

HISTORY OF OLD TESTAMENT ISRAEL

PERIOD #7—THE EXILE & RETURN

Emphasis: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion!”
(Psalm 137:1)

Technically, the Exile period deals with the history of Israel during the 70 years of captivity in Babylon, while the Restoration period describes the dealings of God with Israel after the 70 year captivity.

THE PERIOD OF THE EXILE (CAPTIVITY)

The 70 years of captivity were prophesied in **Jeremiah 25:11-12**, *“This whole land will be a desolation and a horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then it will be when seventy years are completed I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, declares the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it an everlasting desolation.”*

Daniel speaks of the fulfillment of those 70 years in **Daniel 9:1-2**, *“In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of Median descent, who was made king over the kingdom of the Chaldeans—in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, observed in the books the number of the years which was revealed as the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet for the completion of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.”*

The Stages of the Exile

The Exile of Judah took place in three specific stages:

STAGE #1: [605BC]-On his way back from victory in Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar, general of the armies of Babylon, laid siege to Jerusalem, and took some of the leading nobles, and young men from the city of Jerusalem as hostages and carried them back to Babylon.

It is at this point that Daniel and his three friends are carried off (Daniel 1:1-7). Most of the citizens are still in the land of Judah, but are certainly subservient to Babylon. It is possible that it was at this point that Jeremiah prophesied the 70-year captivity (cf. Jeremiah 25:11-12).

Nebuchadnezzar had just vanquished the Egyptians at the Battle of Carchemish, thus establishing Babylon as the new rulers of the eastern Mediterranean world. Nebuchadnezzar was establishing Babylonian dominance over all that area and had come to Jerusalem and laid siege to the city.

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Hearing of his father's death, he took several young men from the royal family as hostages and trainees for his court (including Daniel and his three friends according to **Daniel 1:1-7**). He also made King Jehoiakim a vassal (2 Chronicles 36:6), and then hastened back to Babylon to establish himself on the throne. Nebuchadnezzar and a small military force took the short route across the desert, sending the captives with his greater army along the Fertile Crescent.

At this point, though most of her citizens were yet in the land of Judah, the nation was subservient to Babylon. It is at this point that Jeremiah prophesied that Judah would be carried off to Babylon for 70 years.

Therefore, most scholars believe that the 70 year captivity began with this event. This would coincide well with the decree for the first return around 538 BC, which would be followed by that return and the beginning of the temple rebuilding process around 537/536 BC.

STAGE #2: [597BC]-Jehoiakim rebels against Nebuchadnezzar (about 602 BC), who finally comes and attack Jerusalem (March 10, 597BC), carrying off 10,000 captives to Babylon. After rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar, King Jehoiakim died on December 10, 598BC, so that by the time Nebuchadnezzar arrived to punish Jerusalem for its rebellion, his son Jehoiachin (a.k.a. Coniah/Jeconiah) had been on the throne for 3 months and 10 days.

In other words, Jehoiachin was in the wrong place at the wrong time and would essentially pay for the rebellion of his father against Babylon. Jehoiachin was taken captive to Babylon and remained a prisoner there until the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 561 BC (**2 Kings 25:27-30**).

Nebuchadnezzar also carried off the wealthy elite from Jerusalem; included in these was Ezekiel, the prophet. Although, Ezekiel wasn't actually called to the prophetic ministry until after he had been carried off to Babylon, probably about 593 BC.

STAGE #3: [586 BC]-King Zedekiah ignores the warnings of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 27. 28) and plots against Babylon once again, so that Nebuchadnezzar returns, lays siege against Jerusalem (January 15, 588 to July 18, 586 BC), and captures it. One month after the city fell, the captain of Nebuchadnezzar's army burned the city and the temple.

It is interesting that the temple was destroyed in 586 BC and would not be completely rebuilt until February/March of 516 BC, 70 years after its destruction. So, not only were the Jews in captivity a minimum of 70 years, but the temple would not exist for 70 years as well.

A tiny remnant of Jews, including Jeremiah was left in Judah under Gedeliah, who was appointed governor. When Gedeliah was murdered, those Jews feared reprisal and fled to Egypt, taking Jeremiah there against his wishes (cf. Jeremiah 40:13ff).

The Historical Books from the Exile

There are two historical books of Scripture that were written or compiled during the exile, and were intended to rebuke, encourage, and exhort the Jews in exile in Babylon.

