

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by Revd John Haley

SESSION NINE RETURN

1. Returning

Destruction from War and Neglect

*Reading: Ezra 1:1-11; 3:1-13; 7:1-10, 27-28; 8:31-32, 35-36;
Nehemiah 1:1-4*

2. Rebuilding

The Rebuilding of the Temple

*Reading: Ezra 4:1-7; 17-24; 5:1; Haggai 1:1-4, 12-15; Zechariah 1:1;
2:7-13; 3:1-5; Ezra 6:1-5, 14-16; 19-22; Ezekiel 43:1-5*

3. Renewing

The Rebuilding of the City Walls

*Reading: Nehemiah 1:4-11; 2:1-8; 11-13, 16-20; 4:1-9, 12-14, 16-20;
6:1-8, 15-16*

4. Reforming

A Spiritual Rebuilding of the People

*Reading: Ezekiel 37:15, 20-28; Ezra 9:1-3, 10:1, 10-11; Nehemiah 8:1-3;
Haggai 2:1-7; Zechariah 9:9-17; 12:10; 13:1; Malachi 4:1-2; Isaiah
65:17-19, 21, 24-25*

Discussion questions:

What do the prophets Haggai and Zechariah teach us about right priorities?

What can we learn about spiritual rebuilding from Ezra teaching the law?

1. Returning

Destruction from War and Neglect

Reading: Ezra 1:1-11; 3:1-13; 7:1-10, 27-28; 8:31-32, 35-36;
Nehemiah 1:1-4

Though Ezra and Nehemiah are separate books in our Bibles they are one book in the Hebrew Scriptures. In a sense they are a continuation of the books of Chronicles. The last verses of 2 Chronicles are the same as the opening verses of Ezra. Like Daniel, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah have some sections written in Aramaic, the language that Jesus and the disciples would have used. With the prophets, these books give us information about the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile.

Despite God's repeated warnings, the people of Judah would not repent. Consequently, the ultimate punishment was brought upon them, being conquered by the Babylonians and losing possession of the Promised Land. After the conquest, the people of Judah were taken into exile in an effort to subdue them and make them good citizens of the great empire. The ancient chronology is rather difficult to unravel but this deportation took place in three waves. In 605 BC, the top layer of society, including the royal family and nobility were exiled. In 597 BC, the upper classes, politicians, craftsmen and merchants were deported. When the remaining people rebelled, in 586 BC, the temple was destroyed, the people were deported and the city of Jerusalem was left desolate.

It is not easy to know the exact period of the 70 years referred to by the prophet Jeremiah. While at first sight it might appear to mean the desolation of Jerusalem, it is more likely to mean the period of Babylonian rule. In any event, after this period, the return to Judah (of the people now called 'Jews') began. In 538 BC, Cyrus the Persian, who had conquered the Babylonian Empire, decreed that conquered peoples could return to their lands and even practise their own religions provided they prayed to their gods for him. Like their deportation into exile, the return of the Jews took place in three waves, first under Zerubbabel, then under Ezra and finally under Nehemiah.

Although he was called 'governor' rather than 'king', Zerubbabel, a descendant of the royal line of King David, led the first return with 50,000 Jews. The destruction from war and neglect had left Jerusalem in a state of ruin but, when they arrived back in their home land, the Jews erected an altar and offered sacrifices. Even so, it was not long before they started to ignore the commandments of God again. A major challenge was the relationship with the Samaritans, people living in the land who were the descendants of any citizens of Israel and Judah that had escaped the exile. Opposition from the Samaritans often hindered the rebuilding work and the relatively small group of Jews easily became demoralised. In the face of the hardships the community faced, work on rebuilding came to a virtual stop as the people concentrated on surviving.

In 458 BC, Ezra, a descendant of Aaron with a priestly heritage, led 1,800 more Jews to return. Ezra was devoted to the scriptures which he read, lived and taught. Despite their being free to return to their homeland, life had been good for the Israelites in Babylon and this was very different from facing the hardships of trying to rebuild the ruined land of Judah. The 900 mile journey could take four months and many Jews did not want to return.

The third return from exile began when Nehemiah received bad news from Jerusalem. The royal cupbearer in the court of King Artaxerxes at Susa, Nehemiah heard the news that the rebuilt walls of Jerusalem had been pulled down again and that the local people were angry about the rebuilding of the city. With the king's blessing, in 444 BC, Nehemiah led a third group of exiles to return.

The fate of the remnant, the little portion of Israel (and Judah) from which the Messiah would come, is important. The temple and the city walls of Jerusalem are not simply matters of architectural or practical interest but represented the spiritual state of the nation.

