

Day 266

The First Exiles Come Home c.539BC

Ezra 1.1 – 4.5

Ezra 1.1 – 4 (mirrored in 2 Chron.36.22-23) Where the Babylonians and Assyrians destabilised their conquered people-groups by deporting them, thereby hopefully disorientating them from organising resistance to the empire, the Persians wanted to have a calm and settled territory. Therefore, Cyrus of Persia, fulfilling the word of Jeremiah, and also the second part of Isaiah, invites the people of Judah and Jerusalem to return, to rebuild the destroyed Temple there. Possibly there is a motive of appeasing the God who may have been angry for the destruction of His place of worship, and thus anyone who wants to contribute to the work from anywhere among the exiles is permitted to support the project.

Ezra 1.5 – 11 The returnees are from Judah, the priests and the Levites. This is a voluntary repatriation, and undoubtedly there would have been many who stayed behind in their new communities in Babylon, having been there for six decades. This is why later Esther is needed to intercede for the Jews living in the Persian lands.

The new exodus is equipped by funds raised from fellow Jews and well-wishers, and they have a good treasury with which to make a start on the work. King Cyrus himself donates over five thousand articles taken from the destroyed Temple, which had been housed in Marduk's shrine in Babylon. The leader of the expedition home is given as Sheshbazzar, his Babylonian name. But in Hebrew he is known as Zerubbabel (Heb זְרֻבָבֶל *Zerubbabel*, meaning either 'scattered to Babylon', or perhaps 'conceived in Babylon'.)

Ezra 2.1 – 67 In a long catalogue of names, the returnees are recorded, all forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty Jews, over seven thousand slaves and two hundred male and female singers, plus their livestock.

It is noteworthy that people are recorded by their lineage. Sadly, the descendants of Hobaiah, Hakkoz and Barzillai (v.62) cannot prove their pedigree, and on that basis are excluded from active service and sustenance with the priests, until someone can verify their authenticity by enquiring of the Lord with the Urim and Thummim, the sacred lot.

Ez.2.68-70 Having reached the site of the razed Temple in Jerusalem, an offering is taken up for the rebuilding, and large sums of gold and silver as well as clothing for the priests are received. The priests then go and set up home in their designated towns, and the rest of the people go and set up home in their territories. It has to be remembered that they have royal authority from Cyrus to do this, and at this stage work unhindered.

Ez.3.1-6 When a period has elapsed to allow people to get settled in to their homes, everyone comes 'as one man' to Jerusalem. Jeshua Ben Jozadak leads the priests, and Zerubbabel Ben Shealtiel the people, and they set to work with the building of the altar first, so that sacrifice can recommence in accordance with *Torah*. This happens even before the foundations of the new temple have been laid.

Ez.3.7 Stonemasons and carpenters are employed and trade done for cedar wood from the north-west, from Tyre and Sidon, as Solomon first did, in order to provide the resources for the new building.

Ez.3.8 – 13 The moment comes for the commencement of the work, supervised by the priests and Levites. As the builders lay the foundation stone, with full ceremony, a sound of praise goes up again, the ancient refrain of Israel;

כִּי טוֹב כִּי-לְעוֹלָם תְּסַדֵּר׃ *Ki tov, ki le'olam chasdo* For (He is) good for forever His *chesed*

All the assembly then shouts in praise to the Lord.

An amazing mixture of feelings is being expressed at this moment. There are those in the crowd, the old men among them, who can remember the former Temple before its destruction – these must be those over seventy years of age – and they weep, at the remembrance of the glory that was. But the younger people are shouting with joy, in anticipation of what is to come. This is an amazing picture of the nature of hope and experience together, the sense of loss of what has been and the anticipation of what is yet to come. In the commotion, both anguish and excitement mingle together and make a momentous sound which is heard from a distance.

Ez.4.1 – 5 At this point, we encounter the people who were imported into Samaria after the fall of that city (see 2 Kings 17.24) They say that they were resettled there by Esarhaddon of Assyria, who reigned from 681BC; in 2 Kings 17 it is unclear which King of Assyria brought in the Samaritans, but it seems that Esarhaddon is the one remembered by them.

In the 2 Kings 17 passage, the incomers adapt the worship of the Lord to appease Him, importing priests to instruct them. However, they also mix this with the worship of idols, and therefore are not acceptable to the Israelites, because of their impure descent.

As a result of this, the Samaritan opposition begin to harass the Jews, and do so for a sustained period of the Temple's rebuilding.

