

PART 6:

THE EXILE AND RETURN

The nations of Israel and Judah had failed to honor their covenant with Jehovah God. As a result, God gave them to enemy nations (Israel to Assyria and Judah to Babylon). Both were exiled. This was all according to what God had foretold their ancestors. For example, whenever Moses prepared the people to enter Canaan, he warned about the curses for disobeying God, including the great devastation they had now experienced (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Then, Joshua also warned those who settled in the land about a time they would disappear from the land if they failed to obey God (Joshua 23:6-16). Now, we focus on the sixth major section of the Bible story: “The Exile And Return.”

JEREMIAH 29:1, 4-14

This passage contains a letter the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the exiles taken during the reign of King Jeconiah (597 B.C.). In it, Jeremiah emphasized the fact that their exile would last 70 years. So, the people who had been deported needed to settle into their new environments because they were going to be there for a while. Yet, God had not abandoned His promises and said that a remnant would be restored to the land (Jeremiah 24:4-7; 31:7-30; Ezekiel 36:22-30; 37:1-14). Then, there were other prophesies God had been giving concerning something much greater that would happen. For example, God would send His Servant, the Messiah (Isaiah 11; 53), establish a new covenant with Israel (Jeremiah 31:31-34), and send His word out from Jerusalem so all nations could enter the kingdom He would establish (Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah 4:1-8). Ezekiel and Daniel were prophets during the time of exile.

DANIEL 2:31-46

As prophecies were given concerning what God would accomplish in the future, Daniel’s interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (king of Babylon, who took Judah into exile) concerned some coming kingdoms. Four kingdoms would rise in succession to one another. These were Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. God would then accomplish something special in the days of this

fourth kingdom (Rome). Namely, God would establish His kingdom that would never be destroyed and would fill the earth! Other Scriptures point to the idea that One from David’s ancestry (the Messiah) would sit on the throne of this kingdom (2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 2:6-9; 89:3-4, 34-37; 110:1-4; Isaiah 9:6-7; Jeremiah 23:5-6).

EZRA 1:1-11

The Babylonian kingdom had now been overtaken by the Medes and Persians under the rule of King Cyrus in 539 B.C. (as God had foretold, Isaiah 44:28-45:1; Daniel 5; Jeremiah 51:11-13). Then, in 538 B.C., King Cyrus issued this decree that allowed the Jews who had been taken into exile to return to Jerusalem! They would now be allowed to return to Jerusalem, rebuild the temple, and restore their worship. They had the blessing of the king and were given provisions to help. More than 42,000 returned under this first wave of return that happened under the leadership of Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:1-2, 64). He led a large group of people whose spirits had been roused to go and rebuild the temple. Zerubbabel helped restore the altar for Israel to offer sacrifices (Ezra 3) and helped rebuild the temple despite facing opposition (Ezra 3-6). Haggai and Zechariah were prophets during this time (Ezra 5:1).

EZRA 7:1, 6-10

More than 75 years had passed from the first return of the Jews under Zerubbabel’s leadership. Now, Ezra came up from Babylon with a group of about 1,500 men (Ezra 8:1-20). Ezra was determined to study, obey, and teach God’s law. Ezra left Babylon with the king’s blessing and provisions for what he would need (Ezra 7:11-26). They fasted and prayed to God for a safe journey, and God helped them arrive safely in Jerusalem (Ezra 8:21-31).

EZRA 9:1-5; 10:1-4

Not long after Ezra’s arrival, the leaders of Israel approached him with a major problem. This concerned Israelite intermarriages with nations that practiced detestable things, even among the leaders (contrary to God’s law, Deuteronomy 7:6; Joshua 23:9-13). Ezra was devastated at this news, as was everyone who trembled at God’s words. Ezra prayed to God, acknowledged God’s grace in preserving this remnant of Israelites who could rebuild Jerusalem (Ezra 9:6-9), and confessed their guilt before God (Ezra 9:10-15). There was great weeping in Israel, and it was proposed

that Israel should make a covenant with God that all the foreign wives and children should be sent away. Ezra then led Israel to confess their sin to God and end the sinful marriages (Ezra 10:9-11, 16-17).

NEHEMIAH 2:1-8

Around 13 years after Ezra's return, Nehemiah (cupbearer for the Persian king) found out about the condition of the Jewish remnant that had returned from exile and the terrible physical condition of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:2-3). Despite it being about 140 years after Jerusalem's destruction and some reforms being made, the walls around Jerusalem (which were a primary defense of cities) had still not been rebuilt. After Nehemiah wept and prayed (Nehemiah 1:4-11), the king sent him to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. After arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah organized the people so that the walls were rebuilt, despite great opposition (Nehemiah 2-6).

NEHEMIAH 8:1-2; 9:1-3; 10:28-29

As Jerusalem had been rebuilt and many restorations had been made, Ezra, Nehemiah, and other leaders led Israel in a great spiritual renewal. The Law of God was read among all who could listen with understanding. Ultimately, the Israelites confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. This included a confession of many wrongs the Israelites had done throughout their history, including what had led them into exile (Nehemiah 9:6-37). Now, they once again vowed to be faithful to God! Malachi also likely prophesied around this time and pointed to the one who would prepare the way for the Lord (Malachi 3:1; 4:4-6).

CONCLUSION

As the Old Testament closes, the Israelites had been resettled into Jerusalem after exile. Jerusalem, the temple, and the temple walls had been rebuilt. The people had confessed their sin and made some corrections to live according to their covenant with Jehovah. Now, the Israelites were waiting for the Messiah (Anointed One), who would reign as King over a kingdom that would never be destroyed and establish a new covenant. During the approximately 400 years that took place between the Old and New Testaments, the kingdom of the Medes and Persians was overtaken by the Grecians, which was subsequently overtaken by the Romans (the fourth successive kingdom).

DISCIPLESHIP QUESTIONS

How long would the exile in Babylon last?

What were some prophecies God made?

When would God establish His kingdom?

Who led the Jews back to Jerusalem?

What did Zerubbabel accomplish after returning to Jerusalem?

What did Ezra accomplish after returning to Jerusalem?

What did Nehemiah accomplish after returning to Jerusalem?

What spiritual changes did the Jewish people make?