

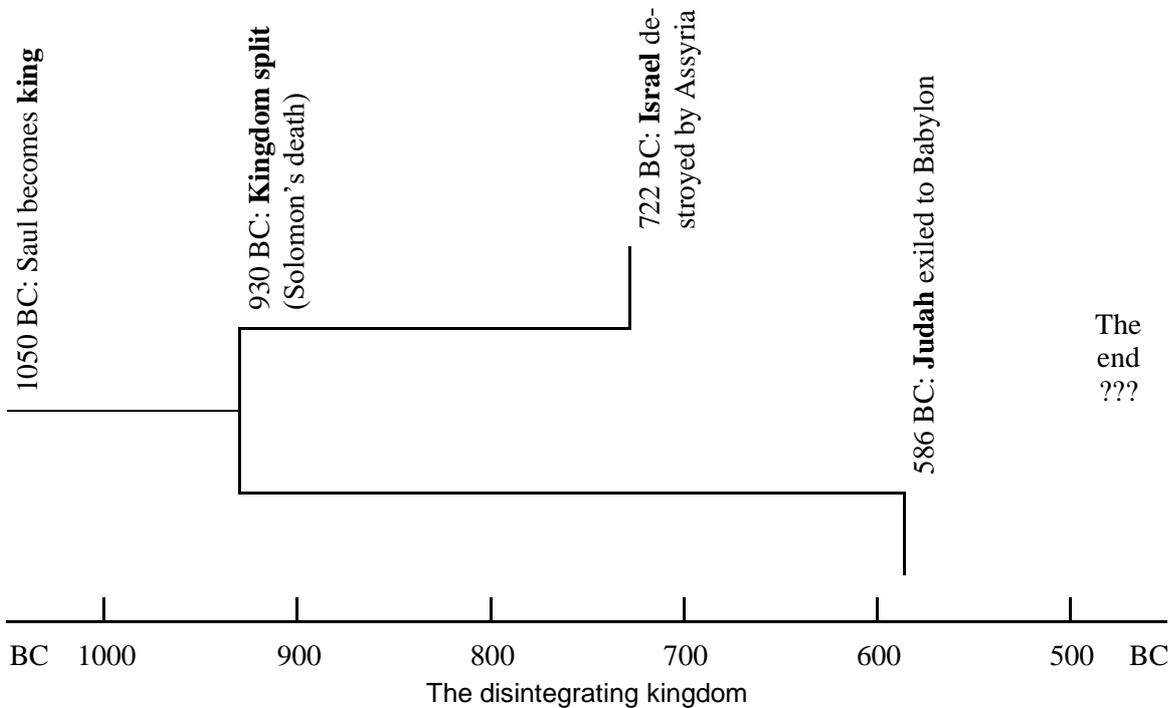
Old Testament Survey

Week 5 — After the exile: Is there a kingdom of God?



Introduction

When Babylon sacked Jerusalem in 587 BC, it was the end of Israel as a nation. It felt like the end of God’s entire project to bring the nations back under his reign. It looked like the nations had won, that God had lost. There was no kingdom of God any more:



No kings represented YHWH’s throne in Jerusalem, for they were now part of the Babylonian Empire. No priests served God by offering daily sacrifices, for the holy space of the temple had been profaned, trampled by Gentiles. There were still prophets, speaking the word of the Sovereign to his people. In fact, the major prophets (Isaiah–Daniel) all deal with the exile and its effects. They affirm God’s message that it was not all over, that YHWH was still working out his purposes even in the face of this monumental disaster.

In this session we will look at the message of the major prophets, and we see how Israel did return to rebuild after the exile (Ezra–Esther).

The major prophets and the exile

It’s hard to overstate just how devastating the Babylonian exile was. God had chosen the Abrahamic family to be his nation, to represent his reign to the other nations of the earth. They had demanded human rulers like the nations. Then, because the human rulers were too harsh, they split into two nations, at times even fighting against each other. The northern nation (Israel) was wiped out by Assyria, leaving only Judah in the south. Then the bit that remained—Judah—was captured and the people were taken into exile to Babylon.

