

Under The Fig Tree



WEEK 38

We now return to the Tanach to complete our reading of the history of Israel prior to the coming of Yeshua. The next stage in the history was the return from exile. Judah went down to Babylon at the time of Nebuchadnezzar. Babylon was defeated by the Medes and Persians. The new ruler of the entire Empire was Cyrus. Darius, one of his relatives, was appointed King in Babylon. Cyrus was God's servant to bring an end to exile, as had been prophesied many years before by Isaiah (Isaiah 45:1). He was a liberal-minded ruler who permitted the worship of many gods, which benefitted Judah, in that they could rebuild their Temple. The return from exile took place in stages, just as Daniel had been shown in the Prophecy of the 70 periods of 7 years. Ezra and Nehemiah were commissioned for different aspects of the return. This took place during the troubled times of the 7 weeks and the 62 weeks (Daniel 9:25). Ezra's initial ministry covered the first 49 years (7 periods of 7 years). Then opposition brought an end to the first phase of the return, until permission was granted by a new King of Persia, Darius I (a different Darius from Daniel's day). Then, stirred by the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah, building of the Temple resumed. It is thought to have been completed in 516 BC, marking 70 years since its destruction in 586 BC. Temple worship reinstated, and the Priestly ministry restarted. This ended the separation from God caused by the exile. The story of Esther coincides with this period of history, as do the ministries of several Prophets. We will weave a course through our Bible reading to enable all these incidents to be read in historical perspective.

Let us begin by reading from Zephaniah. This takes us back to the time of King Josiah, approximately 627 BC. Josiah was a good King who brought in many reforms in Judah prior to the fall of the nation under succeeding Kings. He heeded the prophetic warnings. Like other Prophets, Zephaniah spoke meaningful words for his own day, but also spoke of the distant future. His Prophecy is still relevant. The history of Judah returning from exile, in troubled times, reminds us of the present day return of the Jews to the Land of Israel. The Jews in Babylon remembered the words of the Prophets, just as they have been recalled over the 2000 years since the Romans destroyed the rebuilt Temple in 70AD. Zephaniah speaks in a way that is relevant to the history of Judah at the time of Josiah, through both of the exiles. The Prophecy also carries a mysterious layer of truth: God had even greater purposes in mind than the physical return to the Land. Let us therefore read Zephaniah as a preliminary to the history of the return, so that we hold in balance both the temporal and eternal purposes of God for His people. The return from exile is a shadow of the full restoration of God's Covenant family to the Everlasting Kingdom. Since the Fall of

Adam and Eve, the entire world is like a place of exile. Yeshua will return soon to bring in His Kingdom.

Day 1

Zephaniah Chapter 1. Josiah was eight years old when he became King of Judah (2 Kings 22:1). While he was growing up, the words of the Prophets were heard. They were words of great concern, and Josiah responded to the warnings. The Northern Kingdom had already fallen. Josiah set about his reforms. In hindsight we see that these Prophetic words have a layer of meaning beyond Josiah's day. Josiah's reforms brought blessing to Judah, but it was only a temporary reprieve from the inevitable exile. Using the imagery of the Passover, Zephaniah said that God would *search Jerusalem with lamps* (Verse 12). The custom at Passover was for each family to search their house for leaven, so that it would be fully clean for the Festival. Leaven became a metaphor for sin. God indicated, through Zephaniah, that He would cleanse the House of Judah. With hindsight we know that this was accomplished by Yeshua on the Cross: sin could not be fully dealt with by the temporary measures of King Josiah, good as he was. In Verse 14 comes the often repeated phrase, *the Day of the Lord*. This was partly fulfilled in 586 BC when Jerusalem fell. It will be fulfilled completely at the return of Yeshua.

