

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

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One of the most tragic events in Jewish history occurred in the year 586 B.C. At that time, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon completed a year-and-a-half siege of Jerusalem by utterly destroying the city and Solomon's temple along with it (Jer 52:1-14). The Lord had warned His people that He would have the temple destroyed just like the tabernacle at Shiloh (Jer 7:1-14; 26:1-6). Yet through the same prophet and others, the Lord gave the people hope by promising the rebuilding of the temple after a repentant remnant returned from captivity.

Seventy years of desolation

In Jeremiah 25:11-12, we find this prophecy concerning the period of time in which Jerusalem would lay desolate while the remnant of the Jews were in captivity in Babylon: *“And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations.”* In this passage, Jeremiah prophesied that Judah and Jerusalem would remain in desolation for seventy years. About a hundred years before Jeremiah's prophecy, Isaiah the prophet uttered some astonishing words about this period of desolation, and precisely how it would come to an end. Speaking of God, Isaiah said, *“That says of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.”* God through Isaiah foretold the name of Cyrus and that he would be the one to give the proclamation to rebuild the temple” (Isa 44:28).

Amazingly, not only did God foretell that a foreign ruler would order the rebuilding of the temple, but even identified the king by name, Cyrus! This prophecy was given, calling Cyrus by name, over a century before he was even born. When Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 B.C., God stirred up the spirit of Cyrus to fulfill these prophecies (Ezra 1:1). He then made a proclamation inviting all of God's people to go back to Israel (Ezra 1:3). Cyrus also sent back the vessels of the temple (Ezra 1:7-11), the same vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had carried to Babylon many years before (2 Kings 24:12-13; 25:13-17; 2 Chr 36:7,10,18-19; Jer 27:16-22; 52:12-23; Dan 1:2. God had also foretold the return of the vessels (Jer 27:22).

A weak response

Ezra 2:64-65 records that 49,717 of the captives in Babylon elected to return to the land of Judah, representing only a small portion of the Jews in exile at that time. The captives were originally taken to Babylon by king Nebuchadnezzar in several waves: 1) in 605 B.C., when members of the

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royal family were taken into Nebuchadnezzar's palace, including the prophet Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dan 1:1-4); 2) in 598/97 B.C. when king Jehoiakim was taken captive followed by his son Jehoiachin three months later (2 Kgs 24:10-16; 2 Chr 36:5-10; Jer 24:1; 52:28); 3) in 588-586 B.C. when Jerusalem was besieged and then destroyed (2 Kgs 25:1-21; 2 Chr 36:11-21; Jer 52:29); 4) and 745 more in 582 B.C. (Jer 52:30). Only the very poor were left behind in Judah (2 Kgs 25:12; Jer 39:10; 52:16). Therefore, in 539 B.C. when Cyrus made the proclamation inviting all of the Jews to return to Judah, it had been between 47 and 66 years since the three major waves of captives had been carried to Babylon. That means that anyone in his early fifties or younger would have had no memory at all of Judah or Jerusalem. The majority of the people in Babylon at the time of the proclamation had never known any other home than in Babylon. Clearly, the captives who truly loved God and were concerned about doing His will went back to rebuild the temple. The ones who chose to remain behind did not have fulfilling God's will as their only concern. It is likely that they were comfortable with their lives in Babylon and had their affection on the things of the earth and were not willing to give up the only home most of them had ever known to go to what was to them a strange land and face the hardships of farming new lands, working at new jobs, building new houses for themselves as well as the temple in Jerusalem. God called for more of them to return to Israel (Zech 2). A similar attitude of complacency and spiritual weakness gradually overtook even those who had returned to Israel and started the work on the temple. The work on the temple actually ground to a total halt (Ezra 4:24).

The completion of the temple

The prophet Daniel was alive and serving in Babylon under the Persian rulers when 65 of the 70 years of desolation had passed and the work on the temple languished. In the first year of Darius the Great, King of Persia, *"Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem"* (Dan 9:2). Daniel was eager to see progress so the prophecy would be fulfilled and earnestly prayed to God about this matter. His concern was shared by the Lord, as God through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah rebuked the people of Israel who had returned to the land and were no longer working to complete the temple (Ezra 5:1-2; Hag 1; Zech 1). Finally, in 516 B.C., exactly 70 years after Solomon's temple was destroyed, precisely as God had foretold through His prophets, the Second Temple was completed (Ezra 6:14-22).