

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 8 – Exile and Return to the Land

Key Questions:

- How did the Israelites survive in Exile and return to their own land? How does the Old Testament end?

God, in His grace, preserves His people

The Exile of the Israelites was an act of judgement by God. Although some Jewish people stayed in their own land, many were taken away to Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). Three nations ruled over this region successively:

Assyrians	1100-625 BC	The northern kingdom (Israel) was exiled during their reign (722 BC)
Babylonians	625-539 BC	The southern kingdom (Judah) was exiled in several stages (605 BC, some Jewish nobles; 598 BC, over 3000 Jews including the king Jehoiachin; 586 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed; 582 BC, a final group taken into exile)
Persians	539-330 BC	The Jews returned to Jerusalem during their reign (see below)

During the Exile many of the people who had stayed in the land grew far away from God. In the northern kingdom they became the Samaritans of Jesus' day. Some of those who were taken to Mesopotamia also compromised and blended into the society and religion of their rulers, but some of the Jews people remained faithful to God. They longed for the day when they could return to the land God had given them and rebuild the Temple to worship Him (see Psalm 137).

Although Israel rejected and failed God, He still showed His grace by persevering them during the Exile in a number of ways:

- **David's family was preserved** – King Jehoiachin of Judah (who was exiled in 598 BC) found favour with Nebuchadnezzar's successor as king of Babylon, with the result that the royal line of David (the line from which the Messiah would come) was preserved (see II Kings 25:27-30; Jeremiah 52:31-34).
- **Jews in high positions influenced the rulers of Babylon and Persia** – Several young Jews, including Daniel, became high officials in the Babylonian administration (see the book of Daniel). Later, in around 460 BC, a Jewish woman called Esther became the Queen of the Persian Empire at a time when some people were plotting to kill all the Jews. Esther used her influence with the King to save the Jews (see the book of Esther).
- **God used the change in government to allow His people to return to Jerusalem** – The changes in the system of government of the three ruling nations made it possible for the Jews who had remained faithful to return to Jerusalem (the Persians believed in greater autonomy of regions within their Empire than the Babylonians).

Prophets of the Exile

Four major prophets spanned the period of the Exile. Each of them wrote a book that bears their name:

- **Isaiah** (740-681) – prophesied in Judah during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, including the time when Israel went into Exile. Had a special focus on Jerusalem, and his prophecies include many visions of the Messiah.
- **Jeremiah** (627-586) – warned the last kings of Judah about the impending Exile to Babylon and the futility of trying to resist the invading forces. Mentions a faithful remnant of God's people. Also wrote Lamentations after Jerusalem fell.
- **Ezekiel** (593-571) – taken into Exile in Babylon in 598 BC and there received visions from God and spoke to the Jews in Exile. Foresaw a time when God would give people a new heart through His Spirit living in them.
- **Daniel** (605-536) – taken into Exile in 605 BC when he was just a teenager. He lived in Babylon until he was over 90 years old and became an important figure in the government. Lived until after the first return from Exile.

Through these four prophets God foretold many important details about the period of the Exile and subsequent history:

God would use a man called Cyrus to return His people to the land (Isaiah 44:28-5)

Isaiah, writing around 688 BC (100 years before Jerusalem fell) mentioned the name of the Persian king who would allow the Jews to return to their land. Cyrus would not worship God (45:4-5) but would permit the Temple to be rebuilt (44:28).

The Exile would last for 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10-14)

Through Jeremiah, God revealed that the Exile of the people of Judah would last for 70 years. Jeremiah was writing in 606 BC, and the first exiles returned to Jerusalem in 538 BC, almost exactly 70 years later, fulfilling his prophecy (Ezra 1:1).

The Kingdoms of the World and the coming Kingdom of God (Daniel 2)

Nebuchadnezzar dreamt of a statue with five parts that represented four great powers that would dominate the Middle East:

1. The head of gold	Babylonian Empire	(625-539 BC)
2. The chest and arms of silver	Medo-Persian Empire	(539-330 BC)
3. Belly and thighs of bronze	Grecian Empire	(330-146 BC)
4. Legs of iron	Roman Empire	(146 BC – 476 AD)

The feet of iron mixed with clay represented the disintegration of the Roman Empire and the disunited European powers that would follow it. A great stone fell and hit the statue's feet, crushing the entire statue. This represents the future eternal Kingdom of God that will "crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever" (Daniel 2:44).

The Jews would be under foreign rule for 430 years (Ezekiel 4:5-6)

God asked Ezekiel to enact the siege of Jerusalem and to make a public demonstration by lying on his side for a total of 430 days, each day representing one year during which God's people would be under His judgement. Beginning in 598 BC, when the last truly independent king of Judah was taken in exile to Babylon (subsequent kings were basically puppet rulers installed by Nebuchadnezzar), 430 years brings us to 168 BC. In that year the Jews began a revolt against their Greek rulers which would lead to an independent kingdom ruled by the Maccabees (see *Module 2 Study Aids* for more information).

