

The British Israel Theory

The theory of 'British Israel' in its various forms broadly teaches that descendants of the northern tribes of Israel recovered from their Assyrian captivity (approx. 700 B.C.) and later became great nations, including, most prominently, England and America. It describes these tribes as the 'lost ten tribes of Israel.' It also postulates that God's promise to David that there would always be a king on his throne ruling over Israelites was unconditional and unbroken throughout the ages, and that this promise continues to be fulfilled in today's British monarchy. Such claims are examined below.

So where did the title 'the lost tribes of Israel' originate? Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary (Rev. 2003, p523) states that:

Exiles from the Northern Kingdom were scattered through the Assyrian holdings (2 Kings 17:6). Apparently, their small communities, isolated from other Jews, did not allow them to maintain much national identity. We do not know what happened to these people, thus the popular title: the lost tribes of Israel. Some may have eventually returned to their original homeland. Others may have established the basis of Jewish communities that appear in later historical records.

There are several factors that must be weighed before one accepts the claims of British-Israel as valid. A few of the more challenging factors, operating against the validity of such an idea, are presented below in outline form for consideration and further study.

Firstly, there is no such expression in the Bible as 'the lost tribes of Israel,' or 'the lost house of Israel.' Rather, Jesus refers in Matthew 10:6 and 15:24 to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' In considering the context of Jesus' use of the phrase 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel,' hopefully the reader will see that Jesus is simply referring to their spiritual state of lost-ness, for no issue is raised in these passages as to the location of the lost sheep. The people of Israel clearly had strayed spiritually and were therefore figuratively referred to as lost sheep. The fact of their known whereabouts is even implicit in these verses, for the disciples are sent out on a mission to them in Matthew 10:6, and in Matthew 15:24, Jesus indicates that He had been sent to them. Therefore, Israel, where Jesus ministered, was where the lost sheep of the house of Israel predominantly were. It would therefore be unsafe to take Jesus' use of the expression 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' as a reference to Israeli tribes living in Britain or Europe. The 12 disciples certainly did not have time during Jesus' short ministry for missionary journeys to such far away regions.

Secondly, bearing in mind the great destruction poured out on the northern tribes of Israel during their Assyrian captivity, and recognizing the infamous ruthlessness of the Assyrians, it does not seem realistic that some of the remnant would have become great nations in the far flung corners of the world, as the British-Israel theory goes. See, for example, Isaiah 5:13-30, 6:11-13, and Amos 9 which illustrate the great magnitude of the northern kingdom's prophesied demise. At the hands of the Assyrians, Israel was to be left as 'a pole on top of a mountain' (Isaiah 30:17 & 31).

Thirdly, during Nehemiah's time, the king of Assyria gave the Israelites a bright green light to return to their homeland. Since returning to one's homeland is generally a person's natural yearning, it is unlikely that many Israelites, if any, traveled elsewhere, at that time (or earlier, as the theory generally goes). See the second article below 'Rebuilding of Israel as one nation' for more on this point.

Fourthly, the theory fails to pay due regard to the conditionality of the throne promise to King David. The following scripture shows that the obedience of Israel was relevant to the fulfillment of the promise:

Therefore, Lord God of Israel, now keep what You promised Your servant David my father, saying, "you shall not fail to have a man sit before Me on the throne of Israel, only if your sons take heed to their way ... (1 Kings 8:25) (our emphasis)

The following list of scriptures similarly shows the conditionality of God's throne promise:

1 Kings 9:4-9; 1 Chronicles 22:9-13 & 28:5-10; 2 Chronicles 6:16 & 7:17-22

The list below shows the consequences for Israel of breaking the condition:

Jeremiah 13:11-27, 14:20-21, 15:1-18, 22:1-9, 39:1-15 & 52:1-11

The Israelites were notoriously disobedient. However, whilst their disobedience caused them to miss out on the full benefit of God's promise to David, God was still faithful to David in fulfilling the promise. Peter, in Acts 2:29-33, interprets the throne promise to David for us, and shows us how the ultimate fulfillment of the promise to David was through Christ, the Son of David, ascending to sit at the right hand of the Father:

Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried ... Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear.

Fifthly, British-Israel proponents make much of scriptures in Genesis in which Abraham and his descendants are promised several things including being a blessing to all nations (Genesis 26:4), becoming as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sand of the sea (Genesis 22:16-18), and becoming a nation and a company of nations (Genesis 35:11). Whilst British Israelites generally see a fulfillment of these promises in the benefits Britain and the United States have brought to the world, in the vast population of the Commonwealth and the United States, and in the company of nations known as the Commonwealth of nations, Holy Scripture provides its own rather different interpretation.

