

Daniel was overwhelmed and had to be strengthened repeatedly just to stand up and talk. This warrior angel was battling the spirit princes who stood behind the earthly kingdoms arrayed against God's people. He gave Daniel more details of Persia and Greece (astonishingly accurate as to what would happen in the 200s and 100s BC) in which proud kings would rise and be dashed to dust, and one particular king would exalt himself to divine status, ravage Israel, and finally be crushed. In those terrible times the people of God would suffer horribly, but "the people who know their God will firmly resist" and "those who are wise will instruct many" (Daniel 11:32-33). Then the angel spoke of the end of the age, when after cataclysmic distress the dead would be raised to either eternal life or eternal shame.

Kings and Kingdoms

The details of all this were opaque to Daniel. From our hindsight we can see the rise and fall of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and a fourth kingdom: Rome. We know of a wicked Greek king, Antiochus IV, who did set himself up as divine and persecute the Jews in Israel, but we also find elements of Daniel's visions that look past that king. It appears that Antiochus was going to be a foretaste of many rulers who would tyrannize God's people for refusing to worship what is human, and of a final ruler who would be the epitome of this type. In the face of such oppressors, the message of the visions is clear: "The people who know their God will firmly resist."

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Return to Jerusalem

Ezra 1-6, Haggai, Zechariah

First Return: 537 BC

"This is what Yahweh says to his anointed,
to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of
to subdue nations before him
and to strip kings of their armor. . . .
I will go before you
and will level the mountains;
I will break down gates of bronze
and cut through bars of iron. . . .
For the sake of Jacob my servant,
of Israel my chosen,
I summon you by name
and bestow on you a title of honor,
though you do not acknowledge me.
I am [Yahweh], and there is no other;
apart from me there is no God." (Isaiah 45:1-5)

A century and a half after Isaiah recorded these words, King Cyrus of Persia rode victorious through the gates of Babylon,

having absorbed most of the Near East into his empire. He had never even heard of the God of Israel, but Yahweh had selected him carefully nonetheless. Cyrus viewed politics and religion in a way utterly unlike his Babylonian predecessors. Convinced that sheer force could not make a large empire stable, he sought to win his diverse subjects' good will by tolerating their cultural distinctives. Instead of forcing everyone to worship Persian gods, he encouraged each nation to seek its own gods' favor for him. He sent people back to their homelands, returned confiscated religious objects, and financed the rebuilding of temples. This policy was so successful that his successors continued it.

So it was only months after Yahweh told Daniel his prayers were granted that Cyrus issued an edict that Jews in his empire could return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. A bare fifty years had passed since the city's destruction and not quite seventy since Daniel's capture; in response to prayer, Yahweh had mercifully trimmed the time of suffering.

Only about fifty thousand of the exiles decided to make the trek back to Judah. The rest—the majority—preferred to stay where they had settled, bought houses, and built businesses. After all, many had been born in Babylon and knew Judah only as a story.

But those who stayed behind were glad to help finance the resettlement. And Cyrus's treasurer counted out every last gold dish and silver bowl that Nebuchadnezzar had carried off from the ruined temple. And the returnees were on the whole a prosperous bunch with slaves and considerable personal funds. It was a promising start.

Even after several generations, most of the company could trace their lineage and even their village of origin; roots mattered when the covenant was so tied to family. A few priests who could not prove their ancestry were even barred from officiating because the leaders remembered what had happened in Moses' day when unauthorized priests tried to claim the office. For fifty years and more, the priests and Levites had been poring over Moses and the prophets, analyzing what had gone wrong. This time they were determined to take Yahweh seriously and do everything by the Book.

Temple Foundations

The returnees took about three months to settle into villages around Judah. Then in the autumn of 537 BC they gathered in ruined Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. The temple site was a heap of rubble, but they rebuilt the altar and began offering the sacrifices precisely as laid down in Leviticus, the priestly handbook. If their primary reason for existing as a people was to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6) as a model to the other nations, then worshipping Yahweh took top priority.

Hence, on top of planting their first crops in a land quite different from Babylon, the community's chief task that first wet winter was to line up craftsmen and material to begin rebuilding the temple in the spring. There was a bittersweet celebration when the foundation was laid in May of 536: the young shouted for joy, while the old who had seen Solomon's temple wept.

Everything was going great until a delegation arrived from Samaria (the region that used to be called Israel but was now named after its former capital). They were pleased as punch to welcome their new neighbors and help them build a Yahweh temple. Why, they'd been worshipping Yahweh ever since they came to Samaria! But the Jews knew that these Samaritans were equal opportunity religionists imported from all over the Near East by the Assyrians. They would be glad to support a Yahweh cult along with their other gods and thereby slowly assimilate the well-heeled newcomers into their system.