Chapter 2. Here is a call to repentance for Judah and for all nations. Zephaniah speaks of the Lord's fierce anger. This warning was heeded by Josiah but Judah still suffered the wrath of God at the exile. End-time Prophecies point to a greater manifestation of God's wrath falling on the entire earth. It need not have been like this for Judah or for the world in the end times. The call to repentance still goes out across all nations so that God might turn back His wrath. Yeshua took the wrath of God upon Himself for all who believe in Him. Zephaniah brought the uncompromising warnings of God. God intended, and still intends, to deal with the sin of the world. There have been temporary measures, such as through Josiah's reforms, but God has purposed to remove sin from the earth *completely*. God's judgments on the nations is part of the process for this to be accomplished, difficult though it is for us to understand. Theoretically, it need not have been like this. When Judah went to exile the people were told to submit to Babylon and accept God's discipline, thus avoiding bloodshed. The Babylonians were shown that they were the agent of God's discipline but that they should not gloat – it was enough for Judah to be taken from their Promised Land. Neither Judah nor Babylon nor, indeed, the nations surrounding Judah, heeded the prophetic words and so a great slaughter occurred at the time of the exile. Similarly, God has foreseen that His prophetic warning will not be heeded by all people to the end of time. Just as Zephaniah's Prophecy shook Josiah to establish reforms in Judah, so the entire earth has time to repent before the woes fall on the world, but will this happen?

Chapter 3. Zephaniah 3:9 is thought, by some people, to have been fulfilled when the Hebrew language was brought back to be a living language in the Twentieth Century, through the work of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. We see a signpost to the greater fulfillment when worship of the Lord is established in the Eternal Kingdom. Zephaniah and other biblical Prophets foresaw a full and final

restoration of a remnant of God's people. The suffering of the exile in Babylon revealed the problem of sin that must be punished. The return from exile at the time of Cyrus was a shadow of the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel in our day. This, itself, is a beginning of God's final restoration of the remnant of His people for Eternal life.

With these layers of truth in mind, let us turn to the wonderful, though troubled, days of Judah's return from Babylon.

Day 2

Ezra Chapter 1. About 530 BC, Cyrus was stirred by God to begin the process whereby the exile would end. We have the record of his proclamation. He also restored to the Jews the articles from the Temple and presented them with further gifts. Imagine the joy that grew in the remnant who were to return. They had sung songs of mourning (Psalm 137), and now they would be singing songs of thankfulness to God once more (Psalm 126). Discipline has two opposite effects on people. Some are resentful and fall further away. Some are repentant and turn more fully back. The repentant remnant of Judah, Benjamin and Levi prepared themselves for the return to their Land.

Psalms 137, 96 and 126. These are among the Psalms that catch the sadness that turned to joy for the exiles. These Psalms are sung today in light of the rebirth of the Nation of Israel. They also anticipate the return of Yeshua. Read them today to give added significance to what we are reading in Ezra.

Ezra Chapter 2. Zerubbabel was the descendant of David's kingly line (1 Chronicles 3:19) who was to lead the first group of exiles back to Jerusalem. This was a time to put everything in order. A new day is best marked by care and attention to detail. The list of those returning with Zerubbabel is recorded for all time. Read the list as you would any memorial of people involved in a significant incident of history. Such lists are carved into granite on memorials around the world and such lists are in the records of Heaven concerning both the past and the future purposes of God. This was the procession that set out from Babylon to Jerusalem. Surely they remembered the Exodus from Egypt and resolved to begin afresh in the Land of their forefathers, which God had promised to Abraham and his descendants.

Chapter 3. It was, appropriately, the seventh month when they arrived. This was the month of special Feast Days (Leviticus 23:23-44). The Temple was not yet built nor the houses restored. How appropriate then to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles in temporary shelters. The day of blowing the shofar and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) were also to be celebrated in the seventh month. We do not know whether these were celebrated on this occasion, but the cycle of the Feast days began again immediately the exiles arrived back at the ruined city. How poignant this moment must have been. We cannot fail to see how this anticipates the return of Yeshua to a desolate earth, as the final fulfillment of the Feasts of the Seventh Month, the month of *Tishrei*. The Levites were identified, as were the builders, and a good start was made to the rebuilding of the Temple: the foundation was laid. Imagine the mixed emotions when this first stage was completed. Many of those who returned to Jerusalem were old men who remembered

the Temple before it was destroyed. As the gathered throng worshipped together, sounds of joy were mixed with sounds of weeping, that could be heard far away. Imagine it!