Galatians 3:6-16 and Romans 4:9-22 put a whole new slant on the meaning of these prophecies contrary to that taught by British Israelites. These verses say that the blessing to all nations promised to Abraham and his descendants comes through Christ, and that Abraham is a father of many nations because through his seed - Christ, people from all nations are (or will become) of the faith of Abraham. Whilst in this same sense Abraham's descendants may become great in number, possibly 'as the sand of the sea,' it is also notable that there are already several references in the Old Testament describing Israel in Old Testament times as already having become as the 'sand of the sea' and 'stars of heaven' in number. See for example Deuteronomy 10:22, 1 Kings 4:20, 2 Chronicles 1:9, Nehemiah 9:23, and Isaiah 10:22.

In conclusion, given the above obstacles to the validity of the theory, and given the re-establishment of Israel as one nation in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (as prophesied – see article below) there is good reason to doubt the teachings of British-Israelites.

Rebuilding of Israel as one nation

“Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.” (Proverbs 14:34)

In the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, many years after the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities of God's people, God was ready to exalt Israel. One step of exaltation was their unification. They had been divided into the northern and southern kingdoms since the days of Jeroboam and Rehoboam around 900 B.C.

Ezra and Nehemiah focused, admittedly, on the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi, the southern tribes, in the rebuilding of Judah and Jerusalem. The ordained starting place for the rebuilding of Israel as a strong and united nation clearly had to be Jerusalem, the holy city of the temple. This was the area of Israel where the aforementioned tribes were prominent. They were the tribes-people who were closest in proximity to the historic events unfolding in Jerusalem. However, we do see several indications that the rebuilding was intended as a foundation for a once again united Israel. We see indications that the northern tribes, whilst not specifically mentioned, would also have been simultaneously returning to their cherished homelands.

Chapter two of Ezra lists the captives of the southern tribes who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, 'everyone to his own city' (v1). It reports that:

*... [T]he priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim dwelt in their cities, and **all Israel** in their cities ... (our emphasis)*

Verse 1 of chapter three continues:

*And when the seventh month had come, and the children of Israel were in their cities, the people gathered together **as one man** to Jerusalem. (our emphasis)*

Whilst in these verses Jerusalem and the southern tribes are necessarily the focus, Jerusalem indeed being the place where the nation gathers together 'as one man,' Ezra

considers it apt to describe the people involved in this rebuilding as ‘all Israel.’ They at least seem to be given as a representation of such.

One might argue that since the southern tribes of Israel are part of Israel, Ezra might only have them in mind when he is referring to ‘all Israel’ given that in context he’s describing what’s happening in their part of Israel. This is much more than a matter of terminology though, as Ezra adds the following important comments in Ezra 6:15-22:

Now the temple was finished ... Then the children of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the descendants of the captivity, celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy. And they offered sacrifices at the dedication of this house of God, one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel ... Then the children of Israel who had returned from the captivity ate together with all who had separated themselves from the filth of the nations of the land in order to seek the Lord God of Israel ... [and] the Lord made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel. (our emphasis)

The mention of the sacrifices and offerings at the dedication of the temple being for the *twelve* tribes, and the additional reference to the *king of Assyria*, who had scattered the northern tribes throughout his territories, is instructive. It is important symbolism for this new movement in Israel being undoubtedly the foundation of the rebuilding of the twelve tribes as one nation!

Support for this is also found in the following chapter in Artaxerxes’ great decree for the return of the captives. It relates to Israel as a whole. King Artaxerxes wrote, ‘I issue a decree that all those of the people of Israel and the priests and Levites in my realm, who volunteer to go up to Jerusalem, may go up with you’ (Ezra 7:13).

The prophet Jeremiah, in chapter 50 also foretells the return of captives to Jerusalem from both Judah and Israel after their captivities as follows:

*The word that the Lord spoke against Babylon and against the land of the Chaldeans ... For out of the north a nation comes up against her, which shall make her desolate ... “In those days and in that time,” says the Lord, **the children of Israel shall come, they and the children of Judah together**; With continual weeping they shall come, and seek the Lord their God. They shall ask the way to Zion, with their faces toward it saying, ‘Come let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that will not be forgotten.’ ... ‘Israel is like scattered sheep; First the king of Assyria devoured him; Now at last this Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has broken his bones. Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: “Behold, I will punish the king of Babylon ... I will bring back Israel to his home ... The iniquity of Israel shall be sought, but there shall be none; And the sins of Judah, but they shall not be found; For I shall pardon those whom I preserve (Jeremiah 50:1-5 & 17-20). (our emphasis)*

