

## 7. The Restoration: Judah Freed From the Babylonian Captivity



# How Long Did the Babylonian Empire Last?



- For years, the Chaldean people were ruled over by the Assyrians. With the death of Ashurbanipal in 692 BCE, Assyria suffered a series of civil wars. The Chaldeans of Babylon allied with Medes, Persians and other tribes ruled by Assyria, rebelled against their Masters. In 612 BCE, they sacked the Assyrian Capital of Nineveh and the New Babylonian Empire began
- Babylon was the Capital city of the New Babylonian Empire and Ur, the city of Abraham's birth, was then truly, Ur of the Chaldees. It became known as a major center of learning in the region
- Babylon remained the dominant power in the region from 612 to 539 BCE

# What Were Things Like During the Babylonian Captivity?

- The lands of the Northern Kingdom of Israel had always been far more valuable for agriculture than the lands of Judah. When the Assyrians conquered Israel, they governed it as its own province. They named the province Samaria after the city that had become the capital of the Northern Kingdom.
- When the Babylonians conquered Judah they simply added the lands of Judah to the province of Samaria and governed both lands as one province. In an odd way, Babylon “reunited” the former Northern and Southern kingdoms. Babylon paid little real attention to the rocky, hilly lands of Judah so raiders from neighboring Edom and Ammon from time to time would pick at what little was left
- The devastation of Judah and the Babylonian Exile managed to accomplish what Josiah tried to accomplish some decades earlier. The Jewish people, as in the time of King Josiah, began to refocus on the basics of their faith;
  - Religious practices such as circumcision and Sabbath observance were emphasized maintaining a tight cohesion among the Jewish community
  - The Deuteronomic History (Joshua, Judges, 1+2 Samuel, 1+2 Kings) along with the writings of the prophets may have been collected and edited at this time
  - The Prophet Ezekiel continued to preach about a future resurrection of the nation. In anticipation of that future event, Temple practices were codified
  - Babylon, along with Jerusalem, remained a center for Jewish scholarship for centuries

# Who Replaced the Neo-Babylonian Empire?



- The dominance of the New Babylonian Empire in the region did not last long. A new power began in the East began to assert itself. Cyrus II, grandson of Cyrus I, King of Anshan, ruled a land that was a tributary state of Media, an ally of Babylon
- Cyrus II revolted against the Medes in 549 BCE and defeated them. Three years later, Cyrus II was officially proclaimed King of Persia (modern day Iran). Lydia was next on Cyrus II's to-do list. Around 547 BCE, Cyrus II captured Lydia's Capital city, Sardes, along with the Lydian King, Croesus, effectively bringing Lydia into the ever-expanding Persian Empire
- In 540 BCE, Persia's campaign against the Babylonian Empire began



# But How Many If by River?



**Around 540 BCE, Cyrus II began his war against the Babylonian Empire. He routed the Babylonians at the Battle of Opis along the Tigris River. Cyrus then began to plan for the capture of the Capital City of the Empire, Babylon itself**

**The city of Babylon was protected by great walls. The River Euphrates flowed through the city but the depth of the river ensured that no army could enter by that route**

**According to Herodotus (Histories 1: 189-191), Persian engineers went upstream of the river and built a diversion canal. At a given signal, the water was diverted into the canal lowering the river to an extent that the Persian army could march into the city via the river. The surprise was so complete that the entire city was taken in one day**

# Who Was Cyrus II?



- Much of what is known about the Persian King Cyrus the Great can be found on the Cyrus cylinder. This includes his loyalty to the god Marduk
- The cylinder also describes how Cyrus II treated those nations that he captured, “to Assur and [from] Susa, Agade, Ešnunna, Zamban, Me-Turnu, Der, as far as the region of Gutium, the sacred centers on the other side of the Tigris, whose sanctuaries had been abandoned for a long time, I returned the images of the gods, who had resided there [i.e., in Babylon], to their own places and I let them dwell in their eternal abodes. I gathered all their inhabitants and returned to them their own dwellings.”
- This passage is taken by many to include the resettlement of the Jewish people to their homeland after their captivity in Babylon. Since Judah is not specifically mentioned, many scholars question whether this passage refers to the Jewish exiles

