

Three Times in a Nation's History

YOU'RE quite right – the title does need explanation! The nation is the nation of Israel. The word 'times' has two senses: the number of occasions, and also periods or epochs. So, we're going to consider three occasions, each in a different epoch in the life of the nation of Israel.

"Why?" you might ask. Well, the remarkable survival of this little nation is living proof that God is in control. In around 600 BC, His prophet said:

Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for a light by day, the ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night... "If those ordinances depart from before Me," says the LORD, "then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before Me forever" (Jeremiah 31:35-36).

The First Time

The first time is around 598 BC. The kingdom of Israel has split in two, the northern kingdom is no more but the southern kingdom remains. The southern kingdom is called Judah and its capital is Jerusalem. Jehoiachin is the king, reigning on the throne of his ancestor David.

The little kingdom of Judah has been caught in the middle of a great struggle for power between the two great power blocs

The Ishtar Gate from Babylon



of West Asia, Babylon and Egypt. In 605 BC Egypt was defeated at the battle of Carchemish and power passed to Babylon. Judah had been a kind of independent frontier nation, but with the victory of Babylon Judah became a puppet state and its king served Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon as a vassal.

In 598 BC, Nebuchadnezzar mounted a full-scale invasion of Judah and in three months Jehoiachin was forced to surrender. He was taken captive and sent to Babylon, along with many of the nation's leaders.

The temple and the royal treasuries of Jerusalem were ransacked. Nebuchadnezzar replaced Jehoiachin with his uncle Mattaniah, whom he renamed Zedekiah.

Zedekiah swore to serve and submit to the King of Babylon. But he was a weak and vacillating man. He was influenced by all kinds of people, and he betrayed his pledge by making an alliance with Egypt.

This provoked the king of Babylon and he sent his army to destroy Jerusalem. The siege of the city lasted some two and a half years, and finally the city was taken.

The king abandoned the city and tried to escape with some of his chosen men, but they were overtaken and captured, and Zedekiah was brought before king Nebuchadnezzar.

His sons were killed before his eyes, and he himself was blinded and taken to Babylon. There he died in prison. His warriors and court officials were executed.

The Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem. The temple was looted and burned. The walls of the city were levelled. The city's palaces were all burned down.

The captivity and degradation of the nation of Israel was complete, and the exile of God's people from their land began.

The dynasty of David, the royal line of kings, ceased. Zedekiah was the last king to sit upon the throne of David. Israel's hope was gone.

70 Years' Exile

The Babylonian exile lasted 70 years. During that time, Babylon itself fell to the Medes and Persians.

At the end of the 70 years, Cyrus the Persian was king of western Asia. Within a year of his entry into Babylon, he was issuing an edict allowing the Jewish exiles to leave Babylon and return to their homeland, to rebuild their ruined city and restore the holy temple.

The exiles came home and restored the nation of Israel. The city walls and gates were rebuilt, the new temple was dedicated. A new era began. The people agreed to enter into a solemn covenant to renew their life before God and to observe His law. The land and the people of Israel were restored and renewed. This then is the first time or period.

The Second Time

We must now pass on some 300 years. The Persians have given way in western Asia to the next dominant force – the Greeks. Alexander the Great is said to have captured the world with 32,000 infantrymen and 5,000 cavalry. He died at the age of 32 and his empire was divided between his generals. The nation of Israel endured an uneasy existence in a period of warring dynasties around the Mediterranean coast.

Then came the expanding Roman power, which collided with the little nation of Israel. It began in 65 BC when the Jews

succumbed to the domination of Rome and the oppression grew worse as time passed.

The people clamoured for a Messiah, a saviour to rid them of the Roman oppression. They had puppet kings ruling over them by the permission of Caesar. These kings were called Herods and were not in the royal line of David – they were not Jews at all, but Edomites.

In 66 AD the Jews staged a revolt against Rome. It was a bitter struggle, and it culminated in the long and horrific siege of Jerusalem. At last in 70 AD the city fell. Many of its people were killed – the remainder were taken captive and sold into slavery in the Roman empire. The temple was destroyed and robbed, just as it was under Nebuchadnezzar. Not one stone was left standing upon another. The holy city once again was put to the sword and to the flame. The oppressors, bruised from having to wait four years to accomplish their design, were especially cruel when once they triumphed.

After the fall of Jerusalem, the last few Jewish rebels held out for two years at the fortress of Masada, but in 72 AD the fortress was stormed. The Romans found the bodies of 906 men, women and



children who had all committed suicide. Rebellion smouldered here and there for a while, but for a second time the holy city and its people had been captured, enslaved and destroyed, and scattered into exile throughout the world. Babylon first, Rome second.

The Third Time

At the time of the first assault by Babylon, Israel existed as a sovereign nation. God had given them their land when He brought them out of slavery in Egypt (this is recorded in the Bible book of Exodus).

At the time of the second assault by Rome, Israel was again a sovereign nation, and this came about by being delivered from Babylon, under the decree of Cyrus and through the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah.

We have seen how as a result of the second assault the Jews were scattered throughout the world, without a land, without a government and without a nation. For nearly 2,000 years the people of Israel were in exile, but then on May 14th, 1948 the nation of Israel was restored, established in their own land and constituted a sovereign nation once more.

That third time is still to come and is the subject of part 2. But we see already that God has been in control all along. The sun, moon and stars are still there, and the nation of Israel, against all odds, exists too.

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(to be continued)