

## Exile, Return & Rome

The people's state of mind at the beginning of the exile finds expression in Psalm 137 "By the rivers of Babylon..." However, the prophet Jeremiah had written to the exiles explaining God's will for them in this land, promising His blessing and assuring them that the people would return to Jerusalem (Jer29). He urged the people to settle and seek the prosperity of the land until their return. It is worth noting that it was during this time that the Jewish people, deprived of their temple, developed the synagogue pattern which would become so important for the spread of the gospel in the first two centuries after Jesus' birth.

Individuals attained high rank in Babylon, the best known being Daniel and his three friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego. Heroic stands for their faith and miraculous deliverances from fire and lions have made them popular Sunday School characters. Esther and her family were also influential, although after the 70 years of enforced exile had come to an end. Esther became queen and was used to deliver the exiles from a genocidal plot. Her uncle Mordecai was a valued adviser of the king. Both books are testimony to the care of God for His people, even in adversity.

The book of Daniel records some of the events in Babylon, so is partly a history book. It also records dreams and visions which Daniel saw. These dreams are difficult to interpret, but seem to refer both to the history of the middle east after Daniel's death up to the appearance of Messaiah, Jesus Christ and to the end times when Jesus returns to the Earth to claim it as His own. For this reason, much of the book is termed apocalyptic which means revealing and is also applied to other writings, particularly to the Revelation of John in the New Testament.

Daniel understood from his reading of the scriptures and especially of Jeremiah's letter that the exile would last 70 years. Consequently he began to fast and pray, confessing as one of God's people the nation's unfaithfulness and asking Him to turn His anger away from Jerusalem and to forgive His people for the sake of His name (Dan9). God sent Gabriel to answer Daniel and to show him more of His will for the future, this is part of the apocalyptic section in Daniel.

After the fall of Babylon to the Persian king Cyrus the Great in 539BC, exiled Jews began to return to the land of Judah. Ezra records that construction of a new Temple began at this time. The return from exile began under Zerubbabel the Prince (so-called because he was a descendant of David) and Joshua the Priest in 538BC. The return of the exiles was a gradual process rather than a single event, and many of the deportees or their descendants did not return.

Ezra, a descendant of the high priest Seraiah was living in Babylon when, in about 457BC, Artaxerxes the king of Persia sent him to Jerusalem to teach the laws of God to any who did not know them. Ezra led a large body of exiles back to Jerusalem, where he discovered many breaches of the law, especially in regard to inter-marriage. He caused the people to dissolve these marriages and then reinforced much of the law. Some years later about 445 BC Artaxerxes sent Nehemiah, a Jewish

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noble in his personal service, to Jerusalem as governor with the task of rebuilding the city walls. Once this task was completed Nehemiah had Ezra read the Law of Moses to the assembled Israelites, and the people and priests entered into a covenant to keep the law and separate themselves from all other peoples.

Haggai spoke in Jerusalem around 520BC before the Temple had been rebuilt. Haggai urged the people to proceed with the rebuilding of the Temple, part of Jerusalem's glory. He attributes a recent drought to the people's refusal to rebuild the temple. He then records three prophecies of coming glory and ends by predicting the downfall of kingdoms, with Zerubbabel as God's chosen leader.

Malachi prophesied after the reconstruction and dedication of the second temple in 516BC, probably during the times of Ezra and Nehemiah. The abuses which Malachi mentions in his writings correspond so exactly with those which Nehemiah found on his second visit to Jerusalem in 432BC (Neh13:7) that it seems reasonably certain that he prophesied shortly before that date, i.e. between 445 and 432BC.

Zechariah's ministry took place during the reign of Darius the Great after the fall of Jerusalem and he dates his book to 520–518BC. The book starts with a summary of Judah's history followed by eight visions designed to bolster the hope of the returning exiles (Zec1-6). This section ends with a symbolic crowning of Joshua to signal the victory of the Messiah. Zechariah goes on to make many encouraging promises to the people (Zec 7,8), stating that the periods of mourning will become celebratory feasts (Zec8:19) The final section is apocalyptic writing concerned with the end times (Zec9-14).

The book of Joel is particularly difficult to date and suggestions have been made from 9<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. The book deals with a great locust plague and severe drought which affect the farmers and the offerings to the Temple. The description of the plague is interspersed with a call to the nation to lament. The tone then becomes apocalyptic identifying the locusts as God's army and calling for national repentance. The locusts are banished and harvests restored as a response to repentance. God's people are promised future gifts and safety even as Israel's enemies are judged.

With these “post-exilic” books, the Old Testament canon comes to an end, at least for Protestant churches. The Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches recognise other writings in what is known as the Apochrypha. These writings were written in the period between the Old and New Testaments. They include some wisdom and history books referring to the exilic and post-exilic times. As such they give us some background to these periods.

