

Chapter 19 – The Return Home

Just as the Assyrian empire had fallen to the Babylonians, the Persians under Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonians about 538 B.C. Cyrus had a different policy toward conquered people groups. He made arrangements for the Judean exiles to return home and rebuild the temple. Cyrus was a polytheist and he figured that he needed to please as many gods as he could, so he wanted temple worship restored in Jerusalem.

Take a look at the timeline right before chapter 1 in your book to clarify the leaders and the timing of the three stages of return from exile.

No longer is God threatening to start over and form a new people from a single faithful family as in the time of Moses. God's faithfulness is being revealed to the remaining descendants of Abraham as a community of sinners who are sometimes faithful to God and unfaithful most of the time. God is revealing the divine character by keeping the promises to the ancestors and by giving God's people another opportunity to own up to their idolatry and return to the God who made them and redeemed them from bondage. In this "new exodus" from exile, God gives them another opportunity to live in the land of promise and worship the God of new beginnings. At some point the designation of the returning people of God shifts from "Judaean" to "Jews," the term that begins to appear in this chapter.

The rebuilding begins with an altar for sacrifice and the observance of the various festivals prescribed in the instructions given to Moses (as well as a "new moon" festival not called for in Torah). The foundation of the temple comes next and then opposition intimidates the people into halting work on the construction of the temple. But the prophets Haggai and Zechariah push them to complete the temple, which they do in 516 B.C.

God had told David that there was no hurry to build a temple (page 128); God had never asked for a temple—a tent was fine with God. Now, however, God's prophets are criticizing the people for building their own houses and not building the temple. What do you think is different during the time of Haggai and Zechariah?

Are there some times when a building for worship is irrelevant and some times when such a building is pleasing to God? How did God's people know what to do in Biblical times? How would God's people know what to do now?

Chapter 20 – The Queen of Beauty and Courage

The story of Esther was written to explain the origins of the late winter festival of Purim.¹ It thus made it into the Bible despite the fact that nowhere in the story is God even mentioned. However, it is a wonderful story of God's working behind the scenes through incredible "coincidences" and through the courage of Esther and Mordecai.

This story is a reminder that during the exile from their land, Jews were scattered throughout the Babylonian empire, especially within Mesopotamia and Egypt. Many never returned to Judea. Babylon itself became a major center of Jewish learning and there were Jewish communities all over the Near East until 1948, when Jews were forced out and had to flee to the new state of Israel.

Note the coincidences and the ironic humor in this story.

This story is something of an embarrassment both to Jews and Christians today because it condones the violent revenge that God's people take against those who had planned to harm them. Does this strike you as a problem? Why or why not?

Chapter 21 – Rebuilding the Walls

Ezra was both a scribe (scholar) and a priest. He is credited (page 247) with bringing "The Book of the Law of Moses" from Babylon where the various written materials that were salvaged from the flames of Solomon's temple had been carefully organized and edited into something very closely resembling our present Genesis – Deuteronomy. Because these materials were arranged into five documents, Christians sometimes call them the "Pentateuch." The Hebrew word for the collection is Torah, which means "teaching" or "instruction."

Nehemiah was not a priest or prophet. He is an example of a devout lay leader who used his gifts and passion in the service of God's people. City walls were necessary to keep out desert raiders and wild animals as well as to prevent merchants from entering the city on the Sabbath. Nehemiah applied his determination and resourcefulness to the task of leading the people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

¹ Purim is Hebrew for "lots." Lots were something like dice and were used not only for games, but also for making decisions that could be regarded as unbiased chance, or could be attributed to God or gods, who were believed to cause the lots to fall a certain way.

This chapter, and the Old Testament portion of THE STORY closes with the prophecies of Malachi, whose writings mark the end of the Old Testament in Christian Bibles. Unlike the situation faced by Ezra, Malachi is dealing with men who are divorcing their Jewish wives (“the wife of your youth” - page 249). These are Jewish women who are perhaps being rejected in favor of younger, more attractive women. Malachi demands faithfulness to the covenant of marriage, in part for the sake of rearing children in the knowledge of God (“godly offspring”).

The people of God also have a giving problem. Malachi calls this “robbing God,” illustrating again the principle that everything belongs to God and that giving to God is merely returning what was God’s to begin with.

Malachi closes with exhortations to faithfulness to God’s teachings and with the promise that before God comes to judge the earth, Elijah will be sent to call people to reconciliation. The New Testament Gospel of Mark begins with the preaching of John the baptizer, who was believed to be the Elijah figure that God had sent ahead of the Messiah.

Thoughts on Christian maturity

Imagine walking or riding a donkey all the way from Babylon to Jerusalem, camping out until you could build your family a shelter, then setting to work to rebuild the ruined temple and city. And while you are doing it, there are hostile people trying to intimidate you. There must have been many times when Ezra, Nehemiah and the rest of God’s people felt like giving up.

Share a story about a time when you desperately wanted to give up and God gave you the strength to keep doing what you had been called to do.

What would you say to people who teach that being obedient to God will make your life easy?