

A Study of the Captivity in the Major Prophets

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Introduction

The captivity of God's covenant people of the Old Testament is one of the saddest chapters of all history. Never was an obscure race of men so marvelously blessed of God, and never did one squander it all on such an equally grandiose scale. Israel had every imaginable advantage. Its destiny was rooted in God's promises made to the patriarch, Abram, years before Isaac, the father of their ancestral father, Jacob, was even conceived (Gen. 12:2, 7; 13:15-17; 17:8). God would give them a land and be their provider, protector, and preserver. He would vanquish and drive out their enemies before them. Lush Canaan, the land of "milk and honey," filled with vineyards they had not planted and cities they had not built, would be theirs to enjoy. He would give them health, peace, and prosperity unprecedented (Exo. 3:8; 23:20-33; Deu. 4:32-40; 6:1-3; 10-12; 8:6-16; et al.).

All of this was theirs to claim if only they would obey Him and serve Him (Deu. 6:10-19; et al.). But alas, those wretched ingrates were hardly out of sight of their Egyptian slave-hovels before they began murmuring and complaining against God and begging to go back (Exo. 15:23-24; 16:2-3)! He finally could bear their repeated acts of infidelity no more. In the rebellion at Kadesh He decreed that all of the generation who had come out of Egypt, except Joshua and Caleb who had shown themselves faithful, would never enter Canaan, but must perish in the wilderness (Num. 14:26-35). We still marvel at His longsuffering in bringing even the second generation of such an ungrateful and unbelieving people into the land of promise! The tendency to rebel against God and apostatize from His way that is seen in the wilderness wanderers proved to be a trait, which the sons of Jacob never outgrew.

God's first warnings that Israel's apostasy would result in devastation of Canaan and captivity in a strange land were delivered seven centuries before Isaiah issued his warning. They came through Moses in the wilderness:

And if ye will not for all this hearken unto me, but will walk contrary unto me; ...I will bring the land into desolation; and your enemies that dwell therein shall be astonished at it. And you will I scatter among the nations, and I will draw out the sword after you: and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste (Lev. 26:27, 32-33; Deu. 4:27; 28:64; 32:26).¹

Israel proved to be as faithless concerning the warnings of God's retribution for rebellion against His law and consequent apostasy as she was concerning the unprecedented displays of His power and protection. When the Hebrew parents failed to teach their children constantly, as God had prescribed (Deu. 6:4-9, 20-25), the people forgot both God and His law. In the place of parental failure, God sent prophet after prophet to alert the people to their transgressions and corruptions, calling them to repentance: "And Jehovah hath sent unto you all his servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them (but ye have not hearkened, nor inclined your ear to hear)" (Jer. 25:4; note: this is but 1 of 11 such statements made by Jeremiah).

Long before Isaiah, the first of the major prophets, lived, the once-united nation of Israel had sundered into the separate kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Both nations were overrun by enemy nations and scattered into captivity. Each of the four major prophets was related to these captivities. We will study these captivities as they relate to the major prophets under the following topics:

1. Israel's captivity and the major prophets
2. Judah's captivity and the major prophets
3. Causes of the captivity
4. Conditions in the captivity
5. The return of Israel and Judah from captivity
6. Lessons and observations from the captivity experiences.

Israel's Captivity and The Major Prophets

The Captivity Prophesied

The only "major" prophet to live before the fall of Samaria to the Assyrians was Isaiah. God revealed to him when He commissioned him for his prophetic work that the rebellion against Him by His people would continue...

Until cities be waste without inhabitant, and houses without man, and the land become utterly waste, and Jehovah have removed men far away, and the forsaken places be many in the midst of the land (6:11-12).

What a graphic description of the devastation and deportation God would bring upon these people! Although he was a prophet to Judah who lived in Jerusalem, he also cried out against the corruptions in Israel and pronounced God's judgment upon her. God instructed the prophet to name his son "Maher-shalal-hash-baz," which means, "the spoil speedeth, the prey hasteneth." This was symbolic of the swift destruction and looting of Damascus and Samaria by

Assyria, which would be the beginning of Israel's dispersion into captivity (Isa. 8:3–4). He later spoke of Israel's impending calamity again. Of the ungodly citizens of Israel, he asked:

And what will ye do in the day of visitation, and in the desolation which shall come from far? to whom will ye flee for help? and where will ye leave your glory? ...Ho Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, the staff in whose hand is mine indignation! I will send him against a profane nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets (10: 3, 5).

Isaiah made a remarkably specific prophecy to Ahaz, king of Judah, concerning Israel's ultimate fate: "...Within threescore and five years shall Ephraim [Israel] be broken in pieces so that it shall not be a people" (7:8). At least indirectly, this prophecy also relates to Israel's captivity. The crushing blow that God would bring upon Israel through the Assyrians would be as a hailstorm or a flood; she would be trampled underfoot and gobbled up as a ripe fig (Isa. 28:1–4; cf. 10:5–6). The prophet also uses the strong figure of harvesters who gather the corn, the grapes, or the olives, but who leave a few gleanings behind, to depict the overthrow of Israel and the displacement of all but a few stragglers (17:3–6). None can gainsay that Isaiah prophesied the captivity of Israel.

