

Old Testament 6

History Part 4 – The Faithful Remnant Exiled in Babylon

The Northern Kingdom of Israel, with her capital in Samaria, had been conquered by the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C. The Israelites who survived were disbursed throughout the Assyrian Empire while other conquered people were brought and resettled into the land now called Samaria. All that remained of the nation of Israel was the Southern Kingdom consisting of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin called Judah.

Then, in 701 B.C., the Assyrian king began his conquest into Judah. After destroying 46 towns and villages, King Sennacherib sent a letter to the people of Jerusalem warning that if they wished to survive, they must make a bargain with him. This warning came in the form of a letter that read, in part, *“Do not listen to (king) Hezekiah, for he is misleading you when he says, ‘the Lord will deliver us’. Has any god of any nation ever delivered his land from the king of Assyria? How then can the Lord deliver Jerusalem from my hand?”* 2 Kings 18:23, 32-35

Hezekiah brought the letter into the temple and laid it before the Lord. He bowed in humility acknowledging the words were true; no god had been able to deliver their nation from the Assyrians, but these gods were only idols. *“Now, O Lord our God, deliver us from his hand so that all the kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God.”* 2 Kings 19:19

“That night the angel of the Lord went out and put to death 185,000 men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning – there were all the dead bodies! So Sennacherib, king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew.” 2 Kings 19:35, 36

As time went on, a new power was emerging in Babylon. In 612 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar successfully defeated Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. In 605 B.C., at Carchemish, he defeated the final remnant of the Assyrian Empire and Egypt’s Pharaoh Neco, who had come to their aid. Babylon was now the recognized controlling empire.

Just prior to the battle of Carchemish, Judah’s king Josiah had tried to stop Egypt from going to Assyria’s aid. This resulted in the death of King Josiah and Judah became a vassal state of Egypt. When Nebuchadnezzar defeated Assyria and Egypt, he also gained control of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar went into Jerusalem, and, to help keep the nation in line, deported the best and the brightest of Judah’s future leaders. They were educated in the ways of Babylon and placed in the king’s service. A young prince named Daniel was included in this first deportation.

Things were fairly uneventful until 597 B.C., when Judah’s King Jehoiakim rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. This resulted in Babylon’s laying siege to Jerusalem, during which time king Jehoiakim died, leaving the throne of Judah to his 18 year old son Jehoiachin. 3 months into his reign, Jehoiachin surrendered and Nebuchadnezzar took the king and his family, 10,000 soldiers, priests (including a young man named Ezekiel), craftsmen, artisans and

anyone else of importance into captivity, leaving only the poorest to tend the land. This second deportation left Jehochin's uncle Zedekiah as a puppet king.

Unlike the Assyrians, the Babylonians allowed their captives to resettle together. The Judahites (now called Jews) were settled at Tel-Abib near the Kebar River. Five years into their captivity (593 B.C.) Ezekiel turned 30, the age at which he would have assumed his official duties as a priest. It was at that time the Lord called him to become His prophet to the remnant of Jews in Babylon while Jeremiah served as prophet to those who remained in Jerusalem. Both of these young men followed the Lord God of Israel with all their heart, soul and might. Jeremiah had been warning those in Jerusalem to repent and turn back to the Lord or the city would be destroyed. Now the exiles were desperate to know the fate of their beloved temple and Jerusalem.

Ezekiel – Prophet to the exiles

1. Where and by what method did the Lord “call” Ezekiel? (Eze. 1:1-2 & 28b)
2. In a vision, Ezekiel was shown God's chariot throne that he detailed in chapter 1. Using the second part of Ezekiel 1 verse 28, what did Ezekiel say he:
 - Saw
 - Heard
 - Did
3. Through this vision, the Lord showed Ezekiel that He was not limited to Jerusalem or the temple; rather He was right there in Babylon with His people. The Lord told Ezekiel that he was being sent as a prophet to his own people. How did the Lord describe these exiles to Ezekiel? (Eze. 2:4)
4. What words of encouragement did He give Ezekiel? (Eze. 2:5-7)
5. How did the Lord describe Ezekiel's role as prophet? (Eze. 3:17)

Ezekiel was to warn the exiles to turn from their wickedness back to the Lord their God, often through use of life parables. In one parable, he was to draw a map of Jerusalem on a clay brick then build a ramp and lay siege to the “city” complete with camps of soldiers and battering rams. This was to show the people that predications being made by their “prophets” to plan on returning to Jerusalem in 3 years were false; Jerusalem would be destroyed.