Chapter 4. Now began the problems that held up further building work for several years. Some of the local people, who had inhabited the Land during the exile, pretended that they wanted to help with the building of the Temple. They really wanted to hinder the process. Others spread doubt and discouragement. Right through the reigns of Cyrus and Cambyses, his successor, the building was hindered. This was what Daniel had prophesied would happen. It is instructive to consider this in relation to the rebuilding of Jerusalem in our day, which began in 1948. The same intrigues go on in our modern context as at the time of Zerubbabel. As we will see when we read the Book of Esther, these intrigues were rising among the remaining exiles too. An attempt to erase the Jews from the world was mounted by the spiritual powers behind Persia. This was repeated at the time of Antiochus Epiphanes and at other times, including the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the more recent efforts of the Nazi regime to exterminate the Jews. All these are beginnings of the troubles, pointing to the final great conspiracy foretold by Daniel, the last great attempt by satan to destroy the Covenant people of God. In Daniel 9:27, we learn that a false covenant will emerge in the end times when the antichrist seeks to destroy, by stealth, every remnant of biblical observance centred in Jerusalem. This will be in the middle of the last period of seven years prophesied by Daniel, when for a time there will be a false peace as a prelude to great earth-shaking events which are described, more fully, in the Book of Revelation.

Day 3

Let us turn now to the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah, sent by God to stir up the returning exiles to complete the Temple, at the time when Darius I came to power in Persia, in 522 BC.

Haggai Chapters 1 and 2. Over the years of resistance to the building of the Temple, the Jews set about restoring their own houses. They lost the vision that had brought them back to Jerusalem, but there was no sign of prosperity in the Land. Read the two chapters carefully. The words echo true to us today in whatever ministry we have. We too are servants of the Lord and builders in His Kingdom. Sometimes we are discouraged and the words of Haggai resonate with us, encouraging us to recognize the priorities of our lives and ministries. These words first stirred the returning exiles to restore the Temple at the centre of their nation, so that the Levitical order of service might be reinstated. We now know that this was a temporary means of approaching God, but to Zerubbabel it was the only way. God had further plans for the future and Haggai mentions this. Chapter 2, Verses 6 to 9 point to the ministry of Yeshua. For the time being Zerubbabel was to reestablish worship in accordance with Moses' instructions, waiting in faith for this final promise of God to be fulfilled in due time. The promise of the Messiah would bring fulfillment to the Temple and would come with shaking of both Heaven and earth. The writer to the Hebrews foresaw Haggai's Prophecy as pointing to the return of Yeshua (Hebrews 12:26-28).

When we study the genealogy of Yeshua in both Matthew 1 and Luke 3, despite the problem of identifying some other people in the two lists, Zerubbabel is in both genealogies linking Yeshua to David. He was chosen by God to reestablish the Jews back in the Land and to prepare the way for Messiah. This is how we can understand God's blessing in Chapter 2, Verses 22-23.

Zechariah Chapter 1. Zechariah's Prophecy is longer than Haggai's and sometimes more mysterious. It helps to understand the mysteries by reading the Book in context, as we are doing. His task was similar to Haggai's, to encourage the Jews to complete the Temple, and also to confirm God's plans for the future. Zechariah, saw visions of horses, representing spiritual powers that were bringing a period of peace to the earth. He was shown that God was definitely and zealously intent on rebuilding Jerusalem (Zion). Verse 15 reminds us of God's purposes in the exile of Judah. It was to be discipline for His people, but the nations overstepped the mark –*they helped but with evil intent*. There was a spiritual dimension to the rebuilding of the Temple and reestablishing worship. One result of renewed blessings on Judah would be a cloud of fear overshadowing the nations who had oppressed the Jews.