Day 267

Daniel's Last Vision

Daniel 10.1 – 12.13

As the exiles are preparing to return, Daniel, who must by now be very old, has a last vision of the days to come. It is very mystical, full of symbol and numbers, quite cryptic in its nature. It has a deep physical impact on Daniel, who by turns is found on his face, in a trance, then on his hands and knees, quivering, standing, and on his face again.

Dan. 10.1 – 3 Daniel has a vision of a great war, which is so concerning that he fasts for three weeks.

Dan. 10.4 – 9 Daniel then has a vision of a shining man, which he alone sees, although the men around him are so afraid they run away, leaving Daniel overcome by the sight and in a trance on the ground.

Dan.10.10 – 19 The man explains that Daniel is held in high esteem, and his prayers have been heard – in particular, the prayer for the restoration of Judah to her homeland, perhaps – but there has been great resistance, a contention of some kind which has been going on. The prince of Persia, who it seems may be a spiritual being, resists the man, but another one of the chief princes, or overseers, Michael, comes to assist, so that now this communication can take place. It is significant that the two princes of Persia and Greece refer to major empires in the region. Some commentators believe that the spiritual powers referred to here are those vested in the powerful human institutions, organising themselves against God and resisting Him.

This interchange between Daniel and the shining man has been expanded on greatly in recent times, and given rise to a great scheme of angelology and demonology called ‘spiritual warfare.’ However, there is no key as to who these princes actually are, although they seem to be spiritual forces. Daniel is encouraged not to be overcome by this experience, and receives strength.

Dan.10.20 – 11.4 The shining man speaks of changes which are coming in the empires of the world. There will be four more Persian emperors, Cambyses, Pseudo-Smerdis, Darius Hystaspes and the powerful Xerxes, the husband of Esther (11.2). However, after this Alexander the Great of Greece will rise and take power. But on his death, with no obvious heir, his empire is eventually split between four power blocks – Macedonia in Greece, Pergamum in Asia Minor, the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt (Kings of the south) and the Seleucid dynasty in Babylon (Kings of the North.)

Dan.11.5 – 20 There is mention here of an alliance between the daughter of the King of the south and the King of the North. This seems to refer to Bernice, granddaughter of Ptolemy who married Antiochus II Theos, of the Seleucids. However, Bernice and her son are poisoned by Antiochus’ first wife, Laodice, and so no succession comes from her.

However, Bernice’s brother, (11.6) Ptolemy III Euergetes, attacks the Seleucids to avenge his sister’s murder. This leads to war between the dynasties through to the time of Antiochus the Great. (11.11-20)

Dan.11.21 – 35 Antiochus the Great’s son, Antiochus III Epiphanes is bad news for the people of the Lord. He pushes himself into power, removing a pretender to the Seleucid throne, and then proceeds to carry on a campaign of Hellenization – conforming everything to Greek language and culture. This would bring great oppression and suffering to the people of Israel, in the inter-testamental period – including the replacement and eventual murder of ‘a prince of the covenant’, the High Priest Onias. He continues the wars against the Ptolemies of Egypt, ‘the South’, but is repelled by their alliance with Rome (referred by Daniel as ‘Kittim’) in 168BC.

At one point, Daniel prophesies the ‘filthy devastation’ (11.31) which Antiochus commits when he places an altar of Zeus in the Temple in Jerusalem, desecrating the Jews’ place of worship. When the Jews rise up in reaction, Antiochus attacks Jerusalem, killing 40,000. (11.33). Daniel encourages the people to stand fast, for this is a purging time from the Lord. (11.35)

11.36 – 45 Antiochus Epiphanes goes on to liken himself to Zeus, a stunning act of arrogance, calling himself ‘Theos Epiphanes’ – the *manifest god*. After continual war, he dies in 164BC of a sudden illness, just before the time of the rise of the Maccabees, who restore the Temple to the Jews.

12.1-4 The last chapter of Daniel seems to be looking far into the future, to the end. The words are addressed to Israel, whose protector is Michael (Heb מִיכָאֵל *Mi-kha-el*, meaning, Who is like God?) a spiritual being called a prince. There is looking to a time of deliverance, which certainly would reflect the period of the Maccabees, although this goes further to a more far-off time. There is a clear reference to a resurrection of the dead (12.2) and everlasting life or judgement. There is a closing vision of a life lived in eternal light, at which the shining man brings the words to a close, and draws a veil over the book.