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- **1, 2 Kings**—These books were likely compiled during the exile of the Jews, perhaps were done so in a large part by the prophet, Jeremiah. These books were intended to confront the exiles with the reality that Yahweh had been entirely true to His covenant, that the only reason for the exile of the nation was the rebellion of the people and their kings.
- **1, 2 Chronicles**-These books were written by Ezra by about 450 BC. This would have been possibly after the return or in light of the return. They were directed at the Jews living some decades after the decree to return, and who had lost their passion for the temple as well as their zeal to honor and perpetuate the worship of Yahweh in that place. They were intended to remind the Jews in that day of their heritage, and to refocus their attention and devotion to the true worship of God.

The Prophets of the Exile

There are three prophets who ministered during the period of the exile. These prophets were all considered “major prophets” and they wrote their prophetic books during this period. These prophets are often referred to as “the exilic prophets.” Who are the exilic prophets?

1) Jeremiah—

He was the prophet to Judah (the southern kingdom) during the final days of that nation. He had insisted for years that God would use Babylon to punish Judah and he had been reviled as a traitor for that message.

He witnessed each of the invasions of Judah by Babylon. In fact, he penned the book of Lamentations as a funeral dirge over the city of Jerusalem as Nebuchadnezzar was destroying it. He also penned the book bearing his name recording the many prophecies that he made prior to, during and after the destruction of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah was never taken to Babylon. He was carried off to Egypt against his will when the remnant of Jews in Judah fled because they feared Nebuchadnezzar would demand retribution for the death of Gedeliah, the governor left in charge of that region.

2) Daniel—

Daniel was taken captive in 605 BC in connection with the first stage of the exile. He was carried off in this first deportation when Nebuchadnezzar took some of the royal seed to serve as hostages and to train for service in his court.

Daniel outlived the Babylonian empire. He did serve in the highest official posts in both the Babylonian and Medo/Persian empires. He was used by Yahweh to protect His name in the face of the captivity of His covenant people. Daniel prophesied the course of world history for the next several centuries and He recorded these prophecies in the book bearing his name.

3) Ezekiel—

He was taken captive during the second stage of the exile in 597 BC, but he was not called as a prophet until 593/592 BC. His entire prophetic ministry took place in Babylon. Ezekiel is only mentioned in Scripture in the book bearing his name.

His message recorded for us in Ezekiel uses visions, prophecies, parables, signs and symbols to proclaim and dramatize the message of God to His exiled people. The thirtieth year mentioned in Ezekiel 1:1 probably refers to his age.

He would begin his prophetic ministry around the age of 30, which means he was carried off to Babylon around the age of 25. He would be younger than Jeremiah by about 20 years and about the same age as Daniel, whom he mentions by name as an already well known prophet (Ezekiel 14:14, 20; 28:3).

He was both a prophet and a priest (Ezekiel 1:3). Because of his priestly background, he was particularly interested in and familiar with the temple and its details and thus has much to say about them (Ezekiel 8:1-11:25; 40:1-47:12).

Life in the Exile

If you've ever felt your world has crashed around you and nothing seems to go your way anymore, you know a little of how the exiles from Judah felt in Babylon. They had been completely removed from their lives to a new and foreign land.

The Hebrew exiles found their new home in Babylon very different from what they had left in Judah. Instead of a land of hills and valleys, they now lived in a flat land.

Instead of dry farming made possible in most places by minimally adequate rainfall, they were forced to irrigate crops in soil that received only about 5-6 inches of rainfall per year.

Instead of a land with lots of stone and some timber and other resources, they found themselves in a region of alluvial soil left by overflowing rivers with no stone or good timber or metal.

Instead of reasonably comfortable temperatures in the hills of Judah, they faced unrelieved summer heat of 108 degrees in the shade and 120 to 140 degrees in the sun.

When we think of the Hebrew exiles in Babylon, we imagine their being captive under a despotic and all-powerful king. This is the image that we get from Daniel's address to Nebuchadnezzar, "You, O king, are a king of kings. For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength and glory" (Daniel 2:37).

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As a matter of fact, after the rule of Nebuchadnezzar, very weak and irresponsible kings led Babylon. The Persian colossus in the East actually overmatched them and Babylon eventually fell to Cyrus without a fight around 539 BC.

It is interesting that God referred to Nebuchadnezzar as “My servant” in Jeremiah 25:9, primarily because God used him to carry out His judgment against Judah and the surrounding states. Of course many believe that after Nebuchadnezzar’s own little exile wandering about as a wild beast that he actually turned to God and worshipped and praised God (**Daniel 4:34-37**).