Nehemiah, as Ezra does, likewise naturally focuses on the southern tribes, the House of David, in his discussion of the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple. These were the people most able and most likely to attend and take part in the momentous events at Jerusalem. In addressing them on the occasion of a great fast and rededication of the people, the priests in chapter nine recount to them many key aspects of the history of Israel. They recount how God had multiplied their children as the stars of heaven and brought them into the promised land (v23). They recount to them how they rebelled and were disobedient to God, and how God cast them off as a nation *from the days of the kings of Assyria* (v32). Nevertheless, the representatives of the returned remnant had now come to a time and place where they were to turn back to their God and make a covenant with Him on behalf of the whole nation. No differentiation between southern or northern tribes is evident. Chapter 10 describes their covenant.

Surely God had wrought a mighty restoration of Israel as one nation in this period through the remnant. Israel was still the apple of His eye. No longer was Israel divided into two nations. The theory of British Israel lacks any scriptural foundation.

The Great Revival of Israel

For those who enjoy hearing of great spiritual revivals and the move of God amongst His people, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah make for sumptuous reading. All the ingredients for successful revival and restoration, and more, are present. Nine select aspects of Israel's momentous revival will be highlighted below.

It's important though to firstly set the scene for these historical books so we can see how they tie in with the decrees described above which preceded and partly overlapped them. It is also important to note that although Ezra and Nehemiah were placed in the Bible chronologically before the prophets, they actually post-date 'The Prophets'. So if the books of the Bible were arranged chronologically by date, Ezra and Nehemiah (and Esther too) would appear after Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and most of the other prophets.

Ezra was an Israelite priest and scribe. He was a descendant of Moses' brother Aaron. He left Persia and returned to Jerusalem in about 458 B.C. with a copy of King Artaxerxes' decree giving him significant power and authority in Jerusalem (Ezra 7:11-26). His work focused on the encouragement of the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of true spirituality and holiness amongst God's remnant people according to the laws of God.

Nehemiah was a contemporary of Ezra who had the honorable and trusted position of being King Artaxerxes' cupbearer, having to risk his life testing what ever King Artaxerxes was about to consume. Cupbearer's were often taken into the king's confidence and had a small amount of influence on their master's decisions [see Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary Revised 2003, p373]. Nehemiah visited Jerusalem in 445 B.C. and provided the people with great help and motivation in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. The four major sections of the book of Nehemiah, according to the Holman Dictionary, deal with the "rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls (chaps. 1-7), *the Great Revival*

(chaps. 8-10), population and census information (chaps. 11-12), and the reforms of Nehemiah (chap. 13)” (*our emphasis*).

Israel had been severely battered by the Assyrian captivity, which saw the northern part of their kingdom being captured from approximately 720 B.C., and by the Babylonian captivity, which took the southern part, Judah, from approximately 600 B.C. Israel would certainly need the hand of God to ever be restored to glory.

The marvelous divine help outlined in chapter two which God had given her after her 70 years of punishment in Babylon indeed was significant in restoring her to being the light to the nations she was intended to be, and in restoring her to prosperity and favor among the nations. The following nine select aspects of Israel’s restoration from the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah confirm this, and indeed show that God had returned to His special chosen people who were, as Zechariah 2:8 records, still the ‘apple of His eye.’

1. High level foreign support for Israel

Perhaps the first necessity for a scattered people, taunted and dominated by the nations, if they are ever to be restored as a nation, is the favor of the powerful. The outstanding support given to Israel through empire-wide decrees in their favour issued by great kings such as Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes (which are quoted in Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Daniel) were instrumental in Israel’s great revival. This high level support was given to Israel over a period of 150 years from 570 B.C. to 420 B.C. (*see Daniel 2:46-49, 3:29-30, 4:1-9, 6:25-28 Ezra 1:1-4, 6:1-5, 8-11, 7:12-26 Esther 8:7-9, 16-17, 9:2-5, 16-19, 10:2-3*)

Ezra

King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the House of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and put in the temple of his gods; and Cyrus king of Persia brought them out ... and counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. This is the number of them: thirty gold platters, one thousand silver platters, twenty-nine knives, thirty gold basins, four hundred and ten silver basins of a similar kind and one thousand other articles. All the articles of gold and silver were five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar took with the captives who were brought from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:7-11).