12.5 – 12 Daniel observes a conversation between two men and the one in linen who is hovering above the waters of the river, concerning the time scale of the events shown to Daniel. The answer is very cryptic, but says that God will call time on all things when His purpose is fulfilled. Although a number of days is given, it is unclear as to how this timescale is measured. This is one of the features of such apocalyptic literature, given in symbol and riddle.

12.13 Daniel’s vision is at an end, and he is promised his inheritance when all he has seen comes to pass.

Day 268

The Returned Exiles Face Opposition

Ezra 4.6 – 6.13

Ezra 4.6 The reference to Ahasuerus (Xerxes) here is a problematical one. If Ezra is writing continuous narrative, the King referred to here as appealed to by the opposition Samaritans is Cambyses, not Ahasuerus. However, if Ezra is referring to other opposition which the Jews experienced from their detractors, this verse would refer to persecution arising in the time of Artaxerxes in 486BC, around the time of Esther.

Some commentators suggest that the name Ahasuerus is used here as a generic title of the Persian kings, not a specific name. However, there is little support for such an assertion. This seems therefore to be an anachronistic insertion by the writer to a later period of persecution which highlights the opposition the people of Israel faced in this era.

Ezra 4.7-16 There is a further anachronism here in the use of the name Artaxerxes for the king of Persia appealed to at this point. Cambyses was displaced on the throne by a pretender, Pseudo-Smerdis, who would be the King appealed to now, since Artaxerxes is much later. It may well be that the writer is using generic Persian names of Kings to move the narrative forward and to recount the persecution the people were receiving.

A letter is sent to the King complaining about the re-establishment of Jerusalem by Cyrus. (From this point (Ezra 4.8) until chapter 6.18, the book of Ezra changes from Hebrew to the Aramaic language of the ruler.) The appellants claim that Jerusalem will just be a hive of rebellion, as in the past, which, if the king researches in the archives, he will not want to continue to be built.

4.17 – 24 The reply is a blow to the Jews, since it orders a stop to the construction of the Temple on the basis of what the King has been told. The reconstruction is then halted until around 522BC, in the reign of Darius.

5.1- 5 Darius removes Pseudo-Smerdis the Pretender from the throne, and establishes a new regime. At this point, the Lord raises up prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage the rebuilding of the Temple to continue; Zerubbabel and Jeshua act upon these prophetic words and the work recommences, despite opposition from the governor, Tattenai. The work continues pending written instructions from King Darius; the Lord gives them a window of opportunity.

5.6 – 17 The letter sent by Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai to Darius is enlightening, because it reveals the interaction between the Jews and the governor. The Temple reconstruction is making rapid progress. In answer to the question about the source of their authority for rebuilding, the Jews tell the story, which starts, ‘we are the servants of the God of heaven and earth’ – they are clear of their God and of their mission. They refer to Cyrus’ decree – who was a legitimate ruler of the Persians, unlike Smerdis, Darius’ predecessor – which has given permission and support to the Temple rebuilding by Zerubbabel, called here Sheshbazzar, and his associates.

Tattenai is questioning whether this decree exists, and asks for further searches of the archives to resolve the matter.

Ez.6.1 – 12 On Darius’ command, a search of the archives is made, and Cyrus’ original decree comes to light, confirming the permission for the rebuilding. On the basis of this, Darius warns Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai to stop hindering the Jews in their work, rather they are to see that the Jews receive the royal funding needed to complete the work! He lays on the Jews, however, to pray for the King’s wellbeing – Darius sees this as an opportunity to keep in with whatever god is in his empire! This is in keeping with the Persian multifaith culture promoted in their territories.

A severe penalty is also attached to the contravention of this order; the Jews have the full backing of the law. The governor has no choice but to comply.

Day 269

Haggai and Zechariah prophesy

Haggai 1.1 – 2.9; Zechariah 1.1 – 6; Haggai 2. 10 - 23

In 522BC, Darius Hystaspes I comes to the throne, and two years later, the word of the Lord comes to both Haggai and Zechariah, to urge the people to action and to build the Temple of the Lord; it is completed four years later, in 516BC.

This prophet's name means *my feast*, (Heb חַגַּי *Chaggai*) but we know little else about him. We know that he was recognised as a prophet and that the governor and the high priest listened to him, as he worked in harness with Zechariah, his younger colleague.

Hag.1.1 – 11 The people have been set free to return to the land, but they have been discouraged and now they have privatised their faith (1;2) - they are treating the communal aspect as unimportant, looking to their own homes and comfort .

