

The Remnant And Return

God took joy and mirth away from Jerusalem when He sent Judah into Babylonian captivity for 70 years. At the end of this time, God is ready to perform His good word toward His people and return them to Jerusalem (*Jeremiah 25:11, 29:10*). While God worked through the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar to punish Judah, now He would work through the Persian leader Cyrus to bless Judah with their return.

Cyrus united the Persian people, and defeated the weaker Medes between 559 – 550 B.C. Then, in 539 B.C., Cyrus' soldiers took Babylon, and Persia became the supreme rule in the Near East. In his first full year as supreme ruler (538 B.C.), Cyrus allowed a remnant to freely return to Jerusalem. For the next one hundred – plus years (539 B.C. – 422 B.C.), restoration occurs in Jerusalem. Three major returns occur focusing upon rebuilding the temple, establishing worship, and rebuilding the walls in Jerusalem.

The first return occurred with a Cyrus decree. Hundreds of years before, Isaiah called Cyrus by name as the human instrument through whom He would rebuild God's city (*Isaiah 45:1-13*). When the time came for fulfillment, God stirred up Cyrus' heart to allow God's people to return and rebuild God' house, and exhort others wherever they may be to give and collect funds to support the rebuilding (*2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4*).



History confirms the reality of this decree in the “Cyrus Cylinder” that was found in ancient Babylon in the spring of 1879. The clay cylinder with lines of cuneiform writing was found in some temple ruins. It was a practice to place important documents in a clay receptacle and bury it below the foundation of a temple. The 8.9 inch long cylinder was found along with some other business documents written on pieces of clay tablets. Written on the Cylinder Cyrus speaks of “...the sanctuaries across the river Tigris - whose shrines had earlier become dilapidated, the gods who lived therein, and made permanent sanctuaries for them. I collected together all of their people and returned them to their settlements,” While Cyrus does not specifically mention Jehovah or Jerusalem by name, we do learn by this discovery that Cyrus was busy in allowing many captured peoples to return to their lands and repair the sanctuaries of their god.

Cyrus appointed Sheshbazzar, Jeconiah's son, as governor over the province of Judah as the first exiles set out for Jerusalem. Over 42 thousand Judeans participated in this first return to Jerusalem (*Ezra 2:64, Neh. 7:66*). The vessels Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple in Jerusalem and placed in a temple of an idolatrous god in Babylon, were now returned to be placed in God's new house in Jerusalem. The foundations for this new temple were laid under the governorship of Sheshbazzar (*Ezra 5:13-16*). Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar's nephew soon succeeded him (*I Chron. 3:19, Haggai 1:1*). These early exiles returned and not only laid the foundation for the temple, but built an altar. Daily burnt offerings were offered unto God, as the people desired to follow God's ordinances (*Ezra 3:1-10*).



Soon after the return, the work to build the temple ceased. Opposition from the Samaritans, whom the Jews prohibited to share in the rebuilding project, brought the work to a halt (*Ezra 4:1-5*). For sixteen years (536-520 B.C.) the work on the temple ceased.

God raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to exhort the people to return to the work of rebuilding His house. Haggai rebuked the people for spending their time and money to panel their own houses, while neglecting the house of God (*Haggai 1:4*). Zechariah makes sure the people understand that turning to God in genuine repentance is essential for future blessings (*Zechariah 1:1-6*). God's servants stirred up the heart of the people and despite further opposition of the Persian governor Tattenai, the temple was completed in the sixth year of Darius' rule. Under the new ruler Darius, Cyrus' decree to rebuild the temple and help provide the resources was found. Work began in earnest and in four years (516 B.C.), the work was completed (*Ezra 4:24, 6:15*). The temple was not as glorious as Solomon's temple, but Haggai, encourages the people by focusing on the future glory of God's temple which would surpass Solomon's temple (*Haggai 2:7-9*). This temple in the latter days would be the spiritual temple of God, the church (*I Corinthians 3:16-17*).