6. In another vision, to help Ezekiel understand God's perspective, he was transported to Jerusalem and shown what was taking place in secret, including in the temple. Everyone, including the priests, was involved in idolatry. Using Ezekiel 11:21-25:
 - What did the Lord say about these idolaters?

 - What did the Lord do as a result of this?

"The impending calamity about to fall on Jerusalem became evident with the departure of the glory of God from the city. The glory of God departed to the east, lingering on the Mount of Olives as though waiting for the people to repent."¹

"The idolatrous people in Jerusalem had developed a false sense of security, thinking they were as precious as "meat in a kettle" (a luxury). But Ezekiel announced they would die by the Babylonian sword and those remaining alive would be taken captive to Babylon. Anticipating the ultimate destruction of Jerusalem, the glory of the Lord departed from the city. However, Ezekiel promised a future restoration when in Messiah's glorious millennial reign they would have new hearts of obedience."²

7. Ezekiel continued to warn the exiles to turn from idolatry back to the Lord. Using Ezekiel 22:30:
 - What did the Lord say He was looking for?

 - Why was He looking for this?

 - Did He find what He was looking for?
8. Ezekiel continued to warn the exiles, this time using a parable of two sisters named Oholah & Oholibah.
 - What was their occupation? (Eze. 23:3)

 - Who did they represent? (Eze. 23:4)
9. After describing what happened to Oholah because of her sin (Eze. 23:5-10), what does he say about Oholibah? (Eze. 23:11&14a)

10. “Therefore, you will suffer the penalty for your lewdness and bear the consequences of your sins of idolatry.” Eze. 23:49a Why did the Lord say He would carry out this destruction of Jerusalem? (Eze. 23:49b)
11. The people finally seemed to hear the warning Ezekiel brought from the Lord.
 - What did the people say to Ezekiel? (Eze. 33:10)
 - What was the Lord’s answer to this? (Eze. 33:11)
12. The truth of what was in their hearts was revealed when they said “the way of the Lord is not fair.” (Eze. 33:17) They liked their idols; they wanted God’s blessings plus their idols. How does the Lord address the real “heart” issue? (Eze. 33:20)
13. Although each person would be judged on an individual basis, as a nation they had chosen not to heed the warning of either Jeremiah in Jerusalem or Ezekiel in Babylon. In 586 B.C., a messenger arrived from Jerusalem. Using Ezekiel 33:21:
 - How long had the people been in exile when he arrived?
 - What was the news the messenger brought?
14. The nation God had promised to Abraham appeared to be dead. The exiles felt as if there was nothing left but a pile of dried up bones; they were without a future, without a hope. The Lord used that opportunity to once again send Ezekiel, this time with a message of hope. Using Ezekiel 37:11-14:
 - Who does it say these dry bones represent?
 - What did God promise to do?
 - Why does God say He will do this?
15. Ezekiel described the return of God’s people from all the nations where they are scattered back to the Land of Promise. At that time the Lord “will cleanse them, they will be my people and I will be their God.” Eze. 37:23 Ezekiel was taken in another vision to a new temple in Jerusalem.

