



The tribe of Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel should do

Issachar Ministries UK seeks to be a people who understand the times, listen to the Lord and know what should be done

## Issachar Comments Papers

Expounding biblical concepts on the world scene today

# Life in Babylon

## (1) The Synagogue

October 2013

In August this year we sent out a paper under the heading "**Living Victoriously - in Babylon**". Earlier in the year (March 2013) we published a paper entitled "**Living in Babylon**". We are returning to this theme this month and in the next two months because there is so much we can learn from the way God blessed the people of Israel during the exile in Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem. Jeremiah 29 is a letter to the first wave of slaves taken by the Babylonians urging them to settle down, build houses, encourage their children to marry and have children, and even to pray for Babylon because if it prospered so too they would prosper. Jeremiah also gave them a solemn promise from God that in due time he would bring them back to Jerusalem the land of their forefathers.

### Prosperity

Both the promise of prosperity and the return to Jerusalem were fulfilled. Only 4,600 people were taken to Babylon but 42,360 returned, bringing with them a vast quantity of wealth, according to Ezra 2.64. How did this growth and prosperity take place and what was life like for immigrants in Babylonia? This is a fascinating subject and has great relevance for us today as we enter an increasingly secularised society that is turning away from its Christian heritage and becoming more hostile to the gospel. How do we remain faithful to the Lord and communicate our faith in 21st century Britain?

We can learn much from the Jews in Babylon, exiled from Israel and cut off from the Temple. They no longer had the comfort of priests offering daily prayers on their behalf. They had to learn to be spiritually self-sufficient. They became a praying community each one seeking God themselves. Their elders regularly went to consult with the Prophet Ezekiel who was living among them in Babylon. We know this from such passages as Ezekiel 33.31 where God spoke to Ezekiel saying, "*My people come to you, **as they usually do**, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice.*" On another occasion Ezekiel 20.1 records "*In the seventh year, in the fifth month on the tenth day, some of the elders of Israel came to enquire of the Lord, and they sat down in front of me.*"

### The Synagogue

It was in Babylon that the Synagogue became an important part of life in the exile. The word 'Synagogue' does not appear in the Old Testament and its origins are obscure despite the statement in Acts 15. 21, which says, "*For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.*" Obviously Luke, in writing Acts, did not know the origin of the Synagogue but he knew that it had been around for a long time. In fact, '*from earliest times*' could refer to the early days when Joshua led them into the Promised Land and the period of the Judges when the tribes were settling in their territories and villages, and towns were being built.

Each community settlement right across the land of Israel had a place of meeting where the elders gathered to settle disputes, to organise community events and to care for the government of the area and payment of taxes. Such a building was simply known as the 'place of assembly' or 'gathering'. In Hebrew the word for 'assembly' is 'Synagogue'. So in the course of time the word that actually meant 'a group of people' took on the meaning of the place where they met. We have a similar problem in English, where we only have one word, 'church', meaning an 'assembly of believers' or a 'building' where such a gathering of believers meets for worship.

### First Mention

The first mention of 'Synagogue' in the Bible is in the New Testament, Matthew 4.23 which says, "*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.*" Clearly, by this time synagogues were in every town and village throughout the land of Israel. But why is there no mention of them anywhere in the Old Testament?

Most scholars believe this is because in earlier times the Synagogue did not function as a place of worship. It was simply the place where the local elders met to deal with administrative and legal matters. The central place of worship was the Temple in Jerusalem where the priests did all that was necessary on behalf the nation which included daily prayers, overseeing animal sacrifices and presiding at festivals. There were also numerous high places around the country where people went for prayer and worship. Many of them had been used by the Canaanites for

generations for worshipping the local Baals and the prophets of Israel were continually warning against mixing the pure worship of God with local idolatry.

## Idolatry

The Exile changed all that but only after a long spiritual battle. Ezekiel was told by the Lord to "*confront them with the detestable practices of their fathers*" (Ezekiel 20.3). He reminded them of the idolatry their forefathers practised in Egypt. God rescued them from slavery but many of them took "vile images" from Egypt out into the desert to look at during their trek to the Promised Land. Now they were facing an even greater danger. If they did not hold fast to their faith the whole nation of Israel would be wiped out. Some of them had even got into human sacrifice so Ezekiel thundered, "*Will you defile yourselves the way your fathers did and lust after their vile images? When you offer your gifts - the sacrifice of your sons in the fire - you continue to defile yourselves with all the idols to this day*" (20.30).

The main gods of Babylon were Marduk and Babu. Their local names were Bel and Nebo, as in Isaiah 46. Bel was the God of healing and prosperity and Nebo was the God of destiny. Their festivals were times when the whole population participated which made it difficult for the Jews to be separated. But in Babylon the people of Judah saw so much idolatry and all its excesses that it lost attractiveness and became abhorrent to them. Eventually the teaching of Ezekiel prevailed. He had brought with him a copy of the scroll found in the Temple during the repairs carried out by King Josiah which most scholars believe to be the book of Deuteronomy or "the holiness code" from which he taught the elders.

## Boy Schools

It was this teaching that the elders gave to the people in the synagogues each Sabbath. The synagogues in Babylon actually started as schools for boys to teach them the history of the nation and the faith of their forefathers. Teaching the next generation was seen to be essential for survival and in time the largest school in Babylon became known as "The Great Assembly". Boys trained there were known as "Men of the Great Assembly" - its motto was "Be careful in judgement: raise many disciples: make a fence around the Torah". It was here that the scrolls of the prophets of Israel, smuggled in from Jerusalem, were copied and the role of the scribes was born.

The elders of the various communities scattered around Babylon regularly came to sit at Ezekiel's feet and seek his blessing but by the time they had been there for 12 years many of them were already enjoying a comfortable lifestyle. They had taken the advice of Jeremiah to develop community life as well as to seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which God had sent them into exile (Jeremiah 29.7).

## Elders

Babylon was a city of commerce and there were endless opportunities for making money and the Jewish exiles eagerly went to work. God spoke to Ezekiel about this, "*their hearts are greedy for unjust gain*". This was part of a word he had been given which also tells us something about how he taught the elders of the community. "*My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain*" (33.31). In the next verse God says, "*To them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.*" From this we gather that Ezekiel was not just a preacher; he also led worship with some kind of instrument and actually sang to them about the love and mercy of God.

## Community Worship

This is probably the very first reference that we have of the way the Synagogue became a gathering of the community for worship and prayer and preaching. This is what happened in Babylon. It developed out of the need for survival. If it had not been for the work of men such as Ezekiel the whole Jewish expat communities would have been absorbed into Babylonian life and culture, intermarrying and losing their identity. As it was, Ezekiel and no doubt other true men of God in the immigrant communities, continually reminded them of their past history, of the nature of God and all that he had done for the nation and, most importantly of the covenant relationship that God had established with the nation of Israel through their forebears.

Every Sabbath the communities came together as gatherings (synagogues) for prayer, teaching and worship. It was this practice, developed in Babylon, brought back to the land of Israel after the exile, which can be clearly seen in the Book of Ezra. What we now know as the Jewish religion did not come from Jerusalem, it came from Babylon. It was born in a land of oppression when the faith of Israel could so easily have been destroyed. Yet it was here that they truly discovered the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob and the 'new covenant' Jeremiah had foretold whereby each one would know God for themselves became a reality and prepared the way for the coming of Messiah.

**Parts 2 and 3 will follow**

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