*So the elders of the Jews built, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they built and finished it [the temple], according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia ... And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy; for the Lord made them joyful, and **turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them**, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel (Ezra 6:14 & 22). (*our emphasis*)*

The significance of the highlighted reference to the heart of the king of Assyria being turned toward the work of the house of God should not be missed. Remember it was the northern tribes of Israel who were scattered throughout the once powerful Assyrian empire. If the king's heart was so changed, then the remnant of the Israelites in Assyrian regions who wanted to help in the work of the temple, or who wanted to return to their homeland, which is generally a person's natural yearning, were likely free to do so and encouraged to do so. Indeed it would be most uncommon for exiled nationals to choose to move to a land other than their land of origin when the path for such a move is cleared so wonderfully.

Nehemiah

Nehemiah, another Jew who was raised to an important position in the empire, was also able to solicit further high level foreign support for Israel. The support Nehemiah obtained is recorded in Nehemiah. 2:5-8:

And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the cities of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it." Then the king said to me ..., "How long will your journey be? And when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time. Furthermore I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors of the region beyond the River, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which pertains to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy." And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me.

A green light for revival was blazoning. The stage was set. King Artaxerxes had equipped God's chosen vessel, Nehemiah, to do great service to God in orchestrating the rebuilding of Judah. God granted divine protection to Nehemiah through King Artaxerxes. However, much more protection would be needed for the Israelites to be confident in approaching the awesome task at hand.

2. Protection from enemies

The prophets Zechariah and Haggai were sent by God to encourage the returned and returning exiles in the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. Zechariah prophesied that the Lord would be:

... a wall of fire all around [Jerusalem] ... “Up, up! Flee from the land of the north says the Lord, for I have spread you abroad like the four winds of heaven ... Up Zion! Escape, you who dwell with the daughter of Babylon. For thus says the Lord of Hosts: He sent me after glory, to the nations which plunder you; for he who touches you touches the apple of His eye. For surely I will shake my hand against them, and they shall become spoil for their servants ...” (Zechariah 2:5-9). (punctuation ours)

Ezra and Nehemiah, who wrote over 60 years after this prophecy, describe some of the protection that Israel received from the God who was a wall of fire around them. We read earlier in King Darius’ decree of Ezra 6:11-12:

Also I issue a decree that whoever alters this edict, let a timber be pulled from his house and erected, and let him be hanged on it, and let his house be made a refuse heap because of it. And may the God who causes his name to dwell there destroy any king or people who put their hand to alter it, or to destroy this house of God which is in Jerusalem. I Darius issue a decree; let it be done diligently.

And we read in King Artaxerxes’ decree in Ezra 7:26:

Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily on him, whether it be death, or banishment, or confiscation of goods, or imprisonment.

And from the highest level of protection of all - God, Nehemiah adds:

And it happened, when our enemies heard ... that God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work (4:15).

Nehemiah recognized that it was God who fought for them. He said, “Our God will fight for us” (4:20). The God of Israel neither slumbered nor slept.

He is the same God today, and His promise of old given through Moses to Israel that He would never leave them or forsake them is echoed in the New Testament in Hebrews 13:5 for all who would trust in Him through Christ now. God also provides us with defensive and offensive *spiritual* armor to enable us to stand against all of our enemies (Ephesians 6). God still fights for His people, and if God is for us who can be against us?

3. Self governance

In China, question marks have often been raised over the official Christian church – The Three Self Church. Many would not describe its creation in about 1954 as a sign of revival. Some claim it is essentially a puppet of the communist regime. For example, www.billionbibles.org claim on their web-site that in this church, and in China:

•The Communist Party decides who can preach and what can

be preached.

- *Preaching should focus on the social rules and the social benefits of Christianity.*
- *Preaching outside the Three Self church buildings is forbidden.*
- *Evangelizing or giving out tracts is forbidden.*
- *Importing Bibles is forbidden, even if they are given away for free.*
- *Printings Bibles without authorization is forbidden, even if they are given away for free.*
- *Government officials cannot be Christian.*
- *School teachers cannot be Christian. ...*
- *Children and teenagers cannot be Christian.*

Not all sources are so negative about the Three Self Church and Christianity in China. However, if the above claims are true, then the church could hardly be called autonomous. Its creation could not be characterized as a true revival.

For true revival to flow the people of God must have freedom to worship as God ordains, not man. This important plank, in Israel's case, God put in place through King Artaxerxes. He decreed:

And you, Ezra, according to your God-given wisdom set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are in the region beyond the river, all such as know the laws of your God; and teach those who do not know them (Ezra 7:24-25).

