



Chapter 13

Conquest And Exile

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the old covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, a covenant which they broke,..."

Jeremiah 31: 31-32

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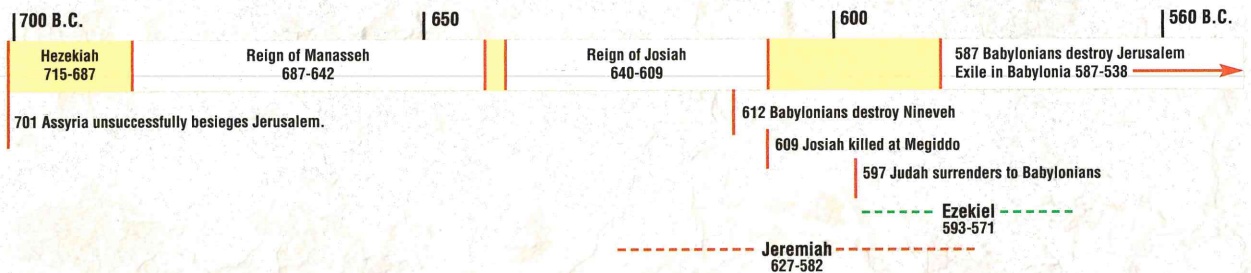
Read

- Isaiah 6:1 - 8
7:10 - 17**
- 2 Chronicles 33:1 - 13
34:14 - 33**
- Jeremiah 31:31 - 34**
- Daniel 3:1 - 30**

With the Assyrian conquest, the story of the northern kingdom of Israel came to an end. Some of the poor farmers were probably left in the land, but all the leading citizens were gone, and the tribal structure of most of the northern ten tribes was dissolved. Only Zebulun and Naphtali, which had been conquered by the Assyrians earlier, remained in their homeland, the rural province of Galilee.

To make sure Israel would never be a problem again, the Assyrians brought people from faraway corners of their empire to resettle the empty cities of central Israel. The new settlers brought their own gods, but after a while (and a few attacks by roaming lions) they decided to learn the worship of the God of Israel, supposing he was a territorial deity who had to be appeased.

These new settlers gradually intermarried with the remainder of the Israelite population that had been left behind by the Assyrians. The combined population worshiped God, but also continued to worship foreign gods from all over the Assyrian empire. Because they had settled in the towns around Samaria, they were called Samaritans.



The Great Prophet Isaiah

Now all that was left of the old kingdom of David was Judah, which included the large tribe of Judah, the little tribe of Benjamin, and the Levites who had not lived in Israel. Judah was spared the Assyrian conquest. While Israel was coming to an inglorious end, Judah was going through a temporary rebirth under the good king Hezekiah. Hezekiah was determined to do what was right in the sight of God. And for his guide, he had one of the greatest of all the prophets: Isaiah the son of Amoz. Hezekiah was a serious reformer. He pulled down the pagan altars and sacred poles. He tore down the high places where people worshiped God the wrong way. He destroyed the bronze serpent Moses had made in the wilderness, because the faithless people had even begun to worship that as a god.¹

Isaiah, Hezekiah's spiritual guide, had been a prophet through the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, and Ahaz, during whose reigns the people of Judah were progressively seduced by the evil practices of the Canaanites. Uzziah was a worshiper of the True God, but his pride made him try to take over the priests' functions as well. Jotham also worshiped the True God, but he allowed many of the people to slip into idolatry. Manasseh was a pagan; he even burned his own son as an offering to one of the horrible Canaanite idols.

Against that background, Isaiah was sent to call Judah to repentance, and to warn of the destruction to come if Judah did not repent.

Come now, let us reason together,
says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.
If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be devoured by the sword:
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.
(Is 1: 18-20)

But Isaiah was not only a prophet of doom. Even when things looked darkest, Isaiah looked forward to a time when Jerusalem would be not just the capital of Judah, but also the spiritual capital of the world.

It shall come to pass in the later days
that the mountain of the house
of the LORD shall be established as the
highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many peoples shall come, and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the
LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
(Is 2: 2-3)



Many scholars today think that the book of Isaiah, as we have it, is compiled from the writings of three or possibly more prophets. In that case, the first part (chapters 1-39) is mostly the work of Isaiah himself; while the remaining material was compiled later on by those responsible for collecting prophecies attributed to Isaiah, especially for the sake of the exiles living in foreign lands. But the whole book has been put together by a talented editor, and the same themes run all through it.