A gap of almost 60 years occurs between the first and second return to Jerusalem. During this time the events found in the Book of Esther fill in approximately 10 years for us (483-473 B.C.). What a gap-filler! The Jewish people are preserved alive from the wicked plot of Haman, the enemy of the Jews (*Esther 3:10*). Esther is encouraged by Mordecai, her uncle, to use her position as queen to overthrow the plan of Haman. As he asks, "Who knoweth whether thou art not come to the kingdom for such a time as this" (*Esther 4:14*). Could it be God is working out His plan to save his people through Esther? In the end, God's people are saved as a brave Esther risks her life, and events just happen to unfold. The Jewish feast of "Purim" (casting lots- which were used to determine the best time to kill all the Jews- *Esther 3:7*) is celebrated today by the Jewish people remembering the event recorded in Esther of God saving His people.

In 458 B.C. a second group returns to Jerusalem led by Ezra, a trip which takes four months to complete. He leads a small group of over 1600 men comprising priests, Levites and temple servants. Artaxerxes I authorized Ezra's work and provided him financial support from the king's treasury (*Ezra 7:11-26*). Ezra, a ready scribe, had set his heart to do the Law of Moses and to teach it (*Ezra 7:6, 10*). He had orders to appoint magistrates and judges who would follow God's law (*Ezra 7:25*). Supplying funds to provide for sacrifices was not all Ezra was to provide. He applied God's law to the people's lives who had married foreign women. Such relationships were forbidden to keep God's people from idolatry (*Deut. 7:1-5*). Ezra instructs the people to "put away" their foreign wives and their children (*Ezra 10:1-44*).



Nehemiah served King Artaxerxes I as a cupbearer in Susa. In 445 B.C., Nehemiah received word "the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and the gates thereof are burned with fire" (*Nehemiah 1:3*). After fasting and prayer, Nehemiah boldly requests to be allowed to be sent to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls

of Jerusalem (*Nehemiah 2:5*). He returns to Jerusalem in 444 B.C. Upon return, Nehemiah quickly inspects the walls and challenges the leaders of the task ahead (*Nehemiah 2:11-20*). Even though there was opposition from Tobiah and his evil associates, the walls were rebuilt in 52 days (*Nehemiah 6:15*). The people had a mind to work (*Nehemiah 4:6*). When the work was completed, even the enemies of the Jews knew that the work had been accomplished with God's help (*Nehemiah 6:16*).

Nehemiah served 12 years as a careful governor before returning to Artaxerxes in 432 B.C. (*Nehemiah 5:14, 13:6*). While away, the moral fiber of the people deteriorated. Malachi responds by rebuking the peoples' sins and exhorting them to repent (*Malachi 2:10-16*). When Nehemiah returns around 431 B.C., he proceeds to establish temple, sabbath and marriage reforms (*Nehemiah 13:4-31*).

The return of a remnant, perhaps less than 50,000, occurred with three distinct returns. Over the next 100 years, the Old Testament Books, of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi record the history we have briefly considered in this lesson. The necessity of continual teaching and exhortation in the way of the Lord is unavoidable if lasting reform is to continue.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the seventy year captivity and release of the Judean captives point to the fact that God rules in the kingdom of men?
2. How many "returns" to Jerusalem does the Bible reveal?
3. What archaeological evidence is there of Cyrus returning people to build sanctuaries for their "gods"?
4. How many Judean captives participate in the first return to Jerusalem?
5. Who was governor when the foundations for the new temple were laid?
6. What caused the rebuilding of the temple project to stop?
7. What two prophets stirred up the hearts of the people to renew and complete the work of rebuilding the temple?
8. The Book of Esther reveals of God's (a) miraculous or (b) providential deliverance of God's people from death.
9. What two areas was Ezra sent as leader of a second return to help and reform?

10. God does not demand we leave an unlawful marriage when children are involved. (T) (F)
11. How did Nehemiah serve the Persian king in Susa?
12. What caused Nehemiah to lead a third return to Jerusalem?
13. Why was Nehemiah successful in his rebuilding project?
14. What prophet was involved in spiritual reform when Nehemiah returned back to the Persian king?
15. What reform did Nehemiah involve himself in when he returned again to Jerusalem?
16. What lessons do you learn from the 100 years of return of the remnant to Jerusalem?