



Part 26 ► Exile and Return

Carried away to Babylon

The glory days of King Solomon's early reign are now a distant memory. His kingdom has been torn in two. The northern kingdom Israel is no more, swallowed up by the Assyrians. Godly King Josiah of Judah is dead; four successive kings of Judah do what is "evil in the sight of the LORD" (2 Kings 23:32,37, 24:9,19). How will God's people—the descendants of Abraham—ever become a blessing to this world?

From the beginning, God told His people that continuing in disobedience to Him means exile from His Promised Land (Deuteronomy 28:63-68, Leviticus 26:33-39). Yet our gracious God continues to plead with His people to return to Him: "The LORD . . . sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept . . . despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy." (2 Chronicles 36:15-16).

Around this time, the Babylonians replace the Assyrians as the Near Eastern superpower. *They're* now the tool in God's hand to bring His judgment on Judah. God brings Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, to conquer Judah and deport most of its people to Babylonia. It's a long drawn-out process, told in several passages (2 Kings 23:36-25:21, 2 Chronicles 36:5-21, Jeremiah 37:1-39:10, 52:1-30, and Daniel 1:1-7).

Around 605BC, Nebuchadnezzar makes the king of Judah his puppet king, and takes some of the Temple vessels. Sometime after this, he deports a small group of people—good-looking, gifted young men from the royal family and the nobility, with potential to serve in the Babylonian royal court (Daniel 1:3-4). They include the prophet Daniel. In 597BC Nebuchadnezzar captures Jerusalem and plunders all the treasures from the Temple and the royal palace. He deports 10,000 more Judeans, including government personnel, warriors and craftsmen. This group includes the prophet Ezekiel. The greatest blow comes around 586BC: the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and Solomon's beautiful Temple, and deport more Judeans. Four years later,

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a final group are taken captive. Some people are left in Judah, but they're mostly the poor. Adam and Eve were sent eastwards from God's garden paradise. Now God's people are marched eastward out of *their* paradise, the Promised Land.

Blessing in Babylon

Jerusalem is ruined. The Temple is destroyed. God's people are in exile. There's no king of David's dynasty on the throne. All the hopes that had blossomed with Solomon's reign are now withered and dead. The writer of the Book of Lamentations weeps bitter tears over the plight of God's people.

But God still speaks to His people. Jeremiah prophesies to them: “*Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent . . . from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; . . . multiply there, . . . But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*” (Jeremiah 29:4–7).

And God's people *do* prosper in exile. Jews (Judeans) become part of Babylonian society, and contribute to the Babylonian economy.^[1] They're to seek the welfare of Babylon. And they're to *pray* for it. God promised Abraham “*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*” (Genesis 12:3). Babylon is now their mission field;^[2] they're to be a blessing to that city. In fact, the Bible tells us that Jews are promoted to positions of leadership in exile. Daniel is given high office by the kings Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and Darius. Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are also given leading positions. In later years, too, Mordecai is described as being “*great*” in the palace of the Persian king Xerxes I, also called Ahasuerus (Esther 9:4). And Nehemiah is cupbearer to Xerxes' son, King Artaxerxes I.

But it's not all plain sailing. In the days of King Nebuchadnezzar, some Babylonians, out of malice, accuse Daniel's friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and they're thrown into a fiery furnace. Daniel himself refuses to pray to the king, and is thrown into a den of lions. A century or so later, God uses a Jewish girl called Esther, who's become queen of Persia, and her relative Mordecai, to thwart a plot to destroy the Jews.

The promise of coming home

But the exile won't be for ever. *God's people are going to come home!* Jeremiah writes to the exiles: “*For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, . . . I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, . . . to give you a future and a hope. Then you will . . . come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. . . . I will . . . gather you from all the nations . . . and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.*” (Jeremiah 29:10-14).

God has His hand firmly on the events of history. He alone causes empires to rise and fall. Proud Babylonia was a tool in God's hand to

chasten and discipline His people. One day Babylonia will fall (Jeremiah 25:11-14, 50:1-51:64), just as God crushed Assyria after *they'd* fulfilled His judgment on the northern kingdom Israel (Isaiah 10:5-19). God is going to bring His people back to the Promised Land.

In 539BC the Persians capture Babylon. The Persian Empire is now the superpower of the Near East. Daniel knows, from what Jeremiah prophesied (Jeremiah 25:11-12, 29:10), that the exile is coming to an end. So he prays. He confesses Israel and Judah's sins, and asks God to forgive and restore His people.

