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Zerubbabel: A Type of Christ

(Part 1)

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Series: Little Known Legends

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The year was 536 B.C. The Jews had been in captivity in Babylon for 70 years. Nebuchadnezzar had ruled for 45 years, his evil son for 23 years after that, and his grandson the remainder of the time. Finally, the day came when the evil kingdom of Babylon was overcome by Darius the Mede and Cyrus, the Persian. Cyrus turned out to be the man God had chosen in eternity past to return the Jews to their homeland and restore the temple. Cyrus was not a believer. He did not know the God of Israel personally, but he did, however, fear Him.

The key was that the “heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord.” And 150 years before, Isaiah the prophet had clearly named this man as God’s instrument to help His people return to their land. The prophecy read like this,

Who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, “You shall be built,” and to the temple, “Your foundation shall be laid.”’

(Isaiah 44:28 NKJV)

“Thus says the Lord to His anointed, To Cyrus, whose right hand I have held—To subdue nations before him and loose the armor of kings, to open before him the double doors, so that the gates will not be shut:

For Jacob My servant’s sake, and Israel My elect, I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me.

(Isaiah 45:1,4 NKJV)

Cyrus had been raised in idolatry, but Jehovah has shown through this prophecy written 150 years before, that this unlikely man would be “like a shepherd” to lead the children of Israel home.

At last, the hour had come. He had become the ruler of the nation that held captive the people of God. Some historians picture him as a kind, benevolent man whose heart broke for the Jew. Others picture him as haughty, cruel, and bloodthirsty. It did not matter. The God of Eternity had chosen Him for Jacob’s

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sake, even though he did not know the God of Jacob.

Our story begins in Ezra, chapter one. It is here that Isaiah's prophecy begins to be fulfilled,

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.

Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem."
(Ezra 1:1-3 NIV)

God had spoken through both Isaiah and Jeremiah concerning this miracle which would take place years hence at the hand of a man named Cyrus. In Isaiah, as we have read, He gave us the name of the man He would use. In Jeremiah 25:12 and 29:10, he predicted that it would be exactly 70 years before their captivity would be over. As always, it was so. The passage here in Ezra tells us that,

...the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia to make a proclamation and to put it in writing."
(Ezra 1:1 NIV)

What He moved him to write was,

...the Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.
(Ezra 1:2 NIV)

The program was this. All the Jews who had been captive in Babylon were suddenly free to return home. What must have gone through their minds? It must have been something like the feeling the East Germans had after being bound by that wall of hatred for all those years. Those who chose not to go were to contribute to the expenses of those who went, including a freewill offering for the temple. To assist in the project, King Cyrus then took the valuables that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Temple in Jerusalem 70 years before and returned them to the Jews. They included 1,000 gold trays, 1,000 silver trays, plus thousands of miscellaneous things. In all there were over 5,000 gold and silver items returned to the people for use in the temple once it had been rebuilt.

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In Ezra 2, the Holy Spirit lists the numbers and names the groups of people who returned at this time to the land. It reads,

Now these are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive to Babylon (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town,

In company with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah):
(Ezra 2:1,2 NIV)

Scripture relates in Ezra 2:64 that there were 42,360 who made the journey under the supervision of a team of eleven men, headed by a man named Zerubbabel and a man named Jeshua. Jeshua was the son of Josedech, the grandson of the high priest who had been put to death by Nebuchadnezzar, and he became the first high priest of the restored community.

Zerubbabel was a direct descendant of the captive king Jehoiachin, and was chosen by Cyrus, with God's leading, to lead the expedition and to be the royal governor of the new settlement. He is our living legend. As we will see, God placed his hand upon this man and chose him to sit in an exalted position in the restored kingdom, and through his life to paint a graphic picture of the one who sits even today at the right hand of the Father.

So our man of the hour assumes his responsibility and leads the children of Israel back to the land from which they had been driven some 70 years before. Here is what happened next,

Then Jeshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.

Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices.

(Ezra 3:2,3 NIV)

Once the altar had been reconstructed, Zerubbabel led the nation in celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles, the New Moon sacrifices, and the other appointed sacrifices and sacred feasts. Then the time came for them to begin rebuilding the temple itself. Next we read,

On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer

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burnt offerings to the Lord, though the foundation of the Lord's temple had not yet been laid.

Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and gave food and drink and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so that they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus king of Persia.

In the second month of the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Jeshua son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers (the priests and the Levites and all who had returned from the captivity to Jerusalem) began the work, appointing Levites twenty years of age and older to supervise the building of the house of the Lord. (Ezra 3:6-8 NIV)

This totally unknown man has led God's people back to their land, rebuilt the altar of God, led the nation back to proper worship, and has now set the stage for the temple itself to be reconstructed, just as he was instructed to do by Cyrus himself.

What now? They laid the foundation, and they fell down before the Lord worshiping and singing,

He is good; His love to Israel endures forever.

(Ezra 3:11 NIV)

And we read in verses 11-12 that while the younger Jews were celebrating with shouts of joy, the older ones who had witnessed the original temple, were so moved with emotion at the rebuilding of God's house that they began to weep, and then he adds,

No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away. (Ezra 3:13 NIV)

So far away, in fact, that Israel's enemies got wind of what was happening. Here is where Zerubbabel gets his next great challenge,

When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, They came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here."

But Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us."

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Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building.

They hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia.

(Ezra 4:1-5 NIV)

Apparently the King of Assyria had, some years before, imported men from the lands of Cuthah, Ava, Hamath and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the land left largely vacated by the exodus of the Jews. There was also a remnant of Jews, particularly of the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim, who had been left behind in the land. But the people in this passage were not Jews. They were enemies who, now inhabiting Israel, decided they wanted in on the activities going on at the temple.

Zerubbabel must have been tempted. It would have meant more money, more supplies, more labor, more cooperation; and after all, the important thing was to get the job done. Right? Wrong. The important thing was that God's people do God's work without any help from the world. Christian groups who think they need to solicit help from unbelievers to accomplish their ministries need to heed Zerubbabel's response. He said, "No way. This is God's project for God's people. Thanks, but no thanks."

Finding that they could not influence the project, these non-believers began to oppose what was happening to God's temple. They sought to frustrate the work. They made it difficult to continue, either through legal or political moves, or through bribery or interference. In any case, years passed with little progress being made. Then a new king comes into power, and immediately a formal charge was made to stop the work altogether.

At the beginning of the reign of Xerxes, they lodged an accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

And in the days of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his associates wrote a letter to Artaxerxes. The letter was written in Aramaic script and in the Aramaic language. (Ezra 4:6,7 NIV)

This is a copy of the letter they sent him.

To King Artaxerxes,

From your servants, the men of Trans-Euphrates:

The king should know that the Jews who came up to us from you have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that

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rebellious and wicked city. They are restoring the walls and repairing the foundations.

Furthermore, the king should know that if this city is built and its walls are restored, no more taxes, tribute or duty will be paid, and the royal revenues will suffer.

Now since we are under obligation to the palace and it is not proper for us to see the king dishonored, we are sending this message to inform the king, so that a search may be made in the archives of your predecessors. In these records you will find that this city is a rebellious city, troublesome to kings and provinces, a place of rebellion from ancient times. That is why this city was destroyed.

We inform the king that if this city is built and its walls are restored, you will be left with nothing in Trans-Euphrates.

(Ezra 4:11-16 NIV)

In other words,

Dear King,

These wicked Jews are trying to rebuild their temple and their lives. If they succeed, there goes your tax money. We'd hate to see that, Mr. King. That would mean more taxes for us to pay. Why not do some research and see if, indeed, these people don't have a heritage of rebellion and warfare. See if that isn't why the city was destroyed in the first place. If so, you just might want to put a stop to this whole thing.