So the Jews turned the delegation down flat. They welcomed with open arms anyone who wanted to join them to serve Yahweh exclusively, but "open-mindedness" and "many paths to the divine" had gotten the covenant nation in hot water the last time, and they had no intention of repeating that mistake.

Rebuffed, the Samaritans showed their true colors. They launched a campaign of intimidation, ridicule, and threats to discourage the rebuilders. They even hired professional help in cutting supply lines and causing trouble with the legal authorities. They had no intention of letting a distinctly Jewish state become a power in the region.

The campaign succeeded, but only because the Jews were

not really prepared for the realities of recolonization. They had marched out full of idealism, their ears ringing with the words of Isaiah and Ezekiel about restoration. They probably expected the land to sprout abundance of its own accord, and certainly to support them in the comfortable lifestyle they had been carving out in Babylon. A few poor crop years and a little scorn from their neighbors, and they were no longer in the mood to build a temple. Priorities shifted to self; when the people had nicely paneled houses and full stomachs, then it would be time again to think about building a house for Yahweh.

The Temple Restarted: 520 BC

So things sat for sixteen years. In the meantime, Cyrus died in 530 BC, and his son Cambyses secured the throne by murdering his brother and hiding the body. Cambyses had soon swallowed Egypt into his empire, but then he died suddenly in 522. In the ensuing struggle for power, one of Cambyses' officers and distant relatives, Darius, gained the upper hand. But he had all kinds of trouble stabilizing his reign; for two years he contended with rebel factions, two of which claimed to be led by Cambyses' vanished brother. It was a credit to Darius' talent and toughness that he finally managed to impose order by the middle of 520.

In August of that year Yahweh knew the time was ripe to prod His people back into action. A series of disastrous harvests because of drought and hail had gotten their attention; the despondent community was a pale shadow of the cocky crew who first set out from Babylon seventeen years earlier.

A prophet named Haggai announced that the crops would keep failing until the people started building Yahweh's house instead of pouring everything into their own. A temple was a national focal point—an essential if Judah was to remain distinct as Yahweh's nation against intense pressures to merge into the surrounding culture.

Haggai's calm reasoning stung into action the community's two leaders: Governor Zerubbabel (a grandson of King Jehoiachin, and therefore a potential Davidic king) and Joshua (or Jeshua) the high priest. They promoted the building project in

earnest, while Haggai cheered them on: "Be strong!" "I am with you, declares Yahweh."

To those who didn't think much of the stark brick-and-beam structure after the splendor of Solomon's temple and those in Babylon, Haggai painted a grand picture of how Yahweh would shake the heavens and the earth and overturn kingdoms. "The desired of all nations" would come, the prophet said, and the glory of this house would be greater than that of Solomon's. From the day the rebuilding began, the harvests would start turning around. And most importantly, Yahweh had chosen Zerubbabel as His "signet ring," His pledge of full payment on the promises about the Son of David.

Zechariah

Haggai delivered just four messages in four months; once construction was well underway, his job was over. But that same autumn a young priest named Zechariah took up the task of encouraging the builders. The following February he received a series of strange visions—angelic horsemen, horns and craftsmen, a woman in a basket—symbolic messages to spur the Jews on. Yahweh was going to overturn the oppressing nations, cleanse Judah, and fill Jerusalem to overflowing. Zechariah saw Joshua in his high priestly robes bloodstained with the crimes of his people; the robes were stripped off of him and replaced with clean ones, and Yahweh repeated His promise to send the Son of David: "I will remove the sin of this land in a single day" (Zechariah 3:9). Did anyone wonder what would have to take place on that single day to remove the land's sin?

Zechariah saw two olive trees providing oil for a lamp: king and priest, anointed with Yahweh's Spirit, fueling the holy service of His people. He saw Joshua crowned as king: the royal and priestly offices intermingled in a way impossible under Moses' law, since kings had to come from Judah and priests from Levi.

The meaning of all this was not too clear, especially statements like, "I [Yahweh] will live among you and you will know that [Yahweh] Almighty has sent me to you" (2:11). God sending God?

But on the whole, it sounded as though any day now Persia

would be overthrown, Jerusalem would be again the resplendent capital of an independent nation, and a son of David would reign. Some of the prophecies gave the distinct impression that Zerubbabel himself might be that king (although what to make of a king with a priestly role of cleansing sin?).

In any case, it was all upbeat enough to keep the builders going when the next round of threats to their project surfaced. Another delegation arrived, this time from the Persian provincial governor. The empire had been in disarray for two years, and any sign of a local uprising — such as building fortifications with large blocks of stone — demanded investigation. The Jews quaked when the governor made out a full report, including names of those involved, and sent it to the Persian capital.

But Yahweh had everything under control. First He moved the governor to let the Jews continue building until a verdict came from King Darius. Then He moved Darius to the same attitude as his grandfather. Cyrus's original decree authorizing state aid in the building of the Jewish temple was found in the archive of a remote Persian city. So Darius ordered the governor not only to permit the construction, but even to finance it out of local taxes. Darius even decided to pay for the daily offerings so that both these citizens and their God would support his regime. Palestine was a key region, what with Egypt so volatile, and it was in Darius's best interest to please his subjects so easily.

