

## **WHO ARE THE CHOSEN? A Jewish Debate at the Time of the Exile**

Scriptures: Ezekiel 11:14-20; Isaiah 37:31-32

**Moderator:** In 597 B. C. the Babylonian army captured the city of Jerusalem. They looted the Jewish temple, and took thousands of prominent Jews into exile 600 miles away in Babylon. Among the exiles were the Jewish king Jehoiachin and a priest named Ezekiel. The exile raised a theological question that dominated the politics of Israel for the next 600 years. The question was this: Who are the chosen people? Who are the true inheritors of God's promises to Abraham and David? As we heard in our first scripture lesson, God promised Isaiah that a surviving remnant of the people of Israel would once again grow and flourish. But who is that remnant? Is it the Jewish people left in the land of Israel after the exiles were taken away? Or is it the Jews who were taken away into exile in Babylon?

Today we have brought two prominent Israelite leaders to debate this issue. On this side we have Pelatiah, son of Benaiah, a leader of the Jerusalem party. (Pelatiah comes up.) And on the other side we have Ezekiel, the son of Buzi, a leader of the Jewish exiles in Babylon. (Ezekiel comes up.) Welcome to both of you. Pelatiah, you may speak first.

**Pelatiah:** Thank you. One hundred and twenty five years ago, in the time of Isaiah, the people of Israel were threatened by foreign invaders known as the Assyrians. The Assyrian army marched into Israel, captured much of its territory and laid siege to the city of Jerusalem, the holy city of Zion where God's temple was built and where God's chosen king reigned on the throne of David. The Assyrians had already taken many Israelites into captivity, and those living in Jerusalem feared the same fate. But God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and said,

Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city, shoot an arrow there, come before it with a shield, or cast up a siege ramp against it. By the way that he came, by the same way he shall return; he shall not come into this city, says the Lord. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.

Long ago God said to King David, "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." Friends, God does not lie. God does not make promises and break them. God promised to preserve David's throne in Jerusalem forever, and that is exactly what God did in the time of Isaiah. The Assyrian army was defeated, and the city of Jerusalem was saved.

My name, Pelatiah, means "a remnant escapes." We who live in Jerusalem are the remnant that God chose to save from the Babylonians, just as God did in the time of Isaiah. We, not the exiles, are living in the promised land. We, not the exiles, have the temple where God has chosen to dwell. We, not the exiles, have the throne of David that God promised to preserve forever. What do the exiles have? Ezekiel is a priest without a temple. Jehoiachin is a king without a throne. The exiles are people without a land. They have nothing. Clearly God has rejected them because of their sins. But we living in Jerusalem have the promises of God. We have the land and the temple and the throne of David as signs of God's

presence, and because of this we know that nothing can separate us from God's love. So I hope you will give your support to the people of God still living in Jerusalem. Thank you.

**Moderator:** We now turn to the representative of the exile party, the priest Ezekiel.

**Ezekiel:** My opponent has quoted from the prophet Isaiah, but he has conveniently forgotten the prophet Jeremiah. In Jeremiah, chapter 7, Jeremiah stood in the very temple that Pelatiah mentioned and spoke these words to the people of Jerusalem. He said,

Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?

How dare you claim to be the chosen people of God when you don't live like it! Yes, the temple is a holy place. The temple is a sanctuary where we can come to meet God. But the point of meeting God in the temple is to remember your responsibility to God everywhere else. Do you think you can ignore God day in and day out and then show up at the temple and count on God's help whenever you need it?

And as for your king: yes, you have a king sitting on the throne of David. But that king uses his power to make rich people richer, including himself. He worships other gods, including himself. He ignores God's commandments, except the ones he can use for his own benefit. Do you think people can live day in and day out serving nothing greater than their own greed and then turn to God when they get in trouble and expect God to bail them out?

God is not bound to a particular building or a particular land or a particular nation. Even in exile 600 miles away I have experienced God's presence. I had dream. In my dream the cherubim, the winged statues in the temple, came alive and flew to me in Babylon. In another dream I saw God's glory lifted up from the temple. It paused at the east gate, and then it left the city of Jerusalem entirely and came to me in Babylon. Both those dreams had the same meaning. God's presence, God's blessing, has departed the city of Jerusalem and come to us in exile. We are the ones God has chosen us to carry God's promises into the future. That is why I support the people of God in exile.

**Moderator:** Thank you both. We will now have rebuttals. Pelatiah, you may go first.

**Pelatiah:** I find it interesting that you exiles think you are better than us. Yet when God sent the Babylonians to punish the people of Israel for their sins, who were the first to be taken away? You were! You say that we ignored God. You say that we lived self-centered lives focused on our own greed. What do you think you were doing? When the good times rolled you were right in there with us trying to get as much as you could for yourselves. You did not care about God or country; you only cared about what God and country could do for you.

**Ezekiel:** Yes, that is true. We too were sinners who turned our back on the God who created us and saved us. And for that reason we were carried into exile. But the same thing is destined to happen to you. Don't think that because you have the temple God will save your city. Don't

think because you have a king sitting on the throne of David that God will preserve your nation. Our whole nation is headed for a reckoning, and you, Pelatiah, shall be the first to experience it.

**Pelatiah:** So you think there is no hope at all. You think that we are all destined for oblivion—Jerusalemites and exiles alike. And God’s promises!—you think God’s promises are worth no more than the promises of a pandering politician.

**Ezekiel:** I have not forgotten God’s promises. In exile that is all we have left. We have no king, no government to bail us out. We have no land. We cannot say, ‘Well, at least we still have our home.’ We cannot even go to church, because there is no church to go to. We certainly cannot count on our own power or our own resources to get us out of this mess. We are captives, living at the mercy of foreign powers. We have nothing—absolutely nothing—except the promises of God. And maybe that is why God has chosen us. Maybe that is why the glory of God left Jerusalem and came to us. When we no longer count on ourselves, when we no longer trust our politicians or our institutions or own wisdom and cunning to get us out of trouble—maybe that is when God can finally get through to us.

**Pelatiah:** And suppose God helps you. Suppose God comes to you in exile and saves you. Suppose God sets you free from your captors and brings you back to this land. What will prevent you from becoming just like us? You say that we ignore God because we feel safe and secure in our land. But if God rescues you from exile and brings you back to this land and makes you feel secure again, what will prevent you from starting to ignore God. What will prevent you from falling back into the self-centeredness and greed that got us into trouble in the first place?

**Ezekiel:** Our hope in God goes deeper than a mere reversal of fortunes. Getting our homes back will do no good, unless we live as new people inside those homes, unless we make them places of kindness, faithfulness, and caring. Likewise, getting our nation back will do no good, unless our nation is filled with a new spirit of generosity and caring that supersedes individual greed. Going back to the temple will do no good, unless in the process we get new hearts—hearts that will love and serve God outside the temple as much as we claim to do inside. You are right about one thing, Pelatiah. Neither those in Jerusalem nor those in exile have any future as God’s chosen people unless God works on them from the inside out.

**Pelatiah:** So what makes you think that you are the chosen people of God rather than us?

**Ezekiel:** Only this: because we have lost everything, we are a little more ready to throw ourselves on the mercy of God. Because we no longer have any hope of saving ourselves, we are a little more ready to let God do it. And that is all the opening God needs.

**Moderator:** Our time for the debate is up. Thank you both. Now let me read our second scripture lesson: Ezekiel 11:14-20. Here is God’s answer to this debate.

- Ken Onstot  
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