

RETURNING FROM EXILE (Secular Eyes and Eyes of Faith?)

Lesson 57

Are you a materialist? I am not asking whether you like to shop. I am asking whether you see the world simply as a collection of matter. The well-known Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) thought there were four elements that comprised all of nature – earth, water, air, and fire. Another perspective came from Democritus (c.460-c.370 BC), a lesser-known Greek philosopher who slightly preceded Aristotle. Democritus advanced a theory on the building blocks of all of nature using the Greek word *temno* (τεμνο), which meant, “to cut.” The Greek would add “a” (α) to the beginning of a word to mean “not” or to make the negative of the word. In this way, for example, the word *theist*, one who believes in God, changes into the word *atheist*, meaning one who does *not* believe in God. When “a” was added to *temno*, the Greeks made a word pronounced *atomos* (ατομος), meaning “indivisible” or “unable to be cut.” Democritus used this word, asserting that all things were made up of “atoms.” He considered this to be a physical substance that could not be physically divided. Democritus’s idea did not get a significant following for over 2,000 years, Aristotle’s theory of the four elements held sway until the 1700’s.

By the 1800’s, most scientists embraced the atom as the basic building block of all things. The atom was considered the smallest particle of matter, although by the mid-1800’s scientists were wondering if even that were true. In 1897, when British physicist Sir Joseph Thomson was experimenting with light in a cathode ray tube, his experiments demonstrated that there were sub-atomic particles (smaller pieces of atoms) that were over 1000 times smaller than an atom. He called the particles “corpuscles,” but fortunately science settled instead on the label “electrons.” In his journal, Thomson wrote that the particles were “the long-sought basic unit of all matter in the universe.”¹ He was quickly proven wrong, as sub-atomic science developed rapidly. By 1932, scientists determined that “protons” and “neutrons” were particles that made up an atom’s nucleus, and many thought the atom was complete.

Of course, what is “complete” in science is rarely complete! Another particle was soon discovered (the “photon”) and then an antimatter particle was discovered (the “positron”). Before long, there were “neutrinos,” “muons,” “pions,” “kaons,” “gluons,” and more. There are now over 150 sub-atomic particles. To better classify and understand these particles, scientists put together models that

¹ Thomson, J. J., “Cathode Rays”, *The Electrician* 39, 104, also published in *Proceedings of the*

explained groupings and reactions of the sub-atomic particles. These “quarks” and “leptons” add to an already dense subatomic world!

As we continue to discover the finer component parts of the universe, I re-ask the question: Are you a materialist? Do you believe that all there is in nature is composed of these physical components? Can feelings be explained by the chemical reactions in the brain? Of course, the brain is composed, ultimately, of atoms and sub-atomic particles, so do these material components explain feelings? Do they explain beliefs? Do they explain faith?

Is there anything else in the world beyond the physical substances that scientists have struggled for millennia to understand?

I believe the Christian answer is yes. There is a spiritual aspect to existence that is not simply material. Jesus spoke of the need to be born again, not of physical matter, but of spirit (Jn 3:6-7 “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”). Jesus promised that after his ascension, the Father would send the Holy Spirit, and this Spirit would indwell and empower the believer (Jn 14-16). Paul explained that there is a world of spiritual insight and understanding that one cannot grasp without the indwelling Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2). The Biblical understanding is that there is a physical world, but there is also YHWH God who exists independently from that world, even as he moves in the world toward an assured destiny. Confronting the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus told her “God is Spirit” (Jn 4:23). When God moves in the world, he does not make a “material” appearance. He is not a grouping of atoms and subatomic particles. God’s work in the natural order of things can be spiritual or physical. In the physical world, he can move atoms about (or create or destroy atoms) contrary to the laws of nature. He can also move atoms about through the laws of nature. A movement of atoms need not be contrary to the laws of nature to be moved by the hand of God. From a Biblical historical perspective, God could have exiled Judah in violation of nature’s laws simply by a Star Trek-esque beaming of Judah into Babylon. Instead, we read that God used Nebuchadnezzar as a tool in executing the exile. This was God working in and through the natural order of things, but it was no less an act of God.