With ample funds, the Jews finished the temple in less than three and a half years. Zechariah kept up morale in Yahweh's double-edged fashion. On the one hand, he predicted extravagant blessings: Jerusalem full; all the exiles restored; abundant crops; non-Jews streaming to Jerusalem to seek Yahweh. But there was a catch. Zechariah relayed Yahweh's instructions to the people:

"These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this." (8:16-17)

Sharing in this glorious future depended on the people's response.

Hope Deferred

Nonetheless, it was a bright day in 516 BC when Joshua and Zerubbabel dedicated the new temple, just seventy years since the destruction of the first one. Those who remembered the opulence of Solomon's temple found the bare-bones replacement disappointing; there was no gold, one lampstand instead of ten, and even the ark of the covenant had been lost and had to be replaced by a slab of stone. The dedication ceremony squeezed the impoverished community to the limit, but even so it was stark compared to Solomon's lavish affair (700 animals versus 22,000). Yet although the kingless nation under Persian domination was a pale shadow of its former glory, the people were full of hope.

But year passed into year; Jerusalem remained in ruins and Darius showed no signs of falling off his throne. To keep the people going, Yahweh gave Zechariah an even wilder series of prophecies, basically encouraging but bewildering in their contradictions. He told of an army (the Greeks?) sweeping through Palestine and routing Judah's enemies, then the Jews battling victoriously against the Greeks, and more glimpses of national greatness. The people would abandon their corruption; Yahweh would come Himself to battle against their enemies and reign as King in their midst; and the nation would be so pure that even the horses' gear would bear the insignia of the high priest's turban: "Holy to Yahweh." Yet the Davidic king would come on a donkey, a symbol of peace, rather than on a war horse when he triumphed over the oppressors. How could a man of peace defeat Israel's enemies? And Zechariah also saw the king as a shepherd rejecting his rebellious flock and its greedy shepherds, and tossing away his wages: thirty pieces of silver, the price of a slave.

With hindsight we know Zechariah was seeing jumbled-together events that would happen over the course of one century, five centuries, even twenty-five. Why didn't Yahweh spell things out more clearly? The Jews got the understandable impression that "soon" meant "in our lifetime," or certainly not centuries and millennia away. When Zerubbabel died and nothing earth shattering seemed to be happening, the Jews not surprisingly cooled in their spiritual fervor. They kept up the temple sacrifices,

of course, but it all became more and more a matter of religious duty than of passionate devotion.

Yahweh couched His messages as He did, knowing that His people would grow fickle through disappointment. What if He had told them back in 520 BC, "Build this temple now, even though you're going to live in poverty and oppression for five and a half centuries until the King comes, and even then he won't be the military general you wanted, you'll sell him for a slave-price, and you'll have another couple thousand years to struggle through"? Surely the Jews would have thrown up their hands right then and said, "This is too much. What's in it for us?" So instead, Yahweh told them just enough to encourage them, just enough to give them a chance to respond *if* they trusted Him. He could have burst in right then, ousted Persia, and dropped the Jews into the lap of luxury. But that would have been just what Satan had said about Job: Yahweh buys love. He didn't want the kind of love that had to be bought; He wanted the Abrahams who would hang on in the dark.

This generation of Jews were not Abrahams. After Zechariah's final prophecies the Bible falls silent on that generation, and we hear nothing more of the restored community for sixty years. By that time, rot and complacency had settled in, and while Yahweh was not finished with the nation, there was no more hinting that glory was just around the corner.

What would have happened if that generation had held faith through the years of hard work and waiting under foreign oppression?

Looking Toward the Future

*Ezra 4:6-23, 7:1-10:44;
Nehemiah; Esther; Malachi*

Esther

Meanwhile, the scene shifts back to the Persian capital, where Yahweh was beginning to deal with a quiet threat to His people's existence.

Darius was a superb leader. He solidified the Persian Empire from India to northern Sudan, improved the bureaucracy, instituted the use of coins, standardized weights and measures, introduced a new law code, and took a strong interest in his subjects' welfare. But he also imposed burdensome taxes to support his administration and building projects, such as his lavish palace at Susa, his new capital.

Darius's son Xerxes (pronounced "Zerk-seez") succeeded him on his death in 486 BC. The new king was bold, ambitious, handsome, stately, and thoroughly self-indulgent. The empire was crumbling under Darius's taxes, but Xerxes did not have his father's diplomatic skill. He burned Athens, took sacred treasures from Egypt, destroyed temples in Babylon after a revolt, and denied a Jewish request to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He seduced his niece, abandoned his sister-in-law to death for rebuffing his advances, and wiped out his brother's whole