

RETURN FROM EXILE

(538 — 420 BC)

(Haggai, Zechariah, Joel, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi)

We saw that the Northern Kingdom (Israel) was taken away in 722 BC by Assyria, while the Southern Kingdom (Judah) was taken into exile by Babylon in 597 BC. In 549 BC, Cyrus the Great founded the Persian Empire, and he eventually conquered Babylon. Persia was now the new world power. Cyrus allowed those who were exiled to Babylon to return to their homelands, as he believed that it was in his best interest to have loyal followers all over the world. Cyrus also showed a great deal of tolerance toward the religions of those he conquered.

In 530 BC, Cyrus was killed in a war and his son, Cambyses, succeeded him. Cambyses was a different kind of man than his father. He murdered his brother to safeguard his throne. After his suicide in 522 BC, there was confusion as to who would succeed him. An army general, Darius, eventually took control of the army and ascended the throne. In 520 BC, Darius restored order in the kingdom, which was the same year in which Haggai and Zechariah began to act as prophets. During the time of Darius, work in the Temple was resumed (Ezra 5–6). Darius, who ruled from 521 to 486 BC, was known as one of the mightiest Persian emperors.

Xerxes ruled from 486 to 465 BC (Xerxes was his Greek name; his Hebrew name was Ahasuerus.) Artaxerxes I then reigned from 464 to 423 BC (the events in Ezra 7 through the end of Nehemiah took place during his reign). Artaxerxes I was succeeded by Darius II (423–404 BC), Artaxerxes II (404–359 BC) and Artaxerxes III (359–338 BC).

The two centuries the Persians reigned were of great importance to God's people, as the Persians encouraged their repatriation and also subsidized it. (We have to bear in mind that not all exiles returned and that the homecoming took place over a long period.) The first group of exiles returned with Sheshbazzar (538 BC), an exiled Jewish prince and later governor of a reestablished Jewish state centered in Jerusalem. As a representative of the Persian crown, protocol demanded that it was he who laid the foundation of the house of God. Unfortunately, for a long time nothing was built on that foundation, but at least Sheshbazzar had shown the way.

A little later Zerubabel, the grandson of king Jehoiachin, escorted another group

back to the homeland. The next main group returned in 458 BC with Ezra, the scribe. Then in 444 BC, Nehemiah returned with another group. It was during this time that the exiles who returned home were called "Jews" for the first time. This word derives from the Hebrew word *Yehudi*, which is related to Judah, the tribe in which Jesus was born.