

# Session 5

## Captivity in Babylon and return to Jerusalem

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The books of 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Habakkuk, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi all concern the period during which the Jews went into captivity in Babylon, and later returned to re-establish their nation and worship. It was a period of great upheaval and change in the Bible story.

### 5.1 The captivity

#### 2 Chronicles 36: The last days of Judah

The last four kings of Judah were Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah. The two superpowers of the day were Egypt and Babylon and they were battling each other for control of Judah.

Read 2 Chronicles 36.

1. On what sin does the emphasis lie (verses 12–16)? How would you describe the cause of Judah's downfall? Compare 2 Chronicles 7:19–22.
2. In what particular matters did Zedekiah fail?
3. What does this chapter reveal about the character of God?

Following invasion by the armies of Babylon, the people of Judah were taken captive into the land of Babylon (part of modern day Iraq). There were those who remained faithful during their exile, and God again provided prophets to preserve them while in captivity. Some of the prophets during this period were:

<b>Jeremiah</b>	626 – 585	BC
<b>Ezekiel</b>	593 – 571	BC
<b>Daniel</b>	605 – 536	BC

During this time the faithful were not left without hope of deliverance, for the captivity of Judah was the subject of some very specific Bible prophecy. The prophet Jeremiah wrote

This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

(Jeremiah 25:11)

Faithful men like Daniel looked forward with confidence to the fulfilment of this prophecy.

Daniel 9:2

In 539 BC, Babylon was invaded by the Persian leader, Cyrus. He issued a proclamation:

This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up." (2 Chronicles 36:23)

This invasion was itself the subject of Bible prophecy in Jeremiah 50–51.

So the prophecy of Jeremiah was remarkably fulfilled.

The Bible does not teach that the ten northern tribes of Israel were "lost" while in captivity. In fact the area of their exile was the same as that of Judah 130 years later, and the people who returned to the land in 539 BC were the offspring of both Judah and Israel.

## 5.2 The return to Israel

The Jews returned from captivity following the decree from Cyrus, King of Persia, so that they might build their temple. Initially, 42,360 people returned, plus servants and animals. They rebuilt their own family houses and re-established farms. Zerubbabel (their governor) and Joshua (the high priest) built an altar and laid the foundations to the temple.

Ezra 2

However, the building of the temple was interrupted for 17 years, partly through opposition from neighbouring people. The temple was finally finished in 516 BC, exactly 70 years after its destruction as God had promised. The prophets **Haggai** and **Zechariah** were instrumental in encouraging the Jews to rebuild the temple. The Persian king also blessed the work.

The throne of Israel was not re-established upon their return. In fact there were no more kings in Israel after their exile.

### Ezra

In about 458 BC, Ezra came to Jerusalem with more Jews from captivity. He commenced a reform in Jerusalem dissolving and pre-

venting marriages with the foreign (and pagan) people in neighbouring countries.

## Esther

This is a story which probably falls between Ezra chapters 6 and 7. It is set in Persia and tells of God's care for his people who were still in dispersion, and how he saved them from destruction when their enemies wished to destroy them utterly!

## Nehemiah

### Nehemiah 1–2: rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem

Nehemiah was the cupbearer of the Persian king, an extremely important official in the Persian government. When he heard of Jerusalem's lack of walls, he sought to go to Jerusalem to help them. The king made him governor of Jerusalem and he quickly began to encourage the Jews to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Read Nehemiah 1–2.

1. How long did Nehemiah brood over the news about Jerusalem before he took action? (Kislev corresponds to our November-December and Nisan to our March-April.) He had probably broken court etiquette in letting his grief be seen in the king's presence. There were four months between Kislev and Nisan.
2. What can we learn from the example of Nehemiah's prayer in 1:8–11? Note his attitude, his knowledge of the Scriptures and his grounds for expecting prayer to be answered.
3. What is the order of events following Nehemiah's prayer in 2:4? What difficulty did he have to face at each stage?
4. How was this prayer different from the prayer in 1:8–11?
5. On what grounds was he confident that God would prosper him in his work? Do you have such confidence?