God responds by sending the angel Gabriel to him. This is the same angel who, centuries later, will bring news of Jesus's birth! So, as you can imagine, he's got some really important things to say. They're recorded in Daniel 9:24-27. This is a key Old Testament prophecy. In this vision, Gabriel assures Daniel that Jerusalem will be rebuilt. But he also shows this prayer warrior a prophetic panorama of world history—as we'll see in a later part.

God answers Daniel's prayers. "The LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia" to issue a decree encouraging the Jews to return to their homeland. He proclaims: "The LORD, the God of heaven, . . . has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, . . . and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel" (Ezra 1:1-3, see 2 Chronicles 36:22-23). The prophet Isaiah had foretold this more than 150 years earlier! He'd prophesied: "Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, . . . 'I am the LORD, . . . who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited,' and of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built, and I will raise up their ruins'; . . . who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'"" (Isaiah 44:24-28). And Isaiah wrote that Cyrus "shall build my city and set my exiles free" (45:13).

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One day Babylonia will fall. God is going to bring His people back to the Promised Land.



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The Cylinder of Cyrus, a clay cylinder (inscribed with cuneiform script) describing Babylon's conquest by the Persian king Cyrus in 539 BC. In it, Cyrus claims to have restored the temples and religious cults of people of neighbouring countries, and to have repatriated their gods and people. It's clear evidence for what we read in Ezra 1:2-3 and Isaiah 44:24-28.

Rebuilding the Temple and the nation

Many Jews respond to Cyrus's decree. They make the long journey back to Judah in at least two groups over a period of some years. They settle

the land, and rebuild the altar of the Temple. Then they begin to rebuild the Temple. Satan hates God's house being built, and opposition brings work to a halt. But after some years, work resumes, encouraged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. The people complete the Temple around 516BC, about 70 years after its destruction.

After the Temple is completed, king Artaxerxes I sends two key people back to Judea. ► He sends *Ezra* in around 458BC. One of his key goals is to teach God's Law to Israel. We read: **"For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel."** (Ezra 7:10). In this, Ezra succeeds brilliantly. He establishes God's Law as the basis for the nation's life.^[3] ► In around 445BC, Artaxerxes sends *Nehemiah*. His key task is to oversee the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. But—as with the rebuilding of the Temple—there's opposition. Enemies try to discourage the people and interfere with the work. But the walls are complete in 52 days!

"Behold, I am doing a new thing"

But the nation remains a pale shadow of what it was in Solomon's day. When the new Temple's foundations are laid, the old men who've seen Solomon's Temple in all its glory weep with disappointment (Ezra 3:10-13, compare Haggai 2:3). It seems that the new Temple is, compared to Solomon's magnificent building, **"drab and utilitarian"**^[4]. The Ark of the Covenant, with its mercy seat, is missing, never to return. The Bible doesn't record God filling the new Temple with His presence, as He did in the Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple. Judah is still under Persian control. And there's no Davidic king on the throne.

And the people still backslide into sin (see, for example, Nehemiah 13:15-18, Malachi 2:10-12). It was their wilful, persistent sin that had cost them the land. Yet they don't seem to have learned their lesson. But God's prophets tell His people that this isn't the end of the story. They reveal a glorious future for God's people, as we'll see in Part 28.

Next time

We'll explore the Book of Psalms—a treasury of Spirit-inspired prayers and praises and prophecies. It was the song book and prayer book of Jesus and His disciples. It's *our* song book and prayer book. And the Book of Psalms plays a key role in the Bible story. It takes us from King David to the final King of David's dynasty, Jesus the Messiah.

Bible Reading and Question

You may like to read Jeremiah 29:1-14. Here's a question to think about:

- ❓ What does this marvellous passage tell us about God? And how is what it tells us about God an encouragement to you personally, and to all God's people corporately?

“The nation remains a pale shadow of what it was in Solomon's day. But this isn't the end of the story. God's prophets reveal a glorious future for God's people.”

REFERENCES ► [1] See *The Progress of Redemption*, by Willem A. VanGemeren page 297. Published by Paternoster Press, Carlisle, U.K., in 1995. [2] See *ESV Expository Commentary, Volume VI: Isaiah-Ezekiel* edited by Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar. Published by Crossway, Wheaton, Illinois, in 2022. [3] H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, page xlvii. Published by Word, Incorporated, Waco, Texas, in 1996. [4] Quoted from *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* edited by Thomas Edward McComisky, page 987. Published by Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 2009.

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