Of course the idea of repentance, and the judgment that will come unless Judah repents, is one of the main themes of Isaiah's prophecy. But even that judgment cannot cancel God's unconditional promises to David. God will chasten his people, but in spite of that punishment a time will come when the most impossible-sounding promises will all come true. A remnant of Judah—the remnant that has been truly faithful to God—will return to establish a new kingdom in Jerusalem. In fact, that idea was so important to Isaiah that he named his first child A-Remnant-Shall-Return.²

Though it might seem impossible, the Davidic kingdom would be restored more glorious than ever before. The line of David, son of Jesse, might seem to be chopped down like a dead tree, but in that time to come, the ideal ruler—the Lord's Anointed, the Messiah or Christ—would rule Israel with ideal righteousness.

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD...

In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious.

In that day the LORD will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. (Is 11:1-2, 10-11)

It already seemed like an impossible promise: all the faithful of Israel, even the tribes dispersed by the Assyrians, would be reunited under the Lord's Anointed. In the dark times to come, it would seem even more impossible.

Not all the tribes of the north had disappeared. Unlike the rest of the northern tribes, Zebulun and Naphtali had never been completely deported. In the last years of the northern kingdom, Assyria had conquered their land, separating it from the kingdom of Israel. Most of the poor farmers who lived there were left when the rest of Israel was dismembered and taken away.

Those stragglers were still there in the land called Galilee, where they were ignored by Jews and Gentiles alike. Yet Isaiah predicted something unimaginably great for them:

But there will be no gloom for her that was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the later time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shined....

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government will be upon his shoulder,
and his name will be called
"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Is 9:1-3, 8)



"... the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord..." (Is 11: 2)

The people of Judah who heard Isaiah's prophecy would not have been surprised to hear the Galileans called "people who walked in darkness." But they might have doubted whether the Galileans would ever see a great light. Galilee would be made glorious? Galileans were poor farmers, not great leaders. It was one of Isaiah's more unlikely-sounding prophecies.

In the reign of Ahaz, the wicked pagan king, the Assyrians attacked Jerusalem, and it looked like the end for Judah. But God sent Isaiah with a message for Ahaz.

"Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test." And he [Isaiah] said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the LORD himself shall give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel [that is, God-Is-With-Us]. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings are in dread will be deserted." (Is 7:10-16)

When a son was born to Ahaz, it seemed like the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise. And by the time little Hezekiah was walking around, the siege of Jerusalem had been lifted.

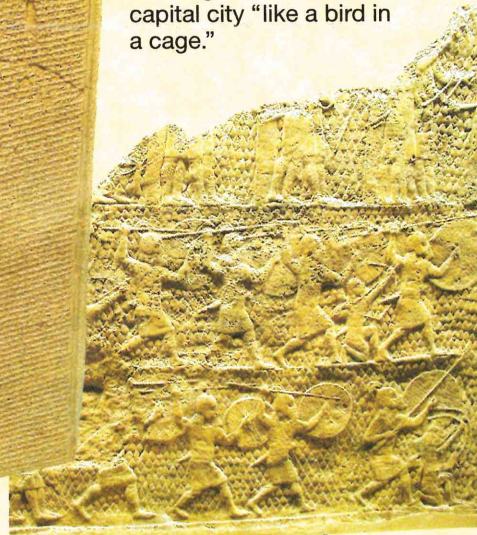
But even Hezekiah, the great reformer, was not the ideal ruler God had promised. After his reign, things rapidly got worse for Judah. The faithful remnant began to understand that the real fulfillment of God's promise was still to come.

The word translated "young woman" in "a young woman shall conceive" can also mean "virgin," and it was translated as "virgin" in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Scriptures made about 250 years before the time of Jesus Christ. Reading this prophecy, the faithful people who were still looking for the Lord's Anointed expected him to be born of a virgin.

With God's Help, King Hezekiah Defends Jerusalem, 701 B.C.



On this cylinder, Assyrian King Sennacherib boasts that he captured 46 of Hezekiah's cities and besieged Jerusalem, shutting Hezekiah up in his capital city "like a bird in a cage."



But Hezekiah had prepared Jerusalem for a long siege by digging an underground tunnel through 1,750 feet of solid rock to bring fresh water from the Gihon spring into the city. Hezekiah prayed for help, and God answered by destroying 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. "For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David." (2 Kgs 18:13-19)

The Wicked King Manasseh

When Hezekiah died, his son Manasseh succeeded him. It would be hard to imagine a greater contrast between father and son. Hezekiah had pulled down the high places; Manasseh built them up again. Hezekiah had thrown out all the foreign idols; Manasseh brought them back. Manasseh defiled the very Temple of God with pagan altars and images. He even burned his own sons as an offering to the horrible pagan gods. He massacred innocent citizens in his own capital of Jerusalem, persecuting the worshipers of God and turning the true religion into an underground cult. An ancient tradition says that one of his victims was Isaiah the prophet, whom he had cut in two with a saw.

No king of Judah had ever been so purely wicked. Judgment came on him swiftly: Assyrians came down and attacked Jerusalem, carrying off Manasseh in chains.