We have at least two perspectives then. We have a perspective that sees the physical in the world. This perspective sees the world as God has set it up. It sees the laws of nature and the behavior of man. For many, however, even this simple explanation, cries out that there is something more. Some label it the paradox of free will, others see it as unexplainable meaning in life, but most recognize that there is something of meaning beyond the rotation of atoms and the laws of physics. This is a real challenge of faith in the 21st century. As we become more

knowledgeable about the composition of things, understanding better the particularities of the basic blocks of nature, we understand easily earthly cause and effect. Where then is there room for faith? British physicist Stephen Hawking made news with his recent book, *The Grand Design*, prompting headlines like:

Stephen Hawking: God did not create Universe²

As science advances its understanding, does it mean that all there is are physical elements? Does it sustain the materialist perspective?

In the historical events that have focused our study recently, we have seen the Bible project a perspective onto human history that sheds divine light onto events. The Bible sees unfolding history as an interaction between the physical (including the decisions and actions of humanity and the elements), and the spiritual. The Bible provides the human dimension, but also sees the hand of the divine.

As we consider the further captivity and begin studying the return from exile, we have a chance to look at things from both perspectives, from secular eyes as well as eyes of faith. The challenge of faith is to see behind the secular with a glimpse into the divine. The difficulty with educated 21st century humanity is the understanding that both in *and* beyond the quarks of existence lies the reality of the divine.

BACKGROUND

In the last lesson, we began discussing the sixth century BC as the heart of Karl Jasper's "Axial Age."³ This century saw the birth of Buddha and Confucius in the East. It saw the birth of Heraclitus in Greece. It saw the transition of Judah from independence into dispersion. Judah was exiled into Babylon, leaving some behind in a desolated and destroyed country. A number of other Judeans fled for safety into Egypt.

In the previous lesson, we concentrated our study on the life of the exiles in Babylon, looking at three psalms that issued forth from those exiles. In this follow-up lesson, as we begin to consider the return of the Jews from exile, we

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11161493>.

³ German philosopher Karl Jaspers labeled the time period between the ninth and third centuries BC as the "axial age." His term gained acceptance among historians of religion because formative thinkers in Greece, the Middle East, India, and China emerged with thoughts and philosophies still relevant today. See, Jaspers, Karl, *The Origin and Goal of History* (Routledge 1953).

consider also those Jews who stayed behind in Judah and Samaria as well as the Jews who fled to Egypt. We also look into the history of events in Babylon that led to the order allowing the Jews to return.

The Land of Judah and Samaria

The Bible does not give us great detail on the land of Judah and Samaria during the exile. We know that there were Jews left behind, as explained in 2 Kings 25:22,

And over the people who remained in the land of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had left, he appointed Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, governor.

Archaeology has shown that the major cities and towns of Judah were destroyed in this time period. This is consistent with the Biblical narrative of Nebuchadnezzar's destruction. However, archaeology also shows the presence of continued habitation in the land, also consistent with the Biblical narrative. Of course nature abhors a vacuum, and to the extent there was one, the neighboring tribes and peoples no doubt would have moved in to take advantage of fertile fields, groves, orchards, and grazing lands. During this time, for example, the Edomites moved into Southern Judah.⁴ Those Jews that stayed behind, without a priesthood and without a temple, were doubtless challenged to maintain a pure YHWH faith, especially when they were missing a pure one to start with! Not surprisingly, once the Jews returned from exile, they were afraid of "the peoples of the lands" (Ezra 3:3). They did not see the Jews left behind as brothers and sisters.⁵

As Scripture relates the exile, Nebuchadnezzar took leaders, the educated, and those able to foment a rebellion.

The Jews living in Babylon represented the cream of their country's political, ecclesiastical, and intellectual leadership—which is why they were selected for deportation.⁶

⁴ Albright, W. F., "Ostrakon No. 6043 From Ezion-Geber," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 82 (April 1941) at 14.

⁵ Many undoubtedly lost their Jewish purity through intermarriage with neighboring people. This gave additional rise to subsequent Jewish abhorrence of the Samaritan as a cancerous growth from Israelite purity.

⁶ Bright, John, *A History of Israel*, (Westminster John Knox 2000), at 345.

Most of those left behind were likely uneducated⁷, and not surprisingly, did not seem to keep any genealogy of purity as to their lineage. To the contrary, most of the Jews in Babylonian exile, did keep a genealogical record, especially those associated with the priesthood (*see, e.g.,* Ezra 59-63). These genealogies were used as the returning Jews sought to settle in their proper areas and roles.