The Prophecies Fulfilled

Isaiah's prophecies concerning the demise of Israel began to be fulfilled in the ever-widening power and sweep of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians came into Israel first under Tiglath-Pileser ("Pul," 2 Kin. 15:19) in about 738 B.C. and exacted a huge tribute from Israel before returning home (v. 20). In this initial subjection there is no indication that captives were taken. A few years later Pekah of Israel conspired with Damascus against Assyria and Tiglath-Pileser returned (733 B.C.). This time he overran all of the northern part of Israel (from Galilee northward) "and he carried them captive to Assyria" (2 Kin. 15:29). In 727 B.C. Tiglath-Pileser died and was succeeded by Shalmeneser. Hoshea, who had killed Pekah and seized his throne, also revolted against Assyria and refused to pay the annual tribute (2 Kin. 17:4). Shalmeneser promptly imprisoned Hoshea and laid siege to Samaria in 725 B.C. He died before Samaria fell and was succeeded by Sargon (cf. Isa. 20:1) who completed the conquest in 722 B.C.² A much fuller exile attended this campaign: "In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria took Samaria, and carried Israel away unto Assyria, and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes" (2 Kin. 17:6; cf. 18:10–12). In the Assyrian annals of Sargon, he recorded the deportation of 27,290 from Samaria alone on this occasion.³ There

was more than one stage of Israel's captivity, even as we shall soon discover there was of Judah's.

I now call attention once more to Isaiah's prophecy that Ephraim would be "broken in pieces" and "shall not be a people" in sixty-five years (7:8). The supposed date for the time of this prophecy is 733 B.C.⁴ The siege and fall of Samaria occurred only eleven years later, as previously indicated. To what, then, was Isaiah referring in his prediction of sixty-five years? While most of the populace was in exile from 722 B.C., Israel was still not utterly broken and had not ceased to be a people. When we project sixty-five years from 733 B.C. we arrive at 669 B.C. At that time God sent Esar-haddon, the Assyrian monarch (2 Kin. 19:37), to Palestine, particularly for the purpose of taking the Judean king, Manasseh, to Babylon as a captive as punishment for his multiplied evils (2 Chr. 33:10-11). It is likely that Esar-haddon also repopulated the largely depopulated area of Israel with immigrants from the East on this journey (Ezra 4:2, 9-10). The introduction of these foreigners to the former territory of Israel spelled its utter and final doom. As these intermarried with the few Israelites left behind, they produced the mongrel Samaritans. The northern kingdom of Israel was shattered to pieces, never to rise again—it was no longer a people! Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled.

Judah's Captivity and The Major Prophets

The Captivity Prophesied

Two of these prophets did all or most of their prophetic work before the captivity of Judah in Babylon began; Isaiah and Jeremiah. Although Isaiah lived over a century before the Judah's captivity, he frequently foretold its coming. Numerous passages apparently have the conquests of Nebuchadnezzar and the captivity of the people in Babylon in view (e.g., 3:25-26; 5:13; 24:1; 32:9-14; 43:14; et al.). While Moses was the first to prophesy captivity as retribution for apostasy, Isaiah was the first to name Babylon as the captor. In Isaiah's rebuke of Hezekiah's arrogant display of all of his treasures to the Babylonian emissaries, he said: "Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in thy house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith Jehovah" (39:6).

Jeremiah lived in the very closing years of the kingdom of Judah and he saw the captivity which he prophesied become a reality. The first thirty-nine chapters of his message relate almost totally to Judah's corruption and to warnings that they would reap subjugation and captivity if they did not repent. He was God's last desperate voice to effect the repentance of Judah and thus prevent the disaster that was looming. Instead of repenting at his message,

the foolish Jews rejected and ridiculed him, accused him of treason, threw him in a miry pit, and sought to kill him.

Lack of space permits reference only to representative portions of Jeremiah's warnings. They begin in the opening chapter in which Jeremiah declared his vision of the "boiling caldron" from the north, which depicted the coming of the Babylonians against Jerusalem (1:13–16). God would bring evil and great destruction upon Judah and Jerusalem from the north (4:5–6; cf. 6:1, 22), Jerusalem would be besieged by a mighty nation of a strange language (5:14–18), and God's people would be scattered among the nations (9:16). These elements are the major theme of his preaching (13:19; 18:16–17; et al.). One of the most forthright prophecies of the captivity is found in the words of Jeremiah to Pashur, the wicked chief officer of the temple who had placed Jeremiah in the stocks:

For thus saith Jehovah, Behold, I will make thee a terror to thyself and to all thy friends; and they shall fall by the sword of their enemies, and thine eyes shall behold it; and I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall carry them captive to Babylon, and shall slay them with the sword. Moreover I will give all the riches of this city...into the hand of their enemies; and they shall make them a prey, and take them, and carry them to Babylon. And thou Pashur, and all that dwell in thy house shall go into captivity; and thou shalt come to Babylon, and there thou shalt die, and there shalt thou be buried, thou, and all thy friends, to whom thou hast prophesied falsely (20:4–6).

