how you treat other people, says verses 8-14. A little kindness goes a long way. In fact, the Lord scattered their ancestors into exile in the first place, insists Zechariah, precisely because they wouldn't learn that lesson.

But don't lose hope. The third section of this discussion, Zechariah 8:1-17, offers some encouragement. As Jerusalem and the temple are rebuilt, the prophet suggests, the Lord intends to see that the people enjoy growing prosperity.

Folks will live to a ripe old age; more exiles will immigrate to their ancestral home; no enemies will hassle their towns; there'll be a chicken every pot. Just keep on dealing fairly with each other.

No doubt all of that was good advice, but it still hasn't answered the original question: What about the annual fast day? So finally the argument comes full circle in verses 18-23.

Forget about such days of mourning, offers the prophet. From now on they can be turned into holidays. You can use them to celebrate. If you do that, even foreigners will flock with you to Jerusalem, convinced that God is with you.

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