

IV. Captivity and Return

(c. 605 BC-4 AD)

- A. 70 Years in Babylon (c. 605-536 BC)**
- B. 3 Returns (c. 538-444 BC)**
- C. Persia, Greece, Rome**
- D. Awaiting the Messiah (c. 400 BC-4 AD)**

Please read the scripture references when you come to them.

A. 70 Years in Babylon

(II Kings 24-25, Chronicles 36)

There were three deportations of Hebrews during Nebuchadnezzar's reign as king of Babylon. The first took place in 605 BC. This group included the scholars and artisans who were to be trained for use in the Babylonian government. Daniel and his friends were taken at this time. A second group was taken in 597 BC. These people were from the ruling classes and also skilled craftsmen. Jehoiachin, King of Judah, was taken at this time. A final group was deported in 586 BC and almost all but the poor and those who had escaped from the cities were taken.

Some of those remaining in Judah fled to Egypt after the appointed governor was assassinated. Jeremiah warned the people not to go and prophesied that not one descendant of those who left would ever return. The people went anyway and Jeremiah went with them. There are historical records of a settlement of Jews in Egypt from this time, which lasted about one hundred years. There is no record of any return.

The trip to Babylon was long and arduous. Many died along the way. One estimate of the number of Hebrews who survived the journey is 70,000. The Hebrews were not treated as slaves. They were allowed to enter into businesses and many of them prospered. There are written records of their dealings and possessions existing today. Many of these people decided to stay in their new home when their 70-year exile was ended. There were those, however, that pined for their inheritance and rejoiced when they were allowed to return.

Babylon was the center of the world during the time of deportation. The Babylonians were undefeated in conquest. Their building projects were of such magnitude and magnificence that historians still speak of their grandeur. The Greeks listed the hanging gardens of Babylon as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Nebuchadnezzar was the central mover in all of this. His military genius, leadership ability, and creative talents were

greatly responsible. But he was only a tool in the hands of God as he discovered in Daniel chapter 4. We have a unique opportunity to see a little into this man's mind as he gives his own experience with the God of the Hebrews. Daniel ruled for 63 years as a governor under the Babylonian government and continued under Cyrus when the Persians conquered Babylon in 539 BC.

B. 3 Returns

(Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah)

The Persians did not use the practice of deportation; and in 538 BC Cyrus issued an edict allowing the Jews to return to their homeland. It is unclear how long it took to gather the necessary people and supplies to make the first return but the work of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem began in 536 BC. The first group included Sheshbazzar, son of Jehoiachin, who was appointed as the governor of Judah. This group also included Zerubbabel, grandson of Jehoiachin and nephew of Sheshbazzar. Jeshua the son of Jozadak was the High Priest at this time. The total number who returned at this time was recorded as 42,360. They established themselves in cities around Jerusalem and took some control of the land. The foundation of the temple was quickly laid.

Strong opposition came from the surrounding cultures. This began the conflict between the Jews and Samaritans that would continue for generations and is mentioned in the New Testament. The Samaritans were of mixed heritage. The Hebrews remaining in the Northern Kingdom at the time of the Assyrian deportation intermarried with those persons imported from other conquered territories. Because they honored the God of the Hebrews (as well as other gods), they wanted to participate in the rebuilding of the Temple. The Jews were very strict about heritage and refused to allow their contribution. Because of this rejection, these people hired counselors to go the king of Persia. The work on the Temple ceased for about fifteen years. In the reign of King Darius, a document was found that told of Cyrus' decree that allowed the return of the Jews and also gave monies for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Since Persian decrees were unalterable, Darius gave permission for the Temple to be rebuilt. Not only did he give his approval but also he decreed that all the taxes that were to come to Persia from this area were to be used in the building. He even went a step further and decreed that anyone who tried to stop the building was to be hung on the timbers of his own house. Under the direction of Zerubbabel and also the spiritual guidance of the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, the temple construction began again in 520 BC and was finished and dedicated in about 516 BC.

A second group of Jews returned to Palestine in 458 BC. The leader of this group was Ezra who was a scribe or religious teacher. Scribes were educated persons who could read Hebrew and interpret the scriptures for others. There were many who learned the current language of commerce and trade and not their native language. Scribes became a very important segment in Hebrew society.

The final group of Jews returned in 444 BC. Nehemiah came to Jerusalem with this group and served as governor. King Artaxerxes to whom he served as cupbearer gave him a leave of absence. He labored in Jerusalem for twelve years and then had to return to Persia. Ezra ministered as scribe and leader during this time also. Under Nehemiah's direction and leadership, the wall around Jerusalem was made secure in 52 days. They worked another 28 months on the gates and battlements. This wall gave the people a secure place to live and work.