The Prophecies Fulfilled

The Assyrian Empire that destroyed Israel in the days of Isaiah was itself vanquished by the ascendant Chaldeans of Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar in 605 B.C in the decisive battle at Carchemish. As there had been more than one stage of deportation of Israel by the Assyrians, so there would be of Judah by the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar first besieged Jerusalem in the reign of Jehoiakim in 606 B.C. Apparently, only a few Jews were taken to Babylon at this time, including perhaps Jehoiakim (2 Chr. 36:6) and certainly some of the royal seed and nobles, among them Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego (Dan. 1:1–7), along with some of the temple vessels (2 Chr. 36:7).

Nebuchadnezzar placed Jehoiachin on the throne in place of his father, Jehoiakim. The new young king displeased Nebuchadnezzar and, after only three months, the Babylonians again laid siege to Jerusalem (2 Kin. 24:8–10). Jehoiachin surrendered, along with his family and servants, and they, along with the richest and most talented citizens, were deported to Babylon — ten thousand in all — in about 598 B.C. (2 Kin. 24:12–16). Among this contingency of captives were Ezekiel (Eze. 1:2) and Shimei, the grandfather of Mordecai (Est. 2:5–6).

Nebuchadnezzar replaced Jehoiachin with Zedekiah, destined to be Israel's last king. When he rebelled against Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar determined to put an end to Judah's rebellion for all time. The Chaldean army once more besieged Jerusalem and it fell in 586 B. C. The city, including the temple and the palaces, was burned and the walls were broken down (2 Kin. 25:8–10). Nebuchadnezzar first executed Zedekiah's sons in the presence of their father, then blinded him before taking him to Babylon in chains (2 Kin. 25:6–7). This fulfilled Ezekiel's prophecy from Babylon against Zedekiah that God would bring the king to Babylon, yet he would not see it (Eze. 12:13). Seventy-three temple and military officers were also executed (2 Kin. 25:18–21) and another group of Jerusalem's citizens was taken into captivity (vv. 11–12, 21b). Jeremiah gives the number of 4,600 that were carried away after the final destruction of Jerusalem over the next few years (Jer. 52:28–30).

Causes of The Captivity

A survey of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel provides far more material than can even be mentioned in this essay concerning the reasons that God gave Israel and Judah into captivity. Both kingdoms had reached the depths of corruption by the time of Isaiah. These may be summarized under four factors:

1. The people forgot God and His law.
2. The people adopted idolatry and all its abominable practices.
3. The people lapsed into the destructive traits of pride, materialism, ingratitude, dishonesty, injustice, drunkenness, and various crimes.
4. The people refused to repent at the preaching of God's prophets. We can offer only a smattering of illustrations of these calamitous causes.

All of these are another stanza of the warnings Moses delivered to Israel in the Wilderness and the plains of Moab (Lev. 26:27, 32–33; Deu. 6:1–9, 16–25).

They Forgot God and His Law

Isaiah began his book with this harsh condemnation:

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for Jehovah hath spoken; I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib; but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider" (1:2–3).

God's judgment against such rebellion is certain: "But the destruction of transgressors and sinners shall be together, and they that forsake Jehovah shall be consumed" (v. 28). Inexcusable ignorance was a factor in their downfall (5:13). The prophet summed up their disobedience in one simple indictment: "Who gave Jacob for a spoil, and Israel to the robbers?

did not Jehovah? he against whom we have sinned, and in whose ways they would not walk, neither were they obedient unto his law” (42:24). Isaiah described this sad condition in several additional passages (e.g., 48:18; 59:12–13; 65:1–2; et al.).

The following denunciation of God’s people by Jeremiah for casting Him and His law aside is unmistakably plain: “Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee: know therefore and see that it is an evil thing and a bitter, that thou hast forsaken Jehovah thy God, and that my fear is not in thee, saith the Lord of hosts” (2:19; cf. 3:20–21; et al.). Between the second and final deportations of Jews to Babylon, Ezekiel explained to the exiles why Jerusalem must be destroyed: “And she hath rebelled against my ordinances... [You] have not walked in my statutes, neither have kept my ordinances, ...therefore thus saith the Lord Jehovah: Behold I, even I, am against thee” (5:6–8).

Even Daniel pointed to this root cause of Israel’s misfortunes in his moving confessional prayer: “Yea, all Israel have transgressed thy law, even turning aside, that they should not obey thy voice: therefore hath the curse been poured out upon us, and the oath that is written in the law of Moses the servant of God; for we have sinned against him” (cf. 9:11; cf. vv. 5–10, 12–15).

