

Who was Zerubbabel in the Bible?

Zerubbabel was the grandson of King Jehoiachin of Judah (1 Chronicles 3:17) and thus a descendant of David. Born in Babylon during the exile (between 587 and 539 BC), Zerubbabel traveled to Judah after King Cyrus II allowed the Judean captives to return to their homeland to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1-4; 6:3-5, 8-10). The prophet Haggai identifies Zerubbabel as the governor of Judah after the exile (Haggai 1:1; 2:2, 21).

Zerubbabel is listed in the Bible as an ancestor of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:12-13; Luke 3:27). The identity of Zerubbabel's father is somewhat of a puzzle. All but one reference in the Bible name Shealtiel as his father (Ezra 3:2, 8; 5:2; Nehemiah 12:1; Haggai 1:1, 12-14; 2:2, 23; Matthew 1:12-13; Luke 3:27). This would make King Jehoiachin his grandfather. But in 1 Chronicles 3:19, Pedaiah, the brother of Shealtiel, is named as Zerubbabel's father. One possible solution is that Shealtiel was married but died before having a son. Under the law of levirate marriage, his brother Pedaiah might have taken Shealtiel's widow, making Pedaiah the biological father of Zerubbabel. Another proposal is that both Shealtiel and Pedaiah had sons named Zerubbabel. A final solution suggests that the text in 1 Chronicles contains a scribal error.

Zerubbabel is a Babylonian name meaning "offspring of Babylon." As governor of Judah, Zerubbabel was appointed as one of the initial leaders who supervised the reconstruction of the Jerusalem temple with the help of Joshua, the high priest (Ezra 3:2-3, 8). After a season of about fourteen months to get settled, the Jewish people began to rebuild in earnest. It wasn't long before opposition arose from surrounding adversaries, and, eventually, the work was brought to a standstill by order of King Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:1-24). Only the foundation of the temple had been completed.

The foundation showed that this new temple was going to be much smaller than Solomon's original, to the disappointment of those who remembered the former structure: "Many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid" (Ezra 3:12). The prophet Haggai addressed their disappointment: "'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? But now be strong, Zerubbabel,' declares the Lord. . . . 'Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the Lord, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the Lord Almighty" (Haggai 2:3-4). Zechariah, too, told the people not to despise "the day of small things" (Zechariah 4:10), because God had great plans for this new temple.

After a seventeen-year delay, under the next king of Persia, Darius, the Jews were granted permission to continue rebuilding. Within three and a half years after the second effort began, the temple was completed in 516 BC.

In one of Zechariah's visions, he receives words that surely encouraged Zerubbabel: "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, 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'" (Zechariah 4:6-9).

As a descendant of King David, Zerubbabel was identified with the coming Messiah by his contemporary prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. The Jewish people began to see Zerubbabel as their great hope for reviving the Davidic kingship and for liberation from the

Persians.

Haggai declared that God would use Zerubbabel to overthrow and destroy kingdoms: “The word of the LORD came to Haggai a second time on the twenty-fourth day of the month: ‘Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I am going to shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms.’ . . . ‘On that day,’ declares the LORD Almighty, ‘I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,’ declares the LORD Almighty” (Haggai 2:20-23).

As a seal of royal authority, the “signet ring” is a messianic metaphor. In Jeremiah 22:24-25, God said if Jehoiachin (Zerubbabel’s grandfather) were His signet ring, He would cast him off. Thus, Haggai was saying that through Zerubbabel God would reverse the curse He had pronounced on Jehoiachin. God would place the wicked king’s grandson like a signet ring on His finger. Likewise, the words “on that day” point to a future messianic fulfillment of Haggai’s message.

Although Zerubbabel’s temple was smaller than Solomon’s had been, God promised a greater glory: “The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,” said the Lord (Haggai 2:9). The glory bestowed on Zerubbabel’s temple came centuries later when Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came into the temple courts. Solomon’s temple never received a visit from the Messiah, but Zerubbabel’s did.

Curiously, even before the temple was completed and dedicated, Zerubbabel’s name disappears from the biblical record. It’s possible that Zerubbabel may have returned to Babylon soon after finishing his work on the temple, or it could be that the Persians

feared a Jewish uprising and had Zerubbabel removed or executed. Regardless, Zerubbabel is revered as one of the Bible's great heroes, laboring to reconstruct the Lord's house of worship and shining like a beacon toward the coming Messiah.

While the temple Zerubbabel helped rebuild paled in comparison to the size and grandeur of Solomon's, it far outlasted it. In fact, Zerubbabel's temple was still standing 500 years later when the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ, graced its courts.