

Israel's Post-Babylonian Exilic Period

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Prescript

The notes in these pages are not intended to be overtly scholarly, supported by scholarly references. They seek primarily to provide information available in scholarly resources like the three major Bible Dictionaries or Encyclopedia, and in some cases in scholarly commentaries that can be found in the bibliographies I have included for additional reference.

The concept I have in mind is to provide a scholarly context or background to each book, topic, or study to guide the student or reader in their research and teaching.

The studies seek to answer the questions, “*What is this book all about, and how does it go about its business?*”

These notes are not intended to be textual commentaries of the Old Testament books. They serve as a proposed *outline guide* for the student or teacher in *preparing personal studies, or for teaching and study notes*. The notes are from the Bible Dictionaries and Bible Encyclopedia referenced below in the Bibliography are research references for further study. Much of the information in this lesson is edited from the *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* and my own lecture notes.

Bibliography

Tyndale Bible Dictionary.

Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible.

Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary.

A Timetable of Israel's and Judah's Captivity and Exile Periods

Text	Captured by	Dates	Comments
2 Kings 18-19 2 Chron 32 Isa 36-37	Assyria captures Israel.	721 BCE	Northern Kingdom of Israel is destroyed by Assyria, never returns home to Israel. Babylon defeats Judea and Jerusalem 586 BCE Assyria was defeated by Babylon 612 BCE.
2 Kings 25 Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekial.	Babylon defeats Assyria	586 BCE	Assyria was defeated by Babylon, leading Judah into ca. 70 year Babylonian captivity until Cyrus of Persia defeats Babylon and issues a decree for Judah to return home to Jerusalem.
Isa 44:28; 45:1.	Persia defeats Babylon	538/9 BCE	Babylon is defeated by Persia. Cyrus, king of Persia issues decree for Judah to return to Jerusalem ca. 538 BCE.
Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Jeremiah 25:11, 12.	Judah returns from exile and Temple restoration	538/9 BCE	Several return treks take place under Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel, 538 BCE.

The Period in Jewish History after their Exile in Babylon. 539 BCE – 331 BCE.

The Collapse of the Babylonian Empire

This occurred with dramatic suddenness, largely because of internal resistance to the policies of the last Babylonian king, Nabonidus (555–539 BCE). His neglect of the traditional Babylonian deity, Marduk, in favor of the moon god, Sin, was particularly resented. Nabonidus lived in Taima during the last decade of his reign, refusing to enter Babylon, where his son Belshazzar ruled as virtual king, as noted in Daniel 5. Babylon fell to the Persians in October 538 BCE and the entire empire passed into their control.

The Policy of Persia

This is well documented through contemporary inscriptions, notably the record of Cyrus, the first king of the Persian Empire (559–530 BCE), in the “Cyrus Cylinder.” A new phase in the relationship of conqueror to conquered peoples opened up, which contrasted with the policy of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires of crushing any opposition by massive force. Cyrus and his successors followed a conciliatory line, allowing exiled groups to return home, encouraging local faiths, posing as the champions of the territorial deities, and allowing local autonomy except where Persian interests were affected adversely. The cost of this operation, although considerable, must have been infinitesimal compared with that of keeping rebellious subjects under constant subjection.

The new enlightened policy is reflected in the decree of Cyrus, dated 538 BCE (Ezr 1:1) and preserved in two versions. The first (vv 1–4) is clearly the official proclamation, while the second (6:3–5) is a more prosaic memorandum dealing with building specifications, a record of Cyrus’s commitment stored in the official archives (vv 1–2). The critical tendency to question the narrative in Ezra 1, especially on the score of the favorable references to the God of Israel and the vast financial support promised, has been nullified by the archaeological evidence, which shows an identical policy elsewhere. The Cyrus Cylinder, for example, notes, “The gods who live within them [i.e., the cities] I returned to their places.... All of their inhabitants I collected and restored to their dwelling places.”

In Judah itself there is no evidence for any warfare in this period, which suggests that the Persian takeover of the area was nonviolent. Judah was incorporated into the fifth Persian province, which included the entire area west of the Euphrates River (Ezr 7:21). It was no more than a minor subdistrict, governed through Samaria.

