

## Lesson 20: The Return from Exile (Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)

### Political Changes

Ezekiel provides hope that the fate of the Israelites will not be lost to history, but the question remains: how will they be brought back from exile to the Promised Land? The people are still in exile under the control of an ever-expanding empire that shows no sign of letting the Jewish people return to their land. Even for those who had faith saw no immediate prospect of an imminent return from exile. History, however, as the great work of the all-powerful God, soon turns in favor of the Jewish people.

The Babylonian Empire expanded under the great king Nebuchadnezzar, but his successors had neither his military nor political talent. Within just a few years of his death the Babylonian empire begins to lose strength and within a generation it is conquered by the Medes and Persians (modern day Iran) in 538 BC (70 years after the Babylonian Exile began). Now the Israelites are under the control of the Persian king, Cyrus, who, unlike his Babylonian predecessors, is a just ruler who allows religious and cultural freedom. To the Jews in exile, Cyrus is more than a breath of fresh air – he becomes their liberator. In the first year of his reign over the former Babylonian territory, he issues a decree that allows any Jew who so wishes to return to Jerusalem:

“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel – he is the God who is in Jerusalem; and let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.”<sup>1</sup>

Hence, the Exile is over for those who want to return. Ezekiel’s optimistic prophecies have proven true, at least in part. Yes, Judah will remain under foreign control for the full length of time spoken by the Angel to Daniel, 490 years, first here with the Persians, then it will be ruled by the Greeks, and lastly by the Romans and in this sense they are still experiencing the consequences of their sin and the exile. (This is analogous to baptism in that while we are set free from sin we remain exiles from heaven.) Not only are the people allowed to return, but Cyrus takes responsibility for the rebuilding of the Temple! While Cyrus is not a Jew, he is the means by which Yahweh blesses the people and fulfills His own promise. In fact, elsewhere in the Scriptures Cyrus is called the “Lord’s Anointed,” which is a title never before given to anyone but an Israelite.<sup>2</sup> God’s use of Cyrus, a pagan king, is proof that God is not limited in who or what He uses to bring about His will. This should be a great consolation and cause of peace for us today. God is more powerful than we can imagine if we only surrender to His divine will and allow Him to bring about our salvation through the difficulties and seeming obstacles of life. This first return of Israelites back to Judah and Jerusalem is one of three “returns” to

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra 1:2-4; see also 2 Chronicles 36:22-28

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 44:24, 28-45:1

the Promised Land, each with its own mission and leader, all of which occur from the period 538-427 BC.

### **The First Return**

Sadly, not all those in exile want to return. Only a portion, a remnant, decide to go back to rebuild the burnt out towns of Judah (537-536 BC). While they are allowed to return, they are still under the governorship of a foreign king. In a sense, their return from exile is only partial. It is an act of faith for those who return since most of their former land had been pillaged of its wealth and former glory. What they find upon their return to Jerusalem is a city in ruins. The Temple lies in rubble and the original beauty of the city is gone. The fact that most of the people in exile do not want to return suggests that their hearts are still not fully converted. Their exile continues because they still have not fully put their trust in the Lord.

Those who return have a specific mission: rebuild the Temple and become a holy nation. The leader of the remnant that returns is Zerubbabel, who holds the title of governor of Judah as a vassal under King Cyrus.<sup>3</sup> There are suggestions that Zerubbabel is part of David's bloodline. This is significant since in the context of these events the line of David is still playing a key role in salvation history.<sup>4</sup> There are mixed feelings about the rebuilding of the Temple. Once the foundation is laid there is joy because the Temple is under construction, but there is great sadness because the glory of Solomon's Temple is gone and it is clear that this new Temple will have none of the previous magnificence of Solomon's original.<sup>5</sup> What is especially troubling is the realization that the Ark of the Covenant would not be there, and so the Holy of Holies would be just an empty space. The very *raison d'être* of the Temple is gone.

