

Understanding the Old Testament 9 Captivity and Restoration 586BC – 400BC

The first group of captives from Judah were taken by the Babylonians in 605, another group in 597, and the final group in 586. Daniel and Ezekiel were prophets to these Jewish captives. Their lives were not as bad as you would expect. Though deeply grieved about their separation from their homeland and the destruction of their temple, they fared quite well. They were able to have their own homes and lands and establish businesses. One Jewish woman even became queen. See the book of Esther.

During this period of captivity, the Jewish identity was shaped. Having lost their temple, they began synagogue worship. Repulsed by the foreign customs that surrounded them, they strengthened their own conviction to live by the Laws of Moses. This was a part of the forming of their hard attitude toward Gentiles. Rabbi and scribes replaced the priests who had taught and sacrificed. The sects of the Pharisees and Saducees came into being.

Daniel discovered in the scrolls of Jeremiah that the captivity was prophesied to only last 70 years. Read Daniel 9:2-3; Jeremiah 25:11-12; Isaiah 44:28; 45:13. This happened to be the number of years the land was due rest. Every seventh year they were supposed to have only harvested what came up naturally, but they ignored that law for 490 years. The land had the 70 years rest it was due.

When Daniel saw it was near the time to return, it prompted him to fast and pray for the people to be right with God so that the return would be a successful event. In 538 BC, Cyrus conquered Babylon and decreed that the Jews could return and build their temple. Haggai and Zechariah prophesied to the people that had returned. Their messages helped the people to stay on track and finish rebuilding the temple. The surrounding people (Samaritans) made false accusations to the king which halted the construction for some time. This was what was behind the hatred of the Samaritans that we see in the New Testament.

When a new king came to power they reminded him that they were only following Cyrus command and were allowed to continue building. It was completed in 516BC. See Ezra 3:10-13. It was not on the grand scale of Solomon's temple, but they finally had a place to worship Jehovah and offer sacrifices.

In 458BC Ezra took another group with financing by the king Artaxerxes. Ezra was a Bible scholar. He was well versed in the Law. Many believe that he wrote the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles and some of the Psalms. Ezra discovered that they had broken the Law of God by marrying women of the land who served other gods. This corruption of their faith was the very reason they had gone into

captivity. The people repented and released those women. They also quit extorting high loan rates from their fellow Jews.

In 445 BC Nehemiah, the cupbearer to the king, heard that the wall of Jerusalem was in shambles which left the temple unprotected. He asked the king to let him return and build the wall of Jerusalem. Again the surrounding people tried to interfere with the work and lie to the king about the Jews intent. The people had to work with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other. A section of that wall was recently discovered by archeologists.

The last prophet to Israel was Malachi. He began his ministry in 430 BC. This was taking place during the golden age of Greece. The Parthenon was built during this period. Socrates was writing philosophy and advancing sciences.

During this period we have the same struggles we have seen in the past. At times they would support the Levites and the Temple worship would prosper. At other times they would compromise and their enemies would become stronger. Nehemiah returned to find one of their chief rivals had a room in the Temple. He promptly cleaned house and set things back in order.

Malachi's message was the same one we see over and over. It had been a century since the temple was rebuilt and now the people had grown complacent in their worship. Their sin had broken their relationship with God. He called them to repentance. He warned that those who would not repent would suffer, while those that did would be blessed. Hypocrisy and careless living were warned against. He spoke out against divorce and pleaded with the people to make the worship of God their primary focus.

Malachi closes with a prediction of John the Baptist coming. See Malachi 4:5-6. It would be another 400 years, the period we will go over in our last study, before he came. During the period of captivity and restoration we do not have many clues to the threads we have been looking at, the lineage of the Seed, Covenants, or the lamb. We do have Ezekiel echoing the prediction of Jeremiah that a New Covenant was coming. See Ezekiel 36:24-26 Zechariah spoke of the coming Messiah as well. Zechariah 3:8-10; 9:9; 10:4 The focus is now on what was about to take place.

The people may have fallen into sin because the Messiah promised by the prophets had not come. Perhaps they thought He was not coming.

Indeed, it would be 400 years, but should that have affected their faith?

How does that relate to us today in regards to the Second Coming? See 2 Peter 3:3-4.

Do you see repeating patterns of history in the Israel's past?

How is the message of the prophets of this period, similar to our own preachers messages?