2. Rebuilding

The Rebuilding of the Temple

Reading: Ezra 4:1-7; 17-24; 5:1; Haggai 1:1-4, 12-15; Zechariah 1:1; 2:7-13; 3:1-5; Ezra 6:1-5, 14-16; 19-22; Ezekiel 43:1-5

Rebuilding the temple took a long time, not least because of the various efforts to thwart the Jews, the new name given to the 'Judah-ites' returning to Jerusalem. At the time of Israel's civil war, Benjamin, the small tribe that had inhabited the land immediately north of Judah, was the only tribe with Judah to remain loyal to King Rehoboam, in the line of King David. When the Assyrians conquered and deported the ten tribes of Israel, they relocated people from Mesopotamia and Syria in Israel 'who feared the Lord and served their own gods' (2 Kings 17:24-33) in effect naming the God of Israel as one god among many gods. The Jews refused to allow people who had compromised in this way to take part in rebuilding the temple. Zerubbabel, a grandson of Jehoiachin, was a descendant in the line of King David and had led the exiles back to Judea. Joshua, who returned with him, was apparently a direct descendant of Aaron the Levite, the first high priest. Once back in the province, many Jews were claiming that the time to rebuild the temple had not yet come. In order to stir them into action, God raised up the prophet Haggai and he was soon joined by the prophet Zechariah. The people responded positively to the message strengthened and encouraged by God who promised, 'I am with you' (Haggai 1:13), and without whom they could do nothing but with whom all things are possible.

Zechariah was a priest before God called him to prophetic ministry. He exhorted the Jews who had not yet returned from Babylon to escape to Zion and help to rebuild the temple and to restore the city. Zechariah said that mistreating the Jews was like striking the apple of God's eye (which is literally the pupil of the eye and something which must therefore be most carefully protected). Zechariah prophesied that the great promises (covenants) made to Abraham and the Hebrew people would be fulfilled not least by the personal coming of God himself to live among his people in Zion, a prophecy that could only come to pass through the person and work of the Messiah. He also prophesied that through the Messiah, many nations 'will be joined with the LORD' (Zechariah 2:11), a further fulfilment of promises made to Abraham (Genesis 12:3).

The people are described as the Lord's portion in the 'holy land' (Zechariah 2:12), the only time in the Bible that this expression is used. Holiness extended beyond the temple, which was made holy by the presence of God's earthly throne, to Jerusalem (the holy city) and Palestine (the holy land). Zechariah, having exhorted all mankind to be still (in awe) before the Lord, who would act in power, was given a vision of Israel's restoration as a priestly nation (Exodus 19:6). In this vision, the high priest, Joshua (the same person as Jeshua in Ezra and Nehemiah, his name meaning 'the Lord saves'), having been dressed in filthy clothes, denoting the defilement of Israel, was robed in rich garments and a white turban to symbolise the removal of sin. This man, a representative of Israel, was 'a burning stick snatched from the fire' (Zechariah 3:3), in the *Authorised Version* 'a brand plucked from the burning', a verse familiar to Methodists because Susannah Wesley used it of her son John's miraculous deliverance from the rectory fire at Epworth in 1709. The fire refers to the Babylonian captivity from which Israel was delivered (an event which happened along the same lines as the Exodus from Egypt and which anticipated a great final deliverance of the people of God).

When the peoples of the land tried to get the king to stop the Jews rebuilding the temple, they wrote to King Artaxerxes asking him to command the work to end. However, in the reign of King Darius, the Jews asked that a search be made in the treasury at Babylon to find the decree concerning the temple at Jerusalem made by King Cyrus. This gave some detail regarding the rebuilding of the temple, the sacrifices to be offered and the furnishings used. This second temple resembled the first but was not so grand and, most significantly, the ark of the covenant had been lost. With joy, the temple was dedicated and Passover was observed but, in a vision, Ezekiel, a prophet during the exile, saw that God's glory would not fill this temple but a great and glorious millennial temple, so that the whole land would be radiant with God's glory as God returned to dwell among his people!

3. Renewing

The Rebuilding of the City Walls

Reading: Nehemiah 1:4-11; 2:1-8; 11-13, 16-20; 4:1-9, 12-14, 16-20;
6:1-8, 15-16

Despite some attempts to rebuild them, the walls of Jerusalem that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar remained broken down for nearly 150 years, leaving the city defenceless. News of this reached Nehemiah, the cupbearer to the king, at the king's winter palace in Susa. When he heard the news, Nehemiah wept, mourned, fasted and prayed, both for the people and for himself.

The prayers of Nehemiah are an important part of the book bearing his name. Throughout Nehemiah, he and the people prayed to God who is great, mighty and awesome, faithful to his covenant of love. They prayed to God who is from everlasting to everlasting, glorious, exalted above all blessing and praise. They prayed to God who is above the highest heavens, the life-giver, holy and righteous. They prayed to God who is compassionate and merciful.

It was considered most inappropriate to look sad in the presence of the king. Royal servants were expected to keep their emotions to themselves but evidently the king saw that Nehemiah looked sad and asked him the reason. The king, himself, had stopped the Jews rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and so Nehemiah would have been naturally fearful about the request he was about to make concerning the walls of Jerusalem, his ancestral home. When the king asked Nehemiah what he wanted, Nehemiah offered a spontaneous prayer before answering the king that he would like to be sent to the city in Judah, where the graves of his ancestors were, so that he could rebuild it. Nehemiah was given letters to guarantee his safe conduct and permission to take wood for the city gates from the royal forest.

