

Foretaste of Restoration from Exile – The Recovery of the Judean Exiles

I. Introduction

1. *Exile* is the underlying theme weaving through the Scriptures and binding them together, for it defines the creation's existence – and so human existence – since the fall. This is because exile is fundamentally a *relational* concept, and thus it was introduced in Eden and continues through the Scriptures until John's final vision of the new Jerusalem.
2. The Bible treats the Egyptian exile as the great prototype, but the exiles of Israel and Judah were the climactic examples that underscored the hardened alienation between Yahweh and His covenant people – *the people chosen to end the creation's exile. To fulfill its divine election and vocation, then, Israel's desolation and exile could not be the final word.*

II. Return from Captivity

A. Fulfilled Promise

1. Through His prophets, Yahweh had been adamant that desolation, exile and captivity were coming to both houses of Israel, but that this would not be the end of His relationship with them. He was determined to send away His unfaithful covenant “wife” and strip her of her adulterous children, but He would not divorce her; *at the proper time, He would take her back to Himself and restore their relationship.* * cf. Isa. 50-51; Hos. 1-2
2. Yahweh had even named the man (more than a century before his birth) whom He was going to anoint as His *mashiach* to liberate His captive people and see that His sanctuary and holy city were restored. That man was the Persian king Cyrus, and he carried out the Lord's commission, even acknowledging His sovereignty and design. * Isa. 44:28-45:5; Ezra 1:1-4
3. Judah was sacked and the temple torn down in 586 B.C., and fifty years later Cyrus issued his decree allowing the Israelites throughout his empire to return to Judea to restore their capital city and rebuild the temple that was the dwelling place of their God. * Ezra 1-2
 - a. Many Judeans returned and were joined by some of their brethren from Israel in the north. After establishing their own homes and sustenance, the people began the arduous process of rebuilding the temple. * Ezra 3-6
 - b. Cyrus had made provision for this new temple, but opposition to the project continued to grow until the Jews were forced to stop their building activity until Cyrus was succeeded by Darius the Great (Ezra 3:1-4:5). He became aware of the situation in Jerusalem when he received a letter from some of his provincial rulers asking him to investigate the Jews' claim regarding Cyrus' decree. That investigation led to Darius' formal endorsement of the temple rebuilding project, *even to the point of requiring the provinces under his reign to pay for the expenses associated with it as Cyrus has decreed.* * Ezra 5:1-6:15
 - c. The temple project was met with opposition from the outside, but also from within. For both the difficulty and frustration of the task and the plainness of the new structure compared with Solomon's temple caused the Jewish builders to lose heart. Thus Yahweh sent two prophets – Haggai and Zechariah – to encourage them to continue building. Yes, this new temple was unimpressive compared with its predecessor, but Yahweh had a plan for it and it was crucial that they continue on and complete the task. * Hag. 1:1-2:9

4. Thus the temple reconstruction was completed in 516 B.C., seventy years after its destruction. This fulfilled the Lord's decree of a seventy-year desolation and rest in which He would grant His sanctuary land the sabbaths that the Israelites had failed to observe for centuries. * 2 Chron. 36:20-21; cf. Jer. 25:8-12

B. Unrealized Promise

Yahweh had promised that the Israelite exiles would return to Judea and rebuild the temple and city of Jerusalem. Two decades after Cyrus issued his decree the new temple stood complete on Mount Zion, and seventy years later the walls of Jerusalem were fully restored under the ministration of Nehemiah (Neh. 1-6). Thus the Lord had shown Himself faithful to His word, and yet it was openly evident that these circumstances, however astonishing and glorious, hadn't accomplished all that He had pledged through His covenants and prophets. *Return from captivity and the restoration of Yahweh's dwelling place on Mount Zion were crucially important to His purposes, but only as steps along the way to an ultimate fulfillment to come.*