The book of **Lamentations** laments that God has forsaken them. God still rules, but they doubt they have any part to play in the restoration of God's reign. Are they are now completely out of the picture?

Lam 5 ¹⁶ The crown has fallen from our head.

Woe to us, for we have sinned! ...

¹⁹ You, LORD, reign forever;

your throne endures from generation to generation. ...

²¹ Restore us to yourself, LORD, that we may return;

renew our days as of old

²² unless you have utterly rejected us

and are angry with us beyond measure.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah writes with this lamenting style as well. They had believed that Jerusalem could not fall because God was there in the temple and no one could defeat God:

Psa 46 ⁵ God is within her [i.e. Jerusalem],

she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.

Jeremiah warned them not to be so presumptuous:

Jeremiah 7 ⁴ Do not trust in deceptive words and say,

“This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!” ...

⁹ Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, ¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this

house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe” — safe to do all these detestable things? ¹¹ Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you?...

¹⁴ Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your ancestors. ¹⁵ I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your fellow Israelites, the people of Ephraim.

Jeremiah told them Babylon would invade. Yet, he promised that afterwards God would raise up a *branch* of David's family to rule again (Jer 23:5; 33:15). He promised that God would ultimately bring the nations under his control and restore justice (Jer 46–51).

Ezekiel

Ezekiel was one of the first captives to be taken into exile, so his prophecy was given in Babylon. He wrestles with what to make of Babylon capturing the city where God lived. They had always pictured the ark as God's throne, so if God was on the throne when Babylon captured it, does that mean God was captured? The ark had

no wheels: it was carried on poles. But in Ezekiel's vision, God can move: his heavenly throne has wheels! In fact, there are wheels within the wheels, so he can travel north-south or east-west without pausing to turn! His throne is not earth-bound: it can fly, and so can the four guardian cherubim who attend the throne! God moves wherever he pleases. That's the vision of Ezekiel 1.

As the prophecy unfolds, Ezekiel declares that God had already moved out of the temple because it was no longer a holy place. He sees the filthy things that were done in the temple (Eze 8), so YHWH had progressively abandoned the temple before the Babylonians captured it. He moved to the threshold of the temple (9:4), its eastern entrance (10:19), and then right out of Jerusalem (11:22). Despite all this, God waits in the hills of Judah, ready to restore his crushed people. Ezekiel sees a day when God would restore them:

Eze 11 ¹⁷ Therefore say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.' ¹⁸ They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols. ¹⁹ I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. ²⁰ Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

God left them to their fate because he could no longer work with Israel's shepherds (kings and high priests). Nevertheless, Ezekiel declares that God will re-establish them and the Davidic kingship:

Eze 34 ²³ I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.

The northern tribes had been wiped out 130 years before, and now Judah was gone as well. All that was left was a valley of dried bones. Nevertheless, God told Ezekiel that he would raise up both houses of Israel (i.e. Israel and Judah) out of death so they could live again:

Eze 37 ¹¹ He said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle

you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.””

Ezekiel concludes by promising the rebuilding of temple and the restoration of the city where God lives (Eze 40 – 48):

Eze 48:35 The name of the city from that time on shall be,
The LORD Is There.”

Isaiah

Isaiah delivered God’s message to Judah over a long time. The book begins at the time of the divided kingdom. He announced the fall of Israel to Assyria (Isa 8), and described how Judah survived Assyria’s attack in Hezekiah’s time (Isa 36–39). YHWH rules over all the nations (Isa 13–21), so he will restore his broken world (Isa 22–35).

The latter part of the book (Isa 40–66) deals with the exile to Babylon. Israel could not restore herself, so God would personally step in to be their king. God himself would lead them back from exile and restore them as his people (Isa 50–55):

Isa 40⁹ You who bring good news to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
“Here is your God!”

¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.

¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

The final part of Isaiah speaks in glowing terms about the future glory of Zion (Jerusalem), and how God will ultimately restore everything—a new heaven and a new earth (Isa 56–66).