# Did the Persian King Cyrus Allow the Jewish People to Return to Their Homeland?

- Whether or not the decree on the Cyrus cylinder was meant specifically for the refugees from Judah, it is nonetheless a fact that Cyrus did allow their return
- Cyrus actually did more than simply allow the return. He restored to the Jewish people a number of the sacred vessels that had been taken from the Temple before it was destroyed by the Babylonians. He also provided money to help with the rebuilding of the Temple
- Not all the exiles chose to return to their homeland. In fact, given the poor state of Judah, many exiles, who had established a comfortable life in Babylon, chose to stay on there. For centuries thereafter, the city of Babylon remained a center of Jewish learning
- On the other hand, many did choose to return but the return did not happen all at once. There were at least two waves of people returning to Judah and to the city of Jerusalem, or at least what was left of it

# What Role Did Zerubbabel Play in the Return?

- **Zerubbabel was the grandson of Jehoiakin (Jeconiah), who ruled Judah for a brief time after his father, Jehoiakim. While Zerubbabel was of the line of David\*, he was no longer a King in Jerusalem. He was a leader of a province of the Persian Empire. It was also important to recall that Jeconiah's line was cursed by the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 22:28-30),**  
**(\* Remember the prophet Nathan's prediction that David's line would last forever)**
- **Zerubbabel was a political leader, There was also a religious leader, a priest named Joshua who, with Zerubbabel, led the first group of hopeful Jewish exiles back to their homeland. Zerubbabel and Joshua laid the foundation for the rebuilding of the Temple. Joshua also carried back some of the sacred vessels from the Temple stolen by the Babylonians**
- **Samaritans from the North asked Zerubbabel to allow them to help in the rebuilding of the Temple claiming that they worshipped the same God (YHWH). Zerubbabel recognized this as an attempt by the leader of the Persian province of Samaria (the former Northern Kingdom of Israel) to assert dominance of the new province of Judah (Yehud). He wisely refused. This was in line with the decrees of King Josiah, before the exile of the people of Judah to Babylon, that all true worship would be held in the Temple of Jerusalem. The followers of YHWH in Samaria worshipped at shrines in the cities of Dan and Bethel**
- **After establishing Jerusalem as the religious center of Judah, Zerubbabel simply fades out of history. The physical house of David came to an end but a Messianic hope for a restoration of David's line had its beginnings**



# What Role Did Ezra Play in the Return?

- Ezra was a religious leader. He was both a priest and a “scribe of the law of the God of Heaven” (*Ez. 7:21*) Ezra was sent at the head of a later, second group of returning exiles to reinforce the former King Josiah’s religious reforms stating that all worship was to take place in the Jerusalem Temple and that the Jewish people should know and follow the Torah, the Jewish Law
- Ezra proclaimed the law to all who would hear. Upon learning that some of the earlier returning exiles had taken foreign wives, Ezra called an assembly of all the returned exiles and accused them of abandoning their faith. Almost all those who had taken foreign wives vowed to dismiss both their foreign wives and any children borne by them
- The word synagogue comes from a Greek word συναγωγή which means either an assembly itself or, more likely, a place of assembly. The Septuagint often used the word συναγωγή to translate the Hebrew word בֵּית כְּנֶסֶת (*Beit K’nesset*). The people who gathered in the *Beit K’nesset* were the קָהָל (*qahal*). The Septuagint often used the word ἑκκλησία (*ekklesia*) for the people assembled. The English word ‘ecclesiastic’ comes from this Greek word. In Christianity, a different Greek expression was used for the place of assembly was δόμος κυριακός (*domos kyriakos*). ἑκκλησία continued to be used for the people assembled

# What Role Did Nehemiah Play in the Return?

- **Nehemiah was, like Zerubbabel before him, a political leader. Nehemiah was a Jewish member of the Persian court. When he heard that the resettlement of Judah was not going well, he had himself appointed governor of Judah**
- **Judah was determined to be its own province with no subservience to Samaria. That status was asserted by Zerubbabel but, until the arrival of Nehemiah, it had not been formalized. After Nehemiah, Judah began to enjoy some level of autonomy while still remaining under Persian rule**
- **Nehemiah began to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Sanballat was a Samaritan, a worshipper of YHWH. He was the political leader of Samaria, the former Northern Kingdom of Israel. Tobiah, was the political leader of nearby Ammon. Geshem was the political leader of Arabia. All four men owed allegiance to their Persian masters, yet neither Sanballat, Tobiah nor Geshem wanted Nehemiah to establish a new province in the region. They plotted against him and accused him of planning a rebellion against Artaxerxes, then ruler of Persia. Artaxerxes remained committed to some level of self rule for Judah**
- **Nehemiah and Ezra combined to bring renewed commitment to Jewish Law that started under King Josiah and was reinforced during the Babylonian Captivity. There was a renewed vigor of life to the land of Judah. The people publicly responded by recommitting themselves to their covenant with the Lord**