The Jews in Egypt

Over the history of Abraham and his offspring, the Israelites have had a love/hate relationship with Egypt. Egypt was a source of refuge for Abram and Sarai when famine hit Canaan, as related in Genesis 12. Even into the New Testament times, Israelites would flee to Egypt if it seemed the safest or best place to be. Matthew 2:13-15 relates the story about the infant Jesus:

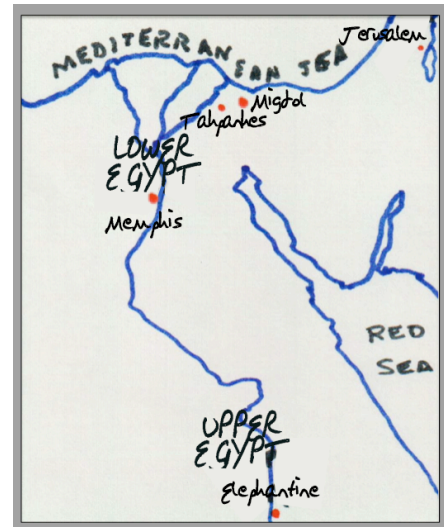
Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

During the Babylonian onslaught, undoubtedly some fled to Egypt. Afterwards, upon the murder of the Babylonian appointed governor Gedaliah, 2 Kings 25:26 explains that a massive group of Judeans,

Both great and small, and the captains of the forces arose and went to Egypt, for they were afraid of the Chaldeans [Babylonians].”

⁷ That is not to say they were poor and unable to live for the duration of the exile. Immediately after the war, there was doubtless starvation and difficulty living, as attested to in Lamentations. Quickly, however, the farms, orchards, and vineyards would restore a measure of wealth and food to local inhabitants. See, generally, Lipschitz, Oded, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, (Eisenbrauns 2005), at 104ff; Lipschitz, Oded. *Judah and the Judeans in the neo-Babylonian period*, (Eisenbrauns, 2003).

The prophet Jeremiah was forced to go with this group of Judeans. Jeremiah 43 gives the fuller story explaining that this group settled in Tahpanhes, which is in the Eastern portion of the Nile Delta. Jeremiah 44 then discusses that other Judeans were settled at Migdol, Memphis and “Pathros,” which is “Upper Egypt.” When referencing Egypt, “Upper Egypt” is further South, which to many would ordinarily be called “lower” but the reference is to the source of the Nile. Upper Egypt is further “up” the Nile from Lower Egypt. Of special interest is an island on the Nile in Upper Egypt known as “Elephantine.” Archaeology has indicated this area held a military colony of Jews that evidently played a role in defending Upper Egypt from Ethiopian invaders. Famed Biblical archaeologist William F. Albright was convinced that the evidence established this colony of Jewish mercenaries in or about 586 BC. This places the settlement in conjunction with the flights out of Judah during the early stages of the Babylonian exile. A great number of papyri have been unearthed from Elephantine, most of them in Aramaic. From these papyri, the worship reveals an interesting syncretism, typical of the Biblical habits of pre-exile Judah and Samaria. The worship of the Jewish colony adored YHWH, but other deities as well. The colony inhabitants called themselves “Jews,” and their practice included the construction of a temple, complete with sacrifices and priests.



Scholars can construct a good bit of the life of one priest named *Ananiah*. There are eight papyrus rolls that are an archive of the Ananiah’s family, detailing information about his wife, children, and work.⁸ Another papyrus letter on file in the Egyptian Museum of Berlin gave instructions for celebrating the Passover.

The Jewish community at Elephantine continued through the restoration period of Jews returning from Babylon. While undoubtedly some Jews returned to Judah when resettlement occurred, Jewish life in Egypt continued to thrive even into the New Testament times. It was in Alexandria, Egypt (further “down” the Nile in Lower Egypt) that the Jewish Scriptures were translated into Greek likely starting in the third century BC.⁹

The Events in Babylon

⁸ This set of papyri is on display in an exhibition entitled “Jewish Life in Ancient Egypt: A Family Archive from the Nile Valley” in the Brooklyn Museum of Art. A book by the same name was published by the Museum in 2002.

⁹ Jobes, Karen and Silva, Moises, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, (Paternoster 2000), at 31ff.