Nehemiah likewise, as governor, was given a free ranging commission to restore Israel as he saw fit according to the will of God. To the glory of God, the people of Israel, although part of the Persian Empire, were at least free to govern themselves. They could hardly be called 'Puppets of Persia'. Persia encouraged the worship of Yahweh, wanted to see Israel flourish, and trusted that the native people of Israel knew how best to make this a reality. Let's thank God if we have the same freedom today and pray for those who don't.

4. Rebuilding of temple and Jerusalem

Strong foundations are essential if any revival is to gather momentum and have longevity. Ezra records in chapter 6:15 how "the temple was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius," and speaks of the measure of revival God had granted the remnant in chapter 9:9 as follows:

For we were slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

Nehemiah adds:

So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work (4v6) ... So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days. (Nehemiah 6:15)

From slaves to master-builders in next to no time. Ezra and Nehemiah have described a remarkable turnaround. The wall was finished in only 52 days! With the temple in place, and a strong foothold in the city of God's choosing, the people would have regained their sense of identity and confidence in God and His prophets, who had proclaimed great restoration after sore captivity. Sure foundations had been laid.

5. World-wide awe of Israel's God

The Israelites were not the only ones in awe of the move of their God. Immediately after recording that the wall was finished, Nehemiah adds:

And it happened when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God (Nehemiah 6:1).

Great revivals are noised abroad. They are heard about from afar. Often this adds momentum as more people within the region, and sympathetic people from afar, now want to be part of it. Critics and enemies also arise, but the momentum is hard to quell, especially as God's people rally closer to Him. The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah etc indeed prophesied much about how Gentiles would even want to be part of what was happening in Jerusalem.

6. Purified hearts and knowledge of God's law

Indeed the people of God were now ready for transformation. Their hard hearts which had driven them into captivity were ready for softening. Their hearts of stone were becoming hearts of flesh, just as Ezekiel prophesied in chapter 11.

This is the true essence of revival. If hearts are not turned toward God in sincerity and truth, then any physical manifestations of revival, such as a restored temple, are nothing but dross. Ezra records:

Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek Him in the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions (Ezra 8:21).

Ezra prayed:

O Lord God of Israel, You are righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as it is this day. Here we are before You, in our guilt, though no one can stand before You because of this! Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly (Ezra 9:15 -10:1).

So Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. Then he read from it in the open square ... from morning until midday ... and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law ... Then all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground ... And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn nor weep." For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law ... And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them (Nehemiah 8:2-12).

This widespread fasting and weeping was a sure sign of the people's sincerity. But what was just as encouraging, if not more encouraging, was why they wept. They wept over their sins. This augured well for real life-changing repentance. Also encouraging was that all the people understood God's Law (note also Ezra 7:25) and were willing to listen to it being read at great length. They did not need great music, entertainment, or gimmicks, to stay in the presence of the Lord. They were interested in receiving instruction from the throne of God. They wanted to hear God's word and to obey it. Their hunger and thirst for God, and their repentant hearts, provide a great example for all generations.

Understanding is another important foundation for true revival. Without understanding, what often occurs, is little more than a short term high or emotional experience. However, when we truly understand our own sinfulness, God's infinite mercy toward us, and His new path for us, we will be set on a rock which can withstand the greatest storms of life.

Many in Israel had reached such a place and were now ready to enjoy the fruit and blessing that flow automatically from being humble in God's sight.

7. Blessings concerning the land

A further blessing enjoyed by the returned captives, which Ezra and Nehemiah record, is the possession of fruitful lands. In light of the desolations they had experienced, this was quite remarkable. It was prophesied that the captive's land would be desolated by their enemies, but that it would again yield its increase abundantly. A few examples of these prophecies are provided here.

Isaiah writes of the departure of Judah's prosperity as follows:

For behold the Lord ... takes away from ... Judah the stock and the store, the whole supply of bread and the whole supply of water (3:1) ... Her gates shall lament and mourn, and she being desolate shall sit on the ground (Isaiah 3:26).

Jeremiah speaks to the land's desolation as follows:

For thus says the Lord: "The whole land shall be desolate; yet I will not make a full end" ... (Jeremiah 4:27).

... [T]his whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11).

He speaks to its restoration in chapter 40:12 as follows:

[T]hen all the Jews returned out of all places where they had been driven ... and gathered wine and summer fruit in abundance.

Nehemiah testifies to the fulfillment of these prophecies when he describes the fruitfulness of the land to which the captives returned in chapter nine. He records in Nehemiah 9:37 that the land indeed yielded 'much increase', albeit to foreign kings.