But then something almost like a miracle happened.

And when he was in distress he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to him, and God received his entreaty and heard his supplication and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God.
(2 Chr 33:12-13)

Much later, an unknown writer imagined what Manasseh's prayer in captivity must have been like. The Prayer of Manasseh is considered canonical by some Eastern churches:

**...For the sins I have committed are more in number than the sand of the sea;
my transgressions are multiplied, O LORD, they are multiplied!
I am unworthy to look up and see the height of heaven because of the multitude
of my iniquities.
I am weighted down with an iron fetter, so that I am rejected because of my sins,
and I have no relief;
for I have provoked your wrath and done what is evil in your sight,
setting up abominations and multiplying offenses.
And now I bend the knee of my heart, beseeching you for your kindness.
I have sinned, O LORD, I have sinned, and I know my transgressions.**
(Prayer of Manasseh 9-12)

Manasseh was completely changed when he came back to Jerusalem. He took away all the pagan altars and threw out all the foreign cults. He made sacrifices of thanksgiving in the Temple. He lived to reign longer than any other king of Israel and Judah.



The Kidron Valley, north of Jerusalem, was an important place of burial and contains many rock-cut tombs. The reforming kings, such as Hezekiah and Josiah, used the valley as a place to destroy pagan idols and altars. They were burned or ground to a powder.

The Great Reform

Judah had a brief return to paganism under Amon, the son of Manasseh. But when he was assassinated, the people made Josiah, Amon's son, king. Josiah would be remembered as the great reformer, the king who brought Judah back—at least temporarily—to the statutes and commandments of God.

One day when the priests were going through the Temple archives, one of them came across an old scroll. It had apparently been hidden away, perhaps to keep it safe from Manasseh's soldiers during the worst part of the persecution.

The priests brought it to the king, and the king had it read to him.

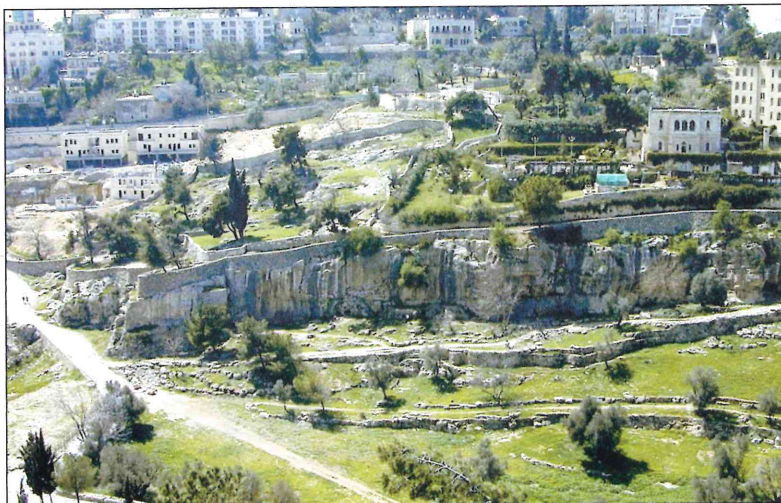
When he heard what was in the book, he tore his clothes. The priests had found the Book of the Law—the book we call Deuteronomy. It had been hidden and forgotten when the priests of the True God were being massacred in the streets. And there, for the first time in his life, Josiah heard the curses pronounced on Israel for disobeying the Law.

“Go,” the king told the priests, “inquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.”³

The priests went to a prophetess named Huldah, and she gave them the bad news.

Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: “Tell the man who sent you to me, Thus says the LORD, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place and upon its inhabitants, all the words of the book which the king of Judah has read. Because they have forsaken me and have burned incense to other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the work of their hands, therefore my wrath will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched. But as to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall you say to him, Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Regarding the words which you have heard, because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the LORD... you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, and your eyes shall not see the evil which I will bring upon this place.” (2 Kgs 22:15-20)

Josiah gathered the people together and read the Book of the Law to them. Together they swore to keep all the commandments of God. Then Josiah had all the altars to false gods burned, and defiled the site where Molech-worshippers had killed their own children. He expelled all the cult prostitutes.



He tore down the high places where people had worshiped God incorrectly. And he did all this in spite of the fact that doom had already been pronounced on Judah. Josiah had decided to do what was right, even if there could be no immediate benefit.

When Josiah became king in 640 B.C., Hinnom Valley had many pagan shrines. He tore them down and instituted sweeping reforms throughout the land.

Josiah was killed in battle by Pharaoh Necho of Egypt in 608 B.C.

Jeremiah Sees The End Of The World

After Josiah, Judah went downhill fast. Josiah's sons were all worthless, leading Judah back to paganism. God's judgment was quick. One by one, the sons of Josiah were carried away by more powerful kings.