The Return from Exile

The continuance of a large Jewish community in Babylonia shows that not all the Jews responded to the invitation to return to their homeland, probably because of the prosperity acquired in exile. But 42,360 dedicated Jews (Ezr 2:64) braved the challenge of a four-month 900-mile (1,448-kilometer) journey under Sheshbazzar (1:8), the officially appointed leader, and Zerubbabel his nephew (3:2), who was probably the one to whom the Jews looked as leader. With great enthusiasm the Jews rebuilt the altar of sacrifice and resumed the observance of the traditional feasts (vv 1–6), revealing both a sense of stewardship (2:68–69) and careful attention to the requirements of the Law (3:2–4). Soon after, work on the second temple commenced—the materials and master craftsmen being imported from Tyre and

Sidon (Ezr 3:7–9; cf. 1 Kgs 5). When the foundations were laid, the worshipers were doubtless aware that they were fulfilling God’s promise through Jeremiah (Ezr 3:10–11; cf. Jer 33:10–11). But their high hopes were thwarted when there was opposition from neighboring areas (Ezr 4:4–5), selfishness in giving their own accommodations a higher priority than the Lord’s house (Hg 1:2–4, 9), and a series of crop failures that further reduced morale (1:6, 10–11; 2:17).

Work on the temple was not resumed until Haggai and Zechariah appeared in 520 bc. They encouraged Zerubbabel and Joshua (Jeshua) the high priest, rebuked the people for their apathy and selfishness, and promised God’s presence and blessing upon the temple project (Hg 1:12–2:9). Zechariah’s preaching went beyond the building of the temple, including the rebuilding of Jerusalem itself (Zec 2:1–5) and its world reputation (2:1–5, 11–12; 8:22). The two leaders were addressed in ways that anticipated the Messiah (Hg 2:21–23; Zec 6:10–14). But the Persian king Darius (521–486 bc) was not alarmed when the rebuilding operation was reported to him (Ezr 5:1–6:13) and allowed the work to continue. In February 515 BCE it was dedicated (6:14–16). The Jewish community again had a focal point for its religion, but the political situation remained difficult, with no real security in a still-shattered city.

The Return of Ezra

The traditional date of Ezra’s return is 458 BCE (preceding that of Nehemiah in 445 bc). This is based on the premise that the King Artaxerxes noted in Ezra 7:7 was Artaxerxes I Longimanus (464–424 BCE) and not Artaxerxes II Mnemon (404–359 BCE). However, some scholars, allowing that the king was Artaxerxes I, but believing that Nehemiah preceded Ezra, suggest that a tens unit has dropped out of “seventh” in Ezra 7:7, and that the date of Ezra’s return should be the 27th (438 BCE) or 37th year (428 BCE) of Artaxerxes I, making Ezra’s return a few years after Nehemiah’s. While this is plausible, there remains strong support for the traditional view. It accords with the order of the two books in the OT and requires no textual emendation. It also accounts for the section in Ezra 4:7–23, where, in the reign of Artaxerxes, an abortive effort was made by a recently returned group to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Nehemiah 1:1–4 suggests that this was regarded as important and its abrupt termination, by a decree of the king, caused Nehemiah great distress. The probability is that Ezra, recently returned, realized that little could be done in the way of major religious reformation until Jerusalem was secure, but in attempting to rebuild the wall he exceeded his mandate and was not able to function adequately until Nehemiah arrived, when the new security of Jerusalem allowed the great Law-reading ceremony of Nehemiah 8:1–12 to take place.

Ezra’s ministry concerned the teaching of the Law of Moses, the Pentateuch, which had long been extant in its final form by this time. Ezra 7 shows that Artaxerxes was following the traditional Persian policy of encouraging good relationships with his subject peoples. Ezra’s appointment (Ezr 7:12) was to a state office; it has frequently been paraphrased as “Secretary of State for Jewish Religious Affairs.”

Nehemiah’s Return and Ministry

Hanani and others (Neh 1:1–3) informed Nehemiah of the complete failure of a recent attempt to rebuild the wall, probably that recorded in Ezra 4:7–23, and sought his mediation before the very king who had authorized the decree that compelled work on the wall to cease. A friend in high places was vital, and Nehemiah, a trusted and influential member of the court (Neh 1:11), was approached for this delicate and dangerous task. Nehemiah 1:4–2:8 shows how well he prepared for and seized his opportunity. His appointment as the governor of Judah (5:14) involved the removal of this area from the control of the governor of Samaria, which accounts for the unrelenting hostility of Sanballat (2:19; 4:1). The evidence of Nehemiah 3 suggests that the extent of Judah at this time was limited, probably not reaching as far north as Bethel or as far south as Hebron. Nehemiah was faced with opposition that

included ridicule (2:19; 4:1–3), armed force (4:8, 11), discouragement (v 10), internal economic problems (5:1–18), intrigue (6:1–2), intimidation, and blackmail (vv 5–14). In spite of these obstacles, the wall was completed in the incredibly brief period of 52 days (v 15).

