

## HISTORY OF JEWS SERIES – PROPHECY

### “Return of Exiles” (Jer. 29:10-14; Ezra 1:1-4)

During the golden age of Babylonian rule, the Lord had prophesied the exact timing of the end of the Babylonian Empire,

**And now have I given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant; and the beasts of the field have I given him also to serve him. And all nations shall serve him, and his son, and his son's son, until the very time of his land come: and then many nations and great kings shall serve themselves of him. (Jeremiah 27:6-7; cf. Isaiah 13)**

This prophecy came true during the reign of Belshazzar around 539 BC the final endpoint of the Babylonian Empire more than 20 years after the death of Nebuchadnezzar. At this point in history, Nebuchadnezzar's great Empire is crumbling and under threat. The Medo-Persians have come to prominence and had surrounded the imposing city of Babylon. However, the residents were confident that they could survive a prolonged siege. A double wall some 15 miles round and at least 85 feet high circled the city. It had over 100 watchtowers and was reputedly so wide, that four chariots abreast could be driven around the tops of the walls. The great Euphrates River ran diagonally through the city providing adequate water supplies. The leaders of Babylon had a 20-year stockpile of food provisions. The city seemed impregnable. However, the walls of Babylon were not strong enough to keep the judgment of God out.

The Persian soldiers captured the city by diverting much of the Euphrates River into a nearby lake. They then walked through the lowered river level under the walls, opened the gates to the Persian army, and then took the city when the Babylonians were still feasting. The seemingly impregnable city was taken without a siege or much of a battle. In one night the Persians swept in to Babylon heralding the end of the Babylonian Empire and the beginning of the Medo-Persian one. The Persians were now masters of the Babylonian Empire. God had also promised those who were taken in Exile,

**For thus saith the LORD, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. And I will be found of you, saith the LORD: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith the LORD; and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive. (Jer. 29:10-14)**

God had honoured that promise by blessing the Jews during the seventy years in Exile. Once again, with the rise of the Persians, the Lord was about to fulfill rest of His specific promises. He had wounded Israel by the painful humiliation and loss of Jerusalem, but now the Lord would heal.

## RULE OF THE PERSIANS

Around 2 centuries before the rule of Cyrus, the prophet Isaiah identified this man as the one God would use to send a remnant back to Jerusalem,

**That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid. Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut. (Isa. 44:28-45:1)**

The returning of the Jews to their ancient homeland, was not an accident in history. The Lord's hand was in it from beginning to end. Just as God predicted, Cyrus was born, rose to power, and freed the Jews from exile. Cyrus even subsidized the rebuilding projects. No man could have known that would happen; only God could. At the beginning of his conquest of Babylon (c 536 B.C.), Cyrus the Persian issued a decree that Ezra records,

**Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem. And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:1-4)**

The edict of Cyrus not only allowed the return of the exiled people to Jerusalem, but also a rebuilding of the destroyed temple. In fact, Cyrus allowed many other people back to the native lands in order to worship the local gods there to pray for his welfare, so the situation with the Jews was not unique. Cyrus was an unwitting instrument of God's providence, "*The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will.*" (Prov. 21:1) Even in our darkest days of loss, this is a reminder that God is still working all things together for the ultimate good. We must never forget that all changes in our circumstances are under the divine hand of God. This is just an example of this. World leaders are all simply instruments of His providence. When we are seemingly alone and sin abounds, God's plan will still unfold. JR Miller notes,

Notice the way the Lord brought about this return of His people. "Jehovah stirred up the spirit of Cyrus." God can always find some way to reach men's hearts. It may be remembered that Daniel was still living and stood high in the government. Possibly it was through his intercession that the attention of Cyrus was drawn to the Jews in their

captivity. Cyrus was a Gentile--but God's dominion is not confined to His own people. His authority extends everywhere. Heathen nations are under His sway. He uses all the powers of the world for the carrying out of His own plans. Men come on the stage of action and carry out their own little ambitions, with no thought of doing anything for the Lord, unconscious that what they do is in any sense a fulfillment of a divine purpose. Yet without knowing it, they are really helping to execute plans of God made long before they were born. It is a comfort to us to know that the divine purposes are being carried out in all the world's life. Even wicked men's devices, which appear to be destructive to the Church, are overruled to the fulfillment of God's purposes of love.