Along with Ezra (who had returned again from Babylon), Nehemiah re-dedicated the people to God and reformed their behaviour. During this time, **Malachi** prophesied. He criticized the people for wrong worship, the priests for being bribed and not keeping the law properly and warned them all of God's judgements to come. He spoke of Jesus' first coming to the Jews and his second coming for judgement.

### Malachi 1: Corruption after the exile

Read Malachi 1:6–2:9.

1. Of what particular sins were the priests guilty? How would God punish them if they remain unrepentant?
2. What are some modern parallels to these sins?
3. What do we learn should be the quality and objectives of our service?

## 5.3 From Malachi to Matthew

The Old Testament is largely the story of the failure of Israel to achieve the heights to which they were called. But it is also the story of a faithful minority who kept the laws of God against all opposition, and of the mercy of God in providing for these people. It is also a story of hope. Throughout the Old Testament, there is an underlying theme of the Kingdom of God when the Messiah would sit on David's throne on earth. We now know this is to be Jesus.

God's direct revelation to Israel ceased after Malachi, and would not return until the days just prior to the birth of his son. For about 400 years, there was no revelation from God—no prophet, no angels revealed. This was a period of intense change in the culture of Israel.

During this period, the Greeks dominated the region, first under the leadership of Alexander the Great. In three great battles, Alexander destroyed the Persian power and incorporated Israel and many other countries into the Greek empire. After Alexander's premature death, his empire was split into four regions ruled over by four generals. Two of these four generals established dynasties: the Seleucids based in Syria and the Ptolemies based in Egypt. They held a tug-of-war over Israel and surrounding areas.

One of the Seleucid rulers was Antiochus Epiphanes who sought to destroy all copies of the Jewish Bible (our Old Testament) and killed anyone discovered in possession of it. He also suppressed all observances of Jewish law; he required offerings to the Greek god Zeus; he erected a statue of Zeus and sacrificed a pig in the Jewish temple. Naturally the Jews were outraged. In 167 BC, they revolted, led by Judas the Maccabee, and reconquered Jerusalem and rededicated the temple. He founded the Hasmonean dynasty which lasted until 63 BC when the area became part of the Roman empire.

Herod of Idumea was made king over Judea by the Romans in 37 BC. He was responsible for an enormous building program in

Jerusalem and other Jewish cities, including the reconstruction of the Jerusalem temple on a much grander scale. Herod died in 4 BC, but his legacy is felt throughout the New Testament period.

This then was the situation at the beginning of the New Testament:

- Herod a non-Jew on the throne;
- Rome in control;
- Greek language (as well as Aramaic) spoken by people;
- many Greek beliefs and customs accepted by the Jews;
- a corrupt priesthood bent on political intrigue.

## Homework

1. Jeremiah was a prophet in Jerusalem at the time the people of Judah were being taken captive to Babylon. He told the people they should not resist the Babylonians. Read Jeremiah 38.
  - (a) Why was Jeremiah treated so badly?
  - (b) Is it significant that Ebed-Melech was a foreigner? (The region of Cush is part of modern-day Sudan in northern Africa.)
  - (c) Why did king Zedekiah want to keep his meeting with Jeremiah a secret? What does this tell us about him as a king?
  - (d) In the end, Zedekiah did resist the Babylonians. His sons were killed before him, then his eyes were gouged out and he was led captive to Babylon. Why did he not listen to Jeremiah? Do you think he believed Jeremiah?
  
2. Read Nehemiah 13:23–31.
  - (a) Why was Nehemiah so concerned about marriage with foreigners?
  - (b) Compare Nehemiah's response to the problem of foreign wives with that of Ezra in Ezra 9:1–4; 10:9–12. Which of them did the right thing?
  - (c) Nehemiah repeatedly prayed "remember me with favour, O my God". Is it right to do this? Should you do it?