The date when the Messiah would come and die (Daniel 9:20-27)

Daniel received a message from an angel called Gabriel. This angel is mentioned only one other time in the Bible – when he came to tell Mary that she would become pregnant with Jesus (Luke 1:19&26). When Gabriel visited Daniel, he was praying, as the faithful Jews in Babylon often did, for the city of Jerusalem. Gabriel told Daniel that:

- A period of 490 years (70 'sevens' of years) would be special for the Jews (verse 24, "your people")
- During this period of time six tasks must be fulfilled (verse 24). They involve the removal of sin and the restoration of righteousness.
- The 490 years would begin with a decree allowing the people to "restore and rebuild Jerusalem" (verse 25)
- After 483 years (seven sevens plus 62 sevens) the Messiah ("the Anointed One, the ruler") would come (verse 25)
- The Messiah would be "cut off and will have nothing" (verse 26) – meaning that he would die

The decree to rebuild Jerusalem (distinct from Cyrus's decree which allowed the Temple to be rebuilt) was made by the Persian King Artaxerxes in 457 BC (Ezra 7:12-26). We can, therefore calculate the year for the Messiah to come:

Decree passed 457 BC **Plus 483 years** **equals** 27 AD (there was no year 0)

AD 27 is very close to the date when John the Baptist baptised Jesus, marking the beginning of His public ministry (see *Part 15*). Daniel's prophecy came true! Just as he foretold, the Messiah died, apparently accomplishing nothing (verse 26), but the six tasks listed in verse 24 were the spiritual results of this death (dealing with sin and restoring righteousness). One more seven year period for the Jewish people remains outstanding (verses 26b-27) to be fulfilled by Christ in the future.

The return from Exile

The Persian king Cyrus, who conquered the Babylonian Empire in 539 BC, gave permission for the Jews to return to their own land and to rebuild their Temple, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy. He also returned the gold and silver items stolen in 586 BC by Nebuchadnezzar. The faithful Jewish people returned in three waves and they rebuilt the city in stages:

Date	Jewish Leader	Number	Mission	References
538 BC	Zerubbabel – the heir of King David	50,000 people	The Temple was restored and sacrifices begin again. The work was finally completed in 518 BC	Ezra 1-6
458 BC	Ezra – an expert in the Law	2,000 men & their families	Priests and Temple servants returned with Ezra, who reminded the people of the Law.	Ezra 7-10
445 BC	Nehemiah – an official in Persia	Small group	The walls of the city were rebuilt, and the people returned to worshipping God.	Nehemiah

The order of this rebuilding of Jerusalem shows the priorities of the people. Sacrifice to God was of first importance and their own protection (the city walls) was the last priority! Through the Exile God purified the Jews, and those who returned never again worshipped idols. God's preservation of His chosen nation during the period of the Exile is amazing. The survival of the nation of Israel throughout history is another great proof that the Bible is true. No other nation has kept its identity for so many centuries despite so much opposition, and no other nation has given the world so many gifted people.

A Review of the Old Covenant and the history of Israel

The Old Testament closes around 430 BC, with the people of Israel in the Land God had given them, worshipping Him with sacrifices at His Temple in Jerusalem, but under the rule of a foreign king (of the Persian Empire). Remember that the nation of Israel had been chosen by God for three reasons (see *Part 4*):

1. To show other nations God's power and goodness

The people were successful in doing this some times, especially in the times of Moses and Joshua (see Joshua 2:8-11) and David (see I Samuel 17:46) and Solomon. However, under most of their kings the people were unfaithful to God and worshipped false gods and idols, and so they failed to show the nations God's character. During the Exile God used Daniel to show His power to the kings of Babylonia and Persia. The return from Exile freed the people to worship God alone in the Temple, but the nation was small and still under the rule of Persia. They had failed to show God to the nations. Jonah's reluctance to take God's message to Israel's enemy, Assyria, demonstrates this failure powerfully.

2. To receive and to preserve God's word

The people of Israel were very faithful at recording God's word. Although there were times during the rule of the kings that they lost the written copies of the Law, kings like Josiah (see II Kings 22:8) and faithful priests and prophets maintained God's word even through the nation's darkest times. During the Exile many Jews became more faithful in memorising the Law of God so that it could not be lost. After the return from Exile, Ezra ensured that the people would remember God's word. The fact that we have the Old Testament today is because the people of Israel succeeded in this responsibility.

3. To produce a Saviour for all nations (the Messiah)

At the close of the Old Testament the Messiah still had not come and the people were not sure how or when He would come. The very last words of the Old Testament (Malachi 4:1-6) speak of the coming day of God's judgement and promise that the "Sun of Righteousness" will arise on people who were faithful to God (verse 2). This is a great promise about the coming Messiah. Before the Messiah came, however, there would be a forerunner who would be like the prophet Elijah (verse 5).

Ultimately, the Old Covenant failed because of the sinfulness of the people. God gave them a way to worship Him through sacrifices, reminding them that they needed forgiveness for their sins, but no animal sacrifice animal could really take away their sins. The prophets pointed forward to a time when the Messiah would come and bring a New Covenant through which sins could finally be forgiven (Jeremiah 31:31-34) and God's *Conquering King* would rule over His people forever (Isaiah 9:6-7). First, though, the problem of sin had to be dealt with through a perfect sacrifice for sins: the *Suffering Servant* had to die (Isaiah 53:1-12).

Key Lesson: The Old Testament ends with Israel in failure but preserved by God's grace

The nation of Israel failed because of sin. The Old Testament gave the pattern for how God's Kingdom could be restored, but this could not happen until the Messiah dealt with the problem of sin. The Old Testament ends awaiting His coming.