Most Biblical attention is given about the exiles in Babylon; however, even there the information is slight during the exile. The information increases after the exile through the historical narrative of Ezra. Through the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the exiles lived in an expectation of a later restoration. Jeremiah 32:6-15 related Jeremiah buying a field at God's instruction to confirm prophetically to the people that after captivity, "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." Ezekiel prophesied within Babylon that God would "gather them [the people of covenant] from all around and bring them to their own land" (Ezek. 37:21).

Nebuchadnezzar continued to reign in Babylon until his death in 562. His son Amel-Marduk, called Evil-Merodach in the Bible, succeeded him to the throne (2 Kings 25:27-30). The history in Kings ends with this king, with the last three verses of 2 Kings:

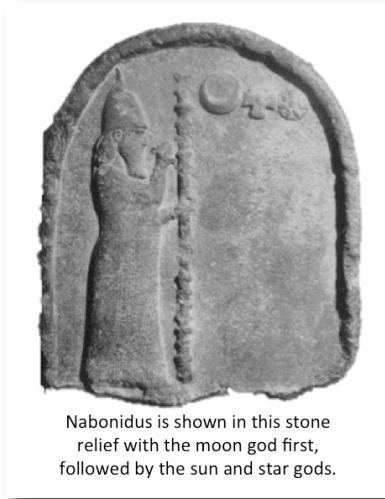
And in the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, Evil-merodach king of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, graciously freed Jehoiachin king of Judah from prison. And he spoke kindly to him and gave him a seat above the seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiachin put off his prison garments. And every day of his life he dined regularly at the king's table, and for his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, according to his daily needs, as long as he lived.

It was good that the king liberated Jehoiachin, and the liberation may have led some to think the exile was about to end; however, such was not the case. Amel-Marduk reigned only two years before his assassination in a coup by his brother-in-law Nergal-shar-usur, who reigned from 559 to 556 BC. While the Babylonian records record the ascension of Nergal-shar-usur, son-in-law for Nebuchadnezzar, we likely know him from Jeremiah 39:3 where Nebuchadnezzar's officials included Nergal-sar-ezer, a Hebrew spelling of the Babylonian name. After three years, he was succeeded on the Babylonian throne by an enigmatic figure, Nabonidus, who reigned from 556 to 539.¹⁰

The biggest claim to fame of Nabonidus is single-handedly causing the downfall of the Babylonian Empire. He was not of royal blood, but both his father and mother were of the nobility. Aside from an early military victory, Nabonidus's main interest was religion. Nabonidus elevated the moon god Sin in the Babylonian pantheon, upsetting the establishment, which was built around the god

¹⁰ There actually was a brief reign of Nergal-shar-usur's son Labashi-Marduk, who was still a boy. His reign did not last even a month.

Marduk. For ten years, likely because of his religious policies, Nabonidus abandoned Babylon and his throne, leaving his son Bel-shar-usur (Belshazzar) acting as king.¹¹ Nabonidus took a selection of the army and went to the western part of his empire some 500 miles away from Babylon, to an oasis named Teima in the Arabian Desert. Upon his return, Nabonidus claimed the right to elevate the moon god even above Marduk, making Sin the head of all gods. The religious establishment withdrew most all support from Nabonidus, and when Cyrus the Persian King came against Babylon, the city almost opened its gates in welcoming the new power. In one fell swoop, the Empire was taken by Cyrus, and passed into history.¹²



The Voice of Isaiah

Starting with Isaiah chapter 40, a number of chapters come into play at this point in Israel's history. Scholars debate whether Isaiah chapters 40 through 55:13 were composed by Isaiah the prophet who wrote the first 39 chapters, or whether they were composed by a later unnamed prophet generally called "second Isaiah." This scholastic dispute makes no difference at this point in these lessons, and other works can be consulted for those interested in the debate.¹³ Either way, whether prophesied by the original Isaiah or by a second Isaiah, the chapters speak to the Jews in exile in these turbulent times.

¹¹ Gadd argues on the basis of three stone inscriptions published in 1956, each of which dates from the reign of Nabonidus, that the reason the king left was political instability caused by Nabonidus's religious policies. "The king withdrew before a mutiny of his subjects dwelling in the great cities of Babylonia, led by their priests." *The Harran Inscriptions of Nabonidus,* *Anatolian Studies*, 8 (1958), at 88.