The Hebrews were forced to live in a land where people were very polytheistic (worshipped many God’s). They thus had a fairly large family of gods to talk about, but a few were especially important for the Babylonians: Anu, the sky god from whom the kingship originally descended; Ishtar, goddess of love and war; Enlil, Anu’s son who eventually replaced him; Ea, lord of the deep on which the world rested; Marduk, the chief god of Babylon, with his snake-dragon. Eventually there was a fusion of one divine-figure into another. Of course, we see in the book of Daniel, that Nebuchadnezzar desired the worship of the people.

Under Nebuchadnezzar, there was great economic opportunity as he imported craftsmen and artisans during the captivity. He tended to carry off royalty, craftsmen, artisans, and the younger healthier individuals for Babylon.

Babylonians built their houses out of unbaked brick and the roofs consisted of mud and tree branches supported by palm poles.

Their diet was similar to that of the Hebrews. Grain and dates formed the staple foods. The primary grain was that of barley, but wheat and millet were also used. Fruits and vegetables included dates, pomegranates, grapes, figs, lentils, chickpeas, beans, turnips, leeks, cucumbers, watercress, lettuce, onions and garlic. Cattle, sheep and goats provided meat, milk and cheese, while those that lived near rivers and canals ate fish in abundance.

THE PERIOD OF THE RETURN (RESTORATION)

The decree to return to the land is found in two places (2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1):

- **2 Chronicles 36:22-23**, *“Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia—in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah—the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, ‘Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up!’”*
- **Ezra 1:1-4**, *“Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying: ‘Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ‘Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem. ‘Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.’”*

Remember that Judah fell to the nation of Babylon, but Babylon was destroyed by Medo/Persia in 539 BC (Daniel 5). Thus, when the Jews return to Judah, they do so under the authority of the Persians. It is necessary to once again mention the differing policies of the Babylonians and the Persians.

The Babylonians like the Assyrians before them practiced a policy of expatriation, where they would remove people from their native lands and place them throughout the rest of the empire in order to avoid an organized resistance.

The Persians, however, had a contrasting policy of repatriation, which was the concept of replacing people back into their native lands in order to gain their loyalty. This policy of repatriation was offered to many people groups, not just given to the Jews. Also, repatriation was given by decree from the king.

Thus, Cyrus king of Persia, upon conquering the Babylonian empire, would begin to repatriate the various lands with their native peoples. The Jews were commissioned to return to the land of Israel, essentially the southern area of Judah for the purpose of repopulating the area and

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rebuilding their temple to God. (The Persians, often allowed native peoples to rebuild their houses of worship in their homeland). Not a problem for a polytheistic people, as the Persians were.

The Stages of the Return

The return of Judah took place in three stages and may be summarized as follows:

Stage #1—538 BC (Ezra 1-6)

This first stage was by the decree of Cyrus for the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple to God. The political leader of the Jews who returned at this time was an individual named Zerubbabel, while the levitical/religious leader who returned with him was an individual name Joshua. Approximately 50,000 people returned at this time (42,360 Jews + 8,000 servants + 200 singing men). The purpose of this return was to rebuild the temple, which was completed in 516 BC. It was during this time that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah ministered.

Note: The work of temple-rebuilding was well begun under Zerubbabel and Joshua; the altar was established on October 5, 537 BC, and the foundations of the second temple were completed in May/June of 536 BC. However the people grew selfish and careless and the work lay dormant for several years. God raised up two prophets to rebuke and encourage the people, and the temple was finally completed in February/March of 516 BC.

Stage #2—458 BC (Ezra 7-10)

The religious leader of this return was Ezra the scribe. This was a much smaller return as only about 2,000 Jews returned at this time. The purpose of this return was to purify the worship services. (Pagan wives had been taken and squatters were in the temple.)

Stage #3—445/444 BC (Nehemiah 1:1-13)

It was at this time that Nehemiah was allowed to return to the land in order to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and enable the people to re-inhabit the city. The Old Testament prophet that ministered at this time was Malachi.

The Historical Books from the Return

There are three historical books, which were written after the Exile, and during the restoration period. The first two record the three stages of the restoration process, while the final records a dramatic and interesting story, which occurs in Persia during the years when the restoration was being accomplished.