Their concerns are all with their own survival,(1.6) which is actually in peril without God. When one puts private concerns before the Kingdom of God, one ends up with a bag with holes.

Action is needed; (1;7) they need to go up and bring the material down for the continued rebuilding.

Hag. 1.12 – 15 The fear of the Lord leads them to obey. They rise in the power of the Spirit, because their spirits are stirred. This is not just a good idea, this is something God is doing within their midst. They need the Lord's courage, given the opposition they are facing.

Hag.2.1-9 Perhaps there is some discouragement among the people about the situation in which they are building this new Temple; they are still under the rule of foreigners, not able to freely order their own nation. Perhaps some of the old men and women who remember the former temple are complaining that 'it isn't like the good old days' or 'it's a shadow of what it used to be.' The Lord speaks again to Haggai, to encourage the leaders that whatever is being said, the Lord's is with them, and His Spirit is empowering them to work.

The promise is that however the physical appearance of the house they are building might turn out, someone is coming who will transfigure it into a place of glory – the best is yet to come. One called the *Delight of All Nations* (2.7 Heb כֹּל-הַגּוֹיִם חֶמְדַּת חַיִּים *Chemdat kol ha-goyim*) will come, one who will carry forward the Lord's planetary purpose to embrace all the world and reconcile them to the Creator. He will come to this Temple, and will transcend any earthly beauty or glory. For Christian believers, this is a clear pointing to the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who will be found in the Temple's precincts in days to come, the one who will be the prince of Peace (2.9),

Zech 1.1 – 6 The younger prophet brings a message the following month. Zechariah (Heb זְכַרְיָהוּ *Zechar-yah*, meaning, 'The Lord remembered') urges the people not to be wayward like their forefathers, who resisted the Lord, and disappeared off the map of history. He calls them to turn from evil and iniquity, which they respond to and do.

Hag.2. 10 – 19 Through Haggai, the Lord draws attention to the people's lifestyles. While holiness is not transmissible, unholiness is contagious, and personal sin infects the communal. But, although they have not seen fruitfulness in the land since they returned, because they have not given attention to the Lord's house, now, the Lord intends to bless

them and make them holy, wholly His.

Hag.2.20 – 23 In these closing words of Haggai's short message to his people, there is an apocalyptic turn; the prophet's eyes are lifted beyond the immediate to coming cataclysmic events across empires and nations, a time of widespread strife and upheaval. But Zerubbabel (or perhaps, Zerubbabel as a symbol of his descendants) will be a signet (Heb חֹתָם *chotam*, from *chatam* to seal or close,) on the Lord's hand, the instrument of the fulfilment of the Lord's purpose in the earth.

Day 270

Zechariah's Eight Visions

Zechariah 1.7 – 6.15

Zechariah follows on from Haggai's prophetic insight, with words of encouragement for contemporary Jerusalem which is now being rebuilt.

Zech. 1.7 -17 Zechariah receives a vision of horsemen standing among myrtle trees; they are those who go through the earth to report back to the Lord on the state of the earth. The import of this message is that the Lord intends to see through the completion of the rebuilding of Jerusalem, while bringing correction to the nations who are lording it over her. The Lord says He is jealous for Jerusalem, to see her wellbeing.

Zech. 1. 18 – 21 Horns are a symbol of power and authority. Zechariah here sees a representation of those powers which overcame Israel, but the promise is that those powers will themselves be overcome by the Lord.

Zech. 2.1 – 13 In the third vision, there is a promise that Jerusalem will be guarded by the Lord Himself, even though it may not yet have walls. The Lord draws back the scattered people, to populate the 'holy land', and He will live among them.

Zech. 3.1 – 10 Zechariah sees the high priest standing before the Lord, who repels satan, his attacker, and exchanges his polluted clothing for clean linen. The promise is made of his priesthood enduring if he will walk before the Lord.

The vision continues with the Lord promising that His servant, 'the Branch' (Heb צֶמַח *tzemach*) will come – that is, one who is a new shoot out of the stock, new life from the old. A memorial stone is established as a witness to this, with seven eyes upon it, the sign of God's completion. Sin will be removed, and prosperity will ensue.

Zech.4. 1- 14 In a vision of the lampstand, the *menorah* of the Temple, the symbol also of the nation of Israel, Zechariah sees a constant supply flowing from olive trees beside the lamps. This is a promise of the Holy Spirit's constant supply to God's people, to enable them to complete the work of the Temple which the Lord has called them to. It will not be by their own power and effort, but by the Spirit of the Lord that this happens.