They Adopted Idolatry and All of Its Abominable Practices

One reason they became so susceptible to idolatry is that they first forgot God and His holy covenant. The first commandment of the ten was, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exo. 20:3). Moses had warned repeatedly both of the danger that Israel would be infected by the idolatry of her neighbors and of the consequences if they were (Exo. 23:33; 34:15–17; Deu. 7:25; 8:19; et al.). Nevertheless, the religions of the heathen had overwhelmed first Israel, and then Judah. Isaiah cried out against the idolaters of his day: “They shall be turned back, they shall be utterly put to shame, that trust in graven images, that say unto molten images, Ye are out gods” (42:17). He reduced to absurdity the man who would take a piece of wood and use part of it for cooking, another part for warmth, and yet another part for fashioning a god before which he would worship and pray for deliverance. Yet, it never entered the fool’s mind to ask, “Shall I fall down to the stock of a tree?” or, “Is there not a lie in my right hand” (44:14–20; see also 41:21–24, 29; 57:5–8; 65:3–4, 7)?

Despite heroic campaigns to rid Judah of idolatry by the kings Joash, Hezekiah, a finally penitent Manasseh, and Josiah, the nation seemed to be addicted to it beyond reclamation. It

took the drastic measure of national disaster to break its hold. Jeremiah almost began his book by lifting up his voice against it:

And I will utter my judgments against them touching all their wickedness, in that they have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands (1:16).

He declared the direct connection between Jerusalem's devastation and her idolatry:

And many nations shall pass by this city, and they shall say every man to his neighbor, Wherefore hath Jehovah done thus unto this great city? Then they shall answer, Because they forsook the covenant of Jehovah their God, and worshipped other gods, and served them (22:8-9).

The weeping prophet lashed out against the idolatry he saw in God's people dozens of times.

Ezekiel 6:3-4 is representative of several other outcries against the idolatry that had helped precipitate the captivity:

Thus saith the Lord Jehovah to the mountains and to the hills, to the watercourses and to the valleys: Behold, I, even I, will bring a sword upon you, and I will destroy your high places. And your altars shall become desolate, and your sun-images shall be broken; and I will cast down your slain men before your idols.

Even though corruptions and apostasy overtook Israel again after the return from exile, at least they never succumbed to idolatry again.

They Had Lapsed into General Wickedness and Debauchery

Just as forgetting God and His law formed the matrix for widespread idolatry, both of these elements were the seeds from which the general wickedness and debauchery of the people sprang. God's law compelled pure and honorable behavior, but they abandoned that law. On the other hand, the idolatry of the Canaanites was filled with various immoralities, including child sacrifice (Deu. 12:31). Little wonder the children of Jacob became corrupt to the core! It is revealing to notice how thoroughly Isaiah attacks their wickedness in the opening chapter of his book: "Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evil-doers, children that deal corruptly! they have forsaken Jehovah, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are estranged and gone backward" (v. 4). Jerusalem was so corrupt that Isaiah sarcastically called her "Sodom" and "Gomorrhah" (v. 10). He urges his fellow-citizens to wash themselves clean of their evil and replace it with good, because in their present condition they make of the city a harlot, full of murderers (vv. 16-17, 21).

Jeremiah pleaded with his people: “O Jerusalem, wash thy heart from wickedness, that thou mayest be saved. How long shall thine evil thoughts lodge within thee” (Jer. 4:14)? Moral conditions were so rotten in Jerusalem that God challenged the prophet to find just one righteous man:

Run ye to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now, and know, and seek in the broad places thereof, if ye can find a man, if there be any that doeth justly, that seeketh truth; and I will pardon her. And though they say, As Jehovah liveth; surely they swear falsely (5:1-2).

God, through Jeremiah, connected their evil behavior with their idolatry: “Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods that ye have not known, and come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered; that ye may do all these abominations” (7:9- 10)?

Ezekiel declared that the wickedness of his people was greater than that of the heathen (5:6). God told them that when he had returned them to their own land after their captivity they would not be able to forget the judgment they brought unnecessarily upon themselves: “And there shall ye remember your ways, and all your doings, wherein, ye have polluted yourselves; and ye shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for all your evils that ye have committed” (20:43). From these glimpses we must almost say that the depth of debauchery among the descendants of Jacob leading up to their sore punishment was all but indescribable!

They Were Impenitent

God did not suddenly, at their first sign of apostasy, bring His ultimate retribution and chastisement upon Israel. As I indicated in introducing this essay, we must marvel at the long suffering of God for His people of old! He bore with them for centuries, going all the way back to the wilderness wanderings, trying to teach them He meant what he promised and warned about faithfully following His law. Through the period of the judges we see the cycle of apostasy, retribution, repentance, and deliverance repeated several times, but still Israel did not learn. There were various temporary, although at times, sore, judgments brought upon the nation during the reigns of some of the kings. And then there were the prophets He sent (including the ones included in this study, but multiplied others as well), calling for repentance, but, alas, it was not to be found in the nation of adamant hearts!