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- **Ezra**—Chapters 1-6 narrate the first stage of the Restoration, when Zerubbabel returned with 50,000 Jews to rebuild the altar and the temple (538 BC). Chapters 7-10 record the second stage of the Restoration, when Ezra returned with about 2,000 Jews to restore pure worship in the temple (458 BC).
- **Nehemiah**—records the third stage of the Restoration, when Nehemiah returned to rebuild the walls and re-inhabit the city of Jerusalem (445/444 BC). Essentially the final chapter of Old Testament history.
- **Esther**—records the account of Esther, Mordecai, and the deliverance of the Jews from the hatred of Haman. This event occurs in Persia about 483-478 BC, or during the period between Ezra 1-6 and Ezra 7-10. The events of Esther take place between stages 1 and 2 of the return.

The Prophets of the Return

There are three prophets that minister during the period of the Return. Because these prophets minister after the exile of the Jews (the 70-year Captivity), they are referred to as post-exilic prophets (post exile). Who are the post-exilic prophets?

1) Haggai—

The work of temple rebuilding had begun in 537-535 BC, then lay dormant for about 15 years. On August 29, 520 BC, Haggai began to rebuke the nation and encourage them to return to the work. On September 20, the work was begun once again, and in February/March of 516 BC, it was completed and the second temple was dedicated.

2) Zechariah—

In October/November of 520 BC, just several weeks after Haggai had begun his prophetic ministry, Zechariah began to speak the word of the Lord to the same audience. On February 14, 519 BC, Zechariah had a series of 8 night visions (Zechariah 1:7-6:8) concerning the future of Israel. Haggai and Zechariah were contemporaries who both ministered during the career of Zerubbabel. Haggai's style was very direct and straight forward, while that of Zechariah was much more visionary and far-reaching.

3) Malachi—

A contemporary of Nehemiah and Ezra, Malachi ministered to the restoration community in Jerusalem at a time of widespread discouragement and carelessness. Malachi called upon the nation to obey Yahweh and trust His provisions. Malachi would be the final voice of the Old Testament.

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Life during the Return

Very little had changed from the time of the exile. The Jews were living previously in Babylon (modern day Iraq) during the exile. But, we find them in the land of Persia (modern day Iran) and returning to their homeland of Israel during the period of the return.

The land of Persia or modern day Iran is a large plateau between the plain of the Tigris on the west and the Indus River valley to the east. On the south it is bordered by the Persian Gulf leading to the Indian Ocean. To the north of the plateau is the Caspian Sea and the chains of mountains that extend from the south end of the Caspian Sea.

As mentioned earlier, Cyrus conquered territories he emphasized winning the favor of the gods, the priesthoods and their followers in those lands. Thus he would reverse the deportation policies of Assyria and Babylon, allowing people to return to their homelands and thus gaining their loyalty.

The Persian people were polytheistic, but at this time there seems to have been the beginnings of Zoroastrianism. To be sure, Darius and Xerxes exalted Ahuramazda, the god Zoroaster preached, but they do not mention Zoroaster. Cyrus, however, comes across very tolerant of various religions, making him simply a typical Persian polytheist.

Note: Zoroastrianism contains a dualism, a contradiction of good and evil, a Good Spirit and an Evil Spirit with his demon henchmen. The Good Spirit represents light, fire, summer, fertile land, and health. While the Evil Spirit represents darkness, winter, drought, sickness, and death. In later Zoroastrianism, individuals were judged by whether their good deeds, outweighed their evil deeds. Fire was used as a symbol of the god Ahuramazda, the god worshipped in Zoroastrianism.

All other aspects of life (dress, diet, etc...) was the same as the period of the exile. Obviously those who stayed in Persia lived a wealthier lifestyle than those who returned to the land. Those that returned would have a more basic lifestyle for a while until houses were rebuilt, city walls put up and crops re-grown.

Conclusion:

The narrative of the Old Testament closes during the period of Restoration to the land. The events of the book of Nehemiah and the prophecy of Malachi would bring the Old Testament to a close. The land of Israel would endure 400 years of prophetic and revelatory silence until the events surrounding the birth of Christ, where the New Testament narrative picks up.

While these 400 years are silent in Scripture, it was a time of world-shaking events. Great empires rose and fell, many battles were fought, and writings such as the Apocrypha and Septuagint were part of the silent years. The events of the 400-year intertestamental period would set the stage for the New Testament. So when we open our New Testament we find a very different Jewish world.