

Summary for Session 16: The Return

Prep work: Ezra and Nehemiah

DVD: Jeff opens this session by remarking that as we review the Israelites' return to the Promised Land, we can use this as a metaphor for the times in our own lives when/ we have lived in exile and are now coming back. We should note the steps the Israelites took to reorient themselves back into their role as God's People, as we can use the same ideas to anchor ourselves again. Jeff points out that the Exile may appropriately be described as "living disoriented," since the Israelites were without the pillars of their faith: the Temple, the Law, and the priesthood. Ezekiel speaks for the people as they return and realize just how unsettled they are: "How shall we then live?" (Ezekiel 33:10). The answer is a three-pronged approach of worship, learning the Word of God, and building community. Leaders during each of the three waves of the Return will see to one of these facets—Zerubbabel will rebuild the Temple; Ezra will reestablish the preeminence of the *Torah*; and Nehemiah will build the walls to encircle the community and defend it from outside influences. Jeff notes that the prophets of the period are Haggai, Zachariah, and Malachi. They will also be speaking to the people about the need to focus on being faithful and the importance of not falling back into the behaviors that sent them to exile in the first place. Another book of this time period covers Israelites who chose to continue to live abroad, specifically the person of Esther. Jeff remarks that a key thought in Esther is when Mordecai tells Esther that God planned for her to become queen so that she could save the Israelites (Esther 4:14). Another example of God working through people is Cyrus, first king of Persia. Isaiah prophesied a couple hundred years before that God would move the heart of a king named Cyrus to free the Israelites to return to their home (Isaiah 44: 24-28). This is remarkable since Cyrus was certainly not a believer, and shows that God can use anyone for His purposes.

At this point, Jeff notes similarities between the Return from Exile and the original Exodus from slavery in Egypt. In both cases, treasure was given to the Israelites willingly by their captors. During the Exodus, this treasure was melted down and formed into the golden calf, but in the Return, the treasure is used to rebuild the Temple (perhaps the Israelites have matured?). There is a list, or census, of the Israelites who leave bondage in both cases. Also, upon leaving captivity, both leaders (Moses and Zerubbabel) set up altars to first offer a sacrifice of thanks. Unfortunately, both periods show the hazards of complacency as the Israelites have grown too comfortable in their captivity and deprivation from God. During the Exodus, Moses continually dealt with a people who threatened to return to Egypt, even if it meant slavery, because they had grown accustomed to life there and were unwilling to believe God would offer a better life with Him. Just so, many Israelites chose to remain in Babylon because they had grown comfortable with pagan customs and their lives far from God's reach. Jeff reminds us to check ourselves for signs of complacency, especially when we become resistant to God's call.

The first wave of Israelites returning from exile faced a formidable task: Jerusalem was destroyed and their glorious Temple was in ruins. Zerubbabel, the ruler and direct descendant of David, faces several obstacles to the rebuilding. The Samaritans (formerly part of Israel, but then repopulated and intermixed with peoples from five nations at the time of the Assyrian exile) stated their desire to help rebuild the Temple, but they were refused (Israel had already apostacized by creating its own religion back in the Divided Kingdom period). Being thus affronted, they wrote to the Persian ruler, Darius, to try and make trouble for the Israelites.