Love,

Your Faithful Admirers.

Then we read,

As soon as the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read to Rehum and Shimshai the secretary and their associates, they went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them by force to stop.

Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

(Ezra 4:23,24 NIV)

It was at this time that God spoke to his man through the prophets.

Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them.

(Ezra 5:1 NIV)

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Those prophecies are recorded in Haggai 1, and Zechariah 1. For the sake of time, we'll focus on Zechariah's prophecies. They read like this,

On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, the month of Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo.

During the night I had a vision—and there before me was a man riding a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in a ravine. Behind him were red, brown and white horses.
(Zechariah 1:7,8 NIV)

God sent an angel to appear to Zechariah, and the angel had described a scene in which a man riding a red horse was standing among the myrtle trees in a ravine or hollow place. These riders had gone all throughout the earth and had come back to report to Zechariah that there was peace and rest in all the earth. And in verse 16, Jehovah makes this beautiful statement about His people,

Therefore thus says the Lord: "I am returning to Jerusalem with mercy; My house shall be built in it," says the Lord of hosts, "And a surveyor's line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem."

"Again proclaim, saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: "My cities shall again spread out through prosperity; the Lord will again comfort Zion, and will again choose Jerusalem."'"
(Zechariah 1:16,17 NKJV)

God had chastised His people, but He had not forsaken His people. He never will. At some point in history, once again, God will reveal Himself to Israel, and they will return unto Him. Here, in a beautiful portrait of that day, God promises to return His people to their home, and return His temple to its former glory. In like manner, one day soon, God will lead His people to an eternal home and grant to us the privilege of worshiping Jehovah as He was meant to be worshipped, for we shall see Him as He is.

God continues His message of hope through the prophet. In chapter two, the prophet sees a man with a measuring line in his hand. When asked where the man was going, he was told,

... "To measure Jerusalem, to see what is its width and what is its length."

"Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls, because of the multitude of men and livestock in it.

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For I,' says the Lord, 'will be a wall of fire all around her, and I will be the glory in her midst.' ”

“Up, up! Flee from the land of the north,” says the Lord; “for I have spread you abroad like the four winds of heaven,” says the Lord.

For thus says the Lord of hosts: “He sent Me after glory, to the nations which plunder you; for he who touches you touches the apple of His eye.” (Zechariah 2:2,4b-6,8 NKJV)

In chapter three, the prophet receives a message for Jeshua, the high priest. And then in chapter four, God addresses our living legend through this mysterious angel that appeared to Zechariah. He sees before him a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top, and two olive trees by it, one on the right, one on the left. The prophet asked what they meant. Here was the angel’s reply,

So he said to me, “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel, ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.

“What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of ‘God bless it! God bless it!’”

Then the word of the LORD came to me:

“The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you.

Who despises the day of small things? Men will rejoice when they see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel...”

(Zechariah 4:6-10 NIV)

It is at this point that we will take up our story in the next lesson. We will look into the deeper meanings of some of these prophecies, and we will go back to the book of Ezra and watch as our “little known legend” sees God at work and the temple rebuilt.

For now, however, let’s look at what has happened to date, and let’s see just how God has taken this hitherto unknown man and lifted him out of relative obscurity and given him a place of such honor that two of the best-known prophets of all time have devoted much space to explaining his place and his ministry. Let us look as well at just what this man stands for prophetically. For we will see, perhaps even more so in our next study, that not only is he a living legend, he is a living portrait, as well, of the One who was to come and who is to come again.

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The Word of God to Zerubbabel was this, “You can’t finish the temple with human force or human power. If it is to be done, it must take a work of God’s Spirit to perform it. Not by might or by power, but by my Spirit will the task be done.” Then God looks at the seemingly insurmountable task of governmental intervention and outside attacks by enemies once presumed to be friends, and He pictures these obstacles which appear as mountains that cannot be climbed, and He laughs in derision. “Who are you, mighty mountains? When Zerubbabel speaks, you will dissolve into nothingness.”

