



## UNIT 6 – LESSON 8

### THE EXILIC/ POST-EXILIC PERIOD

The end of the Kingdom of Judah by the Babylonian conquest began the period known as the Exile. In this lesson we survey that period and the period following when the exiles were allowed to return to Judah and to rebuild Jerusalem with its temple.

#### THE EXILE

Before the fall of Jerusalem there had been a deportation of the leading men of Judah to Babylonia in 597 B.C. (2 Kings 24:10ff). King Jehoiachin was included in this, and he remained imprisoned in Babylon. In 587 B.C. after the siege of Jerusalem, a further deportation was made. (2 Kings 25:1ff). Judah became a Babylonian province under the administration of a Judean named Gedaliah, with its administrative centre at Mizpah. (25:22).

Pockets of resistance to Babylonian rule remained within Judah and a group led by Ishmael assassinated Gedaliah and his supporters. To escape Babylonian vengeance they then fled to Egypt, forcing many from Mizpah to accompany them, including the prophet Jeremiah. A third deportation from Judah was made in 582 B.C. and may have been as a result of Gedaliah's assassination. Judah was added to the province of Samaria. Archaeological evidence shows that the fortified towns of Judah had been destroyed. Only the poor of the land remained there to live as peasant farmers.

The Judeans in Exile (and we can now begin to call them Jews) had to make staggering readjustments to their religious life. Their temple had been destroyed; they had been taken from their land of promise; the holy city was in ruins; they were living among men of strange custom and religion. Had Yahweh forsaken them? Psalm 137 reveals the pathos of exiles longing for Jerusalem and the opportunity to practise their religion in its familiar setting. While evidence is not as abundant as we would wish the impression given is that the exile, far from destroying faith in Yahweh, acted as a purifying and chastening period for the Jews. On the defensive in a strange land they drew together to protect their faith and prevent the entry of foreign practices. Far from losing faith in Yahweh, they developed their faith to the point of proclaiming not only that Yahweh was their God, or the greatest God, but that Yahweh was the only God, and that pagan gods were only the creation of men, lifeless and powerless.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylonia, died in 562 B.C. A period of civil strife followed until Evil-Merodach (Amel-Marduk) succeeded to the throne. The new king released Jehoiachin from captivity and gave him a place of honour at the court. In 560 Evil-Merodach was assassinated and there followed an unstable period in Babylonia.

While Babylonia was having its leadership problems another power was rising to challenge its leadership. In 550 B.C. Cyrus, king of Persia, defeated the Medes and had himself installed as ruler. In 539 B.C. Cyrus defeated Babylonia to become ruler of a vast empire. In the following year he issued 2 decrees authorising the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:2-4, 6:3-5). The freedom to return did not mean the automatic return of the exiles, however. Many of the Jews had become well established in Babylonia and had no wish to return to the harsh conditions of Judea. Moreover, the journey back was dangerous and expensive. Henceforth, the Jews of the Dispersion (Diaspora) would be a powerful factor in Jewish life.



## UNIT 6 – LESSON 8

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#### SECOND ISAIAH

The material in this section of Isaiah relates to the historical situation of the closing years of the Exile. There is debate about its authorship. The Jews have been in Exile but are about to be freed (40:2). Yahweh has raised up a deliverer in the person of Cyrus to overthrow Babylon (44:28; 45:1).

In what is probably the loftiest writing in the Old Testament, the prophet writes of the imminent freedom and subsequent renewal of national life. Behind all this is the work of Yahweh, the only true God, the Creator of the world who looks down on men as men might look on grasshoppers (ch.40). Beside this God the vanity of false gods becomes apparent and the prophet mocks the false hopes of those who put their trust in idols.

Within this prophet's writings come the four great Servant songs, telling of the Servant of Yahweh who will be an innocent sufferer on behalf of others: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13- 53:12. The identity of the Servant is a vexed question, but whatever the original historical identity may have been, the Christian Church has seen the perfect fulfilment of these songs in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Acts 8:26-35).

#### THE RETURNING EXILES

Sheshbazzar, a prince of Judah, was given the task of supervising the temple reconstruction (Ezra 1:8). He appears to have begun the work and then returned to Persia. The leadership of the Jews of Judea fell to Zerubbabel (grandson of Jehoiachin) and the high priest, Joshua. The territory which they ruled was small with a population estimated by Albright to have been 20,000. The rulers of Samaria had controlled the territory of Judah and were unsympathetic to the returning Jews. Nevertheless, a deputation from Samaria offered Zerubbabel help in rebuilding the temple, but he refused and from that time the Samaritans did their best to hinder the work.