- What glorious event did Ezekiel witness? (Eze. 43:4 & 5)
- What will the new name of Jerusalem be from that point in time forward? (Eze. 48:35b)

Daniel - God's man inside the palace

Chronologically, our story now moves to the palace where we catch up with Daniel, one of the young men taken in 605 B.C., during the first deportation. He is currently serving as a high official to the king of Babylon. The Lord had given Daniel the gift of interpreting dreams, both his own and those of the pagan kings. In a series of dreams and visions, the Lord revealed to Daniel that there would be different kingdoms dominating the world beginning with the Babylonians, then the Medo-Persian, Greek and Roman. These empires would be followed by a one-world kingdom led by the "Anti-Christ" and finally the Millennial Kingdom with Messiah reigning from Jerusalem.

16. Daniel began serving king Nebuchadnezzar as a teenager and several events are recorded during the life of Nebuchadnezzar. The Bible then skips over the next four Babylonian kings who were weak and inept rulers and picks up again in 539 B.C., with king Nabonidus. This king was very unpopular because of his beliefs and because he chose to live at Teima in the Arabian Desert leaving the day to day operation of the kingdom to his son Belshazzar. Our story continues with Belshazzar's giving a great banquet for his nobles. Using Daniel 5:1-3:
 - How many were in attendance?
 - What request did Belshazzar make?
- While they were drinking their wine, what were they also doing? (Dan. 5:4)
17. The Lord will not allow such behavior so He sent the king a message. Using Daniel 5:5-7:
 - How did the Lord get Belshazzar's attention?
 - What was his response?

18. No one could read the writing or interpret its meaning even though it was in Aramaic. “So Daniel was brought before the king.” (Dan. 5:13) By now Daniel was close to 80 years of age and his reputation was one “who has the spirits of the gods in him and that he has insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom.” (Dan. 5:14) What did the message mean? (Dan. 5:25-28)

- When and how was that fulfilled? (Dan. 5:30)

19. Daniel (nicknamed “camel knees” because of his extensive prayer life) was reading the scroll of the prophet Jeremiah. What did he discover in that scroll? (Dan. 9:1 & 2)

20. What did Daniel do when he understood the Lord’s plan? (Dan. 9:3 & 9:17-19)

21. Using Daniel 9:21-23:

- How did the Lord “speak” to Daniel?
- Why does it say the Lord did this?
- When does it say the answer was given?

“Daniel praised the Lord, confessed sin, and pleaded fervently that the Lord would restore his nation. His requests were based on God’s great mercy.” ³ Daniel was willing to be that man who would stand in the gap for his people. He confessed not only his own sin, but the sins of his whole nation. The Lord heard Daniel’s prayer and said the answer was already given.

Ezra 1:1 records, “*In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia (also referred to as Darius in Daniel 5:31 which may have been Cyrus’ throne name or Cyrus’ representative in Babylon) in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout the realm.*” This proclamation gave permission, funding and authority for any Jew throughout the Persian Empire (including the former Assyrian and Babylonian Empires) to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the House of the Lord.

22. Using Ezra 2: 64 & 65, approximately how many Jews accepted King Cyrus’ offer and returned to Jerusalem?

23. The first exiles returned in 538 B.C., 48 years after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Zerubbabel, a descendant of King David, had been given the role of governor of Judah by King Cyrus. Yeshua (or Joshua), a descendant of Aaron and Zadok, served as high priest. Once the exiles had settled into their own towns, they gathered at Jerusalem “as one man”. What was their building priority and why? (Ezra 3:2 & 3)
24. Verse 3 said they worked “despite their fear of the peoples around them.” Why does it say these exiles were afraid? (Ezra 4:4 & 5)

Haggai & Zechariah – Prophets to the returned exiles

25. By 536 B.C., the enemies of Judah (Samaritans, a mixed population brought into the Northern Kingdom of Israel by Assyria), did not want the former inhabitants to return and rebuild the temple or reclaim their land. They were successful in getting the exiles to stop rebuilding for almost 16 years. Then the Lord sent a message to Zerubbabel and Joshua through the prophet Haggai. What did the Lord say that finally got their attention? (Haggai 1:4 & 5)
26. What was the response of Zerubbabel, Joshua and all the exiles to this message? (Hag. 1:12)
27. After putting their words into action, what was the next message the Lord sent to these returned exiles called “the remnant?” (Hag. 1:13)

“So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel ... governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua ... the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty, their God on the 24th day of the 6th month in the second year of King Darius.” (Sept. 21, 520 B.C.) Hag. 1:14 & 15 Haggai’s message motivated the people to go back to work and to finish the task the Lord had called them to.