When the people begin to rebuild the Temple it is interesting to note that they begin first with the altar before they work on the Temple itself.<sup>6</sup> The order of the work might seem a minor point, but it touches on the heart of their and our vocation. The altar comes first because they recognize that worship (*avad*) should come first. That is, work flows from worship and prayer, not the reverse. In the first exodus God asked the people, "Whom do you serve (*avad*)?" Now the people are answering that same question by placing their prayer ahead of other concerns.<sup>7</sup> So, we see that the people are finally beginning to learn what it means to be children of God. Once the altar is built, they begin to work on the Temple and lay the cornerstone.<sup>8</sup> As a sign of continuity with Solomon's temple, the people bring the same vessels from the first temple back from Babylon to Jerusalem. This is the very Temple that Jesus comes to know, and it will survive until its destruction in 70 AD.

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<sup>3</sup> cf. 1 Chronicles 3:16-19

<sup>4</sup> cf. Haggai 1:20-23; Zechariah 4:6-10; Matthew 1:12

<sup>5</sup> Ezra 3:11-13

<sup>6</sup> Ezra 3:1-8

<sup>7</sup> This is true also in the New Testament. Just one example is from Luke (his Gospel and Acts of the Apostles). Seven times Luke speaks about prayer and work and each time he places prayer first.

<sup>8</sup> Ezra 3:10

The rebuilding of the Temple is a slow process that tests the faith and perseverance of the people. There was initial excitement about the work ahead, but as difficulties present themselves, there is less and less enthusiasm. This is typical of human nature – we have a strong tendency to want to be satisfied now, and yet the great successes in life take time. So it is with our own growth in holiness. We must persevere if we want to grow in holiness.

Shortly after work on the Temple begins “adversaries” try to get involved in the work.<sup>9</sup> These adversaries are Samaritans from the territory of former northern tribes taken in the Assyrian exile. The Samaritans recognize Yahweh as one of many gods and try to involve themselves in the building of the Temple. This might sound like a good thing, but the remnant knows their history too well to think that they can intermingle with pagans and expect to remain faithful to the law. Prudently, these Israelites refuse to interact with the Samaritans. This causes the Samaritans to react with hostility. While they do not wage war, they use diplomatic means to shut down the work on the Temple.<sup>10</sup> The joy and sorrow that was first experienced with the rebuilding of the Temple now turns to despair, and they interpret the new difficulties as a sign to quit. The truth, however, is that it is precisely through difficulties that God stretches us to grow in trust and virtue and become more the children He created us to be. God does not give us success on a silver platter. Obstacles should not be excuses to give up the struggle, but the very things that propel us to greater heights of perfection. In a sense, obstacles and difficulties are gifts from God – through them we become more than we could otherwise.

Unfortunately, in the face of the Samaritan opposition the work on the Temple stops.<sup>11</sup> It stops for some sixteen years until God sends two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who encourage the people to continue their work and trust in the Lord. Haggai says, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: This people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord...Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?...Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may appear in my glory, says the Lord. You have looked for much, and lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while you busy yourselves each with his own house.”<sup>12</sup> This sentiment is echoed in the Gospel, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.”<sup>13</sup>

The people had refrained from the serious sin of pagan idolatry, but they had become complacent in their attitude toward Yahweh. While the rebuilding of the Temple stood idle, they built homes for themselves and concerned themselves with their own well-being. Haggai says, “Enough, it is time to put first things first and get back to the work of the Lord.” He encourages them to be bold in faith and trust and that the Lord would be

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<sup>9</sup> Ezra 4:1-7

<sup>10</sup> Ezra 4:6-22

<sup>11</sup> Ezra 4:24

<sup>12</sup> Haggai 1:2-4, 8-9; This is echoed in Matthew 6:19-20, 24-34.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 6:33

with them as He was with the generation of the conquest.<sup>14</sup> In a sense the despair of the Israelites harkens back to the despair of the people at the report of the ten spies back in the Exodus.<sup>15</sup> Despair, the loss of Hope, had crippled their obedience to God, but now the people listen to the prophet and begin to build the Temple again.<sup>16</sup> The Temple is completed and dedicated in 515 BC,<sup>17</sup> and while it does not compare to the original splendor of Solomon's temple, Haggai says, "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts."<sup>18</sup> Jesus confirms this when he says that there is "something greater than Solomon here."<sup>19</sup>

While the Temple is dedicated, it is never consecrated; it is never flooded with the Holy Spirit as at the time of Solomon in the first Book of Kings. So, while it is a place for worship and sacrifice, it does not have the Ark of the Covenant or the presence of God. This is why Mary is sometimes given the title as "Ark of the Covenant" or the "Temple of God," because she will be the next vessel to contain the Spirit of God within her when she becomes the Mother of God and first home of Jesus.