When God commissioned Isaiah for his work and the prophet volunteered to do it, he was warned as follows: “Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and

shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn again, and be healed” (6:9–10; cf. 42:18–23). (The Christ used this very statement to describe the hard hearts of the religious leaders of God’s people in His own time [Mat. 13:14–15].) Although God had repeatedly reminded Israel of His mighty acts and blessings upon them, yet still He had to say to them: “Thou art obstinate, and thy neck is an iron sinew, and thy brow brass” (48:3–4).

One great passage from Jeremiah will suffice to say what he repeated many times about the abject impenitence of Israel as a whole:

Thus saith Jehovah of hosts, the God of Israel:... This thing I commanded them [your fathers that I brought out of Egypt], saying, Hearken unto my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people; and walk ye in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you. But they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear, but walked in their own counsels and in the stubbornness of the evil heart, and went backward and not forward. Since the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt unto this day, I have sent unto you all my servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them: yet they hearkened not unto me, nor inclined their ear, but made their neck stiff: they did worse than their fathers (7:21–26).

God warned Ezekiel of the kind of reception his message would receive among the sojourners in Babylon:

Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel,... and the children are impudent and stiff-hearted: I do send thee unto them; and thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord Jehovah. And they, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear, (for they are a rebellious house,) yet shall know that there hath been a prophet among them. (2:3–5).

Israel had not changed since the days of Isaiah, more than a century before: “Son of man, thou dwellest in the midst of the rebellious house, that have eyes to see, and see not, that have ears to hear, and hear not; for they are a rebellious house” (12:3). Although not a “major” prophet and, although he was among those who returned from the exile, Zechariah knew well the national character of his people that had brought doom upon them:

But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they might not hear. Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which Jehovah of hosts had sent by his Spirit by the former prophets: therefore there came great wrath from Jehovah of hosts (7:11–12).

They were still possessed of “hardness and impenitent heart” in the time of Paul, which stubbornness would haunt them in the final Judgment (Rom. 2:5).

The four great prophets thus painted a graphic picture of consummate corruption and wickedness in Israel, even less excusable in them than in the

nations because they had the revealed law of God and were the people of God, the very point Paul made in the early chapters of Romans. After listing the abominations of the Gentiles (1:18–32), he then turned to the Jews with the piercing indictment: “Wherefore thou art without excuse...for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest dost practise the same things” (2:1). Moreover, they were the more guilty because they had been “entrusted with the oracles of God” (3:1–2). While it appears that Paul was addressing the proud, self-righteous Jews of his time, he described to a “T” their national attitude and behavior that brought God’s judgment of the captivity upon them!

There can never be a question concerning the reason the calamities occurred that eventuated in the captivity of both Israel and Judah.

Conditions in The Captivity

We have no certain information concerning the way the exiles from Israel behaved in their new homes, nor under what conditions they may have lived. Given their long history of idolatry under an unbroken chain of evil monarchs for 250 years, it is not hard to imagine that many or even most of them adopted the idols of the Assyrians. Likely many of them lost their Hebrew identity by intermarriage, even as many of their brethren did who were allowed to remain in the homeland. Yet, it is certain that some preserved their Hebrew heritage and had found their Judean brethren before the time of the return from captivity (Ezra 2:2).⁵ Indeed, it appears certain that Ezekiel was commissioned to go among the weary exiles of both Israel and Judah, for they were all exiled to the same general area.

In God’s commission to Ezekiel, he is sent “...to the children of Israel, to nations that are rebellious” (Eze. 2:3; emp., DM). To whom could “nations” refer but to both Judah and Israel under the revived name, “Israel,” thus embracing all of the remnant of Jacob’s descendants? Relevant to this reunion theme in Ezekiel’s message is the fact that “Judah” is mentioned only 15 times, while “Israel” is addressed or referred to some 177 times by the prophet. Surely, we are not to conclude that this displaced prophet of Judah is primarily addressing the former ten-tribe nation of Israel in the exile.... Rather, we are to understand the use of “Israel” by Ezekiel to be directed toward the strangers and pilgrims of both Jacobean nations.⁶

Further, in the dramatic object lesson of the two sticks, God revealed beyond doubt His plan once more to make of Israel and Judah one nation during the captivity (37:15–23). The

foregoing passages and their implications are quite sufficient in my mind to account for the fate of the northern Kingdom of Israel in their captivity. Those who expect to find those ten tribes elsewhere look in vain. Thus, the hypotheses that they may have become the Anglo-Saxon race (Armstrongism) or that they may have become the American Indians (Mormonism) are both only wild guesses concocted in order to serve wild and heretical systems of theology.