In addition to this monumental achievement, Nehemiah completely reorganized the social and economic life of Jerusalem, dealing with alienated mortgages, excessive interest rates (Neh 5:1–13), mixed marriages (10:30; 13:23–30), Sabbath observance (10:31; 13:15–21), and temple supplies (10:32–40; 13:10–13). Almost certainly, it was this political and economic security that allowed Ezra, who probably arrived 13 years earlier, to proceed with his great religious reformation based on the Law. Nehemiah’s book, usually called the “Nehemiah Memoirs,” was probably presented by him in the temple as a “votive offering” (as indicated by the form of 5:19; 13:14, 22, 31).

The Remainder of the Persian Period

Persian control, which probably centered on Lachish, was traditionally mild, except where her interests were directly threatened. There is no evidence of any major discontent in Judah, which enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy. The Phoenician revolt of 351 bc, which took Artaxerxes III (359–338 bc) three years to subdue, was the only serious disturbance in the area. While Artaxerxes deported some Jews to Hyrcania, southeast of the Caspian Sea, that was probably a precautionary measure, and Judah does not appear to have been greatly involved in the revolt. The Jerusalem priests were allowed to mint their own coinage and levy a temple tax. Under the wider influence of the Persian Empire, Hebrew gradually fell out of popular usage as a spoken language, being replaced by Aramaic. As the international stature of Greece increased, so the influence of Hellenism began to be felt, even in Judah.

Religious Features of the Postexilic Period

Rebuilding the Temple and the Walls of Jerusalem

A major feature of God’s plan for Judah, and of Cyrus’ decree was the restoration of the religious faith of Israel, the repentance of cultural and religious adultery, the rebuilding of Jerusalem as the political and religious life of Israel, the rebuilding of the Temple as the “residence” of God through his Holy Spirit (Ezek 40) the restoration of the Law, *Torah*.

The Decline of Prophecy.

There were three main reasons for this:

1. The prophetic movement as a whole became discredited after Jerusalem fell in 586 BCE. The large number of popular cult prophets who had foretold a sudden end to the Babylonian oppression (e.g., Jer 28:1–4) were proved decisively wrong. The suspicion that henceforth became attached to prophecy was increased further in the Persian period, when large numbers of itinerant “prophets” of various religions traveled widely. Zechariah 13:2–6 shows the stern measures advocated against such false prophets and fortune-tellers.

2. There was a markedly different historical situation. The chastened remnant that survived had turned away from the blatant apostasy that characterized the preexilic period, so that the prophetic condemnation was not required with the same urgency. The temple and the Law had acquired a new prominence, and postexilic prophecy generally was concerned either with the rebuilding of the temple (e.g., Haggai and Zechariah) or the purification of its cult (e.g., Malachi). Once this goal had been realized, the role of the prophet was diminished. Another historical factor was the relatively large number of priests who returned from captivity, doubtless encouraged by the prospect of serving in the rebuilt temple. The main need at this time was for the priest, who revealed God’s will on the basis of the Law.

3. There was an increasing stress on the transcendence of God, caused partly by an emphasis upon priestly mediation and partly by a fear of God that resulted from the recent judgment. The apocalyptic movement, with its emphasis on angelic intermediaries between humans and a transcendent God, encouraged this tendency. Correspondingly, the prophetic appeal for a personal, moral walk with God weakened.

The Rise of the Synagogue

Some type of local worship, independent of the temple and its sacrifices, must have developed in the Captivity, with the Law increasingly occupying a dominant position. Later on, the prophetic books were read and expounded, but the primary stress was always on the Law. This mode of worship later took root in the homeland, and the synagogue gradually developed into the focal point of the community for social relationships, education, and worship. It facilitated the worldwide continuance and expansion of the Jewish faith, independent of Jerusalem.”¹

¹ *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, pp. 1063–1065.