

# Paradise to Promised Land

A Bible study about the history of the Old Testament

## The Return

Israel's return to Jerusalem makes up the last chronological event before the arrival of the New Testament (or the Intertestamental period). This homecoming also marks a promise of God to save a remnant of his followers and to reestablish worship of God.

- **When have you returned home or to a familiar setting after a long absence? Describe what that was like.**

## Haggai: Major Aspects of the Text

Haggai is the first book of hope for Israel. This prophet who was likely born in Babylon writes to the people of Israel in order to inspire them to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Haggai's time is very specific as he points out even the day that God comes to Haggai with the orders for prophecy. This time period is roughly about two years after the initial decree from Cyrus (a.k.a. Darius) to return to Jerusalem.

- Read Haggai 1:1-8

## Zechariah: Major Aspects of the Text

Zechariah is first written around the same time as Haggai, only about two months later according to each of the prophet's accounts of when God first came to them. Zechariah, however, was likely a longer-term prophet and wrote for years after his initial prophecy (while Haggai seems to have written a singular prophecy). While we know little about Haggai's background, we know that Zechariah was the son of a priest named Iddo who is listed as one of the important priests to return to Jerusalem. Zechariah's content is apocalyptic, having many visions and revelations.

- Read Zechariah 3:1-10

## Ezra: Major Aspects of the Text

Ezra is the first of two books that describe the return of the Jews to Israel, the other being Nehemiah. Ezra is written from the perspective of the priest Ezra who is the religious leader of the returning exiles. The book is split into two sections: the first part of Ezra being about the Jewish king Zerubbabel, the second being about Ezra being released from Babylon in order to begin Israel's worship again.

Ezra tells us that the first exiles to return came in a mass of about 42,000 people. These first returners built an altar and initial temple in Jerusalem where they celebrated their first Passover in Jerusalem. Later, Ezra arrives with the second set of about 2,000 returners. These returners begin teaching the people of Israel – not only those who have returned but those who were left or emigrated to Jerusalem during the Exile. Much of this teaching is about the forbidding of intermarriage which unfortunately was taken out of context during certain periods of Christian history.

- Read Ezra 1:1-4 and 3:1-7

## Nehemiah: Major Aspects of the Text

Nehemiah is written in the same period as Ezra and in some collections of Hebrew scripture is even combined with the book of Ezra, although it is clearly a different book from a different author. Nehemiah views the return of the Jews through the lens of Nehemiah who served as cupbearer to Darius/Cyrus and seems to have been one of the proponents that swayed the Persian king to allow the Jews to return.

As a first person account, Nehemiah is less concerned with sweeping statements about the historical overview of the return and more concerned with narratives about the return. From Nehemiah we learn the difficulty and political intrigues that surrounded the return to Israel.

- Read Nehemiah 2:1-8

## Esther: Major Aspects of the Text

Esther is a book that is somewhat like another female protagonist of the Bible, Ruth. Esther gives us a picture of the time during Israel's return, but the events of the book happen in Persia rather than in Jerusalem. Esther shows that there is still a Jewish population living in Persia, in the capital city of Susa. In the story, Esther is selected as a replacement queen after the rebellion of Vashti who refuses to appear at the banquet of her husband, King Ahasuerus. The story of Esther is one of political intrigue as Haman, a prince of the king, seeks to eliminate Jews living in Susa. Esther is able to rescue her fellow Jews by a bold move which destroys Haman.

- Read Esther 4:12-17

## Malachi: Major Aspects of the Text

Malachi is the final book to be written in the canon of the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures. A prophet, Malachi urges the returning Jews to covenant faithfulness including offerings and sacrifices. Malachi reminds the returned people of Jerusalem of what happened when they strayed before and how it may happen again. Additionally, Malachi points to a time in the future when a final "Day of the Lord" will come that will be signaled by the return of the prophet Elijah.

- Read Malachi 4:1-6

## No Bible Study Next Sunday

We will begin again on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter, April 24.