Ezekiel and Daniel (along with some passages in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther) give us considerable insight into the circumstances of the Judean exiles because they themselves were exiles. As earlier stated, Daniel and his three friends were among the first to arrive in Babylon. They were of royal blood and were kept by Nebuchadnezzar as part of his court in the capital city. They were uncompromisingly loyal to Jehovah, even in the face of great peril, and Daniel rose to a place of great power and influence as God's prophet in a Gentile court. Eight years later, Ezekiel arrived as a part of the second deportation which numbered ten thousand and which settled near Babylon by the River Chebar at Tel-abib (Eze. 1:3; 3:15). It is clear that Ezekiel was at least acquainted with the name and fame of Daniel, if not with him personally (14:14, 20; 28:3).

He began his prophetic work in the fifth year of his captivity (1:2; cir. 593 B.C.). While Daniel and his three faithful friends upheld God's name and honor in Nebuchadnezzar's court, Ezekiel was God's prophet to the disconsolate exiles themselves. We are told little of the physical circumstances of the Jews, but if the "Exile Psalm" (Psa. 137) is any indication, their emotional state was one of depression and sorrow unbounded. Lamentations, Jeremiah's great book of pathos over the disasters that befell his people, gives additional insight to the degree of grief the Jews experienced during the exile period, whether in Babylon or still in Judea. Ezekiel spent the first seven years of his prophetic work telling the people why tragedy overtook them and refuting false hopes that Jerusalem would be spared, and they would soon be restored to their homeland (Eze. 13:8-19).

In a long letter, Jeremiah also rebuked the false prophets in Babylon and countered the false expectations they aroused in the people (Jer. 29:1-32). He told them to settle into a normal routine of life (i.e., building their houses, planting their gardens, and raising their families) because the captivity would be long—seventy years (vv. 4-10). After the destruction of Jerusalem, the overwhelming need of the exiles was a message of hope to offset that unspeakable and unimaginable tragedy. The last half of Ezekiel's book (25-48) was just such a message. While he made mention of the restoration to Palestine even before Jerusalem fell

(11:17), the restoration and revival of Israel was the burden of his message afterward (28:25; 34:11f; 37:1-14, 21; et al.).

The Return of Israel From Captivity

The Return Prophesied

As we have seen, the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah are rife with prophecies of the destruction of Samaria and Jerusalem and the captivity of Israel and Judah if they failed to repent. Likewise, all of the “major prophets” preached hope. This message of hope promised that they would be restored to their beloved Canaan. Moreover, these apply (sometimes by explicit statement) also to the exiles from Israel who mingled with the Jews and returned to Canaan with them (see comments above on God’s commission to Ezekiel).

Isaiah wrote many words of hope which those disheartened captives could (and likely did) read and by which they were surely cheered. The prophecy in which Isaiah named Cyrus, the great Medo-Persian king, is nothing short of amazing and spectacular. Isaiah uttered this oracle during the apex of what appeared to be an invincible Assyrian Empire. He spoke eighty-five years before Nebuchadnezzar secured his Babylonian Empire which would enslave Judah and almost one hundred fifty years before Cyrus would appear and conquer Babylon, thus beginning the Medo-Persian Empire! No man could know the name, much less the place and work of such a one, long before he was conceived or his empire imagined, except God gave the information. What a mighty proof of Isaiah’s inspiration this is! As God’s servant, Cyrus would order the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. He would also open the doors and smooth the rough places for His servant Jacob’s sake (44:28-45:7). His extensive descriptions of the doom of Babylon (13:1-14:27; et al.) relate to the return from captivity in that they would furnish hope to the exiles that the power that bound them would be broken.

Not only did Jeremiah graphically and repeatedly prophesy the captivity, but he also forcefully prophesied the return. He was very specific not only about the return, but about the fact that Israel and Judah together would return (as previously discussed) : “In those days the house of Judah shall walk with the house of Israel, and they shall come together out of the land of the north to the land that I gave for an inheritance unto your fathers” (3:18). He explicitly prophesied that the duration would be seventy years, after which Babylon would be decimated and all Israel would be returned to their homeland (25:10-11; 29:10).⁷ He prophesied the return many other times as well (e.g., 16:14-15; 30:3; 50:1-5; et al.).

While Ezekiel was explicit in his warnings to the exiles that Jerusalem was to be destroyed and the captivity prolonged, he also offered his weary people hope by predicting their eventual release and return:

For in my holy mountain, in the mountain of the height of Israel, saith the Lord Jehovah, there shall **all the house of Israel, all of them**, serve me in the land;...As a sweet savor will I accept you, when I bring you out from the peoples, and gather you out of the countries wherein ye have been scattered; and I will be sanctified in you in the midst of the nations (20:40–41; emph, DM—note again the emphasis by Ezekiel upon the gathering of all Israel, per my previous comments).