Nehemiah also describes the blessing of enjoying one's own plot of land when he records that:

*[I]n the cities of Judah **everyone dwelt in his own possession** in their cities – Israelites, priests, Levites, Nethinim, and descendants of Solomon's servants. (Nehemiah 11:3). (our emphasis)*

Dwelling in one's own possession would equate to sitting under one's own vine or fig tree. How marvelous was the Lord to the apple of His eye! How marvelous is He still!

8. The nation's covenant with God

What occurred in Israel at this time was not something we are accustomed to seeing, and it's very hard to imagine that such would have happened very often, even in ancient times. What happened was nothing short of amazing. The leaders and representatives of the

nation committed themselves to God, devoting themselves to holiness. They did this on behalf of the entire nation of Israel.

They did not do it lightly, or half-heartedly. They did it tearfully and reverently. Nehemiah writes:

Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month [the seventh month] the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, with dust on their heads. Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquity of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for one-fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshipped the Lord their God (Nehemiah 9:1-3).

Recently, in 2008, Australia experienced a day that was greatly heralded when the leaders apologized to the indigenous people of its land for the wrongs committed against them over many generations. We can appreciate just how significant such a day was to Australia, and especially to the indigenous people. Realizing the great significance of such an historic event, we can begin to relate to the even greater magnitude of this separation for holiness in Israel.

To fully appreciate this, we need to reflect on chapter seven and eight of Nehemiah. In chapter seven we read of a great assembly of 42,360 Israelites (plus their servants) who assembled in Jerusalem to be registered by genealogy. Then, chapter eight, in verse one, states that “all the people gathered as one man in the open square” to hear Ezra the priest read to them from the Book of the Law. They did not sit as Ezra read, but remained standing, and he read from morning until midday. This was on the first day of the seventh month. Verse 6 says that the people “bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.” The people wept.

Upon hearing of the fast of the seventh month (the feast of booths) mentioned in the law that was read by Ezra, they reacted swiftly:

So the whole assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths ... Also day by day, from the first day until the last day, he [Ezra] read from the book of the Law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day there was a sacred assembly, according to the prescribed manner (Nehemiah 8:17-18).

When they heard in the Law that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into the assembly of God they also responded swiftly by separating the ‘mixed multitude’ from Israel (Neh. 13:1-3). The people’s new commitment was born out of many days of devotion. The covenant they made, with God Himself, after much fasting, confession and worship, is set out in part below:

... [W]e make a sure covenant and write it: Our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it. ... Now the rest of the people – the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the Nethinim, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, and

everyone who had knowledge and understanding – these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law ... We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the lands, not take their daughters for our sons; if the peoples of the lands brought wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day, and we would forgo the seventh year’s produce and the exacting of every debt. Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God ... And we made ordinances to bring the first fruits of our ground, and the first fruits of all fruits of all trees, year by year, to the house of the Lord; to bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God ... and to bring the tithes of our lands to the Levites ... For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the grain, of the new wine and the oil, to the storerooms ... and we will not neglect the house of our God (Nehemiah 9:38 ... 10:1-32).

The majority of the remnant people of Israel were serious. Their commitment was a demanding one, but their hearts were true. Their past sins genuinely pained them, and they were resolute in their determination to see they respected God and His laws. The true remnant today will do the same. The law of God will be written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit as we enter God’s new covenant through Christ (Hebrews 10:16-22).

9. Great rejoicing

Of course rejoicing accompanies great revivals as there is much to rejoice about! The completion of the temple brought great celebration. Ezra records:

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the ordinance of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord ... Then all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid (Ezra. 3:10).

Similarly, at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, one of the greatest days of celebration and rejoicing recorded in the entire Bible is described by Nehemiah. There were thanksgiving choirs singing thanksgiving psalms, besides trumpets and much else. Nehemiah records:

Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off (Nehemiah 12:43).

Conclusion

God had worked mightily for His people through Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes, Daniel, Esther, Mordecai, Ezra, Nehemiah, and others. They had been restored magnificently. God had declared it. He speaks things beforehand, just as Amos

testified when he wrote in Amos 3:7: “Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets.” Many prophecies concerning Israel’s restoration from captivity had been fulfilled.

Israel’s restoration was not done in a corner. Ezra and Nehemiah have described the awe of other nations over what took place. The doom and gloom and statelessness of the scattered Israelites had turned into rejoicing. They could once again take their place among the nations of the world and hold their head up.