28. As they were building, the Lord sent a second prophet by the name of Zechariah to bring them a message of hope. Using Zechariah 8:3-8, make a list of promises the Lord made.

29. What effect did the messages of these two prophets have on those working at the temple site? (Ezra 5:1 & 2)

The temple reconstruction was once again progressing well. As Daniel learned from God's messenger Gabriel (Daniel 10) when God's people are actively engaged in seeking the Lord, they will face opposition. This time it came in the form of a Persian governor named Tattenai whose territory included the area of Judah. A rebellion had just been put down in Babylon when Tattenai was informed of a great building project taking place in Jerusalem. Not wanting any trouble in his district, Tattenai made a trip to Jerusalem to check it out for himself. When he arrived he found *"the people building with large stones and placing timbers in the wall. The work was being carried on with diligence and making rapid progress."* Ezra 5:8

30. Tattenai wrote a report to King Darius regarding his findings. What specific information had he requested from the workers? (Ezra 5:9 & 10)

- How did they answer Tattenai? (Ezra 5:13)
- What specific information did he request of King Darius? (Ezra 5:17)

31. King Darius searched the archives and found what he was looking for. He sent a memo back to Tattenai. Summarize the instruction he gave to Tattenai using Ezra 6:6-10.

32. "So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo." (Ezra 6:14a) The second temple was completed March 12, 516 B.C. "Then the people of Israel – the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles- celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy." Ezra 6:16 What was the first festival they celebrated at the second temple? Ezra 6:19

The Lord's timing is always perfect! Prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, the Lord revealed to Jeremiah that the exile would last 70 years. With 20/20 hindsight we discover that when you add together the time of exile, the first return, the rebuilding of the altar, the abandonment of the building project plus the renewed commitment that brought strength to finish the temple in record time – it took (amazingly) 70 years! God knew all the delays, all the problems and all the human failure, and yet He still kept His promise. The temple along with proper worship was restored in Jerusalem. Please keep in mind that Judah is still not an independent nation; the people are still subjects of the Persian Empire, but they are back in the Land of Promise.

33. During this same period of history, God continued to reveal to the prophet Zechariah the future of the nation of Israel. What does the Lord say the people of Israel were to be watching for? (Zech. 9:9)
34. Since the remnant that returned was mostly from the tribe of Judah, what special words of encouragement did the Lord give to them? (Zech. 10: 4 & 5)
35. Unfortunately, time would pass and when the Promised One arrived, He would not be recognized. Zechariah was given another glimpse into our future. What is yet to come for the nation of Israel? (Zech. 12:10)
36. What does he say will happen on the day they finally recognize Him:
 - In Zech. 13:1?
 - In Zech. 13:9b?
37. Zechariah's messages conclude with a glimpse into the final war of history. All the nations of the world will gather together under the leadership of the Anti-Christ in Israel to fight against Jerusalem. This battle will bring about the day of the Lord's judgment. What information was Zechariah given about this event in Zechariah 14:
 - Verse 3?
 - Verse 4?
 - Verse 9?

This period of biblical history concluded in 516 B.C., with the first 50,000 exiles back in the land called Judah, the House of the Lord rebuilt and proper worship restored. Our story resumes in the year 483 B.C., at the palace in Susa with Xerxes (son of Darius the Great) king of the Persian Empire giving one of those infamous royal banquets.

Bibliography

¹ Shepherds notes, Ezekiel (Nashville, TN Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998) Page 23

² Shepherds notes, Ezekiel (Nashville, TN Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998) Page 24

³ Shepherds notes, Daniel (Nashville, TN Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998) Page 67