### **The Second Return**

Roughly fifty-eight years after the dedication of the reconstructed Temple (458 BC) a second wave of Israelites returns to Jerusalem. Again it is with support from the pagan king, this time the Persian King Artaxerxes. Inspired by God, the King sends a Jewish priest, Ezra, with the people with the mission to teach them the law of Yahweh.<sup>20</sup> Ezra is a priest but he also has the vocation of a scholar. One might say that he prefigures the teaching orders that exist today within the priestly ministry of the Church. The Scripture says, "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel."<sup>21</sup> As the mission of the first return was to rebuild the Temple, the mission of this return is to draw the people back to the law.<sup>22</sup> King Artaxerxes commissions Ezra to lead the Jewish people back to the ways of their God: "And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of God; and those who do not know them, you shall teach. Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed upon him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Haggai 2:4-5; see Joshua 1:6-7, 9, 18; 23:6; 24:14

<sup>15</sup> Numbers 12-14

<sup>16</sup> Haggai 1:14

<sup>17</sup> Ezra 6:15-16

<sup>18</sup> Haggai 2:9

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 12:42; Luke 11:31

<sup>20</sup> Ezra 7:1-10

<sup>21</sup> Ezra 7:10

<sup>22</sup> Christian tradition links Ezra to Jesus. Just as Ezra instructs the people in the law, Jesus teaches the law and brings it to fulfillment (cf. Matthew 5:17).

<sup>23</sup> Ezra 7:25-26

As the first step in his instruction of the people in the Law of Moses Ezra reads the Book of Deuteronomy to them.<sup>24</sup> Upon hearing the Word of God the people weep because they recognize that they have not been living up to the law of God and, consequently, are guilty in the eyes of the Lord.<sup>25</sup> This is similar to the scene with Josiah who finds the law, which had been lost, in the Temple and rents his clothes because of the recognition that the people are guilty under the law.<sup>26</sup> In the time of Ezra, there is not so much outright pagan idolatry as a weak complacency that has infected the people with spiritual laziness. The Israelites had been lax in their observance of the law and many of the men had married more than once, or married non-Jewish wives, and failed to offer a tithe or brought diseased or maimed animals as their offering. The intermarriage of Jews with gentiles threatens the identity of the Chosen People and undermines their loyalty to the Lord.<sup>27</sup> Nehemiah recognizes this danger and reforms the habits of the people to distance themselves from gentiles.<sup>28</sup> This is a prudent decision to keep at bay anything that is likely to endanger one's fidelity to the Lord. The prophets Haggai and Malachi (Malachi is the last Old Testament prophet before John the Baptist) acknowledge the sin of the people and exhort them to turn back to the Lord.<sup>29</sup> These Israelites were set free to go back to the Promised Land physically, but they remain enslaved in their own sin. Though they have returned to the Promised Land, they have not returned to the Father in their hearts. They have stopped short. This is why Nehemiah can say, "Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that thou gavest to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves."<sup>30</sup>

And so on the threshold of the city Ezra proclaims a fast.<sup>31</sup> He knows that the new arrival of Israelites need to purify themselves in anticipation of their entrance into Jerusalem and to be worthy to worship in the Temple that they no doubt have been hearing about for years.<sup>32</sup> This is a renewed call for conversion, which is a story that has been lived many times already throughout the Old Testament, but it is the heart of the whole story of salvation: sin, exile, and return (conversion). We will see this theme again throughout the New Testament and perhaps most vividly in the story of the prodigal son: a father has two sons, one of which takes his inheritance and leaves for a life of sin where he squanders the inheritance, but then recognizes his sin and returns to his father asking for mercy, and his father receives him with a joyful heart.<sup>33</sup> This is the story of the Israelites, and it is the story for all of us today. The Father waits for us to return to Him with humble hearts, we need only acknowledge our sin and submit ourselves to His mercy.