God adds, “The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation. His hands will complete it.” Then he gave us the reason, “Then you will know that the LORD almighty has sent me.” Humanly speaking, the task was impossible. The forces of man had gathered against the spiritual objectives of God’s people, and there seemed to be nothing to do but give up. Then God entered the scene. He placed His precious hand on the shoulder of Zerubbabel, the man He had chosen to be His vessel of deliverance, and He said, “You started it; you’ll finish it—so the world may know—I AM is God.”

As we will see in our next study, God kept His word. For now, however, let us be reminded that Zerubbabel was a type of Christ. He was a physical picture of a spiritual truth yet to be unfolded. Let’s see how it worked:

1- Like Jesus, he was called to lead His people out of bondage, into freedom and fellowship once again. Jesus, our Zerubbabel, has seen us in the slave-yard of sin and has reached out to us and said, “Follow me, and I will lead you home.”

2- Like Jesus, he met with satanic opposition. The enemy does not want to see Jesus build His church any more than he wanted to see Zerubbabel rebuild the temple. The reason is the same. He does not want God to be glorified.

3- Like Jesus, his battle was not really against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers. The battle would be won in the heavenlies, not on the battlefield where the strength of man can prevail. It was not by might or power, but by God’s Spirit that the temple would be built, and it is not by man’s wisdom or power that His church will be built, either. “For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever.”

4- Before Jesus, the mountains of adversity melt into nothingness, just as the mountains before Zerubbabel were to

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dissolve before God's power. Left to man, it could not be done. Enter victory.

Jesus is our Zerubbabel. He has been charged with the task of building the church. It's not our job. Oh, He may choose to use us, but the task is His. Praise God for that.

And so the book closes only temporarily on another living legend. In our next study, we'll continue to pursue our look into this man's heart and the shadow which forms an image of the One who is to come.

In closing, may we be reminded that, like Zerubbabel, Jesus plans to finish what He started. He's not through with you. He's not through with me. We are now the temple of the Living God, and He is building in each of us a dwelling place for His Spirit conducive to worship, testimony, and praise. We may get discouraged. We may see no way for anything good to come out of our lives. We may see the future as anything but bright. Like God's temple in Zechariah's day, we may see the temple of God in us as unfinishable. And we may wonder why God ever even chose to begin the building in the first place. The enemy may seem to have us surrounded, and as he whispers in our ear, "You're finished," we may well begin to believe him.

Then, out of the shadows, we see Zerubbabel. And we hear God's voice. "I will finish what I started. It will not be by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord." It won't be anything we do. It will be what we decide to move aside and let God do that will make the difference. But, my dear Christian friend, you did not begin this building, God did. He knows all about your sin. He knows all about your failure. He knows all about those promises that you never kept. He knows. But He also knows that,

He who has begun a good work in you will complete (perform)
it. (Philippians 1:6 NKJV)

He always has. He always will. Maybe on that day, we'll miss some of the rewards that could have been ours. Perhaps we'll have broken His precious heart, but the temple will be finished, Beloved. The temple will be finished. Jesus, our Zerubbabel, said so, and He always keeps His Word.

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JESUS OUR ZERUBBABEL

Jesus, our Zerubbabel
Stands before the throne
And with 'oft a broken heart
O'er the sins we've known

Weeps at all the broken walls
Left within our lives
Grieves at all the great neglect
On which the flesh still thrives

He cries, "Oh, my temple
Built to house My Name
Created for such holiness
How can it bring such shame?"

Then in tones that thunder!
With power that oceans parted
He answers, "Oh, Beloved,
I'll finish what I started."

"Not by might, nor power
Will the task be done
Only by My Spirit
Is the battle won."

Jesus, our Zerubbabel
Speaks out to me and you
And says, "I began the temple
And I will see it through"

"Only trust Me, child of Mine,"
The Master doth entreat,
"Let Me build the temple
And it will be complete."

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