The renowned vision of the dry bones was an object lesson designed to teach the revival and restoration of “the whole house of Israel” to their own land (37:1–14; cf. vv. 15–23). Ezekiel, as Isaiah and Jeremiah, made this promise several times (e.g.; 20:34, 38; 28:25–26; 34:13, 27; 36:24; et al.). Through the angel Gabriel God revealed to Daniel that the beginning of the seventy weeks of the famous vision revealed to him would be from the “...commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem.... it shall be built again....” (9:25). To whichever rebuilding decree this referred, it nonetheless plainly declared that Jerusalem was to be rebuilt, which itself is a prophecy that Israel would be returned from captivity.⁸ Daniel was well aware of the prophecy of Jeremiah, which stated that the captivity would last only seventy years (Dan. 9:2; cf. Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10). Each of the major prophets foretold glorious and wonderful days in the future for and through Israel, that involved far more than mere fleshly Israel and her political kingdom and kings (e.g., the coming of Emmanuel, the giving of a new covenant, the building of a new house in Jerusalem that would attract and admit all nations, the setting up of an everlasting kingdom, et al.). All of these and related promises themselves imply the return of the captives from their captivity.

The Return Enacted

None of the major prophets was a part of the return. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and apparently Ezekiel had all died before the decree of Cyrus, which sent the first group of Israelites home (Ezra 1:1; 2:1–2). Since this occurred in the first year of the reign of Cyrus over Babylon and since Daniel was still prophesying in the third year of Cyrus (Dan. 10:1), we know he lived to see the return begin. We are not told why he elected to stay in Babylon, but all of the exiles were given that option (Ezra 1:4). He gives us no information on the return itself.

We must move outside of the four prophets, to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, for information on the return of the people to Canaan. As there had been three groups of exiles, so

there were three distinct groups of returnees, beginning in 536 B.C. The first group, numbering almost 50,000, was led by Zerubbabel, who was charged with rebuilding the temple (Ezra 1:3; 2:64–65). It was no small task to lead this number in a trek of some nine hundred or more miles. Ezra, an influential man in the court of Artaxerxes of Persia, a descendant of Aaron and a scribe in the law, was commissioned and provisioned to take a second group back (7:11–26). This occurred in the seventh year of Artaxerxes, or about 457 B.C. (7:7) and the people numbered near two thousand men (8:1–20). The third and final return of exiles returned under the leadership of Nehemiah, the cupbearer of Artaxerxes, in the twentieth year of the king (444 B.C.; Neh. 2:1). We are not told who or how many may have accompanied him.

Lessons and Observations on The Captivity

God's promises are conditional

Israel was promised the blessing of God only as long as she continued in His law. Their apostasy brought tragedy upon them. His promises have always had an “if clause.” He has never promised, indiscriminately and universally, to provide spiritual blessing to men apart from His own conditions. It is still so. One can enter the kingdom of God **if and only if** he is willing to be born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). Christ is the author of eternal salvation **only** for those who obey Him (Heb. 5:9). **Only if** we abide in the Word of Christ are we truly His disciples (John 8:31). Universalism teaches that God will save regardless of what we believe and how we behave. The liberalism, which is so popular among so many prominent brethren, is at least a near cousin to universalism in that it no longer believes in the conditional nature of God's promises. Baptism for remission of sins, Scriptural worship, Biblical morality, God's law on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, and several other things are negotiable to them. In their view, men may do what they will about them and God will still give them eternal life! They would do well to step inside the walls of Jerusalem in the siege of 586 B. C. and then join the shocked exiles on their pilgrimage to Babylon and learn better!

God is true to His Word

He not only fulfills His promises of blessing for loyalty, but He also remembers His promises of judgment for rebellion. Israel apparently decided He had forgotten His many warnings of doom if they did not obey Him, but how painfully they learned otherwise. Men have generally relieved themselves of the threat of judgment and accountability for their beliefs and behavior by denying that the Bible is the Word of God. This includes millions of rank and file human beings and tens of thousands of theologians. Sad to say, there are probably

thousands of members of the church of Christ who are not very far from this position in their theology. They have bought a “make-me-feel-good” philosophy that forbids any “negative” preaching that might contain correction or reproof, which, in turn, might induce guilt and require repentance. How like the people of Jerusalem in the time of Jeremiah are so many brethren today! They do not want to be bothered with the Truth that will save them if they will give heed. They only want words to cheer them up, even if they are a perverted and mutilated “gospel” that will lead to their destruction. Never forget: “If we are faithless, he abideth faithful; for he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim. 2:13).