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<sup>24</sup> This is a new emphasis. From the time of Solomon up to the fall of Jerusalem, religious activity centered on the Temple liturgy, whereas now the emphasis will be on the law. The law starts to become the priority in the religious life of the Jewish people.

<sup>25</sup> Nehemiah 8:8-9

<sup>26</sup> 2 Kings 22:8-13

<sup>27</sup> The Catechism speaks of the difficulties of mixed marriages, see CCC, #1643.

<sup>28</sup> Nehemiah 13:1-3

<sup>29</sup> Ezra 9:1-5; Nehemiah 5:1-5; 10:32-39; Haggai 2:14; Malachi 2:10-13; 3:8-10

<sup>30</sup> Nehemiah 9:36

<sup>31</sup> Ezra 8:21

<sup>32</sup> The Church emphasizes both the purity of Christ's sacrifice as a sinless man, but also the need for the faithful to purify themselves before participating the worship of the Father (see CCC, ##1330, 1350, 2643).

<sup>33</sup> Luke 15:11-32

### **The Third Return**

The third and final return of the Israelites to Jerusalem occurs in 445 BC, thirteen years after Ezra's return. The leader this time is Nehemiah whose mission is to restore the walls of Jerusalem and to restore the people to fidelity.<sup>34</sup> While the walls of the city are completed in just fifty-two days, renewing the moral and spiritual life of the people will take much longer. Though the reform under Ezra had its effect, once again the people have grown complacent to certain key elements God's law: they have not been faithful to Sabbath, making it a day consecrated to the worship of God and the care of familial relationships and they have not been faithful to God's teaching concerning marriage. The Prophet Malachi is sent by God during the time of Nehemiah to call the people back to fidelity:

And this again you do. You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor at you hand. You ask, "Why does he not?" Because the Lord was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Has not the one God made and sustained for us the spirit of life? And what does he desire? Godly offspring. So take heed to yourselves, and let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I hate divorce say the Lord.<sup>35</sup>

### **Three Ages of the Interior Life**

A loose analogy can be made between the return from exile and the movement within the spiritual life. The spiritual life is not, as many people might think, a drifting from one inspiration to another. Rather, it is a journey, with a beginning and an end. While every person's spiritual life is unique, there is enough commonality to be able to map the path. This is helpful in gauging one's own growth and to have a sense of what areas within the spiritual life need particular attention.

There is a traditional division of the spiritual life into three stages, or what is classically known as "three ages of the interior life." The first, sometimes called the *purgative stage*, is the movement away from serious sin. In the analogy of the Exile, it is the movement out of Babylon back to Jerusalem. In this stage, the individual begins to live the Ten Commandments. He or she begins a conversion to the Father by rejecting serious sin and then venial sin. This might seem like an easy and quick process but with a close examination of conscience it is usually easy to find a variety of sins that affect the soul. The seven capital or deadly sins are a good place to begin the examination of conscience.<sup>36</sup> The first stage of the spiritual life is the battle against sin. Until a person is able to habitually overcome the temptation of serious sin his or her spiritual life will be limited.

The second state is the *illuminative stage*. This is when the will freely and habitually separates itself from venial sin, and the mind is infused with deeper knowledge regarding

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<sup>34</sup> The wall is finished in October, 445 BC (Ezra 6:15).

<sup>35</sup> Malachi 2: 13-16.

<sup>36</sup> For a good summary of different types of sin see CCC, ##1849-1876.

the spiritual life. Keeping with the analogy of the return from exile, it is in an acknowledgment and deep-felt knowledge of the law as the Word of God. Just as Ezra instructed the people in the law and the ways of the Lord, the spiritual life is a drawing more deeply into the wisdom of God so that the soul may be perfected through virtue and spiritual insight.

The final stage, the *unitive stage*, is when the soul is perfectly united to the will of God. Although there might be few people who consistently live this way, it is the very reason God created each one of us and is quite possible to reach with through grace and virtue. God desires to be one with us, and so this is the work of the spiritual life. Like the Israelites, we are called to live according to the law in love, keeping sin at a distance and building a civilization of love that recognizes God as the source and summit of our life.