Obviously the work of rebuilding the temple lagged, but in the reign of Darius (522-486 B.C.) the prophets Haggai and Zechariah urged the people to complete the task and work resumed. There was open hostility from Samaritan and Persian authorities to this work and a challenge was made to its validity. Darius consulted the royal archives, found the decree of Cyrus and gave the work his blessing. (Ezra 5,6). In 515 B.C. the temple was completed and dedicated in an occasion of joy for all who were not saddened by memories of the glory of Solomon's temple.

#### HAGGAI

Haggai's prophecy consists of 4 messages addressed to the Jews rebuilding the temple:

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|---------|---|
| 1:1-15  | Criticism of delay, and urging resumption of work.                |
| 2:1-9   | A message of hope, for Yahweh will fill the house with His glory. |
| 2:10-19 | Yahweh will bless from this time.                                 |
| 2:20-23 | A message of comfort concerning the establishment of Zerubbabel.  |

#### ZECHARIAH

Zechariah worked beside Haggai in encouraging the builders, but more of his prophecy has survived. In the first 6 chapters the prophet records a series of visions full of symbolism but bearing upon the work in hand. Chapters 9-14 go beyond immediate problems to the glorious future.



## UNIT 6 – LESSON 8

### THE EXILIC/ POST-EXILIC PERIOD (cont'd)

#### THE FIFTH CENTURY: NEHEMIAH AND EZRA

The books of Nehemiah and Ezra present problems with regard to their dating and mutual relationship. The viewpoint adopted here is that Nehemiah was appointed governor in 445 B.C. and Ezra followed in 428 B.C. This involves amending the text of Ezra 7:7,8 to read “thirty-seventh” instead of “seventh”, and students wishing to follow up this point in more detail are referred to the discussion in John Bright, *A History of Israel*.

#### NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah was a Jew who had risen to high rank in the service of King Artaxerxes 1. He approached the king about rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls after hearing of the city’s plight from a delegation of Jews (Neh. 1:1-3). The king agreed to the rebuilding of the walls, vital to Jerusalem’s security, and appointed Nehemiah Governor of Judah to supervise the project (Neh. 5:14; 10:1). Nehemiah organised the work so well that a wall was soon completed (Neh. 6:15) though the completion of the project took longer. In the work of rebuilding Nehemiah faced opposition from powerful neighbours, but he stood firm in the face of their attempts to prevent the work from proceeding (chs. 4,6).

The city’s security assured, Nehemiah began a programme of reforms:

1. The population of Jerusalem was increased by recruiting from the rural areas of Judah (11:1f).
2. Nehemiah recognised the problems of those who had lost lands because of poor seasons and heavy taxation. He arranged for the return of confiscated lands (ch.5).
3. He set an example of austerity by his own attitude to official privileges (5:14-19).
4. In a second term as governor he stopped misuse of temple facilities (13:4-9).
5. Nehemiah rectified deficiencies in collecting and distributing pay for the Levites. (13:10-14).
6. He prevented foreign traders from operating in or around Jerusalem on the sabbath (13:15-22).
7. He forbade intermarriage with foreigners.

Nehemiah’s work was important in the establishment of ordered civil life. This was complemented in the religious sphere by Ezra.

#### EZRA

Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 428 B.C. along with many other Jews (Ezra 7:27 – 8:36). His commission was to regularise Jewish religious practice (Ezra 7:12-26).

**UNIT 6 – LESSON 8****THE EXILIC/ POST-EXILIC PERIOD (cont'd)**

Ezra's great reforming work was to recall the people to the Law. He read and proclaimed it publicly (Neh.8). Like Nehemiah, he attacked the problems of mixed marriages (Ezra 9,10). Under his influence the people made a covenant to dissolve mixed marriages and a commission was appointed to see that this was done. Ezra's work was so effective that the Law became the great standard of Jewish faith from this time on.

**QUESTION 1**

What beneficial effects did the exile have on the people of Judah?

**QUESTION 2**

Many attributes of God are stressed in Isaiah Chapters 40-55. What particular ones are shown in Chapter 44:21-28?

**QUESTION 3**

Why did the return exiles refuse the help of the Samaritans to rebuild the temple? (Ezra 4:3).

**QUESTION 4**

In Nehemiah 5:14-10 what example did Nehemiah set for the people?

**QUESTION 5**

Why do you think Ezra was so outspoken against mixed marriages for Jews? (see Ezra 9).

**FURTHER QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY:**

How could you personally apply Nehemiah's example in 5:14-19?