About a year after Nehemiah's return to Persia, he convinced the King to allow him to return to Jerusalem as governor again. He brought about some religious reforms including the collection of tithes for the temple, strict observance of the Sabbath, and opposition to intermarriages. Ezra was the strong religious leader during this time and he brought the people into a renewed covenant with God. Under his authority, all mixed marriages were dissolved. He was credited with restoring the law.

The Temple

First temple built and dedicated by Solomon after the death of David 966 - 959 BC

First temple destroyed in 586 BC by Nebuchadnezzar

Second temple was completed by Zerubbabel and dedicated in 516 BC

Second temple desecrated in 169 BC by Antiochus Epiphanes

Herod the Great began restoration of second temple in 19 BC

Restoration continued for 90 years until 70 BC

Second temple destroyed by the Romans 70 BC

C. Persia, Greece, Rome

Babylonians conquered Nineveh (capital of Assyria) in 612 BC end of Assyrian control

Cyrus, King of Persia, conquered Media & Lydia

Persians conquered Babylon 539 BC

end of Babylonian control

Alexander the Great (Greece) defeated Persians 333-331 BC

end of Persian control

Alexander died 323 BC, conquered lands were divided

and given to his four generals

Ptolemy ruled over the Jews from 323 BC until 198 BC

Seleucid ruled over the Jews from 198 BC until 143 BC

end of Grecian control

Hasmonean revolt, independence for the Jews 143-63 BC

Pompey (Rome) conquered Israel 63 BC

end of Jewish Independence

Jerusalem and the temple destroyed in 70 AD by Rome end of Jewish nation until 1948 AD

The Persians ruled over Palestine from 539 BC until 331 BC. In 331 BC, Alexander the Great ended the control of the Persian Empire. At his death in 323 BC, all the territories

conquered by him were divided and given to his four generals. Ptolemians ruled over Palestine from Egypt until 198 BC. This was a time of relative peace and prosperity for the Jews. The Ptolemians had a policy of tolerance and encouraged trade. There was much travel between Egypt and Palestine during this time period. In 198 BC when the Seleucidians won possession of Palestine, everything changed. The Seleucidians were committed to the promulgation of their religious beliefs known as Hellenism. They worshipped many gods and considered the human body as sacred. There was constant unrest in Palestine although the harshest rule did not occur until thirty years later. In 169 BC the Greeks desecrated the temple in Jerusalem and began the worship of Zeus there. They outlawed any worship but their own, forbid circumcision (they felt it desecrated the human body), and forbid adherence to dietary laws. There was a bloody persecution of any who continued in the Jewish faith. The Jews were largely unsuccessful in warfare against the Greeks because of their smaller number and because they refused to fight on the Sabbath. The Greeks knew they could wait until the Sabbath day and destroy any group that had formed against them.

A Hasmonian family, who were descendants of Aaron, formed a rebel force that eventually overthrew the Seleucid rule. The people rallied to their leadership. Mattathias, the father, chose one of his sons, Simon, to head the rebellion and another son, Judas, to be the military leader. Judas was called “Maccabeus” which means “the hammer.” Through guerrilla warfare, they were able to secure most of the area of Palestine. In at least six offensives, the Seleucid tried to regain control but they were unsuccessful every time. In 164 BC, buoyed by their successes, the Jews were able to retake the temple in a political compromise. The temple was cleaned and rededicated.

Jewish writings record that there was only enough sacred oil at the dedication of the Temple to light the candlestick in the Holy Place for one day. It required seven days to ritually produce enough oil to continue the flame. The joy of the people and the desire for worship was so great that they decided to light the candlestick even if it would burn for one day. God provided and the flame burned for seven days until the new oil was prepared. This occurrence is remembered today in the Jewish celebration called Hanukkah.

For twenty more years, the battle for Palestine continued until they finally won independence in 143 BC. Their independence only lasted until 63 BC when the Roman legions captured Jerusalem. Antipas, who was an Edomite (descendant of Esau), garnered political power by aligning himself with key Roman authorities. He was able to convince the Roman conquerors to proclaim his son, Herod, as “King of the Jews.” His son became known as Herod the Great. He married a woman named Mariamne who was descended from Mattathias. This was his only claim to rightful leadership over Palestine.

During the early Roman reign, Herod the Great was a strong political figure and the controlling force in Palestine. The Jews hated him. He tried to soften their response to his leadership by rebuilding the temple. He also wanted to impress the Romans by having a magnificent edifice in Jerusalem. The religious leaders did not trust him (with cause) and did not want him to bring change into their sacred place of worship. They eventually

compromised and gave their approval for the rebuilding. Herod was able to begin to rebuild the temple if it was done in sections. As one section was removed, it was immediately replaced block for block so that the temple was always under construction but never looked torn down. It was to this temple that Jesus came. Although it did not have all of the precious metals that beautified the temple built in Solomon's day, in many ways it was more beautiful and elaborate. In Haggai 2:3-9, God promised those who were dismayed at the lack of beauty of the second temple that "the glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts; and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts." Christ fulfilled this when He walked within its courts.

