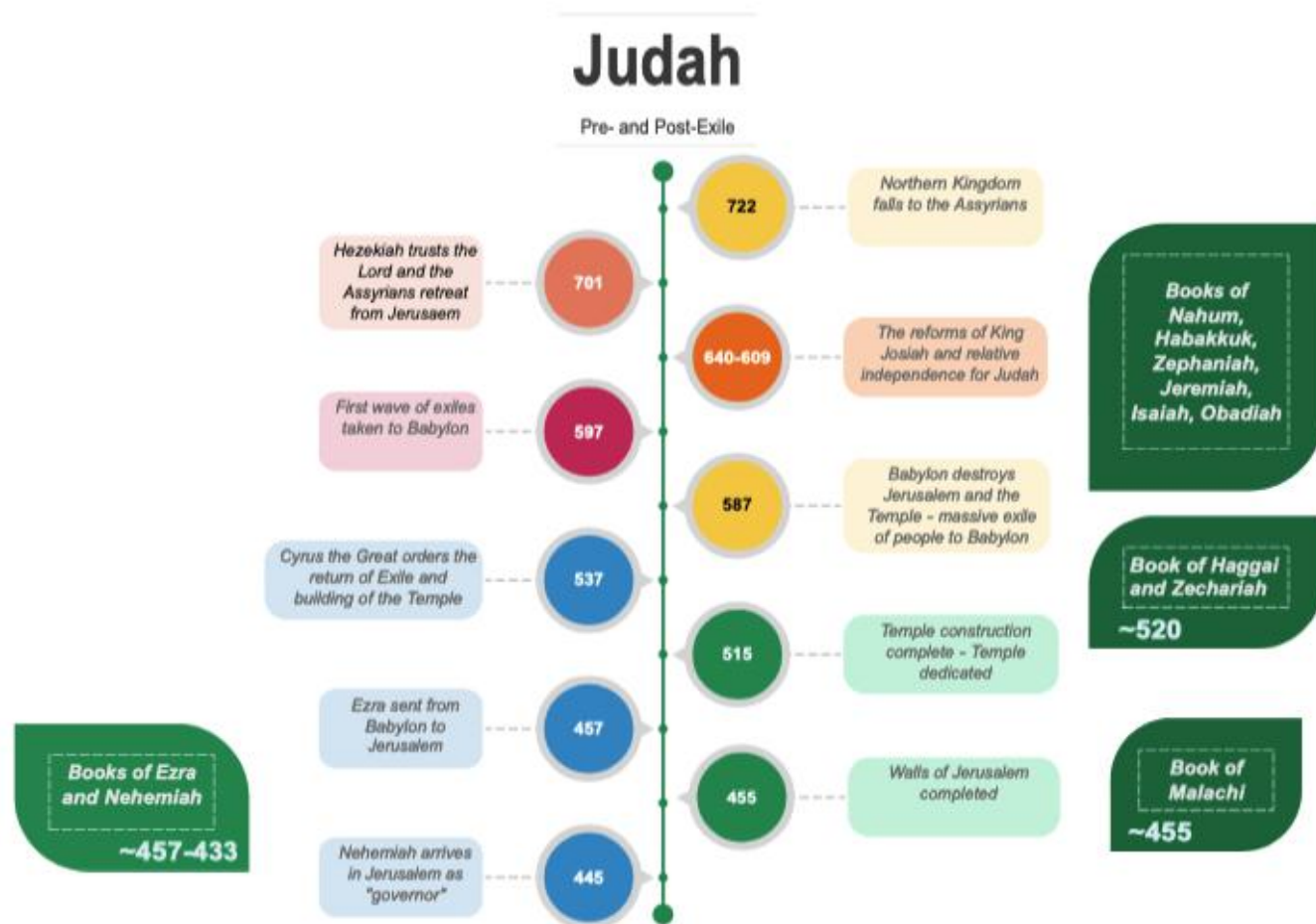


## Judah: The Post Exilic Period

Over the next several lessons we delve into the “Minor Prophets” of the period after the Babylonian Exile. So, it seems good to provide an overview of the timeline, the key characters during the re-establishment of Jerusalem and the Temple, as well as the changing fortunes of nations and empires in the same period. Hopefully this timeline will help:



*While the historical dates are well known and agreed upon, dates of the prophetic works do not enjoy the same level of agreement - but the dates provided above will help anchor your understanding of the audience of the words of the prophets.*

### The Ruin of the Kingdom of Judah.

At the beginning of the 6th century BC the nations of Egypt and a weakened Assyria hoped to mitigate the growing powers of the Empire of Babylon. The Promised Land and the Kingdom of Judah lay at the crossroads. King Jehoiakim of Judah saw this as an opportunity to free himself from vassalage to the throne of Babylon. He joined in a revolt against Nebuchadnezzar in December of 598 BC. Within 4 months, Jehoiakim died and the city of Jerusalem fell. Jehoiakim's son, King Jehoiachin was taken into captivity and exiled to Babylon, never to return, just as the prophet Jeremiah had prophesied (Jeremiah 22:26-27). The young king is described as a broken pot, as though childless, none of whose descendants would sit on the throne of David (vv. 28-30). Although the actual destruction of Jerusalem came ten years

later in 587, in a real sense the succession to the line of David ended with the deportation of Jehoiachin, grandson to Josiah.

Ten years later, after another failed revolt, Babylon returned. This time the city and its Temple were utterly destroyed and reduced to ruin and rubble. While some of the city residents had already escaped, those remaining, including the elite among leaders and priests, were taken into captivity and exiled to the eastern realm of Babylon's empire. The year was 587 BC.

The people of God no longer possessed the Promised Land. This disaster was the death of the nation. Far from recording an evolutionary spiral of steady progress from Moses to Christ, the Bible presents a high point of revelation at the time of the exodus, followed by a decline which the occasional reformation was powerless to reverse. The whole tragic story could be summed up in the sequence: chosen, privileged, presumptuous, rebellious. In its own way it echoes the story of humanity in the Garden of Eden.

The final defeat and captivity of Judah (the Northern Kingdom having fallen 135 years prior) was a divine judgment, from which the nation would never recover. The carefully tended vine had grown wild (Isa. 5:2; Jer. 2:21), the tree had been felled (Isa. 6:13). Things could never be the same again. The only other event in Jewish history comparable to the exile was the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, which foreshadowed final judgment at the end of time (Matt. 24). The exile was the prototype; it was 'the day of the Lord' for Israel and Judah.

The best part of a lifetime separated the deportations of 597 and the first return in 538 BC. The common feeling among the exiles was despair, but in the midst of their circumstance they were not abandoned by God who sent them prophets. Ezekiel captured their feeling in his dry bones vision, a vision immediately followed by a vision of glorious restoration. The encouragements of Isaiah chapters 40–48 laid new stress on election and covenant. The Lord still counted Israel his servant and Jacob his chosen (41:8) and therefore they need not fear. He had blotted out their transgressions 'for his own sake' (43:25) and planned their return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (44:28).

The problem was not "dry bones" but hard hearts. It is to this that Ezekiel tells the people how the Lord will intervene:

*I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezekiel 36:24-27)*

## **The Ruin of Babylon**

The fall of Babylon is a fascinating story of international intrigue and empires, but it is sufficient to say that east of Babylon a new power arose under the leadership of Cyrus the Great, the Persian, who established an empire that ultimately spread as far west as Egypt and as far east as Pakistan. In 539 BC, the last opposition fell: Babylon.

## **The Return of the Exiles to Judah**

One of Cyrus' projects was the return of exiled people to their homelands as well as assisting them in establishing their traditions and worship. The impact upon the exiles is recorded in the first four chapters of [Ezra](#).