There is a call not to rubbish small beginnings of the work, because the Lord is supplying the nation's hopes through the anointed ones, the king and the priest, whom He has put in place.

Zech.5. 1- 4 Zechariah has a vision of a recorded curse against all evildoers in the land, hovering in the sky. The Lord will not tolerate sin in the land.

Zech. 5.5-11 The next image is of a great measuring basket, which contains the sin of the people. The sin is symbolised by a woman sitting in the basket, which is then carried away, back to Babylon where evil is still made to be at home.

Zech. 6.1 – 8 The vision of four chariots, horses straining to run with news is an encouraging word that the Lord is bringing peace to the earth at last.

Zech.6.9-15 The vision is given of a crown being placed on the head of the High Priest. This is an indication that the priesthood will become more kingly in the future, especially into the days of the Maccabees ahead, when the priests will lead the people. However, the great heir of this crown will be Jesus Christ Himself, who combines the offices of prophet, priest and king.

Day 271

The Temple Complete

Zechariah 7.1 – 8.23; Ezra 6.14 – 22

Zech. 7.1 – 10 There is always a great temptation on the part of God's people to substitute religious formalism for true Godliness. The people of Bethel are enquiring if they should continue the practice of fasting in the fifth and seventh months, perhaps in repentance and a looking for the re-establishment of the Temple. Now that the Temple is going up, is that really necessary.

Zechariah reminds them of the words spoken to previous generations, before the fall of Jerusalem and exile, that instead of focussing on religious rituals and formalities, they should act with a true right-wising justice which brings God's order (Heb מִשְׁפָּט אֱמֶת *mishpat-emet*), with self-sacrificial obligation to the covenant (Heb חֶסֶד *chesed*) and with gut-level compassion (Heb רַחֲמִים *rachamim*), resulting in the lifting of exploitation of the widow and orphan, the immigrant and the poor.

Zech.7.11-14 And yet, their forefathers hardened their hearts and refused to listen, provoking the Lord to anger. The lesson is still to be learned and listened to, therefore, by the present day returnees to the land.

Zech. 8.1 – 8 The Lord speaks again of his jealousy, his passion to see Jerusalem restored and prosperous again, with old and young enjoying life. This may seem a pipe-dream at the moment, given the hard work going on in the Temple, but it will become a reality, as the Lord calls back His people from across the nations.

Zech.8.9 – 13 A new season is coming in Jerusalem, not as the previous one, when there was great fear and hardship in the original establishment of the nation, but a time of security and fruitfulness, and the fulfilment of the Lord's intention that His people should be the vehicle of His restoration and reconciliation for the world.

Zech.8.14- 23 As the people live in new honesty, transparency and love with one another, so the Lord will be the guarantor of a new era of peace for the once troubled land. Fasts will turn into feasts, and Jerusalem will become a place of pilgrimage for the nations. The Jews, instead of being outcasts, will become celebrities, sought after and known for the presence of God in their midst.

Ezra 6.14 – 22 With the encouragement, then, of Haggai and Zechariah, the work on the Temple is completed around 516BC, with great sacrifice and celebration. The priesthood is restored, in accordance with *Torah*, and once again the great commemoration of Passover is held on the fourteenth day of Nisan, the first calendar month. They spend the seven days of the feast in great joy, because of the change of heart of the regime towards them, letting them rebuild the Lord's house.

Day 272

A Psalm of Waywardness

Psalm 78

This is an instructive Psalm, as its opening words suggests – 'listen to my teaching', in Hebrew, listen to my *Torah* (Heb הַוְּרָה) It is ascribed to Asaph.

The singer sings of the faithfulness of the Lord and the faithlessness of Israel. Despite the Lord's careful provision for the generations of His people, they break his covenant. He does wonders and miracles for them, yet they doubt His ability to provide for them in the desert. When He sends them food, their sin causes His anger to rise against them.

The singer recalls the days of the judges, when God would deliver them, yet they were not faithful to Him, resorting to idolatry, leading to the Lord's rejection of them, and His quitting the tabernacle.

Lastly, there is the great division of the kingdoms; the Lord rejects northern Israel, also called here Ephraim, but resides amidst the people of Judah, in the Temple. The reference to David, at the end of the Psalm, is to the promise to the descendants of the shepherd-king who have been given to be shepherds before the Lord of His people.