D. Awaiting the Messiah

(Malachi)

A driving force for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem was the promise that the Messiah of the Jews would one day come to His temple. It was the hope of the people that He would come at the completion of the temple after their Babylonian captivity. As the years passed, their excitement and expectation dwindled and their service and devotion also diminished. God chastised them through His prophet Malachi (3:14), "Ye have said, It is vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of hosts?" He promised that "unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall." The Jews searched the scriptures for any reference to the Messiah and spent much of their time discussing His appearing,

There were several groups that influenced Hebrew society during this interim period between the Old and New Testament writings. They were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Scribes.

The Pharisees or "separated ones" were a religious sect that believed in miracles, resurrection, immortality, and strict and total adherence to every detail of the law. First century writers (somewhat humorously) broke down this sect into seven special types of Pharisees: Shoulder, Wait-a-little, Blind, Pestle, Ever-reckoning, God-fearing, and God-loving. The Shoulder Pharisee was one who wore their good deeds like a garment for others to see. The Wait-a-little Pharisee told everyone to wait and watch while they preformed some good work. In Matthew 6:2, they were chastised for blowing a trumpet so people would know to watch. The Blind Pharisees believed that they could not risk looking at a woman for fear of sinning and so they walked around with their eyes closed running into everything and everyone. The Pestle Pharisees were those who fixed their eyes on the ground as not to be tempted by anything around them. The Ever-reckoning Pharisee kept a tally of their good works to balance out their sins. The God-fearing Pharisee was one who was truly righteous in his everyday life and the God-loving Pharisee was one who walked with God in a loving relationship. The Jewish population as a whole was closer in its beliefs with the Pharisees than with any of the other groups.

The Sadducees were the “intellectuals” and aristocrats of their day. They were mainly from the priesthood line. They were practical in their beliefs. They stressed the law and rejected the supernatural. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection and immortality which explains Jesus’ criticism and instruction in Matthew 22:23-31. Their pragmatic beliefs allowed them to work with political leaders to gain power and strengthen their own positions in the Jewish society.

The Essenes were groups of Jews who chose to live in isolated communities where they could uphold their particular beliefs. They were usually very strict in their interpretation of the law and desired to live quietly out of the way of the world while they waited for the Messiah. Such a group was responsible for the preserving of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Scribes were biblical scholars who interpreted the scriptures. They were not priests. What set them apart was their education and their understanding of Hebrew law. As a segment of society, they tended to uphold the Sadducees in their beliefs. They held a position of respect in Hebrew society and could be considered as our lawyers today.

Although much occurred politically during the years between the Old and New Testament, spiritually the people were in a time of waiting. Many read every scripture relating to the coming Messiah. Much like people today, they discussed their hopes and desires. They tried to speculate and reason out how and when the Messiah would come. They anticipated His arrival and prepared as well as they knew how with their devotion waxing and waning. Their expectation of the coming One was shaded by their strong desire to have Israel returned to its place of power and authority as in the days of King Solomon. Perhaps they were looking back and longing for an earlier time. Although Jesus did not fulfill the desires of the people for the restoration of Israel in power, His life and death brought about the way of restoration of His people to their God. He opened the doors of Heaven. It is no wonder that the Christian people of the first century called themselves “The Way.” They pointed others to Jesus who was the way, the truth and the life. He is the only way back to the Father.

Additional information:

The Hebrews were called “Jews” for the first time during the time of the Babylonian conquest. (Note: Lehi left Jerusalem during this time, prior to the deportations, and the word “Jew” is found in the Book of Mormon.)

Idolatry was no longer a national problem after the Hebrew return from captivity.

Synagogue (which means gathering) came into much use as a place for the study of the word of God during the Babylonian captivity. This study took precedence over ritual since there was no temple as a center of worship. After the temple was rebuilt and sacrifice

reinstated, the study of the word of God in Synagogues continued along with the rituals performed in the temple.

Scribes became an important part of the Jewish society during the time of captivity. They were scholars. Ezra was a scribe and he interpreted and taught the law. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew. Many of the Jews spoke Aramaic.

Principal of the remnant - Only a small number of the people who were living in Babylon returned to their homeland. Most chose to remain where it was comfortable and safe. They eventually lost their inheritance and national identity. Those that returned were subject to much hardship but they were able with God's provision and protection to become a nation again and receive the promise of the Messiah.

The book of Esther gives an interesting look into the life of the deported Jews during the Persian Empire. This story takes place after the first two returns of the Jewish people to Judah and before the third. The people in the book of Esther are those Jews who were a part of the Persian society and yet did not abandon their worship of the one true God. We do not know if any of Esther's family returned to Judah, but because of her, the Jewish nation was not destroyed.

The Word Bible Handbook; Richards, Lawrence O.; Word Books Publishers; 1982; Waco, TX.