*“In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his entire kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing: “Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: ‘All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Those among you who belong to any part of his people, may their God be with them! Let them go up to Jerusalem in Judah to build the house of the LORD the God of Israel, that is, the God who is in Jerusalem.” (Ezra 1:1-3)*

Thus the Jews were encouraged to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, and received back the sacred vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had confiscated when the city fell. One needs to remember this is all 40 years after the fall of Jerusalem. As seen by later waves of immigrants from Babylon, not all or even a majority of Jews returned in this first wave. They were settled and comfortable in Babylon and they knew that Jerusalem was still in ruins. In any case, among the leaders of the first wave was **Zerubbabel** and **Joshua** who are included in the list of returnees in Ezra 2.

One of the first actions was the setting up of an altar (Ezra 3:1–6) so that sacrificial ritual was resumed amid the ruins of the temple. Steps were also taken to obtain the official grant of timber allowed by Cyrus (Ezra 3:7), and in the second year a ceremony was held to give thanks for the inauguration of the rebuilding of the temple (3:8–13).

Progress was short-lived, however. The people of mixed descent who had appropriated the land during the exile wanted to identify themselves with the Jews by cooperating with them in their building projects. They probably hoped to keep a controlling interest in local political issues. Zerubbabel and Joshua appear to have had the support of the repatriates in refusing to compromise with people whose easy-going religion and morals might encourage apostasy. The resulting hostility brought the work to a halt, and the temple was still a ruin in 520 BC (Ezra 4:1–5).

[Note: Ezra the scribe captures all this history happening ~536 BC. Ezra was not present (nor was Nehemiah). They arrive on the scene almost 100 years later. Nonetheless, the *Books of Ezra* and *Nehemiah* are invaluable in describing this period of Judah’s history]

### **Zerubbabel and Joshua || Ezra and Nehemiah**

Together, Zerubbabel and Joshua led the first wave of Jewish returnees from exile and began to rebuild the city and the Temple. It is estimated that Judah was now a small province that contained land extending 25 km from Jerusalem. Appointed by Darius the Great, Zerubbabel was governor of the province.

Zerubbabel was the grandson of King Jehoiachin (the one taken into Exile; also known as Coniah or Jeconiah) and as such an heir to the line of David, but as mentioned above, neither he nor his descendants were to ever sit upon the throne of David. His task, along with the priest Joshua, was to rebuild the Temple and city confines, still a ruin some 40 years later.

Much of their story was told in the *Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. While listed as separate books, these stories are actually one unified whole and were designed to be read as one big story told in three parallel movements with two conclusions, one positive and one negative. ...and keep in mind that the author of these books describes the efforts of Zerubbabel and Joshua some 100 years before Ezra and Nehemiah arrive on the scene.

*Three Parallel Movements:* Ezra 1-6: Zerubbabel and Joshua lead the first wave of exiles back from Babylon (with mixed results); Many years later - Ezra 7-10: Ezra attempts a spiritual revival

among the returned exiles (again, with mixed results); Nehemiah 1-7: Nehemiah leads the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls (with mixed results)

*Two Concluding Movements:* Nehemiah 8-10: Ezra and Nehemiah stage a revival in Jerusalem...; Nehemiah 11-13: ... which basically fails and ends with Nehemiah's anger and disappointment

The first three movements each begin with lots of hope and possibility. Each starts with a Persian king sponsoring an Israelite leader to lead a wave of exiles back to the ruins of Jerusalem to rebuild their lives (Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel in Ezra 1-2; Ezra in Ezra ch. 7; Nehemiah in Nehemiah ch. 1). In each case the group returns and makes some attempt at restoration, whether it's rebuilding the temple (Ezra 3-6), making a commitment to the Torah (Ezra 9-10), or rebuilding the city walls (Nehemiah 2-7). And in each case, they face hostility from without (Ezra 4 and Nehemiah 2-7). After all three of these cycles, the reader should start to clue in and ask: "Why do these great beginnings keep concluding with mixed results?"