

THE RETURN FROM BABYLON

“In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom—in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.” Daniel 9:1-2

The people of the northern kingdom of Israel were overrun by the Assyrians and taken into exile in 722 BC. The people of the southern kingdom of Judah were overrun by the Babylonians in 587 BC and taken to Babylon. The northern tribes who were taken by Assyria seem largely to have been swallowed up in exile. There was a return of some of the people of Judah from Babylon, however, in 538 BC. There are a few prophecies which quite clearly foretold this particular restoration from Babylon, and cannot be construed as indicating anything beyond that restoration. They are certainly few in number compared with those which speak of a restoration which is quite clearly too extensive to be easily fitted into the Babylonian return. Despite the fact that they are few, however, those prophecies relating to the return from Babylon are instructive in a number of ways, not least that their very specific nature forms a strong contrast with the others that point much further into the future and remain in many ways enigmatic. In particular we have a remarkable biographical note from Daniel (quoted above) that throws much light on a prophecy from Jeremiah pointing to a return from Babylon.

Daniel’s Revelation from Jeremiah

Daniel had good reason to pay attention to the prophetic word. He experienced at first hand the horror of being taken into exile and watching his nation destroyed, precisely as the prophets had spoken. He was only a boy when he was taken prisoner by the Babylonians, but being a member of the nobility he was immediately taken into exile in Babylon as a hostage. That was in 605 B.C., 19 years before the Babylonians actually destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and sent its population as a whole into exile. Thus from 605 onwards he was to spend the rest of his life in exile and watch a precise fulfillment of the warnings of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. He himself, as far as we know, was not part of the prophetic movement that gave these stern warnings of judgement to Judah though later in life he was to prophesy most powerfully about the Jewish nation. But he was undoubtedly very much aware of what those earlier prophets had said and were saying. Doubtless as a young boy in Judah he would have been aware of Jeremiah’s ministry, and after his exile and whilst he matured in the Babylonian court he would have observed Jeremiah’s battles with the leaders of Judah. He would also have been aware of the prophecies of Ezekiel who followed him into exile in 596 BC and who began a major prophetic ministry inside Babylon warning what would happen to Jerusalem unless there was repentance. It is obvious from Daniel 9:4-16 that Daniel himself acknowledged that it was the sin of the nation that had brought it into the degradation of exile, and clearly he viewed the events of the exile through the same eyes as the prophets.

It was after he had seen almost 70 years of exile and was well past his 80th year that Daniel first understood from Jeremiah’s prophecies that the exile in Babylon would last 70 years (Dan 9:1-2). It was the year 538BC and would prove to be the year when the Babylonians would themselves be conquered by Darius the Mede (better known as Cyrus). Daniel tells of his study of the writings of Jeremiah (which Jeremiah himself had had collected and written down as part of his battle with Zedekiah, the last king of Judah before its exile) and the revelation that came from his studies. How long he had had those writings, or parts of them, it is, of course impossible to say, but astonishingly it was only at this point in time, about 538 BC, that it seems he realized that Jeremiah had spoken about an end to “the desolation of Jerusalem” after a period of seventy years. It would not have taken him long to further realize that those years were now up! It immediately released intense prayer on behalf of Judah. He felt a huge surge of hope of a restoration.

The prophecy of restoration produced in Daniel passionate intercession

One thing is very obvious; Daniel took the prophecy of restoration very seriously. It could hardly have been otherwise when he had lived with a life time’s experience of the fulfillment of the prophecies about judgement and exile. Restoration would have been a burning, almost unbelievable revelation. This is why it produced passionate prayer. Daniel stands at this point as a supreme example of the kind of prayer that genuine prophetic utterance can produce in the life of someone who clearly grasps such utterances. He also stands as a reminder that when God wants to bring about the fulfillment of prophecy he is sure to set his intercessors praying for such fulfillment.

Jeremiah’s Prophetic Letter

What Daniel had seen in Jeremiah about Judah’s 70 years of exile is not difficult for us to track down. He found it in one of Jeremiah’s letters, written from Jerusalem, where he had been allowed to stay, addressed to those who had been deported to Babylon when the city was finally captured and destroyed in 587. The substance of what Jeremiah wrote is preserved for us in Jeremiah 29, and in the main it is an exhortation to the exiles to settle down in Babylon: *“This is what the*

LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." (Jer 29:4-7). This word held out the hope of eventual prosperity for the Jews. However, God had also revealed to Jeremiah more specifically that Babylon's resurgence as a world power would run for 70 years, and that restoration of the Jews would come after that period of time. Jeremiah told the exiles of this later in his letter: "This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jer 29:10-11).

So the word was very clear: after seventy years God would bring the people of Judah back home. It was this clear statement of Jeremiah's that Daniel came to appreciate towards the end of those seventy years. Doubtless he was also struck by the sentences which followed: *Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."* Jer 29:12-14. Daniel responded to these words by seeking the LORD with all his heart, pleading "in prayer and petition, in fasting and in sackcloth and ashes". (Dan 9:3). How many others were praying in similar fashion at that time we do not know, but doubtless many were. Thus the return took place in the context of outpoured intercession.

"Cyrus will rebuild my city and set my exiles free"

A Revelation from Isaiah

Jeremiah was not the only prophet who spoke directly about a return from Babylon. Isaiah also stated very clearly that such an event would happen: "I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the LORD Almighty." (Is. 45:13). He not only said the city would be rebuilt and the exiles freed but gave those events a date – it would happen under Cyrus the Persian. He also said it would happen "freely" – an act of grace; they would not have to buy their freedom.

The complete sovereignty of God in these huge political movements among the nations is strongly emphasized in Isaiah. Is. 45:1 reveals the LORD even speaking of Cyrus as his "anointed one" in the sense that he was taken hold of by God to do a work that God wanted doing, namely the restoration of his people. It was God who took hold of the "right hand" of Cyrus, who "subdued the nations before him" and gave him their riches "for the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen" (45:1-4).

And, of course, the restoration did take place through the decree of Cyrus: "In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing" Ezra 1:1

Doubtless many of the prophetic descriptions of the people of God being restored could easily and happily be applied to this return from Babylon, even if there is not the precise indication in them that they do apply to that episode, and even if they do have very strong indication of a greater return. This appears to be very much the case in Zechariah 8. Zechariah prophesied to the Jews after their return from Babylon, having been sent by God to encourage those who had returned to be diligent and positive about rebuilding Jerusalem. His cry was, "Let your hands be strong so that the Temple may be built" (8:9) He backed up this exhortation with sentiments which were very reminiscent of the pre-exilic prophets, for example, "This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with cane in hand because of his age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there." (8:4-5); "This is what the LORD Almighty says: "I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God." This is what the LORD Almighty says: "You who now hear these words spoken by the prophets who were there when the foundation was laid for the house of the LORD Almighty, let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built" (8:7-8). This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Just as I had determined to bring disaster upon you and showed no pity when your fathers angered me," says the LORD Almighty, "so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid" (8:14-15). This kind of language and sentiment is very much part of those prophecies which seem to have much larger and more long term implications, but were none the less evidently relevant to stirring up the Jews after the Babylonian exile. **There is always a versatility and power in prophecy to address immediate concerns even when its main import still lies in the future. We have yet much to learn about the nature and purpose of prophesy in this connection.**

Another example of this would be Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones coming once again to life (Ez.37), where, though it seems clearly to indicate a much greater restoration event, there is much that could be very meaningful even to a Babylonian return (which was certainly a coming out of their graves).

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