¹² This history is recounted in a very readable form in the famous work Saggs, H. W. F., *Babylonians*, (University of California Press 2000), at 165ff.

¹³ The core arguments against the original Isaiah as author center on the clear message in these chapters to the exiles. Cyrus is named in Chapter 45 as YHWH's anointed who would "subdue the nations" (Isa. 45:1). In verse 4 Isaiah adds, I name you, though you do not know me." The argument against a second Isaiah recognizes both the comfort these passages would have afforded people even in Isaiah's time, as well as the ability of YHWH to give a prophetic word at any time he chooses. Whether God gave the prophetic word 100 years early or immediately before and during the events, *should not change that it was a word from the Lord*. The book of Isaiah does not ascribe these words to the prophet Isaiah. In the New Testament, portions of this section of Isaiah are labeled as words "of the prophet Isaiah" (See, e.g., Mt 3:3 quoting Isaiah 40:3. Of course, by the time the New Testament writers were quoting the Isaiah passages, they were

The passage flows naturally from chapter 39 of Isaiah where Hezekiah welcomed envoys from Babylon, showing off his treasuries. This was over 100 years before the exile. Isaiah then prophesied to Hezekiah that a time would come when the treasures and the people would “be carried to Babylon” (Is. 39:6). Isaiah 40:1-2 then continues with words that must have ministered to the exiles:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

This let the people know that YHWH God still identified with them. They were his people, in spite of their sin and iniquity.¹⁴ Furthermore, God's word was still inviolate and perfectly reliable. Even though “the grass withers, the flower fades, the word of our God stands forever” (Isa. 40:8). YHWH is ruler over the heavens and all the earth. He rules over all nations. He is Creator and Sustainer. (Isa. 40:9-29). Even as the exiles have waited for generations, they could take faith that,

...they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint (Isa. 40:31).

Into this time, the Jews did not need to fear Cyrus and his Babylonian invasion. Cyrus was a tool of God. What the world was seeing through secular eyes was visible in a different way through the eyes of faith! God was not only aware, but he was also directing events. God had grasped Cyrus by the “right hand” (Isa. 45:1). YHWH was the one who would “subdue nations before him” and “open doors before him” (Isa. 45:1). God would “level the exalted places” and “break in pieces the doors of bronze” (Isa. 45:2). This was not because God was trading the Jews in for the Persians. Rather, this was all “for the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen” (Isa. 45:4).

already in the book we (and they) called “Isaiah,” whether by original authorship or by subsequent prophetic inclusion. The New Testament attribution may be no more than the label of which prophetic scroll contained the quote. We see a similar New Testament label in Jude 14 to words “prophesied” by “Enoch, the seventh from Adam.” The Jude passage then quotes a writing from a pseudepigraphal work (1 Enoch 1:9), which was written around 300 BC, at the earliest. This writing would have been known to the church as the prophesies of Enoch, the seventh from Adam. They are quoted with the label much as we cite works in this paper in the footnotes. It does not speak to the title's accuracy, but merely provides the source for the quotation.

¹⁴ In a way that shows the multiple layers of prophetic application, the next verses are prophetic of John the Baptist's ministry as Isaiah declared, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD.”

In Isaiah 46, there is an interesting contrast of the Babylonian gods and their treatment compared to the truth of YHWH. As discussed in an earlier lesson, each year, in the New Year processional, the gods of Babylon were carted in on carriages, much akin to the Rose Bowl parade and floats. The prize Babylonian god was Bel-Marduk. This processional is exposed in Isaiah 46, shown humiliated rather than exalted:

Bel bows down; Nebo stoops; their idols are on beasts and livestock; these things you carry are borne as burdens on weary beasts. They stoop; they bow down together; they cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity (Isa. 46:1-2).

These are the gods that are man-made and man-carried. These gods are not comparable to YHWH.

“To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike? Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales, hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship! They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries to it, it does not answer or save him from his trouble (Isa. 46:5-7).