# Where Did the Hebrew Scriptures End?

The Hebrew Scriptures end with the Book of Second Chronicles. The last words of that book are almost as prophetic and meaningful today as they must have been those many centuries ago.

*“Thus says Cyrus, King of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. All among you, therefore, who belong to his people, may their God be with them; let them go up.” (2 Chron. 36:23)*

You can almost hear the words that end many Jewish Seder meals “Next year in Jerusalem.”

While these are the final words of the Hebrew Scriptures, they are not the final words of the Christian Old Testament. Even the Protestant Old Testament, which uses exactly the same books as the Hebrew Scriptures, does not place them in the same order. All Christian Bibles end with the Book of Malachi whose last words point to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry at his Baptism by John the Baptist

*Now I am sending to you Elijah\* the prophet, before the day of the LORD comes, the great and terrible day; He will turn the heart of fathers to their sons, and the heart of sons to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the land with utter destruction.*

# Why Elijah and Not Isaiah?

It is interesting that Christians chose the reference to Elijah instead of Isaiah. Keep in mind that in Matthew, Mark and Luke, John the Baptist, when asked about his ministry replies: *“I am the voice of one crying out in the desert. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight his paths.”* (Matt. 3:3, Mark 1:2-3 and Luke 3:4).

Yet, in John, we see the reference to Elijah. It is the Jewish Levites who ask John the Baptist who he is. They specifically ask the Baptist if he is Elijah. John says that he is not and repeats the same quote from Isaiah states above. The Levites then ask why John is baptizing is he is not Moses or Elijah.

The reason is that the Jewish Levites knew the quote from Malachi quoted on the previous slide:

*Now I am sending to you Elijah\* the prophet, before the day of the LORD comes, the great and terrible day;*

Judaism also had prophecies involving the use of water to purify God’s people. God says: *“I will sprinkle clean water over you to make you clean; from all your impurities and from all your idols I will cleanse you”*. (Ez. 36:25) and, *“On that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David\* and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to purify from sin and uncleanness”*. (Zec. 13:1)

And do not forget the answer to Jesus’ question *“Who do people say that I am?”* in Matthew 16:13-14, *“Some say Elijah. Some say John the Baptist”*.

# The Nevi'im: Both History and Prophets

## History

The Torah tells the history of the Hebrew people from Adam to Moses. Their history from Joshua the time to the Babylonian Captivity can be found in the following books;

- |                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| - The Time of the Joshua + Judges  | Joshua, Judges, 1+2 Samuel                 |
| - The Time of the United Kingdom   | 1+2 Samuel, 1 Kings, <b>1+2 Chronicles</b> |
| - The Time of the Divided Kingdoms | 1+2 Kings, <b>2 Chronicles</b>             |
| - The Babylonian Captivity         | Jeremiah, Ezekiel                          |
| - The Time of the Restoration      | <b>Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther</b>              |

## The Prophets of the Hebrew people;

### From the Northern Kingdom of Israel

Hosea, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum (Minor Prophets)

### From the Southern Kingdom of Judah

- Zephaniah, Habbakuk, Joel, Micah (Minor Prophets, pre-Captivity)
- Isaiah (Major Prophet 1<sup>st</sup> Is. 1-39, 2<sup>nd</sup> Is. 40-55, 3<sup>rd</sup> Is. 56-66)
- Jeremiah, Ezekiel (Major Prophets, during Captivity)
- Haggai, Zechariah, Malachai (Minor Prophets, during the restoration)

Note: The Book of Daniel is often thought of as a prophetic book however it was likely written long after the time of the prophets and is placed in the Ketuvim (the writings) section of the Hebrew Bible