However, in a nice twist of irony, Darius sides with the Israelites (after taking the Samaritans' suggestion and reviewing the history books) and even commands Samaria to send them money for the rebuilding. Even within the Israelite community, there are obstacles to rebuilding the Temple. The Israelites become more interested in building their own homes and lives instead of the Temple. The prophet Haggai warns them that God is not happy with this, as He says, "My house lies in ruins, while each of you hurries to his own house" (Haggai 1:9). It seems God's Chosen have forgotten the big picture while focusing on their own narrow viewpoints. They need to restore themselves as a people, as God's People, before they can work on themselves individually. The Temple takes 20 years to rebuild, though in the end, it is not nearly as glorious as Solomon's Temple (which only took 7 years). Jeff reflects at this point on the various levels of meaning found in this second Temple, based on the outline of levels in the Catechism (CCC115-117). In a literal sense, this was a re-grounding in one of the pillars of the Israelites' faith—God's presence among them. At an allegorical level, Jesus says that *He* is the new Temple (John 2:21). In a moral sense, we have become living Temples, because the Spirit lives in us, and we are called to keep ourselves holy (2 Corinthians 6:16). Also, we are called to allow God to work through us, so that we become "living stones" from which the Temple (dwelling place of God) is built in the world (1 Peter 2:5). Finally, in the anagogical sense, we will still be living stones in the Kingdom of Heaven with God. We too, face challenges in building up ourselves as Temples: cultures and people who criticize and ridicule our efforts, as well as our own tendency to sin. In making us "living stones" Jeff points out Jesus' abilities as a master builder, since working with living stones (who can get up and walk away at anytime, grumble and complain) is a much harder job than say, Solomon's efforts with regular stone and building up the first, glorious Temple. Jeff then recounts a parable of a master stonemason who chiseled out a large, perfectly-shaped stone. This stone was very proud of its perfection and hoped to be singled out for some distinguished position. It watched the stonemason then hew out a large, misshaped stone. To the perfect stone's horror, the mason lays the ugly stone atop the perfect one. The ugly stone protrudes too much for a strong build, much to the perfect stone's relief as it thinks another, better stone must be chosen to be next to the perfect stone. Instead, the stonemason turns to the perfect stone and begins to fashion a similarly unsightly groove in the perfect stone. He then turns the ugly stone so its protrusion fits snugly into the perfect stone's new hollow and the match is superb—the building will be stronger for it. The point? God sometimes asks us to adapt to the weaknesses of others so that His Kingdom on earth will be stronger for it. The second wave of returnees to the Promised Land brought the priest-scribe, Ezra, with it. Ezra understood the need for the Law to be reestablished as primary in the hearts of the Israelites. The Book of Ezra observes that "Ezra had set his heart on the study and practice of the law of the Lord and on teaching statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). Jeff pauses to note the importance, not only of studying, but of practicing and teaching the Word of God. He urges us to incorporate all three aspects into our lives, as well. Since he was so preoccupied with Israel knowing *Torah*, Ezra had the Israelites assemble while he read the whole of the Law to them, "interpreting it so that all could understand what was read" (Nehemiah 8:8). When he hears a report that many of the Israelites, even the leaders of the people, have intermarried with people from pagan cultures, Ezra bemoans the fact that God's Chosen People are still doing the very things that led them away from God in the first place. The people come to him and, realizing the truth of his words, offer to make a covenant with God that they will dismiss all their

foreign wives and the children born of them. Ezra agrees and helps them arrange it. While it may seem unethical to us that so many people were ripped from their families and kicked out of Judah, Jeff reminds us that this was an extreme measure and highlights the importance of the family in leading each member to God. He notes that the Catechism speaks to this when it allows that a difference in religion is not “an insurmountable obstacle for marriage,” but only when the spouses share with each other how each comes to Christ (CCC 1634). In addition, Paul touches on the role spouses can play in the salvation of each other when he writes: “For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through [her husband]” (1 Corinthians 7:14).

In the final wave of Israelites returning to Judah, we find Nehemiah as the leader and an emphasis on rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah works tirelessly to assign clans portions of the wall to rebuild and is threatened by neighboring nations who do not want to see Judah become strong again. In response, Nehemiah has his workers arm themselves, but the work is too important to stop: “each did his work with one hand and held a weapon with the other” (Nehemiah 4:11). Jeff notes that we, also, often have to live our lives building with one hand and protecting with the other. We, too, are faced with the Evil One, who is constantly trying to break our unity and disorient us. Our work is the building up of the Church and our sword is not a physical weapon, but a far more powerful one: “the sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17). Our prayers and intercessions for one another and the Church wage an effective battle against evil and indifference.

The Temple is restored, the *Torah* reestablished, and the community is rebuilt, but the Israelites soon show signs of becoming lax again. The prophet Malachi warns the people, especially the priests to be true in giving the tithe to God. The priests were begrudging the offering assigned to God, but Malachi points out that all they have has been given to them by God; He has a right to demand any and all of it (Malachi 3:7-8). Jeff reminds us that we, too, have been given everything we have by God; we are stewards of it and God gives us such things so that He may do His work through us. Malachi goes on to warn the Israelites that God's justice is like a refiner's fire—in the end, the things of God are all that remain (3:2,19-20). Finally, Malachi prophesies that God will “send you Elijah the prophet, before the day of the Lord comes” (3:23). While the Israelites came to believe that Elijah would literally return to them, Jesus announces that the prophecy actually refers to John the Baptist (Matthew 17:10-13).

Jeff wraps up the session by emphasizing that God always offers a way to return to Him; one is never out of reach of His grace. Jeff reminds us that these words apply not only to the Israelites, but to us, too. The Israelites of today, reflect this eternal hope even in the National Anthem of Israel, the *HaTikvah*, which literally means, “the hope.”