Whereas the captivity began as discussed last week with the Jews sitting on the ground by the rivers of Babylon in mourning over the devastation of the defeat and exile, Isaiah gave the Jews assurance that the Babylonians would soon be the ones sitting on the ground in defeat. Whereas Babylon had invaded Jerusalem and stripped her naked, in words echoing the physical abuse of a woman, that same language is used of Babylon:

Come down and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon; sit on the ground without a throne, O daughter of the Chaldeans! For you shall no more be called tender and delicate...put off your veil, strip off your robe, uncover your legs...Your nakedness shall be uncovered, and your disgrace shall be seen (Isa. 47:1-3).

The Jews were to know this was not some random chain of events, but was the moving hand of God in history.

I will take vengeance, and *I* will spare no one. Our Redeemer—the Lord of hosts is his name—is the Holy One of Israel (Isa. 47:4).

This was to be a final day of ruin for the Babylonian Empire. God would redeem his people, angry with them no more, and bring down the haughty Babylonians in the process.

Sit in silence, and go into darkness, O daughter of the Chaldeans; for you shall no more be called the mistress of kingdoms. I was angry with my people; I profaned my heritage; I gave them into your hand; you showed them no mercy; on the aged you made your yoke exceedingly heavy. You said, "I shall be mistress forever," so that you did not lay these things to heart or remember their end. Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, "I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children": These two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day: the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure (Isa. 47:5-9).

There seems to be in Isaiah 47:13, a particular word that would have stood out to those of Nabonidus's day. As he brought the worship of the moon god to the forefront of Babylonian religion, Isaiah warned of the inability of those to save who "divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars," and "who at the new moons make known what shall come upon you." These priests "cannot deliver themselves" (Isa. 47:14), much less the king of Babylon!

So in this day of Cyrus, the time was ripe for Judah, not to fear, but to get ready! God was at work! The people were told to be prepared for the calling to,

Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it out to the end of the earth; say, "The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob!" (Isa. 48:20).

In one of my favorite passages, the Jews are reminded of the depths of YHWH's love and commitment:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands (Isa. 49:15-16).

In the midst of these prophetic words, woven in and through them are passages that speak of the love and justice of God. It is clear in these passages that his forgiveness and redemption go beyond a change of heart or the mere passage of time. YHWH was at work in the future bringing a new servant that would bear the transgression of the people. This servant would be stricken for sins, and would carry the iniquity of the people. Forgiveness was coming and redemption was around the corner, but it was at a price – a price God himself would pay. Isaiah 53

spends the entire chapter in this prophetic discourse that finds final fulfillment centuries later in the Messiah, the true Suffering Servant of God.

Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?

And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

These prophetic words must have brought great solace to those Jews wondering at the possible cataclysmal events unfolding by the threats of Cyrus and the insecurity of the Babylonian monarchy. As events unfolded, the truth of Isaiah's promises became manifest.

The Exile Ends

Ezra gives the details of what happened after Cyrus conquered Babylon:

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:

“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.” (Ezra 1:1-4).

This is consistent with the historical views of Cyrus related in ancient histories. As Nabonidus had attempted to defend himself with every means available, he had decided that the gods of the people might prove helpful. Before his fall, he brought into the city of Babylon the gods from the surrounding towns and temples. Undoubtedly, this demoralized the people in these surrounding towns whose “god defenses” were stripped as those gods were taken away for the defense of Babylon. One of



This “Cyrus Cylinder” is on display in the British Museum. It dates from the sixth century BC and was discovered in Babylon in 1879. The text praises Cyrus and denounces Nabonidus. It also attests to Cyrus's repatriation of displaced people, his restoration of temples throughout Mesopotamia.

Cyrus's first deeds was to restore the gods that had been removed to their original sites. Old Testament scholar John Monson terms the Persian attitude as: "Have any god you want; and go home if you like, but prosper and pay taxes, and do not forget to pray for us!"¹⁵

John Bright comments on this policy and its application to Judah:

Cyrus was one of the truly enlightened rulers of ancient times. Instead of crushing national sentiment by brutality and deportation as the Assyrians had, it was his aim to allow subject peoples as far as possible to enjoy cultural autonomy...They preferred to respect the customs of their subjects, to protect and foster their established cults, and where they could, to entrust responsibility to native princes.¹⁶

This was Cyrus's policy toward Babylon, and it was his policy toward Judah and the Jews.