Chapter 2. *He who touched you touches the apple of His eye* (Verse 8) is a well-remembered verse, expressing God's care for Judah. Judah was to be raised up again as a testimony of God's faithfulness. There was also a longer term purpose, that the witness of Judah would enable God to win many people from other nations (Verse 11). This promise and purpose was laid, by the Prophet, before Zerubbabel and the returning exiles. In hindsight we know that this purpose would be fulfilled in the distant future through Yeshua. This Prophecy is still not completely

fulfilled even in our day. From the time of Zechariah, God has had this purpose in mind, using Judah as His witnesses, ultimately offering His Hand of salvation to all people through Yeshua, the King of the Jews.

Day 4

Zechariah Chapter 3. At one and the same time this was an encouragement to the High Priest being prepared to serve in the rebuilt Temple, and a pointer to Yeshua. God would take away the filthy garments of the exile and put on him the clothing of the High Priest. Satan, the adversary to God's people was rebuked in the vision. Like a stick taken from the fire, Judah was to be restored as a nation. The High Priest's name was Jehoshua, which is a permutation of Joshua who led the Children of Israel across the Jordan. It is also a pointer to Yeshua, who is symbolized as the Branch in this Prophecy. Jehoshua was to establish the priesthood as a shadow pointing to Yeshua, the promised Saviour. Yeshua would indeed take on filthy garments, which symbolize the sins of His people. He would confront satan and win the spiritual battle for the salvation of all who will live by faith in Him. Jehoshua was to be clothed as the new High Priest, a shadow of the time when Yeshua would rise from the pit of hell, where He suffered for us, to the status of High Priest, for all eternity.

Chapter 4. With more imagery, the Prophecy proceeds. Zerubbabel was again in focus. He was to learn from the prophetic vision of the Temple Menorah that he was not to trust his own strength but to establish Jerusalem in the strength of the Lord: *not by might nor by power but by My Spirit* (Verse 6). He was to understand that God had a purpose beyond the immediate restoration of the Jews to their homeland. He was using them for His own purposes in the entire earth. The two olive trees symbolized the Spiritual provision for the work God appointed them to do. The Menorah is symbolic of the light that shines from God's people. The olive trees speak of the power of the Holy Spirit in His people. This Prophecy was first given to Zerubbabel. It is also relevant to all of God's people who, abiding in Yeshua, are the Spiritual Temple whose pattern is understood through the order and structure of the physical Temple.

Chapter 5. Here is another vision relevant to our day. In Zerubbabel's day, God initiated a new move across the earth. These visions are mysterious. Because of this we often skim over them. We should not do that. This was God's chosen way to bring His Word to us. The vision of the scroll is interpreted as God pronouncing a curse on all who sin against, oppose, and speaking falsely about Him. The basket symbolized the fact that Babylon would rise again as a wicked nation. These visions were for Zechariah's time with ongoing meaning to the end of time, when the wicked will be finally judged. This will be when the revived antichristian Babylonian system will have come into prominence like a second Roman Empire. These words were spoken by God and are still in force.

Chapter 6. Horses are used symbolically in the Bible a number of times They symbolize spiritual power. Four horses are in Zechariah and four more are in Revelation, both sets symbolizing how spiritual power is being sent out across the world. We can understand from this that there is much more happening in the world than we perceive from our physical senses. We will not

understand all that God is doing, but we must be aware that He is at work “behind the scenes”. This brought much to bear on the importance of initiating the Priesthood through Jehoshua. The crowning of Jehoshua may have seemed symbolic, but it was far from that. There was a spiritual dimension. It was in fulfillment of God’s purposes, ultimately pointing to Yeshua. The last words of the Chapter are important. They show us the importance of obedience in our day as well as those of Zerubbabel: *and this shall come to pass if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God*. This points, among other things, to the ministry of Yeshua’s servants in preparing the way for Him. We must obey God’s commands and be His ministers, through prayer and action, to what He will bring about.