# Organization of the Land Under Persian Rule

- **Some of the people who lived in Samaria were descended from Israelite tribes from the Northern Kingdom who managed to remain in the land after the Assyrian deportation. At the time of the return of the captives taken by Babylon from the Southern Kingdom of Judah, many Samaritans themselves to be faithful worshippers of YHWH. The largest majority of these claimed specific descent from Manasseh and Ephraim, the sons of Joseph. So, not all of the “Lost Tribes” of Israel were really lost.**
- **As mentioned earlier, land to which the exiles returned was initially included in the Persian province of Samaria and governed by a Satrap (governor) from that region. Later, Judah became its own province and was governed by its own satrap. Given the state of Jerusalem after the destruction of the city by the Babylonians, the Satrap ruled from Mizpah in Benjamin until about 445 BCE. Satraps of Judah were almost always Jewish rather than Persian following the Assyrian and Babylonian tradition**
- **While these Samaritans did worship YHWH, they only accepted the Torah as the actual word of God. They also did not accept the version of the Torah used by the people of Judah. The Samaritans claimed that the Jewish Torah had been changed from the original version. The Samaritans had worship centers in Bethel and Dan and their own center of sacrificial worship on Mount Gerizim. They denied the Jewish claim that the Temple in Jerusalem was the only legitimate center of sacrificial worship**

# Weren't the Persians one of the “Bad Guys” of History?

- As usual, the answer to that kind of question depends on the point of view of the people involved. The Jewish people found the Persians to be tolerant and supportive
  - they allowed the Jews to return to their homeland
  - they allowed the Jews a certain amount of self-government
  - they supported the Jews as they rebuilt their Temple
- The Jewish people so respected the Persian King Cyrus that they considered him one sent by God to help the Jewish people (a Messiah?) The name Cyrus is acceptable even today as a first name for Jewish male children
- Considering the Persians from the point of view of Western Civilization (i.e. the Greek view), they were more like barbarian invaders:
  - in their many conquests, the Persians conquered Greek colonies in Asia Minor
  - they invaded Greece in 492 BCE and 480 BCE and were attacked, first by Greek city-states and then by the alliance of those city-states, called the Delian League
  - the Persians did finally ally themselves with Greek Spartans in their victory against Athens in the Peloponnesian war
  - despite the enmity between Greece and Persia, the Greek writer Xenophon wrote of Cyrus with some admiration
  - they were finally conquered by the Macedonians under Alexander in 334 BCE

# How Did Judah Exist Without a King?

**There is a great deal that is unknown about the years in Judah between the return from exile in Babylon and the arrival of Alexander the Great almost two centuries later. One thing seems clear, however. The Jewish people seemed to live peacefully under Persian rule**

**Nonetheless, for two centuries, there was no king on the throne of Judah. The king was now a Persian who lived hundreds of miles away**

**While the Davidic line of Jewish kings ended with Zerubbabel, the line of the High Priest, which started with Zadok, the High Priest under David, still continued and would continue for several hundred years. This line, too, however, would end before a truly Jewish King would once again rule from Jerusalem**

**The Satrap appointed by the Persian king remained the political leader in Judah. He did not, however, fill the void left by the lack of a descendant of David on the throne. The Satrap may have been Jewish (most were) that made little difference. It was in this context that the High Priest of the Temple in Jerusalem began to take on an increasing level of political importance**

# What happened Between the Return From the Babylonian Exile and the Time of Jesus?

A lot happened and Alexander the Great probably had the most influence on those events.

The problem is that neither the Hebrew Scriptures nor the Old Testament as found in Protestant Bibles tells us anything about that time period

Since Catholic and Orthodox bibles contain books about the Maccabees, they do mention it but not in great detail

Most of the information we have about that time period comes from Flavius Josephus, a general who, at first, fought against the Romans in the First Jewish War. He was captured by the Romans and wrote two main works; *The Antiquities of the Jews*, a book of Jewish history from the Creation to 66 CE, and *The Jewish Wars*, a history of the first conflict between Judah and Rome. Josephus also wrote an autobiography and a defense of Judaism called *Against the Greeks* sometimes called *Against Apion*

Jewish History between the Restoration and Jesus can be divided into three periods;

- The Hellenist Period (Rule dominated by Greeks)
- A New Kingdom (self-rule initiated by the Maccabees)
- The Roman Period (Jesus was born in this time frame)