

Should Messianic Believers Return to the Land of Israel? A Lesson from the Time of Ezra and Nehemiah

Does the Lord wish for non-Jewish Christians and believers in Torah to uproot themselves from their jobs and hometowns in America and other countries and relocate to Eretz Israel? Major Messianic ministries are currently teaching their followers that if certain prophetic milestones are reached here in America or in the Middle East, then the faithful few need to be prepared to sell out and move to Israel. We set aside, for the time being, the impractical nature of this proposition, and address in this article a major precedent in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah that indicates the mind and will of Yahweh on this matter, as expressed by His prophets, Ezekiel and Daniel.

Most zealous believers, intent upon pleasing Yahweh, have not stopped to consider: Was there ever a time in history when the Ten Tribes had another opportunity to return in large numbers, but did NOT?

Ten Tribes of the Median Empire Were Invited By Ezra to Return to Palestine

Darius Hystapes the Persian (also called Artaxerxes) gave authority to the Levites and Jews of Babylonia to return to Jerusalem with Ezra around 520/519 BC. This decree is given in Ezra 7:12-13:

Artaxerxes, king of kings, unto Ezra the priest, a scribe of the Law of Elohim of Heaven...I have made a decree that all they of the People of Israel, and of his priests and Levites, in my realm, which are minded of their own free will to go up to Jerusalem, go with thee.

According to Josephus, Ezra sent a copy of Darius' letter "to those of his own nation that were in Media."^[1] As we shall soon see, Josephus is referring here to non-Judah, non-Jewish Israelites living north of Babylonia, in the former territory of the Median Empire. A great multitude of these other tribes had been living in Media since the days of Assyrian captivity, when Assyrian king Sargon II exiled them there. This deportation of the inhabitants of Samaria and the northern tribes to the "cities of the Medes"^[2] preceded that of the Jews by Nebuchadnezzar by about 120 years. Media was well north of Babylonia, in the Caucasus Mountains area (modern Georgia), and the area *from which* the Caucasian people of Europe migrated in the early centuries of the Christian era. Josephus goes on to say that many among them, when they heard that King Darius gave authority to Ezra to return to the land of their forefathers, were "greatly pleased," and "came to Babylon as very desirous of going down to Jerusalem..." Then what happened?

This story has a peculiar twist, the explanation of which holds quite a lesson for those in our day overly zealous of returning to the land of Israel. Josephus continues: "...but then the entire body of the people of Israel remained in that country [Babylon]; wherefore there are but two tribes in Asia and Europe subject to the Romans, while the **ten tribes are beyond the Euphrates till now**, and are *an immense multitude*, and not to be estimated for numbers."

What did Josephus mean, "beyond the Euphrates"? In his day the phrase could mean only one thing, because there was only one nation, or rather empire, "beyond the Euphrates" and that was the Parthian Empire (c. 250 BC - 243 AD), comprising the territory of modern Iran, Iraq, Georgia, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and the Mekong delta of Vietnam. We conclude then that

thousands of ten-tribed people from Media moved southward into Babylonia during Ezra's day, and over the next several hundred years grew into "an immense multitude" fulfilling to some degree the promises given to Abraham concerning his descendants. The question we wish to answer is why thousands of Median Israelites failed to complete their migration from Media back to Jerusalem/Palestine in the days of Ezra/Nehemiah. No doubt Ezra felt Judah would need more than 42,360 Levites and Jews to defend Jewish interests in Jerusalem against the Samaritans and other hostile Palestinians already in the area. So Ezra gave great encouragement to the ten tribes to come, during and after Adar of 515 BC, to help give Israel "a nail in His holy place...to repair the desolations of the house of God, and to give them a fence in Judah and Jerusalem." (Ezra 9:8-9) Ezra, the son of a high priest, a ready scribe in the Law of Moses, was, like Nehemiah, very devout; but he was not a prophet. In Babylonia, however, the "desirous" Median Israelites discovered very specific prophetic messages in Ezekiel 37 and of Daniel chapter 9. Any illusions these Israelites had entertained about returning to The Land hastily were dispelled by Ezekiel, from whom they would have learned the following:

Thus says the Lord Yahweh, Behold, **I will take** the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel his fellows, and will put them with him, even with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and ***they shall be one in My Hand.*** (Ezek. 37:19)

Many modern believers seem incapable of discerning the difference between what man can accomplish and that which only Yahweh and His Son can bring about. Ezekiel continues his prophecy on behalf of Israel's Savior in verses 21-24:

Thus says the Lord Yahweh, Behold, **I** will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land. And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all: and they shall no more be two nations [thus healing the breach which occurred under Solomon's son Rehoboam], neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all. Neither shall they defile themselves any more with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with *any* of their transgressions. [has this been the result of modern-day Israel's return to the Land?] I will save them out of all their dwellingplaces, wherein they have sinned, and will cleanse them: so *shall they* be My people [implication, they haven't been My people up to this point (see Hosea 1:9), and I will be their God (Yahweh has not been the God of most of the Jews since Hosea 1:9 came to pass). And DAVID my servant shall be king over them, and they all shall have one shepherd...