Day 5

Chapter 7. To this point, Zechariah's Prophecies were given over two years. They began in the second year of Darius and now it was the fourth year. Zechariah brought a review from God of why the Jews were exiled. They had not listened to the former Prophets who brought His warnings, and so they were scattered, as by a whirlwind. Now God was showing them that He had looked into their hearts through the seventy years of exile. They had fasted and yet their hearts were not fully towards Him. Verse 6 has an implication for us too. It comes as a rebuke to any of us who partake of the Communion meal wrong-heartedly: *When you eat and drink, do you not eat and drink for yourselves?* The words of the Prophets bear implications not just for Judah at the time of Zechariah, but for all of us. Consider the simple statement of the heart purpose of Torah in Verses 9 and 10.

Chapter 8. Read this Chapter with a number of interpretations simultaneously in mind. First Zechariah presented a wonderful picture of hope for the exiles restoring Jerusalem. God would again be in their midst. Imagine how this touched their hearts. This is also a picture of the City of Jerusalem and the surrounding cities in our day. It is a picture of the peace and interaction that God wants to plant in His people. Verse 23 looks ahead to a time when Christians will rediscover their historical and biblical link to the Jews. This is beginning to take place in our day, coinciding with the return of the Jews to Israel. This is a foretaste of the days when all God's people will be united as one, believers in Yeshua from the Gentile world firmly grafted into the Israel of God (Ephesians 2, Romans 11). It is also a picture of the eternal purposes of God beyond the troubles of this world that will not be over until Yeshua returns.

Chapter 9. The Chapter begins with the same warning to the surrounding nations as was given through other Prophets Then comes the wonderful Prophecy of the time when Yeshua rode into Jerusalem on a donkey (Verses 9 and 10), and the purpose that God had in mind when this would be fulfilled. Zechariah prophesied when Persia was the dominant empire. Soon Greece would rise. The first major defeat of Persia was at Marathon in 490 BC. This was followed by further victories until what was called the Golden Age began in 461 BC. Alexander finally overthrew the Persian Empire in approximately 336 BC. Through philosophy, science, arts and politics the Greek Empire has been admired since then, but God declared it to be a deceptive empire subtly against His ways: *I have raised up your sons, O Zion, against your sons, O Greece* (Verse 13) echoes from the time of Zechariah to our day. A battle line was drawn up by God when Judah returned from exile. Judah was to be the witness to the Living God who would defeat the spiritual powers of Greece. This battle goes on today, and many of us are waking up to it. As our "Jewish roots" are being reconsidered, we are discovering the way Greek philosophy and Roman tradition have infiltrated Christian theologies.

Chapter 10. Here is more imagery to confirm God's plan to establish both Israel and Judah as the central nation through whom His covenant purposes will be fulfilled. This Chapter is more clearly for the future than for the time of Zerubbabel. Verse 9 speaks of the dispersion of Israel at the time of Hoshea and also at the time of the Romans: *I will sow them among the peoples, and they shall remember Me in far countries; they shall live...* Then follows the promise of the return that is taking place in our day.

Day 6

Chapter 11. Zechariah spoke in mystical terms concerning a further judgment on Israel. Just as the earlier Prophets had spoken, he condemned false shepherds – the false leaders of the people. He seems to have acted out the Prophecy, breaking a stick before the people and asking for wages. All this was exactly fulfilled by Yeshua, who came and rebuked the false teachers of Israel and was betrayed by Judas for the 30 pieces of silver mentioned here. Furthermore, the money was then used to purchase a potter's field (Matthew 26:14-16, 27:3-10). Zechariah acted out this Prophecy in Jerusalem, which was about to be rebuilt. In the same City, Yeshua fulfilled the Prophecy, prior to the second destruction of the City.

Chapter 12. This is a very important Prophecy for the end times. Jerusalem was about to be rebuilt; many years later, it was to be rebuilt again. At that time it would cause all nations to behave foolishly as if drunk. This is what we are witnessing today, when weak leaders of nations pay little or no heed to biblical prophecy and consequently act as fools. Zechariah also pointed to the day when a great spiritual outpouring would fall on the Jewish people. This has not yet happened. If we fit Zechariah's Prophecy with other end-time Prophecies, we realize that there will arise a day of *Jacob's Trouble* (Jeremiah 30:7): *Alas! For that day is great, so that none is like it; it is the time of Jacob's trouble, but he shall be saved out of it.* The same picture of the end-times is portrayed by Daniel (Chapter 12: 1-3). Some people would like to consider the struggles to be over, but there is one more period of trouble coming such as has never been before. It will be a time when many of the Children of Israel will realize that *Yeshua* is Messiah, *looking on the One whom they pierced and mourning as for a firstborn* (Verse 10). This mourning will take place in Jerusalem, now inhabited once more by the Jewish people. Despite all the suffering, especially in the Second World War, the time of mourning for the death of Yeshua has not yet occurred. Just as Zechariah accurately foretold Yeshua's first coming, so he has foretold His second.

