



THE RETURN OF THE EXILES FROM BABYLON TO THE TIME OF JESUS CHRIST

Reading: Ezra 1

As we have seen, God foretold that the Jews would be captive in Babylon for a period of 70 years and at the end of that time they would return to Jerusalem and Judah. You will find the details of this set out in your notes - "Jeremiah's Remarkable 70 year Prophecy", Lesson 15.

Daniel, who had been captive in Babylon for the whole period, realised that this 70 year period foretold by Jeremiah had drawn to a close and offered an impassioned prayer to God asking Him to make it possible for the Jews to return to Jerusalem and to their land. This prayer is recorded in Daniel 9. Particularly note his requests (v1-4, 16-19).

God was faithful to His word and so He overshadowed international affairs so that His prophecy would be fulfilled. Today God is still superintending international affairs so that His revealed will regarding the return of the Lord Jesus Christ will be fulfilled exactly as He has foretold (Daniel 4:17).

The Decree of Cyrus

Cyrus, the outstanding king and military leader of the Medo-Persian Empire, overthrew the kingdom of Babylon in BC 538. Not long after coming to power he made the remarkable decree recorded in Ezra 1:1-4. As we read through this decree we notice some very interesting facts.

Verse 1

"...that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled" This has specific reference to the prophecy of Jeremiah regarding the 70 year captivity (Jeremiah 25:8-12; 29:10-14).

"The LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus" The motivation for this decree was initiated by God Himself, who caused Cyrus to fulfil a prophecy of Isaiah, recorded over 200 years before the event. In Isaiah Cyrus is foretold by name, and so, too, is the proclamation that he would make concerning the rebuilding of the Temple and Jerusalem (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1-4).

Verse 2

"He hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem" The Temple had been burnt to the ground by Nebuchadnezzar in BC 586 in the final siege and overthrow of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:8-12). Now Cyrus makes a decree to allow the scattered Jews to return and rebuild the Temple.

The Books of Ezra, Haggai and Zechariah

Many Jews responded to the decree of Cyrus and made the long journey back from Babylon to Jerusalem with the express purpose of rebuilding the Temple. The book of Ezra records that they returned under the leadership of Joshua and Zerubbabel with great enthusiasm to rebuild, but suffered considerable opposition from the neighbouring peoples.

God's spirit then came upon two of the returned exiles, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, and we read of their influence upon the people in Ezra 5:1-2: "*Then rose up Zerubbabel... and Joshua...and began to build the house of God which is at Jerusalem: and with them were the prophets of God helping them*". These two faithful prophets not only gave encouragement through their message but also became involved in the work. The remainder of the book of Ezra tells of the completion of the Temple, and of Ezra's efforts, as a priest, to re-establish the true worship of God amongst the people.

Nehemiah and Malachi

Once the Temple was completed, the Jews faced the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. This was an enormous task and it was Nehemiah, a Jew and trusted servant of Artaxerxes King of Persia, who sought the king's permission to return to Jerusalem and oversee the rebuilding of the city walls (Nehemiah 2:1-6).



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His request was granted and, returning to Jerusalem, he organised this great work. The details of the difficulties he faced and how the work was finally achieved through the overshadowing hand of God is revealed in the book of Nehemiah.

During the period covered in the book of Nehemiah we find that there was a decline in the faithfulness of the Jews. They allowed the worship of God to become a meaningless formal ritual. God sent his messenger, Malachi the prophet, to call the people back to faithfulness in their worship (Malachi 1:6-8). His stern yet encouraging message, though brief, is set out in the prophecy of Malachi.

From the Return of the Exiles until Jesus Christ

The last historical events recorded in the Old Testament relate to the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, the re-establishment of Temple worship and the rebuilding of the city walls.

These events were concluded around BC 450. For details of the 450 year period from the days of Nehemiah and Malachi through to the birth of Jesus Christ we need to look at the secular history of the period.

Daniel gave several prophecies that particularly relate to this period. These prophecies are found in Daniel 8, 9 and 11. The 11th chapter in particular deals prophetically with the events that followed the overthrow of the Persian Empire by the Greeks in BC 333 through to the rise of the Roman power.

Alexander the Great, after destroying the Medo-Persian Empire, died in Babylon in BC 323. His Empire was finally divided into four sections and controlled by his four generals (see Daniel 7:6; 8:22; 11:4). The section north of Israel was called the Seleucid Kingdom, while that south of Israel in Egypt was ruled by the Ptolemies. These two kingdoms continually contended with each other over ownership of Israel. In Daniel 11 they are spoken of as *“the king of the north”* and *“the king of the south”* (v5-35), for this was their geographic relationship to Israel.

Finally a resistance force was raised in Israel by the priestly family named Hasmon. They were the “Hasmoneans” and were also known as the “Maccabees” after the Greek form of the name of their leader, Judas ben Mattathias. The Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes had desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem and forbidden Jews to worship after the manner of their law. This motivated the revolt that burst out in the village of Modein, and led to Judas later overpowering the military force of the Seleucid army. The Hasmonean family was subsequently established as the high priest and ruling family in BC 163. This line continued to BC 37 when the last Hasmonean high priest / king was slain and Herod the Great, a pro-Roman Idumean (Edomite), was given rulership of Judea by Rome.

The northern Seleucid Kingdom was overthrown by Rome in BC 67 and the Egyptian Ptolemaic Empire ended with the death of Cleopatra in BC 30. Judea was overthrown by Rome and became part of its Empire in BC 63.

Thus when Jesus was born Israel and its neighbour countries were part of the Roman Empire, with Herod the Great ruling as King over Judea and Caesar Augustus as Emperor of the Roman Empire.

Summary Points

1. God had foretold through the prophet Jeremiah that the Jews would remain in Babylon for 70 years (**Jeremiah 25:8-12; 29:10-14**).
2. In fulfilment of this prophecy God raised up Cyrus the king of Persia who made the decree for the Jews to return to build the Temple that had been destroyed (**Ezra 1:1-4**).
3. The Jews returned and rebuilt the Temple, encouraged by the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, and then through the encouragement of Nehemiah the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt.
4. Throughout the period from BC 536 through to the birth of Jesus, the Jews in the Land were ruled by the Medo-Persians, then the Greeks, followed by the Seleucid and Ptolemaic Kingdoms north and south of Israel.



5. After the revolt of the Maccabees and rulership by this family of Jews, the country was overthrown by the Romans who were in power when Jesus was born.

Lesson 17 - Questions

1. How long were the Jews in captivity in Babylon?
2. Who was the Persian king who made a decree that fulfilled a prophecy of Jeremiah and Isaiah?
3. What did Isaiah prophesy regarding this king?
4. Who were the two prophets who encouraged the Jews to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem?
5. What world power ruled Judah at the time when Jesus was born?