God began to move on the hearts of a group of those in Exile, *"Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem."* (Ezra 1:5) More than 49,697 (including servants) are said to have availed themselves of the privilege of returning. A man named Zerubbabel led them. It was a smaller number in the later 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> returns under Ezra and Nehemiah. Zerubbabel first returned in 538 B.C. He was then followed by Ezra, who led the second return in 458 B.C. Nehemiah did likewise 13 years later, in 445 B.C. No doubt those first returnees were those who rejoiced, *"When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing; then said they among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them. The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad."* (Psa. 126:1-3)

Not all of the Jews went home; a large portion stayed in Babylon and some had converted to Babylonian/Persian religions. False prophets sought to influence them (cf. Jer. 29:8-9). Isaiah and Ezekiel denounced this spiritual declension (cf. Isa. 65:3-11; 66:17; Ezek. 14:1-5). Doubtless, many of those that remained had been born and reared in Exile. Jerusalem was just a place they had heard the older folk speak about. They were enjoying the good life there and did not relish the 1000 mile trek through hazardous terrain to the ruins of Jerusalem. These people were unwilling to face the massive rebuilding task awaiting them there. The price was too high to obey God. We see some of those values reflected in the Book of Esther. However, what looks like the easy road of comfort ultimately leads to wasted years and wasted lives. The only road to true contentment and joy is the hard road of sacrifice and total obedience to the will of God.

This return was no ordinary event, though. It was not a political but a religious movement. Cyrus sent them home *specifically* to worship Jehovah—what was once only a kingdom would become a monotheistic nation of God again. As part of this return Cyrus also ordered the temple rebuilt. For another two hundred years, Persia dominated all of the Middle East and Egypt, and came within a hair's breadth of conquering Greece. During all this time Palestine was a tribute state of Persia. The Persians had a different political philosophy of managing conquered territories than the Babylonians or Assyrians: under the Persians, local personages were put into power to govern the local populace. John MacArthur notes of the return,

The Jews' return from the Babylonian captivity seemed like a second Exodus, sovereignly patterned in some ways after Israel's first redemption from Egyptian bondage. The return trip from Babylon involved activities similar to those of the original Exodus: 1) the rebuilding of the temple and the city walls; 2) the reinstatement of the law, which made

Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah collectively seem like a second Moses; 3) the challenge of the local enemies; and 4) the temptation to intermarry with non-Jews, resulting in idolatry. Other parallels between the original Exodus and the return from Babylon must have seemed to the returnees like they were given a fresh start by God.

The return was no bed of roses. It was a long and arduous journey through dangerous territory. When they arrived they found that Jerusalem was in ruins. The hostile Edomites and Samaritans overran much of the land. The people soon got to work building homes to live in. They quickly rebuilt the altar and began offering sacrifices. They laid the foundations for a new temple. However, for fifteen years intimidation caused many of the Jews to cease rebuilding the temple. God's work is always opposed by the devil's crowd – that you can count on! Soon the Jews lost any sense of urgency of rebuilding the temple. God's work became less of a priority for them. Procrastination is always a sin if it keeps you from obeying God. If you need an excuse the devil will willingly provide hundreds of them for you.

The Lord then raised up prophets like Haggai and Zechariah to bring blunt messages of rebuke to the intimidated returnees.

**Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the LORD. Ye looked for much, and, lo it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the LORD of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house. (Haggai 1:7-9)**

Eventually the Jews rose up under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua in obedient response to God's call and rebuilt the temple (Hag. 1:14-15). God promised them, "*I am with you, saith the LORD*" (Hag. 1:13b). When you have the Lord, you have everything. That is true blessing!

The Jews have lived through dark and difficult days but through it all the Lord had remained with them and brought them back to Jerusalem in safety. Against incredible odds, they were back in their ancestral land. God had kept His promises to them. What a day of rejoicing that must have been as they looked back on the workings of providence in their lives.

### *I WILL TRUST WHEN I CANNOT SEE*

*1. When I cannot understand God's leading,  
When I do not know the reason why,  
He should choose the path that lies before me,  
Still to Him in faith I can reply.*

*I will trust when I cannot see,  
When I'm faced with adversity,  
And believe Your will is always best for me,-  
I will trust when I cannot see.*

*2. When I feel the sting of disappointment,  
And my dreams lie crumbled in the dust,  
When my best adds up to loss and failure*

*And the things that happen seem unjust.*

*3. When I face the furnace of affliction,  
And the pain seems more than I can bear,  
When I think it strange--this fiery trial,  
Still I'll tell my blessed Lord in prayer:*