Historical Confirmation

One could spend many days in libraries reading the great volume of secular historical material dealing with the history of Israel after its captivity in Babylon. Just a cursory study however of some of the material considering this period reveals much that is consistent with Israel’s great rejuvenation, and much that is consistent with the biblical record concerning important facts of the era. The secular historians, it must be said, rely predominantly on Ezra and Nehemiah as their primary sources (due to the paucity of other sources), but generally show a healthy respect for the reliability of such.

Judah’s Destruction

It would be premature to talk of the evidence for restoration without mentioning evidence for Judah’s destruction. Hayes and Miller write:

Archeological excavations at many Judean sites show evidence of destruction which scholars have related to Nebuchadrezzar’s campaigns. Evidence for destruction extends from Tell ed-Duweir (Lachish) in the west, to Arad in the south, to En-gedi in the east. This is not to suggest, however, that every Judean city was left in ruins. Primarily those cities that served as fortress towns would have been the most likely targets for the Babylonians. Cities north of Jerusalem, in the traditional territory of Benjamin, apparently did not suffer much destruction. These may have surrendered to the Babylonians early. ... Because soldiers profited from the spoils of war, plundering was the conqueror’s privilege and the conquered’s fate. Thus one must assume that much of the people’s possessions became Babylonian spoils of war. Many cities, like Jerusalem, that had once been thriving centers were left as depleted, subsistence-level villages. The primary economy of the country was probably reduced to a purely agricultural base ... A fair percentage of the manpower and leadership was killed off. There is no way to estimate the number of casualties who died at the hands of Babylonian troops, but it certainly would have been a sizeable portion of the population even though the Babylonians had no reputation for needless destruction and excessive killing. Nebuchadrezzar had taken a lenient attitude toward the country in 597 B.C.E., but no ancient ruler was very hospitable to a rebellious subject on the second military visit. Hayes & Miller, ‘A History of Ancient Israel and Judah’ (1st ed. Philadelphia, Pa: Westminster Press, 1986)

Babylon's Downfall

The prophet Zechariah prophesied under the rule of Darius following the downfall of Babylon. It is interesting just to note his mention of the 'four horns' who scattered 'Judah, Israel and Jerusalem' (Zech 1:18-20).

The historian J.M. Cook whilst reflecting on the relatively peaceful state of the world from 605-561 B.C., before the Persian Empire, writes:

By the 560s the Great Kings in Asia were growing old; and the ancient civilizations had become set in their ways ... Turbulence such as had followed the Cimmerian and Scythian incursions was forgotten. The ruthless aggression that had sustained Assyrian rule had happily disappeared, and military efficiency seems to have declined ... It had become an international age with conservative attitudes and wide-ranging commerce that is well reflected in Chapter XXVII of Ezekiel on the merchandise of Tyre. It was a world that must have begun to seem eternal. Yet in a quarter of a century (550-525 B.C. exactly) each of the four great powers was to collapse in turn under the onslaught of the remote and little known Persians. (J.M. Cook, 'The Persian Empire' (London, Dent & Sons, 1983, p11-12)

Miller confirms at p426 [op. cit. above] that there were four major powers at the end of the seventh century before the Persian Empire, and they were "Babylonia, Egypt, Media and Lydia." It seems reasonable to suggest that these may be the four horns Zechariah was referring to in his symbolic way.

The prophet Jeremiah had predicted that Babylon would only rule over Judah for seventy years. The historian J.A. Soggin confirms that the Babylonian empire lasted less than a century. [J.A. Soggin, 'A History of Israel from the Beginnings to the Bar Kochba Revolt, AD 135' (SCM Press 1985) p261]

The Imperial Decrees

The majority of scholars accept the authenticity of the decree of Cyrus concerning the restoration of the Jews. Concerning the decrees Hayes and Miller (op. cit) write at p445:

There is no real reason to doubt their historical value, although their wording may have been shaped by biblical editors.

Israel's Spiritual Restoration and Autonomy

Hayes and Miller further write:

For over two centuries, from the Persian capture of Babylon in 539 B.C.E. until the fall of Tyre to Alexander in 332 B.C.E., Palestine and the Jewish community in Judah were under Persian Hegemony (p437) ... [H]istory has remembered Cyrus as a great liberator of captured peoples. ... The portrait of the good ruler as 'the gatherer of the dispersed' and the 'restorer of the god's and their sanctuaries' was a common feature of Near Eastern royal ideology (p440).

