**Biblical Theology**

Lesson 10 – A Restored Nation (Ezra & Nehemiah // Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)

1. The exile had a profound effect upon the Hebrews. They found themselves in a new environment. Hebrew names are changed to Babylonian names (Daniel🡪Belteshazzar in Daniel 1:7), the Jewish months take on Babylonian names, and Aramaic rises to prominence as the language of the day. This last change is evidenced by the fact that portions of Daniel and Ezra are written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew (Daniel 2:4-7:28; Ezra 4:8-6:18, 7:12-26). Religiously, the focus of the Jews became less on studying God’s law academically and more on doing God’s law as an expression of doing His will. In other words, obedience replaces academics or flat-out rejection. The rise of “Judaism” as distinct from the Old Testament occurs during this time period and the Jews have to learn how they can be a faithful people in the midst of a pagan land. What is permissible to adapt to in the new culture and what is not permissible? So, there is a tension during the exile between religious isolation and cultural interaction.
2. Though exiled by Babylon, the Babylonian empire is overthrown, and the Persian empire becomes the dominant superpower. This was prophesied in Daniel 2 in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and is recorded in Daniel 5. This event occurred around 539 B.C.
3. In 538 B.C., Cyrus decreed that all captive peoples could return to their homes. Cyrus’ purpose was to garner a favorable disposition from his subjects so as to not give cause for any rebellions or uprising. But in this event, the Jewish people saw this decree as God fulfilling His word of the remnant being restored. This is recorded in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 as well as Ezra 1:1-4. It had been prophesied by the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 44:28 some 300 years earlier. And Daniel who is never recorded as going back to Jerusalem is said to have prospered under the reigns of the Persian kings Darius and Cyrus (Daniel 6:28).
4. Scripturally speaking, the return from exile is recorded in the Old Testament in 2 distinct ways. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah talk about the return from a historical perspective, while the books of Haggai and Zechariah view the return from a prophetic perspective.
5. The first wave of exiles returns to Judah under the leadership of Sheshbazzar who is called the prince of Judah (Ezra 1:8). With them not only goes a great amount of gold, but also the furniture of the Temple that had been captured by Nebuchadnezzar and placed in the temples of foreign gods is returned to Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:7). In addition to the great wealth and Temple vessels, the people returning include the heads of the house of Judah and Benjamin (Southern Kingdom) as well as priests and Levites.
6. The total number who return is approximately 42,000 (Ezra 2:64) so it is a very small number when you think that during Solomon’s reign they could not be numbered because they were like the sand on the seashore. When they get there, they offer freewill offerings to God in Jerusalem and also contribute out of their great wealth for the Herculean task of rebuilding the Temple of God (Ezra 2:68-69).
7. 7 months after the return, the people begin to rebuild the altar under the leadership of Joshua the priest and Zerubbabel, a descendent of David, and after the altar is rebuilt they celebrate the Feasts of Booths/Tabernacles which commemorated the time of the Israelites in the wilderness (Ezra 3). Ezra points out that everything is done according to the Law of Moses which means they still had access to the books of Moses in order to know how to rebuilt the altar as well as how to perform the sacrifices and how to properly observe the Feast of Booths. Yet, Ezra 3:6 notes that the foundation of the Temple was not yet laid, so the rest of that chapter details the building of the foundation of the Temple. And there is a mixture of great joy and sadness – joy because this is a significant step to building back the proper worship of Yahweh; sadness because this new Temple is going to pale in comparison to the Temple in the days of Solomon (Ezra 3:11-13). This can be seen when you compare the sacrifices at the dedication of Solomon’s Temple (1 Kgs 8:63) with that of the rebuilt Temple (Ezra 6:17): 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep vs. 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and 12 goats.
8. The book of Haggai recounts the prophet Haggai encouraging the people and building up their morale to get busy working on the Temple. The rebuilding project was opposed by people who had been resettled into the land of Judah from other nations as well as other Gentiles (Ezra 4). 16 years pass by and nothing is further done to the foundation of the Temple. The people are living relatively comfortable in their own houses while the house of the Lord is neglected (Haggai 1:4). Eugene Merrill writes, “Within 3 weeks Zerubbabel and Joshua had marshaled a labor force to set about the work with renewed enthusiasm.” Even though the new Temple will be a shadow of its former glory (Haggai 2:3), that does not matter because Yahweh promises to fill the new Temple with His glory once more as it was in the days of old and because of the glory of God in it, the glory of the new Temple will surpass the glory of the former Temple (Haggai 2:6-9).
9. Zechariah begins to prophesy to Judah 2 months after Haggai. In addition to needing the right structures in place for the right worship of God according to the Law of Moses, the people needed repentant hearts and a renewed covenant with Yahweh (Zech 1:2-6).
10. Zechariah also receives a series of night visions. In the 1st vision, the message is God’s sovereignty over the nations (Zech 1:7-17) while visions 2 and 3 show that there will be opposition from the Gentile nations, but Judah will be protected by God (Zech 1:18-21; 2:1-13). The other visions detail that God will cause the work to be successful (“Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts” – Zech 4:6), sin within the community must be dealt with (Zech 5:1-11), and God will accomplish His purpose (Zech 6:1-8).
11. Encouragement is also given to the people through Zechariah in that in the final section of Zechariah (chapters 9-14), a true king will king who will enter Jerusalem on a donkey and begin judging the nations and this true king will be a good shepherd instead of a false shepherd and He will restore the people of God from exile and God’s kingdom will triumph over all other kingdoms. In light of that coming reality, the Judahites are encouraged to rebuild the Temple and be ready for this coming king.