For David to be shepherd-king over all Israel requires the setting of this prophecy to be *after* the Second Coming (not before), just as in Ezek. 34, which is very similar to Ezek. 37 in its emphasis on what the Lord says He will personally accomplish. It is the time of final judgment, during which the Lord Yahweh personally seeks out his sheep and brings them to the mountains of Israel to feed them. The personal pronoun "I" occurs 26 times in Ezekiel 34, peaking with the statement "I will set up one shepherd over them, and *he* shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and *he* shall be their shepherd. And I Yahweh will be their God, and my servant David a prince over them." (vv. 23-24) It is, therefore, only once the Father has sent His Son back to this earth to judge (vs. 20), concomitant with the resurrection of the dead, that the prophecy of Ezek. 34:13 can come to pass: "I will bring them out from the people, and gather

them from the countries, and bring them to their own land..." The suggestion by Dave Hunt, John Hagee, Pat Robertson, most Messianic teachers, together with countless other modern-day prophecy interpreters that these prophecies in Ezek. 34 and 37 are "being fulfilled before our very eyes" is to displace them from their natural setting, which is the early stages of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Yahweh divided Israel due to Solomon's grievous sins, and only Yahweh and His Son can undo the effect of this breakup. Two thousand years of woefully deficient rabbinic and pastoral supervision is enough to demonstrate our need for His personal intervention and supervision of the flocks of Israel. When the prospective returnees of the Ten Tribes in Ezra's day read Ezekiel's prophecies (both chapters 34 and 37), they understood that only Israel's Messiah could heal the breach and restore them to the land of Israel. The "lost" ten tribes of Israel began to comprehend, at least at that time, what it would take for them to be restored, and that Yahweh had no intention of a premature restoration which would lead to another repeat of the events of the 8th Century BC.

At the same time that they came to know Ezekiel's message, the Median Israelites discovered through Ezekiel's contemporary, one of the greatest prophets of all time, Daniel, exactly *how long* it would be before the Messiah would appear. The Median Israelites who relocated to Babylonia, as per Josephus' historical record, during the days of Ezra, would have come into contact with fellow-Israelite Daniel,^[3] or his book, sometime around 515 BC. Daniel's reputation for prophetic wisdom was Solomonic and far-reaching (Ezek.14:14, 20; 28:3). Josephus says this about Daniel's reputation in his own day:

Daniel was to them a prophet of good things [in contrast to other prophets who only foretold misfortunes], and this to such a degree, that by the agreeable nature of his predictions, he procured the good-will of all men; and by the fulfillment of them, he procured the belief of their truth, and the opinion of divinity for himself among the multitude.^[4]

The substantial concerns raised by Ezekiel and his prophecies (see above, chapters 34:13, 14, 23-24; 37:19-25) caused the Median Israelites in Babylon to realize they should wait until Israel's Messiah, the Son of David, came on the scene before attempting to repatriate to the holy land with their Jewish brethren. This understanding was confirmed and quantified by Daniel 9:25's explicit prophecy indicating that 69 weeks of years, or 483 years, would elapse before Ezekiel's Messiah would appear. As Josephus says, Daniel was known, not just for predicting the future, "he also determined the time of their fulfillment."^[5]

The Apostle John uses the apt metaphor "Sodom and Egypt" to describe the spiritual condition of latter-day Jerusalem (Rev. 11:8, cp. Gal. 4:25).^[6] Repatriating the holy land when it is filled with iniquity is, in my opinion, foolhardy. Instead, Yshua challenges us to "occupy til I come" (Lk. 19:13), wherever we may reside.

^[1] Josephus, *Ant.* XI.v.2.

^[2] See II Kings 18:11.

^[3] If Daniel was still alive at this time, he would have been in his 90's, assuming he was in his mid-teens at the time of captivity in December of 598 BC.

^[4] Josephus, *Ant.* X.xi.7.

^[5] *Ibid.*

^[6] The Apostle John also records in the fourth chapter of his Gospel the fact that the Father is seeking people to worship Him, not in Mt. Gerazim (the sacred place of the Samaritans), nor in Jerusalem, but in spirit and in truth, wherever they are.