Rebuilding after exile

The Babylonian Empire that crushed Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 586 BC did not last forever. In 539 BC, Persia defeated Babylon. The Jewish people were now part of the Persian Empire.

The Persian ruler Cyrus had a different strategy for keeping subjects happy. The Babylonians kept everyone subjugated by taking them captive to Babylon. Cyrus ordered them to return to their countries,

to re-establish their culture and temples and religions. The decree of Cyrus has survived: you can see it in the British Museum:¹



So, groups of exiles begin to return to Judah, led by people such as Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel. The people who have settled there while they were gone are not too pleased to have them coming back and claiming their land again.

Zerubbabel was a direct descendant of King David, so he was made governor of Judah. He encouraged people to rebuild the city and the temple. The task was so huge that they became discouraged. Haggai and Zechariah (minor prophets) stirred them up to finish the job. They completed the second temple in 516 BC, 70 years after Solomon's temple was destroyed. This second temple stood in Jerusalem until the Romans destroyed it in 70 AD.

But Jerusalem remained vulnerable to attack without its defensive walls. After considerable administrative skill and focused effort, **Nehemiah** finally led the people to rebuild the walls in 445 BC.

Ezra insisted that those who returned from exile needed to listen to the Torah (Gen–Deut), since Torah was the foundation for their society as God's nation under his rule and law. Ezra is described as a *scribe* (Neh 8:1). Scribes read the Torah and gave the sense so the people understood how it applied to them (Neh 8:8). Ezra advised them to divorce any foreigners they had married during the exile, so that they remained ethnically pure (as Abraham's descendants).

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally a single scroll.

¹ http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=327188&partId=1

The Jews: Judah after the exile

The people who returned after the exile were asked to trace their ancestry to show they were part of the Abrahamic family. They became known as the **Jews**, since most were from the tribe of Judah. There were people from other tribes too. Simeon shared land with Judah. Benjamin had joined with the southern kingdom. The tribe of Levi had continued to serve at the temple in Jerusalem. According to 1 Chron 5–7, there were also some people from the tribes of Israel that had largely been wiped out when Assyria invaded back in 722 BC.

However, the majority of Jews did not return. They remained outside Palestine, dispersed throughout the nations — the *diaspora*. For example, Esther lived in the Persian city of Susa.

Esther

The book of **Esther** relies on irony. It sends up the Persian kings who are pictured as playboys—partying and showing off their girls, even though they can't even manage their own household (Esther 1). Yet, these clueless Persian rulers have real power to destroy the Jews. Esther is in the right place at the right time to save them. Ultimately, the Jews are given the right to kill anyone who tries to kill them (Esther 9:1-16). The feast of Purim celebrates this new right. God is not mentioned by name in the book of Esther, but we are meant to see his hand behind these ironies—the one who determines outcomes despite what earthly rulers intend.

Daniel

The book of **Daniel** makes the same point, more overtly. It begins with Daniel in exile in Babylon, advising Nebuchadnezzar (the king who destroyed Jerusalem) on how he should use the power God has given him. The first half of Daniel is a series of stories. In each story the earthly ruler realises that it is not him but God who runs the world:

Dan 2 ⁴⁷ The king said to Daniel, “Surely **your God** is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery.”

Dan 3 ²⁸ Nebuchadnezzar said, “Praise be to **the God** of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.”

Dan 4 ³ “**His** kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation.”

Dan 4 ³⁴ Then I [Nebuchadnezzar] praised **the Most High**; I honoured and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

Dan 6 ²⁶ “I [Darius] issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence **the God** of Daniel. For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end.”

At Daniel 7, the genre changes—from stories to apocalyptic visions. These visions are about the kingdoms of the earth—the Babylonians, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks (Alexander the Great and sons), the Ptolemies and Seleucids. It culminates with Antiochus Epiphanies IV trying to force the Jews to give up their uniqueness and integrate into Greek culture. In 167 BC, he set up a statue to Zeus in the Jerusalem temple, and violated the altar by sacrificing a pig:

Dan 11 ³¹ His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up **the abomination that causes desolation**.