12. The temple was completed in 515 B.C. which is the 6th year of the reign of Darius and 25 years after its foundations were laid (Ezra 6:15). This marks the end of the 70 years of exile from the book of Jeremiah and the vision of Daniel. Dillard and Longman say in their introduction to the Old Testament that “at the end of the book of Ezra, we have a holy people dwelling in a holy city.” The book of Esther comes in at this point to speak to those exiles who remained in other lands that God is sovereign over other nations and will protect His remnant even in foreign lands.
13. Due to problems internally and externally in restoring the city, Nehemiah arrives in Judah in 445 B.C. The problem Nehemiah tries to address is the wall surrounding the city of Jerusalem. Though the Temple as been rebuilt, the city surrounding the Temple is still in ruins. Nehemiah displays many leadership qualities and shrewdness in dealing with those opposed to the rebuilding of Jerusalem so that after 52 days, the walls were completed (Neh 6:15) and great fear falls upon the nations because they recognize the handiwork of God in this restoration project (Neh 6:16). The people attend to the reading of the Torah and again celebrate the Feast of Booths (Neh 8), then they reaffirm the Mosaic covenant (Neh 9-10). In all of this, Nehemiah sees the promise of God given to Moses at work as seen in Nehemiah 1:8-9.
14. Malachi prophesied at some point while Nehemiah and Ezra were away from Jerusalem (either 480-470 B.C. or 433 B.C.). He is prophesying to the second generation of exiles after the rebuilding of the Temple as they have grown lax in their attitude toward worship and God. They offered maimed and diseased animals to the Lord, thus revealing their hypocrisy (Mal 1:6-14). The priests have corrupted the teaching of the Law of God (Mal 2:8) and the people have been unfaithful in their marriages through divorce (Mal 2:10-16) and they rob God in not bringing their tithes and offerings (Mal 3:6-12). Despite the punishment of the exile and the great joy of the restoration, God’s people fall back into the same sinful patterns of their ancestors. Malachi ends with prophesying about the great Day of the Lord wherein the Messiah will purge the evil from among His people and purify a remnant to walk before Him in truth (Mal 4) and he notes a time frame for this coming of the Messiah by saying that the Lord will send Elijah the prophet to the people before the great and awesome day comes (Mal 4:5).
15. Considered as part of the storyline of Scripture, additional insight is given into these verses and books of Scripture.
    1. The Wealth of the Nations. The Hebrews plundered the Egyptians in the Exodus and brought out with them much wealth. The wealth of the nations was used to build the Temple under the reign of Solomon. The Queen of Sheba brought much wealth to Solomon because of his wisdom, and the fame and glory of his kingdom. Now the resources of Persia are going to be used to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.
    2. The Temple of the Lord. The house of the Lord symbolized His presence and a restoration of God’s presence dwelling among His people. This anticipates the true Temple which is Jesus Christ (John 1:14; 2:19-21; Rev 21:22) who builds up the church as a temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph 2:19-22). The church is being built up as a dwelling place for God just as the Temple was being rebuilt after the exile as a dwelling place for God. This is accomplished because the Lord repeatedly tells His people that He is with them (Haggai 1:13, 2:4) even as Jesus is called Immanuel (“God with us”) and He tells us that He is with us always (Matt. 28:20) by the indwelling of the Spirit of God (Rom 8:9-10; 1 Cor 3:16).
    3. The Davidic descendent. Yahweh says to Zerubbabel in Haggai 2, “On that day, declares the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel and make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares the Lord of hosts.” A signet ring represented kingly authority, so even though Zerubbabel is only a governor, Yahweh is saying that kingship will be restored and the line of David will be restored to the throne because Zerubbabel is a descendant of David. Matthew’s genealogy says, “And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel…” (1:12). Zerubbabel in the OT becomes a picture of the future Messiah and King from the line of David, Jesus Christ.  
       Zechariah prophesies about the Branch as the servant of God that God will bring forth (Zech 3:8) and shall build the temple of the Lord (Zech 6:12) and sit on that throne as both priest and king (Zech 6:13) which is exactly what Jesus does through building His church (Matt 16:18) and is seated now on the throne as our priest and king.
    4. Elijah the prophet. The Gospel of Mark opens with a quote from Malachi 3:1 which says, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me” (Mk 1:2). Malachi 4 identifies this messenger as Elijah. Mark identifies this messenger as John the Baptist and so does Jesus in Matthew 11:10 (compare Luke 7:27) and Jesus goes on to say that John the Baptist is Elijah in Matthew 11:14 meaning that John the Baptist was a prophet and the last of the OT prophets who came in the spirit of Elijah calling for the people of God to repent. If John the Baptist is Elijah as the messenger coming, then implicitly that means Jesus identifies His coming as kickstarting the great and awesome day of the Lord.
    5. Abrahamic promises. Israel is hardly a blessing to the nation; the people are depleted, but not completely defeated; the Temple is a shadow of its former self as well as the city of Jerusalem; and the land boundaries are only a portion of its former grandeur and there is no Davidic king on the throne as they are still under Persian rule. But there still exists the promises of God and tokens of His grace to give His people hope and encouragement for the future.
16. Willem VanGemeren states, “The era of restoration is both climactic and transitory. It is climactic because it brings upon the 12 tribes the fullness of God’s wrath and judgment. The period is also transitional, though, because judgment and alienation mark the road that leads from Babylon to Bethlehem!”
17. Matthew Harmon writes, “As the OT draws to a close, the people are back in the land. But it is evident to everyone that God’s promises of restoration through a new covenant inaugurated by a Davidic descendant remain unfulfilled.” Tim Chester puts it this way, “In one sense the exile was over, but the kingdom of God had not been re-established.”
18. The rebuilding of the Temple, the city of Jerusalem, and the people of God all point forward to the greater Temple, Jesus Christ, who is building the people of God up into a living Temple who will ultimately dwell in the New Jerusalem and rule over the nations with God as their King.