Hayes and Miller, confirming the good degree of autonomy enjoyed by Judah, state that:

[There] seems to be no reason to doubt that Zerubbabel served for a time as governor of Judah [p456] ... Except when Persian affairs were directly involved, self-government was apparently enjoyed by the province [Judah], with governors appointed from local people. ... Both Ezra and Nehemiah... conducted their reforming and restoration work with the permission and under a commission from the Persian authorities ... Their activity, therefore, was not only condoned but also encouraged by the ruling government and thus must have been viewed as in the best interests of the Persian [p462].

J.A. Soggin (op.cit, p284), on this point, adds that:

We know from Josephus XI ... that Alexander continued the religious policy begun by the Persians. Judah was left alone and the inhabitants were allowed to live in accordance with the law [Pentateuch (Mosaic/God's law)]; and it is probable that this continued to be the law of the state.

Martin Noth concerning this also writes:

Above all, however, the Persian period was important because it saw the beginnings of the canonization of a particular literature. It is certain that it was in this period that the Pentateuch not only acquired essentially its definitive form but also became a holy book which was binding on the whole Jerusalem religious community. [Noth, M, 'The History of Israel' 2nd Ed. (London: A & C Black, 1960), p341]

With respect to the character of the remnant who returned to Judah, Hayes and Miller state that most of them “were strict followers of Yahweh.”

George Adam Smith adds:

Nehemiah had secured for his nation the full practice of their Law, and there is no reason to suppose that their Persian lords seriously interfered with this. [G.A. Smith, 'Jerusalem: The Topography, Economics and History From the earliest Times to A.D. 70' (London: Hodder & Stoughton MCMVIII) p362]

The Centrality of the Rebuilt Temple for a United Israel and Jerusalem as a World Religious Centre

J.A. Soggin (op.cit.) states that “the temple of Jerusalem was an important centre of economic power in the country, if not the only one” [p294] and writes of the “markedly missionary and proselytic (sic) attitude in Judaism” [p297], which was also evident hundreds of years later in Matthew 23:15. He also refers to the great importance of the rebuilt temple as a central sanctuary and it being visited regularly by pilgrims [p311-312]. Acts 2 provides an indication of such, as there we see devout Jews *and proselytes* from ‘every nation under heaven’ gathered at Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. Acts 8:27 also records how an Ethiopian Eunuch of great authority went to Jerusalem to worship.

As to the reunification of Israel, and Jerusalem becoming a world religious centre, Martin Noth (op. cit. p394) writes:

It is true that the events of the Persian period had reunited Israel as a great community gathered around the Temple cultus in Jerusalem linked with ancient traditions, and had given all Israelites a binding rule for daily life in the 'law of the God of heaven' [p394].

After Cyrus had given instructions for the rebuilding of the sanctuary, Jerusalem became the religious centre not only for the Israelites living in the vicinity but for those scattered throughout the world ... In Jerusalem there ruled a priestly hierarchy with the 'High Priest' ... at its head and a closed priesthood who derived from the Zadokite families of the Davidic period ... [p338-339].

Drane J, in his book 'Introducing the Old Testament' (2000, Rev, ed. Lion, Oxford, UK) at p204-205 even states that Judaism was to be increasingly important in many parts of the Mediterranean world, not the least in Egypt. He also refers to evidence of there being a Jewish-like temple there.

Judah's Population Increase

George Adam Smith adds some further interesting conclusions regarding the restoration of Israel in the Persian period:

... [T]here can be no doubt that during the last century of the Persian dominion, the Jewish nation developed considerably in numbers, in resources and in institutions. As to the numbers, we have seen that the population of Jerusalem in Nehemiah's time proved too small for the restored City, and that a levy was made upon Jews of other townships to supply what was lacking. But by the beginning of the Greek Period, we have evidence, both from the Chronicler and other sources, that the population was comparatively large and fairly prosperous, and that there prevailed among them the spirit of a people which not only felt itself worthy of its great past, but was quietly confident of the future. Still, we must not suppose that the vast numbers, in which the Chronicler indulges, are correct. A quarter of a million would be a generous estimate for the population of Judah at this period. [G.A. Smith, 'Jerusalem: The Topography, Economics and History From the earliest Times to A.D. 70' (London: Hodder & Stoughton MCMVIII) p361-362]

Practically nothing is known about the history of the Jewish community between Ezra and Nehemiah's time and the conquest of Alexander the Great.

Conclusion

History confirms how a plundered, exiled, remnant people are given the opportunity to return and rebuild their desolated homeland. The opportunity is grasped, and the most sacred pillars of their nation, such as the temple (where their God dwells) and the holy city, are restored. The people are free to resume their lives and their worship of Yahweh, which are largely unhindered by their Persian overseers.