The book of 1 Maccabees (in the Apocrypha) describes how Judas Maccabeus rallied the Jews to fight against these Greek oppressors. They temporarily liberated the country, and in 164 BC they cleansed and rededicated the temple. The feast of Hanukkah celebrated this rededication. Jewish people still celebrate this Feast of Lights around the time Christians celebrate Christmas.

The unresolved story

The last 100 years before Jesus was a time of vicious infighting, assassinations, and conflict among the Jewish leaders (the high priests and some who claimed to be king). Tens of thousands of Jews died. Eventually the Romans invaded Palestine, ruling with an iron fist that stopped the bloodletting. Yes, you read that right: the oppressive violent Gentile rulers eventually stopped “God’s people” from slaughtering each other!

The majority of Jews were still dispersed among the other nations, since those who lived in Palestine were under foreign rule anyway. The promises of the prophets—that a descendant of David would rule once again—remained unfilled. Israel was not representing God’s reign to the nations. The hope for a kingdom of God had stalled. Was the exile really over? Was there a kingdom of God, or were they part of the Roman Empire? Would the hope of prophets ever be fulfilled?

The Jewish people wrote many other stories during this time, stories that are not in our Bibles. They described their suffering, the injustice

of being oppressed by the other nations (Gentiles). They imagined a day when God would step in to judge the nations and liberate his people. They yearned. They hoped. They despaired. They remained crushed by the beasts that rule the earth when it should be God who rules. As Proverbs 13:12 said, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick” and it felt like a never-ending sickness.

So the OT closes with an unresolved story, the unfulfilled promise that God would deal with evil rule and restore his reign over humanity and over the earth. To see how the heavenly ruler finally fulfilled that promise, we need the New Testament. The whole unresolved OT story finally comes into sharp focus in the person of Jesus. He was part of the Abrahamic family, a direct descendant of King David. Everything Jesus did was about the kingdom of God, the restoration of God’s reign. But Israel’s rulers felt threatened by his power, so they did what evil rulers always do: they killed him. God raised him up out of death, appointing him as the ruler of humanity.

Death had lost its power. Evil rulers now had no way to remove him: they could not kill him again! The resurrected Jesus received all authority, in heaven and on earth. He will reign until all his enemies are under his feet. Jesus restores the kingdom of God to earth.

Summary

To put the exile in perspective, they spent longer under foreign rule than they did as a kingdom. Samuel gave them their first king (Saul) in 1051 BC. 121 years later, the kingdom split. 208 years after that, Israel fell. 135 years later, Judah too fell. In total, the kingdom existed for 464 years in one form or another. Then they waited another 617 years before Jesus faced the powers at the cross:

Kingdom	Period	Years
United kingdom (Judah & Israel together)	1051 – 930 BC	121
Divided kingdom (Israel & Judah separately)	930 – 722 BC	208
Judah alone	722 – 587 BC	135
Total duration of the kingdom (1051 – 587 BC)		464
Under foreign powers (until Jesus came)	587 BC–30 AD	617

Little wonder they needed the message of the prophets so desperately! The prophets kept promising that God would restore his throne, that a son of David would restore his kingdom. Inspired by those messages, some of the exiles did return under leaders such as Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel. They dedicated the second temple in 516 BC. They rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem in 445 BC. They waited.

Others like Esther did not return but took to heart the future of the Jews under foreign rule. Daniel wrestled with the reality of this on-going oppression, as the Jews remained under whatever power ruled their region: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, the Ptolemies (south), the Seleucids (north), and finally Rome invading their land in 63 BC.

Into this space of seemingly unending oppression, Jesus came to face the powers, defeat evil, and restore the kingdom (reign) of God. That's why he taught his followers to pray like this?

Father of ours, the one acknowledged in the heavens,
May your authority be revered.
May your kingdom come,
so your purposes are done here on earth
in the same way as they are done in the heavens.
(*Paraphrase of Matt 9:9-10*).

