

HOW SURE THE SCRIPTURES ARE!

God's vital, urgent word,
as true as steel, and far
more sharp than any sword:
so deep and fine,
at his control
they pierce where soul
and spirit join.

They test each human thought,
refining like a fire;
they measure what we ought
to do and to desire:
for God knows all –
exposed it lies
before his eyes
to whom we call.

Let those who hear his voice
confronting them today,
reject the tempting choice
of doubting or delay:
for God speaks still –
his word is clear,
so let us hear
and do his will!

CHRISTOPHER IDLE
© AUTHOR/JUBILATE HYMNS



KENDAL
Autumn 2006

ALL SCRIPTURE IS GOD-BREATHED

AN OLD TESTAMENT OVERVIEW



6

JEREMIAH, EZEKIEL & LAMENTATIONS. EZRA & NEHEMIAH. HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH & MALACHI

The exile and return of God's people

"The prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven."

1 PETER 1:10-12



KENDAL

EXILE AND RETURN

A VERY BAD KING • Manasseh. (2 Kings 21:3-6, 9-16) During his evil reign Judah became little different from any pagan nation.

A VERY GOOD KING • Josiah. (2 Kings 22 and 23). He tried to stop the rot but died young fighting the Egyptians. His successors did not follow his example and Judah ended up paying tribute to the new superpower, Babylonia.

A VERY GOOD PROPHET • Jeremiah faithfully, though at times reluctantly, preached that Judah had passed the point of no return and that Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed and the people taken into exile in Babylon. The popular idea, encouraged by false prophets, was that the Temple was indestructible and that God would never abandon it. Jeremiah preached that it was useless to trust in the Temple and that judgement was inevitable. For this he was hated and persecuted.

EXILE – PART ONE • When King Jehoiakim refused to pay tribute to **Nebuchadnezzar** the Babylonian army invaded and besieged Jerusalem. Jehoiakim surrendered and he and the cream of the population were taken as exiles and hostages to Babylon. These included **Daniel and Ezekiel**.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN JERUSALEM ... Those who were left breathed a sigh of relief, but Jeremiah continued to preach that God's judgement hadn't finished yet. Nebuchadnezzar would be back! He also wrote to the exiles in Babylon telling them to settle down and make the best of it because it would be 70 years before they came home (Jer. 29).

ANOTHER VERY GOOD (though slightly odd) PROPHET • While Jeremiah preached his message in Jerusalem, **Ezekiel** was called by God to preach the same message to the exiles in Babylon. God had left his Temple. It was doomed.

EXILE – PART TWO • The last King of Judah, **Zedekiah**, withheld tribute from Babylon and once again Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem. This time he finished the job. After a long and terrible siege which reduced the population to starvation, the city was destroyed, including the Temple. King Zedekiah's sons were put to death as he watched and then his eyes were put out before he was taken, along with the rest of the population, into exile in Babylon. This was a disaster of massive proportions. It seemed that God had totally abandoned Judah. They now had no land, no king, no Temple, no sacrifices. Once again they were slave labour in a foreign land with false gods. The Exodus had been put into reverse!

The **Book of Lamentations** expresses how they felt. See also e.g. Psalms 137 & 79.

CONDITIONS IN BABYLON • Not as bad as they had been in Egypt. Some Jews rose to positions of influence (e.g. Daniel). The Exile led to the Jews sticking together and emphasising what made them different. They stopped worshipping other gods and they had to learn to worship God without a temple. Growing emphasis on the Law. Much of the Old Testament gathered together at this time. The development of the synagogue.

MESSAGES OF HOPE • The prophets who had preached judgement now began to preach salvation and hope. God would forgive Israel. She would return. There would be **a new Exodus** (Isaiah), **a new covenant** (Jeremiah 31), **a new heart** (Ezekiel 36). The Spirit would breathe **new life** into the dead bones of Israel. (Ezekiel 37) There would be **a new Temple** from which a river of life would flow (Ezekiel 47).

RETURN • In 538BC the Babylonian empire was defeated by the Persians led by **Cyrus the Great**. He immediately issued a decree allowing all deported peoples to return to their homelands and follow their own religious traditions. This included the Jews (Ezra 1:1-4). This was as significant as the Exodus from Egypt though not as spectacular.

Many Jews had become prosperous and comfortable in Babylon and decided to stay where they were. "Those whose hearts God had moved" made the long and dangerous journey home to a devastated land into which foreigners had now moved. They experienced great opposition but laid a foundation for a new Temple and built an altar and began to offer sacrifices (Ezra 3). Work on the Temple stopped for about 15 years but with the encouragement of the prophets **Haggai and Zechariah** the Temple was eventually rebuilt.

However the Jews at this time give an impression of being discouraged and depressed. The foreigners who had settled in their territory during the Exile were a constant problem. The walls of Jerusalem remained broken down. Some of the Jewish leaders began to intermarry with local foreigners.

But help was on the way. Two men who had remained in the Persian empire were led by God to return. **Ezra**, a great priest and scribe, led the people in a spiritual reformation, and **Nehemiah**, a great leader, organised the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and also supported Ezra's reforms.

However, at the end of the Old Testament the impression of discouragement and depression remains. The priests neglected their duties or carried them out in a half-hearted manner. The tithes were neglected (**Malachi**). The Jews remained a tiny backwater of the Persian empire.

The great hopes of the prophets had yet to materialize. God's people were still waiting for the King, the Temple, the Spirit and the salvation they had been promised.