## Successive Empires

The book of Daniel contains some prophetic passages which seem to refer to the times following the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. As such, they are often cited by those

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who do not believe in prophecy as evidence of a much later date for the book's writing. However this is not a problem for us who believe in the inspiration of scripture. The two passages relevant to the inter-testamental are Daniel 2 which holds an account of a dream which Nebuchadnezzar had and which Daniel interpreted and Daniel 7 which is a second vision of Daniel. Although not necessarily the only way of interpreting these visions, an application to the end times is also possible, they are open to interpretation as relevant to this period in history. We will treat them in this fashion in this session.

The golden head (and the lion with eagle's wings) is representative of the Babylonian Empire which Daniel proclaims to be great and powerful. However it will not last for ever and is succeeded by an inferior empire represented by the silver chest and arms (and the beast like a bear). This would be the Persian Empire which, in 539 BC invaded Babylon under the leadership of Cyrus II (Cyrus the Great). The Babylonians were defeated at Opis and the king, Nabonidus, fled to Babylon pursued by the Persian army and the soldiers of Cyrus entered Babylon without fighting. Nabonidus was dragged from hiding and killed and Belshazzar died in battle later that year. Belshazzar was the king mentioned in Daniel as holding a great feast and using some of the Temple vessels in this. His sacrilege resulted in the "writing on the wall" which Daniel interpreted as the judgement of God on Babylon that it would be taken in a single night. Belshazzar's title was long held to be an error as he was said not to be king at the time, but later finds confirmed his position in Babylon and fit in with Daniel being made third in the kingdom.

Cyrus issued a proclamation early in his rule that the Jewish exiles could return to their own homes, taking with them their sacred temple vessels. Cyrus claimed to be the legitimate successor of the ancient Babylonian kings and the avenger of Bel-Marduk. A year before Cyrus' death, in 529 BC, he made his son Cambyses II king of Babylon, while he remained king of the provinces of the empire. Immediately after Darius seized Persia, Babylon briefly recovered its independence under Nebuchadnezzar III, who reigned from October 522 BC to August 520 BC, when Darius took the city by storm. During this period Assyria to the north also rebelled. A few years later, probably 514 BC, Babylon again revolted under king Nebuchadnezzar IV; on this occasion, after its capture by the Persians, the walls were partly destroyed. Darius quelled several revolts in different parts of his empire and then proceeded to expand it until it reached its largest size. Darius invaded Greece and was initially successful, but was finally stopped at the Battle of Marathon. Darius died three years after this battle and was succeeded by his son, Xerxes I. This is the most likely candidate for King Ahasuerus who is ruling when Esther becomes queen, although some suggest that this was his successor Artaxerxes. Darius is the king who is responsible for sending both Ezra and Nehemiah to Jerusalem.

The third empire, represented by the thighs of bronze (the beast like a winged, four-headed leopard) is held to be the Greek empire from Alexander the Great. Alexander

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was the son of Philip of Macedon and succeeded him on his death in 336BC at the age of 20. Alexander was a formidable general and the pace and extent of his conquests was remarkable. He spent the first two years establishing his rule and then in just 10 years he conquered an empire which stretched from Greece around the Mediterranean to include Palestine, Egypt and part of coastal North Africa and eastwards through modern-day Turkey to the western borderlands of India with modern-day Pakistan.

Alexander died when he was only 32 and his empire was parcelled out to his generals. Their quarrels, fights and wars continued for some years until it was split into four under different rulers. From Israel's point of view, it returned to the situation pertaining before the exile. In other words as a buffer state between two kingdoms, the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt, who originally controlled Judea and the Seleucid rulers of Babylon and the east who captured Judea around 200BC. Their low point was probably under the rule of Antiochus (IV) Epiphanes between 175 and 164BC who pushed forward Hellenization of the empire and as a result attacked Jerusalem, capturing the Temple and suspending the sacrifices there. Some months later he sacrificed to Zeus in the Temple and burnt a pig on the altar. He outlawed the Torah and the practise of circumcision and insisted on worship of greek gods. During his reign the gulf between the Hellenizing Jews, who would become the forerunners of the Sadducees, and the traditionalist Jews loyal to the Torah, who were the forerunners of the Pharisees, began to widen.

In 167BC a Jewish priest from Modiin, Mattathias the Hasmonean, refused to offer a sacrifice to an idol to a greek god. Another man stepped up to offer the sacrifice and Mattathias killed him. Mattathias and his five sons fled into the wilderness. There then began a series of guerilla wars against both the Seleucid army and Hellenistic Jews. Judas and his followers entered Jerusalem and ritually cleansed the Temple and appointed Jonathan Maccabee as high priest. It was during this cleansing that Jews affirm the miracle celebrated during Hannukah. It is said that there was only one jar of oil which was found sealed and whose purity could therefore be confirmed. This oil was placed in the Menorah and miraculously lasted 8 days rather than the 1 day expected. By the end of this time more oil had been produced and the Menorah could be refilled and its flame kept burning. The Maccabees (or Hasmoneans) continued to exercise spiritual authority and political military command until 63BC when the Roman general Pompey made it a Roman client kingdom. The Hasmonean dynasty finished in 37BC when Rome made Herod the Great king of Israel.