Jesus is the hope of the world. He defeated evil and death. He will restore God's reign to the conflicted world. Ultimately every knee will bow to this son of David; every tongue will give allegiance to him as the Son of the eternal ruler. He will restore God's reign over the earth.

Memory verse

Isaiah 40:9 (NIV)

You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"

Take home exercise

Read **Isaiah 40:1-11** again. (This is one of the chapters you read last week.) See if you can grasp the significance of what Isaiah was saying to a people who felt so hopeless as a result of the exile.

In 39:6, Isaiah had announced the disaster of the exile. Now he speaks words of comfort to God's people who felt so crushed (40:1). If God was ready to forgive them, the exile would be over and they could come home again.

Judah's last kings had been carried off into exile in Babylon, but now Isaiah hears (prophetically) a voice out on the desert road from Babylon to Jerusalem announcing that their true king—YHWH himself—was coming back to Israel. They should prepare the road for his arrival (40:3). Every obstacle to his return would be flattened (40:4), so that “all flesh”—Jewish or Babylonian or whatever—would see his majesty revealed by the restoration of his kingdom (40:5).

Earthly kings (such as those of Babylon and Persia) are mortal. They do not last. Persia conquered Babylon, and Greece conquered Persia, and so on. Their plans and their power fade, like a dead flower that has no lasting glory. The true heavenly sovereign is not like that. Even though Judah had been decimated, God outlives human rulers. Consequently, his purposes last too. What he has declared for his people stands forever (40:6-8).

Therefore Isaiah calls for a herald to climb up where he can be heard and to announce to Jerusalem (the city built on Mount Zion) “good news.” The good news is that God, their sovereign, is coming down the road to Jerusalem (40:9).

The true ruler YHWH is arriving with his might, to rule with his strength (strength that no one can resist). He is here to set right the injustice of Jerusalem being overthrown (40:10).

YHWH is a different kind of ruler from earthly rulers like Babylon's. Their power comes from armies that kill anyone who dares to stand against them. By contrast, YHWH's power is more like that of a shepherd caring for his scattered and ravaged flock. He personally carries the wounded ones. He gently leads the vulnerable ones, such as the ewes with little lambs (40:11).

When Jesus arrived, he was not what many in Israel expected. If they expected a warrior like Joshua or David who could rally an army and slaughter their foes, they were disappointed for he was nothing like that. And yet Jesus was the *good* shepherd, leading those who recognised his voice (John 10:14-16). He was recognised as the son of David returning to Jerusalem (Mark 11:1-10). There in Jerusalem he confronted the evil rulers who put him to death. When he was raised out of death, they began realise that he was, in fact, God-returning-to-Israel: he was God-in-person.

In an unexpected sense and an unexpected way, Jesus had restored the kingdom of God for which they had waited so long.

Our prayer is that this example helps you understand how to read the OT prophets, and how Jesus ultimately fulfilled the promises they made.

In preparation for next week, read:

- **Psalm 2:** YHWH is sovereign, so the anointed son of David will rule the nations.
- **Psalm 57:** The Davidic king cries out for help, under attack from earthly rulers.
- **Jeremiah 31:** After the exile, God will restore his people and establish a new covenant.

- **Joel 2:** The kingdom of Israel would suffer attack, but afterwards God would restore his people through the presence and power of his Spirit.

We also plan to provide a time next week for you to ask questions you still have regarding the OT.

Solution to Last week's question

How are you going in piecing the OT story together as a single narrative? The correct order is:

1. Adam
2. Noah
3. Abraham
4. Isaac
5. Jacob
6. Joseph
7. Moses
8. Joshua
9. Deborah
10. Gideon
11. Samson
12. Samuel (There is some overlap in the lives of Samuel, Saul, and David.)
13. Saul
14. David
15. Solomon
16. Rehoboam
17. Elijah
18. Hezekiah
19. Josiah
20. Zedekiah