

RACHEL'S CHILDREN

Jon Macon

Jeremiah 31:15-17 says, *“Thus saith the Lord; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not. Thus saith the Lord; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the Lord; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy. And there is hope in thine end, saith the Lord, that thy children shall come again to their own border.”* This is a classic example of a prophecy with a dual fulfillment, one pertaining to events that were taking place within the time of the prophet (in this case, Jeremiah), and the other pertaining to events that would occur far in the future when the Messiah came.

The return to Israel of the captives from Babylon

A review of Old Testament history shows a pattern of rebellion and disobedience on the part of the Israelites from the time they were delivered from their bondage in Egypt until they were finally removed from their land and sent into captivity. There were, of course, brief periods of time when the people would repent and a generation would serve the Lord as they were commanded, but those were the exceptions. *“For so it was, that the children of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, which had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods, and walked in the statutes of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out from before the children of Israel, and of the kings of Israel, which they had made”* (2 Kings 17:7-8). God sent prophets to His people to rebuke them and warn of them of their coming destruction if they did not repent, yet the people would not listen (2 Kgs 17:13-15). Thus, one of the major themes of the preaching of all the prophets, including Jeremiah, was impending destruction and bondage for Israel. Yet, God also made it clear that He would preserve a remnant of His people: *“Nevertheless in those days, saith the Lord, I will not make a full end with you”* (Jer 5:18). God promised that He would return a remnant of the children of Judah back to the land of Israel (Jer 3:18; 12:14-15; 16:14-15; 30:1-3). This would be accomplished after 70 years of captivity in Babylon (Jer 29:10-14). And those who would be brought back would be the ones who sincerely repented and turned fully back to the God they had forsaken (Jer 24:4-7; 32:37-44; 33:6-14). Jeremiah the prophet lived to see the fulfillment of his own prophecies of the

RACHEL'S CHILDREN

(continued)

destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the sending away of a remnant of Judah into captivity in Babylon. It is in this context that Jeremiah 31:16 pictures Rachel, the wife of Israel and mother of the nation, weeping for her children and refusing comfort because they are gone. In this case, the children were gone into captivity. God told Rachel to stop weeping for them, because God would return them all to their land (Jer 31:16-17).

Herod's destruction of the children of Bethlehem

Over 500 years after the first part of the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy in Jeremiah 31:15-17, there was a fulfillment of a different aspect of the prophecy contained in that passage. This occurred in the time of Christ, shortly after his birth. After Jesus was born and the wise men from the east came looking for the "King of the Jews" (Matt 2:1-2), Herod was troubled because he feared that there was born a rival to his own throne (Matt 2:3). He learned from the Jewish scholars that the prophets had foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem in Judea (Matt 2:4-6; see also Micah 5:2). Herod attempted to use the wise men to reveal the exact location of the newborn Christ (Matt 2:7-8), but God warned them and sent them away (Matt 2:12). At the same time, God also defeated Herod's plans to kill Christ by warning Joseph to take Jesus and Mary down to Egypt until Herod's death (Matt 2:13-15). Since Herod failed to locate the specific child he was looking for, he decided to have killed all of the children in and around Bethlehem who were 2 years old and under. *"Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, In Ramah was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not"* (Matt 2:16-18). Jeremiah 31:15 had foretold that *"a voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not."* Rachel once again was weeping for her children, but in this case, the children had not been taken captive. They had been murdered.