Chapter 13. At that time there will be fear across the entire earth. There will be a silence concerning the Word of God with people afraid to prophesy because of the powers and threats of the world government. Families will be divided. *Strike the Shepherd and the sheep will be scattered* (Verse 7) was fulfilled at Yeshua's crucifixion (Matthew 26:31). He will return to gather His sheep together again, but not until there has been yet another time of refining. It will take all of this to complete the purposes of God in covenant history. We do not like the details any more than the false prophets of Jeremiah's day could face up to the warnings that were being sent from God. Zechariah prophesied as the Jews were returning from exile. This brought emphasis to the message. If they could have looked forward with understanding to the end-times they may have believed the details more than many do today: they had recently suffered just as had been so clearly prophesied. For the time being, however, their straightforward task was to obey God and rebuild the Temple.

Chapter 14. With imagery that sounds like a battle involving nuclear weapons, Zechariah, so long ago, gave clear details of the world situation prior to the Lord's return. The false covenant of peace will have broken down. During the short-lived false peace, the antichrist will gather his forces and converge on Israel to attempt to annihilate the Jews once and for all. If the invasion of the Babylonians brought to pass the exact details that had been prophesied, we must take careful note of these details of the end times, watching and praying until they are fulfilled. It will be more than a physical battle. It will have supernatural dimensions. Finally, after all of this, Jerusalem will be established as the City of the Lord. Yeshua will reign from Zion and all the nations will celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. We must study this Prophecy, note carefully the teaching and wait for it to be fulfilled. It is unwise to force detailed interpretations ahead of time, because mistakes will be made. Zerubbabel's task was enough to accomplish and sufficient for the day: so is ours. With the encouragements of Haggai and Zechariah, Zerubbabel was to rebuild the Temple and trust the Lord day by day for the rest. We must do the same: the Temple is now the Living Temple of Yeshua's disciples.

Day 7

A Day for Rest and Further Reflection

Ezra Chapters 5 and 6. The return of the exiles to Zion may have seemed like the crossing of the Red Sea or the entry into Canaan across the Jordan when the waters parted: so must the coming of permission to recommence the building of the Temple. The Prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah coincided perfectly with the reign of Darius I. No sooner had the exiles taken a step of faith, in obedience to the Prophecies, that permission was granted for the rebuilding. We have a record of the letters sent to Darius and of the reply given. The Temple was completed in the sixth year of Darius. Passover was celebrated once more in Jerusalem, with a resolve among the people to live holy lives.

Passover has been celebrated every year in Jewish communities around the world. Encouraged by the account of Ezra Chapter 6, the Passover has always ended with the cry *next year in Jerusalem*. Passover cannot be fully celebrated among the nations, and the dream for a return to Zion has never gone away. Since 1948, when the Jews began to return to the Promised Land, the hope of Israel continues to flourish. Some want to rebuild the Temple again, because the Feasts cannot be fully celebrated without a Temple. God has a better plan than that, however, yet to be fulfilled through faith in Yeshua. This must be a prompt for all of Yeshua's disciples to pray, not only for the peace of Jerusalem (Psalm 122:6), but for Yeshua to make Himself known to His people – after all *He is our Peace* (Ephesians 2:14) and His people are the Temple.

Imagine the returned exiles singing the songs of ascents once more, just as they were able to before the exile. It is fitting to end this week, therefore, by reading some Psalms that will help us to understand the events of the day.

Read Psalms 128, 129,130,132, 134 and 135.