Faithful preachers preach the Truth regardless of the reaction to it

All four of the “great prophets” understood this. In some cases, God warned them in advance that they would meet with obstinacy and opposition. Nevertheless, they went on delivering the message God gave them. Not only did they meet with unwillingness to listen, but Jeremiah and Daniel faced persecution and the threat of death if they continued to preach and/or live as God commanded. Especially were Jeremiah and Ezekiel commissioned to preach a most unpopular message. There are few better places for the preacher to go to learn faithfulness and perseverance in the Truth in the face of hostility than from these prophets. It is a consistent trait of compromising preachers through the centuries to provide what the people **want** to hear, rather than what they **need** to hear. You can fill a church building with such preaching, but you have nothing when you get through. Like these prophets of old, let us be determined to preach the Truth that makes men free, regardless of how many times we may be ridiculed, challenged, ignored, mistreated, or run off! Even if they will not hear, they must know that “there hath been a prophet among them” (Eze. 2:5).

When God’s leaders fail, His people go astray.

The very ones who were charged with keeping God’s people faithful to Him (kings and priests) were themselves corrupt for the most part. While the people themselves were responsible for their own behavior (Eze. 18:20), their leaders who led the people astray bore the greater guilt. The kings adopted the idols and taught the people to worship them. The priests tolerated the desecration of not only the holy city, but of the temple itself with idol worship. Immorality, Injustice, bloodshed, greed, and hypocrisy eventually pervaded the general populace by means of “trickle-down” corruption—it came from the top down.

The parallel picture in the church at present explains much of the apostasy that is abroad among us. There have always been some in every congregation who wanted to push doctrine

and practice to the limit and beyond. However, faithful elders and preachers generally kept them in check until several years ago. Likewise, there were smart-aleck students in some of my Bible classes in college who thought they knew more than the Bible, but faithful teachers restrained them. However, now it is elders and preachers who are leading and have led many congregations away from the Truth with some of their members pleading with them to repent and stand firm. Now we have professors in our schools who no longer stand for the Truth themselves, but they openly ridicule it and teach their students to despise it as well. These professors know that they have administrators who will protect them while they do their mayhem. It is no wonder that the church has digressed when one looks at so much of its compromising leadership over the past twenty-five years.

I remain firmly convinced that elders have done more to encourage and allow this apostasy than any other one group. The local congregations will be lost or retained for the Truth one by one and elders are God's overseers in them. They could empty every pulpit that has a double-tongued, Gospel-perverting preacher in it before next Lord's day if they would. They could purge every liberal, compromising Bible class teacher and get rid of all of the denominational class material overnight if they cared to. They could write the president and chairman of the board of each of our colleges, universities, and graduate schools and tell them they are going to...

1. Cease to announce any school functions.
2. Refuse to invite any faculty members to speak.
3. Discourage any students from enrolling or attending.
4. Discourage members from sending any financial support unless and until they cleanse their faculties of false teachers and openly declare their allegiance to the Gospel Truth.

And if they loved the Truth, this they would do. The fruitcake liberal preachers that are having a field day in the church would dry up overnight if elders did not hire them and keep them and keep inviting them to preach in meetings. Brethren, when leaders fail, all of God's people fail with them!

Conclusion

Men seem to never learn the lessons of history. Those who constitute the Lord's church are no exception. From the tragic captivity that God allowed Israel to suffer, only a remnant was preserved. From the tragic apostasy that overwhelmed the church in the past century, only a

remnant of fifteen percent remained faithful. The digression that has fastened itself on so many of the Lord's people today appears certain to take a large percentage of them into the foreign wastelands of denominational heresy. Those of us who have not been captured by it must strive to prevent as many as possible from falling prey to it. Let us recommit ourselves to remaining steadfast as the great prophets did, even if we are part of a very small remnant. From our remnant God can rebuild His people today just as He did those of twenty-five centuries ago.

Endnotes

1. All Scripture citations and quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. H. I. Hester, *The Heart of Hebrew History* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press 1969 revision), p. 220.
3. F. F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub Co., 1983 Reprint), p 66.
4. George Rawlinson in *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. 1950)), 10:125-126.
5. George Rawlinson in *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1950) 7:17.
6. Dub McClish, "Ezekiel: the Prophet of the Exile," in *Living Lessons from the Prophets*, ed, John Waddey (Knoxville, TN: East Tennessee School of Preaching and Missions, 1985), p. 202, but the entire chapter is recommended.
7. We will use the name "Israel" henceforth in reference to all of God's Old Testament chosen nation because after the return from captivity the national distinctions of "Judah" an "Israel" never again existed. All of the descendants of Jacob became one again. In fact, there is evidence that this occurred during the exile. Doubtless, the memory of their common ancestral heritage and the shared misery of the captivity outweighed all former partisan and political loyalties.
8. For a good discussion of which decree to rebuild Jerusalem is in view in Daniel 9:25, see Bill Lockwood, "Daniel 9" in *The Book of Daniel* ed, Gary Colley (Austin, TX: Southwest Pub., 1984), pp 176-77.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS and delivered a digest of it orally at Power Lectures, hosted August 20-24, 1995, by Southaven Church of Christ, Southaven, MS. It appeared in the lectureship book, *Major Lessons from the Major Prophets*, ed. B.J. Clarke.]

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