

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi

Jeremiah had prophesied 70 years of captivity for the Jews. The captivity began ca. 606-605 BC, and for about the next 70 years, God's people would be exiled in Babylon because of their sins.

The Babylonian empire was overtaken by the Medo-Persians. When Cyrus became king, he issued a declaration of restoration for the Jews that would free them up to return to Jerusalem and start rebuilding what they had lost. This decree from Cyrus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy some many years earlier (Isa 44:26-45:1). The return to Jerusalem started ca. 538-536 BC.

After the temple was rebuilt, the work in Jerusalem was not yet done. More men would help influence the direction of the people under God's care. Here are three significant voices during this time:

Ezra

Ezra the priest returned to Jerusalem in about 458 BC., some 80 years after the initial decree from Cyrus (and just shortly after the time of Esther). Ezra's mission was to reform the spiritual condition of the people, to teach the law of God, and restore proper worship (see 7:10). He is often credited with recording and bringing together much of the Old Testament Scriptures.



Ezra discusses the time of the initial restoration. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, the appointed governor, many of the people returned to Palestine and started rebuilding the temple. Because of opposition, they

stopped building for about 15 years. Under the urging of Haggai and Zechariah, and with the support of Darius the Persian King, they finally finished the temple in about 516 BC.

When Ezra arrived, he found the spiritual condition of the people unacceptable. Many of the priests and leaders had entered into marriages that God had forbidden. They married idolatrous, foreign wives, and were in danger of being right back in the condition they were in before captivity. Under Ezra's leadership, this was remedied, and the people could get back on the right path once again.

Nehemiah

Just a few years after Ezra returned to reform the spiritual condition of the Jews, Nehemiah returned to rebuild the walls of the city (ca. 445-425 BC). Together, Ezra and Nehemiah helped to restore the spiritual and political state of the Jews.

Nehemiah was a cupbearer to the king of Persia. He heard that the walls of

Jerusalem were still laid waste, and this troubled him greatly. As he stood before the king, the king noticed his sadness, and asked what the problem was. Nehemiah prayed to God first, then told the king. The king, Artaxerxes, granted Nehemiah leave to go to Jerusalem and oversee the work of rebuilding the walls of the city. In fact, Nehemiah became governor of the area for a time.

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and saw what was needed. It would be a formidable task, but with God's help, and the willingness of the people to work, they could accomplish the job. They set their minds to the work, though they were opposed. People from the outlying areas ridiculed, mocked, and threatened. Yet Nehemiah kept right on with his work, refusing to let anyone else stop what he was there to accomplish. He told his detractors: "The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem" (2:20). It was this mindset that made the people successful. They finished their work in an astounding 52 days!

Of all the great characteristics of Nehemiah, perhaps the most notable is the fact that he was a man of prayer. His faith in God played a vital role in his accomplishments. That's a lesson we all need to learn.

Malachi

Malachi means "my messenger." He is usually considered to be a contemporary of Nehemiah (ca. 430 BC) because what he describes fits with Nehemiah and the

general post-exilic period. A primary problem that he addresses has to do with the way that worship was being corrupted. The dialogues in the book make it clear that God was not happy with the way they were treating Him. The issue here wasn't idolatry, but rather a failure on their part to worship Him properly, reverently, and according to their best efforts. God's complaint is seen here:

"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is My respect?' says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests who despise My name" (1:6).

They apparently argued with God about this assessment, but they had nothing on which to stand. The priests were not teaching properly, and as a result, "you have caused many to stumble by the instruction" (2:8). They had been breaking their covenants and divorcing their spouses (2:10-16). Their actions were such that they were committing injustices and robbing God (3:8). They needed to repent once again.

God promises to remember those who feared Him. He then ends with an admonition to follow the Law of Moses (4:4) and to wait for the coming of Elijah, who would "restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (4:5-6). The promised Messiah would come.

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