From a materialist's perspective (as defined in the introduction of this lesson), this ultimately resulted only from the movement of material building blocks in nature. Ezra adds that a divine hand was involved in the material building blocks proceeding as they did. Ezra saw the divine beyond the simple material worldview. For Ezra, the material was a puppet on the world's stage with YHWH directing the show. "The LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus." Something immaterial was acting in the material. Something beyond nature (from the "super nature" or "supernatural") occurred. It is amazing that God invokes the world's superpowers at will and on command, to bring about his purposes. He is the God who stills the storm, who parts the waters, and who moves the hearts of men.

In 538 BC, it is decreed that Jews could return to their homeland. From the first deportation, generations had passed. There were people who could return, who had been born in Babylon, grew to adulthood in Babylon, married in Babylon, reared children in Babylon, given those children in marriage in Babylon, and had grandchildren in Babylon. These people, by the hand of God and consistent with his promises, were invited to return to the homeland of their ancestors, to renew covenant life before YHWH. These were not simply events of the material world. This was the hand of God working.

CONCLUSION

¹⁵ From private correspondence reviewing this lesson.

¹⁶ Bright, at 362.

My friend Dr. David Egilman, a medical doctor who teaches at Brown University, is fond of telling me,

To a man whose only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.

David is right. We have a tendency to see and understand things based on the reference points of our own experiences and studies. As physical people who deal most readily with the physical world, as people who study “physics,” and as people bound by the material laws of atoms and such, we most readily see things from the physical dimension. Paul makes the point that spiritual matters are not discernable apart from the spirit, because they are by nature “spiritual” matters:

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

This is wisdom from God that “makes foolish the wisdom of the world” (1 Cor. 1:20):

...the world did not know God through wisdom (1 Cor. 1:21).

So, how do we see the events unfolding in our lives? God is intimately involved at both spirit and physical levels in all creation, political history, the shimmering beauty of Scripture, and even (or for purposes of the points for home, “especially”) in our daily lives. Obviously we can easily see life through secular eyes, but do we have and use spiritual insight to see the hand of God? That is our challenge in the 21st century!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly...”* (Isa. 40:1).

Judah had been through unimaginable trauma. It was not because God was merciless, it was because God had made a promise and was going to fulfill it. Through those fires of pain, came the purity needed for his people to continue forth. Once the people had reached a point where they could hear and see the voice and hand of God, he placed it before them, seeking to comfort and console them ever so tenderly.

God has and will do whatever is necessary to get the attention of his children. His goal is nothing short of bringing his plans to completion,

including his plan to mold us into the image of his Son. If that requires pain, then he will allow pain, even as his heart is tender. It is all set to work for good for those who love him and are called according to his good purpose (Rom 8:28f).

2. “*Bel bows down; Nebo stoops; their idols are on beasts and livestock*” (Isa. 46:1).

I do not know anyone who has a gold Bel Marduk they cart around when helpful. We would scoff at such a person. These were material gods bound up in and by nature. Still, we cannot say that means we have no idols we turn to today! If we define an idol as something that we allow to take a greater position of authority in our life than YHWH God, then I fear many of us have a number of idols. The assurance of Scripture is that these idols are worthless and more. We say more because they lead us away from seeking the true God, and as such, cause us damage.

With prayer, I am going to examine my life. I want to locate the things (or people) that I rely on in place of God. I want to bring everything in subjection to Him who reigns on high. I want to have one God not only in theology and belief, but also in practice.

3. “*He bore the sins of many*” (Isa. 53:12).

What a profound prophecy. This word reached through the centuries to Calvary and the cross of Christ. In Christ we have the miracle of the incarnation. The God who is Spirit, who is Creator of matter, entered into the material world as a material, DNA carrying, atomic and sub-atomic particle-based being. The 21st century understanding of the building blocks of nature sends shockwaves of significance in the words of Paul to the Philippians:

He [Christ] was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And *being found in human form*, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:6-11).

This was seen dimly in prophecy, as God’s hand to bring redemption and buy his people back from the death wage of sin.

The New Testament sermon, which is the book of Hebrews, spoke of the Old Testament prophets who “though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised” (Heb. 11:39). That promise was of Christ, “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.” It is Christ who, “after making purification for sins,” “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3). This is the assurance of our faith, of our salvation, and of the promise. This gives meaning to today and purpose to life. This is the assurance that would lead martyrs to a willing death, even as it inspires saints to live a godly life. In this faith I stand, with gratitude to the Holy One.