After the long journey to Jerusalem, Nehemiah rested for three days before reviewing the situation in Jerusalem by night. While the people who had been there for some time had become used to the sad state of things, as an outsider, Nehemiah wanted to encourage the people to renew their efforts at rebuilding. The people resolved to rebuild the walls despite those who mocked and ridiculed them.

The Jews devoted themselves to rebuilding, working with all their heart but when the wall was rebuilt to half its height, the Arabs, Ammonites and men of Ashdod (one of the great cities of the Philistines) became very angry and plotted to fight against Jerusalem. Nehemiah's response was his typical blend of the spiritual and practical – he prayed to God and posted a guard day and night (Nehemiah 4:9). This resulted in some of the men carrying their building loads with one hand and their weapons in the other. Nehemiah was also accompanied by a trumpeter and, if the trumpet sounded a warning, the people had to remember that God would fight for them.

Nehemiah gave the innuendo that the Jews were planning to rebel short shrift. He not only focused on the task in hand but also inspired others to do the same. Consequently, the walls which had been ruined for so long were rebuilt in less than two months, much to the discomfort of Nehemiah's enemies, who realised that this work had been accomplished with God's help.

Nehemiah must be commended for his courage, for his restraint, for his persistence, for his insight, for his efficiency and for his hard work. He was trustworthy, unselfish, a great reformer and champion of the poor, fighting against evil. Though neither prophet nor priest, Nehemiah took a stand for his beliefs and was committed to the Law of God, to faith, and to prayer.

Just as the overthrow and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians was an indication of God's judgment, so the rebuilding was an indication of God's grace and providential hand upon his people. The temple and the city walls represented the state of the religious and national life of Israel. The rebuilding of the temple and the city walls had to be matched by spiritual rebuilding of the people.

4. Returning

A Spiritual Rebuilding of the People

Reading: Ezekiel 37:15, 20-28; Ezra 9:1-3, 10:1, 10-11; Nehemiah 8:1-3; Haggai 2:1-7; Zechariah 9:9-17; 12:10; 13:1; Malachi 4:1-2; Isaiah 65:17-19, 21, 24-25

By means of a symbolic act, the union of two sticks, Ezekiel demonstrated that the two previously divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah would once again be reunited into one nation when God brought his people back into their own land, as promised to Abraham. Under the rule of one king, from the line of David, the people of God would be cleansed from their idolatry and sin and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, would be able to live in obedience to God.

As if the sins and failures of the exiles were not great enough, they married not so much foreign women (which is an issue of nationality) but pagan women (which is an issue of religion), adding to their guilt. This included the whole people, including the priests and Levites. While no reason is given for intermarriage, reference is made to the eight Canaanite tribes and to the similarity of the circumstances faced by the Hebrew people after the exodus into Canaan from Egypt, though of these, in addition to the Egyptians, only the Ammonites and Moabites continued to exist after the return from the exile. Marriage to those who did not belong to the God of Israel was considered infidelity for the people of Israel who were supposed to be the bride of God. When Ezra heard this he was scandalised and could only express his grief, as in bereavement, by tearing his clothes and pulling out his hair. Like laughter, weeping aloud is contagious and so, as Ezra began to weep aloud, this spread among the people. After the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people gathered together to hear the public reading from Book of the Law of Moses, probably what we call the Pentateuch. While the command to send their pagan wives away seems harsh, Jewish men may well have divorced their Jewish wives for younger, more liberal pagan women.

The returning remnant were also reminded by the prophet Haggai that, although the second temple did not match the splendour of the previous temple of Solomon, the glory of God would return to the temple. To a people discouraged that the new temple was inferior to the one destroyed by the Babylonians, God promised that the glory of the new temple would be greater than that of the former. It would be a different kind of glory, for the actual building would not be more splendid, even with the improvements made by Herod the Great. Instead, the divine presence would fill the temple with glory in person when the desired of all nations came.

Zechariah made it clear that the one who would come would be a king, but a different kind of king – righteous, humble, gentle and peaceful. This king comes not on a warhorse but on a donkey. God had promised a king in David's line. In contrast with ordinary, earthly empires, which are established on bloodshed, this king (or Messiah) will establish a universal kingdom of peace. Before this king can reign in peace, he must fully deliver and restore Israel. This will not only be a physical deliverance but also a spiritual deliverance. As people look to God in faith, they will look 'on the one they have pierced' (Zechariah 12:10). The people will mourn and repent of their sins but God, by his Spirit, will enable them to obey his law and to come to a personal saving knowledge of himself and to experience the forgiveness of sins. On the one hand, judgment will come on the arrogant and every evildoer, yet on the other hand, on those who revere God's name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings, symbolism suggesting enlightenment and healing.

God's great promise is that the whole created order is going to be renewed. Jerusalem is to be created anew. God who identified with his people in their affliction would also do so in their joy. In the kingdom of God, the former sorrows will be over and weeping will be banished. Instead, men and women will live in peace and prosperity but the greatest of blessings will be a personal relationship with God. These blessings will come through the work of the Messiah. The overthrow of the serpent is the work of the woman's offspring (Genesis 3:15) and when that work is complete 'dust will be the serpent's food' (Genesis 3:15) as the Messiah reigns in glory.