

The ransomed return

John Houghton ©

A. Introduction

1. 'The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy on their heads' (Isaiah 51:11).
2. The unthinkable happened; Babylon, the satanic kingdom, fell to the Persians in 539, just as had been prophesied (Isaiah 13:17; Jeremiah 50-51). One year later God's people were free to go home.
3. The period of captivity proved to be a severe mercy. Not only had the Jews discovered that theirs was the God of the whole earth in the midst of the idolatry of Babylon but they were thoroughly purified from their chasing after the Canaanite gods.

B. Going home

1. In fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 44:28-45:7), Cyrus, the Persian king, was anointed to issue a decree in 538, permitting God's people to return to Palestine (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-2). As a result, Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest led the first return in 538. Out of around 3 million exiles, 49,897 from the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi made the journey. This company of faith-filled people forsook the comforts of Babylon to fulfil a prophetic purpose that would extend far beyond their lifetimes.
2. It wasn't easy. They had to trek 900 miles across the wilderness, arriving home to face hardship and animosity. They managed to re-lay the Temple foundations in 536 (Ezra 3:10-13). However, hindered by Samaritans (crossbreeds from peoples imported into Palestine by the Babylonians), difficult economic conditions and political restraints, they gave up the task in 534 to concentrate on building their own homes and livelihoods (Ezra 4:24).
3. Nothing new happens without the voice of the prophets. In 520, Haggai and Zechariah prophesied and as a result building recommenced (Haggai 1:14-15). The dates are precisely given because of their significance in the light of God's promises to limit the judgement and to restore the fortunes of his penitent people. Daniel understood this, and prayed a prophetic prayer to release the promise. (Daniel 9:1-19).

Haggai

Zechariah

1:1 01 Sept

1:15 24 Sept

2:1 21 Oct

2:10 24 Dec

1:1 Nov

1:7 24 Feb 519

7:1 04 Dec 518

4. In 516, seventy years to the month from its destruction, the Temple was rededicated and the Passover celebrated (Ezra 6:15-19). In keeping to his appointed time, God in his sovereignty had taken account of the people's discouragement and delay.

C. Zerubbabel and the second temple

1. Zerubbabel the governor, though he didn't realise it, was a prophetic sign and his faith and steadfastness was pivotal in God's purposes (Zechariah 4:6-10; Haggai 2:23).
2. He alone brought back in his person to Palestine the royal line of David, and thus of the promised Messiah. The ancestral line was

Josiah > Jeconiah > Shealtiel > Zerubbabel

3. Zerubbabel is the distant relative of both Jesus' parents. Our Lord drew his legal inheritance to the line of David from his adoptive father, Joseph (see Matthew 1:12). He took his unsullied bloodline from Mary (see Luke 3:27).
4. Zerubbabel, prophetically strengthened and encouraged, rebuilds the Temple as a prophetic act in anticipation of the coming Messiah (Haggai 2:6-9; Malachi 3:1). The shekinah glory that had filled Solomon's temple and had departed at the time of its destruction, did not come upon Zerubbabel's temple. Nor did it come into that temple when it was eventually greatly enlarged and beautified under king Herod.
5. Yet the glory of God would come. One day Zerubbabel's Descendent would stand there and declare that 'in this place there is One greater than the temple.' (Matthew 12:6). The glory, when it at last arrived, came (tabernacled among us) in the human form of Jesus of Nazareth (see John 1:14).

D. Myrtle saves the day

1. Xerxes I was a boisterous king who threw a grand party and asked queen Vashti to appear. She refused and was demoted. A new queen was sought and a Jewish girl was chosen. Her name was Myrtle, and her stepfather was Mordecai, who later uncovered a plot against the king.
2. During the time between the events of Ezra 6 and 7 (483-473) a satanic strategy emerged that was designed to annihilate the entire Jewish race. The tool was Xerxes I's vizier, Haman. He, by deceit, secured an irrevocable decree to slaughter the Jews and then cast lots (pur) to determine the day for the planned genocide.
3. Mordecai unearthed the plot and asked Queen Esther to intervene. At risk to her own life, she obtained another irrevocable decree to the effect that the Jews could defend themselves against their foes on the day of the intended massacre. Haman was duly hung on his own gallows. The Jews survived and celebrated with a feast, which is still celebrated as The Feast of Purim (13-15 Feb).
4. Esther's courage had saved the people from a terrible holocaust that would have spread from Susa throughout the Persian empire. She had also preserved the Messianic purpose, for the issue at stake was simple: no people, no Messiah, no salvation.

DATE	BABYLONIA	PERSIA	JUDAH
625			Jeremiah (625-539)
605	Daniel (605-535)		
605	Nebuchadnezzar		
593	Ezekiel (593-570)		
586	70 year Captivity (586-516)		Destruction of Temple
562	Belshazzar		
556	Nabonidus		
539	Fall of Babylon	Cyrus	
538			1 st return Zerubbabel & Joshua
537			Rebuilding starts
536			Temple foundations laid
534			Work stops. Samaritan opposition
530		Cambyses	
522		Darius I	
520			Haggai & Zechariah
520			Rebuilding resumes
516			Rededication of the Temple
486		Xerxes I (Ahasuerus)	
483		Esther ((Hadassar) (483-473)	
464		Artaxerxes I	
460			Malachi
458			2 nd return Ezra
445			3 rd return Nehemiah (445-433)
444			Jerusalem's walls rebuilt
423		Darius II	