1. No Davidic King

- a. Yahweh revealed through Jeremiah that He was going to sever David's royal line in Jehoiachin (Jer. 22:24-30), and this occurred when Nebuchadnezzar removed Jehoiachin from the throne of Judah, exiled him to Babylon, and replaced him with his uncle Mattaniah, whom he renamed Zedekiah. And so, while Zedekiah succeeded Jehoiachin as king, Jehoiachin had no descendent who inherited the throne of David's kingdom.
- b. Zedekiah was himself exiled to Babylon at the time of Jerusalem's conquest, and no Davidic king reemerged when the Jewish exiles returned to Judah. The Jews were allowed Israelite civil authorities such as Zerubbabel and Nehemiah, but they were subject to Gentile rule. Thus the Jews' return from exile didn't see the restoration of the Israelite kingdom as Yahweh had pledged; *no Davidic king meant no Davidic kingdom.*
- c. The post-exile prophets Haggai and Zechariah underscored this truth, instructing the returned Judeans that Yahweh's promises to David concerning His throne and kingdom were yet to be realized. Rebuilding the temple was important and the Lord wanted the project completed, but that wouldn't indicate that David's kingdom was soon to be restored. The house Yahweh ultimately intended for Himself was to be built by the royal seed pledged to David, but He had cut off that line, creating a seemingly unsolvable quandary. Indeed, Zerubbabel was the legal heir to Jehoiachin's throne and he oversaw the construction of the new temple, but there is no indication that the recovered exiles sought to make him king. * 1 Chron. 3:17-19; cf. Zech. 4:1-10; Hag. 1-2
- d. The Jewish exiles well understood that God had severed David's royal line; Jeremiah had disclosed that before Jerusalem fell, and the progress of David's throne from Jehoiachin through Zedekiah substantiated Jeremiah's words. Nevertheless, Yahweh's later prophets continued to insist that He would yet uphold His pledge to David concerning a regal son and the house that he would build. Zechariah, in particular, revealed that this son would fulfill not only the Davidic kingship, but David's peculiar priestly activity: David's *Branch* would take his father's throne and then build Yahweh's house as His elect king-priest. Zechariah stressed to Zerubbabel and the Judeans the importance of completing the new temple, but the Branch would build the Lord's ultimate sanctuary, and he would do so with a multitude drawn from the ends of the earth. * Zech. 4:1-14, 6:9-15

- e. A half-century later, a second and then a third group of exiles returned to Judea, and it was during this time that Jerusalem was restored and its walls rebuilt. The seat of David's kingdom was again secured, but under Gentile authority and domination.

2. No Restoration of Northern Kingdom of Israel

- a. The continuing *diaspora* of the ten tribes further indicated that the promised restoration had not occurred. For, just as David united the twelve tribes, so it would be with his covenant son when the kingdom was revived. * ref. Isa. 11:1-13; Jer. 30-33; Hos. 1-3
- b. Again, some Israelites joined their Judean brothers in returning to Canaan, but most remained in the places to which they'd been deported (note the story of Esther). Indeed, the Lord was adamant that He would not restore Israel (often referred to as *Ephraim*) until He reunited both houses in and through the Davidic seed.

3. No Return of Yahweh's Presence

Perhaps most importantly, Yahweh did not return to His sanctuary after He departed from it just prior to the fall of Jerusalem. The temple was rebuilt, but it remained an empty structure; the Lord's *shekinah* didn't fill it as it had the tabernacle and first temple (cf. Exod. 40:34-38; 1 Kings 8:1-11). In fact, this was likely one of the reasons for the growing indifference of Israel's priesthood in the succeeding generations. * Mal. 1:6-14

- a. Yahweh's absence was conspicuous, and yet His return to again dwell among His people was a central and enduring theme among His prophets. Indeed, there could be no fulfillment of His covenant promises (whether to the patriarchs, David or Israel) as long as He remained estranged from the covenant household, for Father-son intimacy with Abraham's offspring was the very marrow of His covenant and its design.
- b. The prophets were unanimous in affirming the Lord's return to Zion, but perhaps none so explicitly and repeatedly as Isaiah. In fact, Isaiah introduced the theme of the *forerunner* whose role would be to announce Yahweh's return to the children of Israel (Isa. 40). This imagery suggests a scout who is sent ahead to make preparations for an army's movement, or a herald or ambassador sent by a king or dignitary to prepare a people for his arrival. So kings would sometimes send a messenger to prepare their subjects for a celebratory reception when they returned home from some great triumph. This seems to be the idea behind the Isaianic forerunner, whom Yahweh was going to send to announce to Zion that He was returning to take up His reign as conquering King after having triumphed over the subjugating powers that had oppressed and enslaved them.
- c. Yahweh was going to return to Zion, *but as Redeemer in order to liberate the prisoners from that which actually held them in bondage*. For it wasn't Gentile powers that had driven Israel and Judah into exile and taken them captive, but their own incorrigible unfaithfulness: "their sin had made a separation between them and their God," and He affirmed this *relational* estrangement with *geographical* estrangement (as in Eden). Thus Yahweh's return would signal the end of relational alienation, but that depended on reconciliation, which required addressing the sin and defilement that stood between Him and His creation. This is why the prophets associated Yahweh's return to Zion with the coming and triumphal work of His *messianic servant*, the regal son of David. For He would win the decisive battle, not against foreign armies, but sin, death and hell.