First the Egyptian pharaoh made Judah a tributary and carried off Jehoahaz, making his brother Jehoiakim king in his place. Then Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came and carried the second brother away to Babylon, along with the best furnishings from the Temple, leaving Jehoiakim's eight-year-old son as a puppet king. But only three months later Nebuchadnezzar decided to take the little boy off to Babylon, too, along with what was left in the Temple and all the best soldiers and craftsmen in Jerusalem. He left the last of Josiah's sons, Zedekiah, to rule as Nebuchadnezzar's vassal.

In spite of all the bad news, there was no repentance. And even as Jerusalem suffered one raid after another, there were flattering false prophets willing to tell the king of the moment that prosperity was just around the corner.

It wasn't easy being a true prophet in those dark times. The news was all bad, and bad news wasn't what people wanted to hear. The great prophet Jeremiah was imprisoned, beaten by thugs, thrown down a well, and repeatedly threatened with death. Yet Jeremiah's stubbornness was the best witness to the truth of his prophecies. Even the worthless Zedekiah consulted Jeremiah in secret.



Zedekiah had decided to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar, relying on help from Egypt. It was precisely the same mistake the last king of Israel, Hoshea, had made a century and a half before. Even though his flattering court prophets promised him that Egypt would save Judah, Zedekiah secretly sent for Jeremiah to find out the truth about his chances of success against Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah told him Egypt would do him no good. God had already determined the fate of Jerusalem.

Thus says the LORD, Do not deceive yourselves, saying, "The Chaldeans will surely stay away from us," for they will not stay away. For even if you should defeat the whole army of Chaldeans who are fighting against you, and there remained of them only wounded men, every man in his tent, they would rise up and burn this city with fire. (Jer 37: 9-10)

Jeremiah was a powerful figure in spite of his unpopularity; he was known for giving prophecies against the reigning authority, and yet the king felt compelled to consult him rather than a more compliant prophet. Jeremiah had the truth, and the king and the people recognized it, even when they didn't want to.

The truth was a terrible thing in those days. Jeremiah told the people of Judah that there would soon be destruction so terrible, so total, that words could hardly describe it. Only a practical demonstration could get the point across.



Thus said the LORD, "Go buy a potter's earthen flask, and take some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests, and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the Potsherd Gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you. You shall say, 'Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem... Behold, I am bringing such evil on this place that the ears of every one who hears of it will tingle.... And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will cause their people to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hand of those who seek their life. I will give their dead bodies to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the earth. And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at; every one who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its disasters. And I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters, and every one shall eat the flesh of his neighbor in the siege and in the distress, with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them.'

"Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, and shall say to them, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended....'" (Jer 19:1-3, 7-11)

In his search for words to describe the horror to come, Jeremiah reached all the way back to the beginning of time. Genesis 1 describes how the earth was waste and void before creation began, and God's first act was to create light. Now, in Jeremiah's vision,

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
 and to the heavens, and they had no light.
 I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
 and all the hills moved to and fro.
 I looked, and lo, there was no man,
 and all the birds of the air had fled.
 I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
 and all its cities were laid in ruins before the LORD,
 before his fierce anger.
 (Jer 4: 23-26)

The destruction would be so complete that all the work of creation would be undone.

The Fall Of Judah To Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians



The Impossible Promise

Yet creation will not be entirely undone. As with the Flood, God will preserve a remnant, and creation will begin anew. All the disasters of the previous centuries will be reversed, and Israel will be brought back together under the ideal Davidic king.

Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they will be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, says the LORD.

*Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."
(Jer 23: 3-6)*

This time the people of God will not be united by the covenant of the Law or even by the covenant with David, but by a new covenant.

*"Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the old covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, a covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."
(Jer 31: 31-34)*

Israel has been an unfaithful wife, but her sins will be forgiven. The prophets often spoke of Israel's "adultery" in chasing after false gods. Yet the promise was always that God would redeem his unfaithful bride. Many of the prophets used the same metaphor. Hosea, in fact, saw his own marriage as a mirror of the relationship between God and his people. Hosea's wife was unfaithful to him, leaving him and their children to run after other lovers, until she finally ended up as a common slave. Yet Hosea still loved her.

And the LORD said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is beloved of a paramour and is an adulteress; even as the LORD loves the people of Israel, through they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins." [Cakes of raisins were part of Canaanite pagan worship.] So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley. (Hos 3:1-2)

No matter how unfaithful she had been, Hosea redeemed his wife when she had sunk into slavery and degradation. God would do the same for his people: Israel would sink into slavery and degradation, but God would still love her and pay the price to redeem her from slavery.

Ezekiel, who lived at the same time as Jeremiah, made the same amazing promise. Like Jeremiah, he foresaw terrible destruction ahead. But no matter how terrible the destruction might seem, in the more distant future God would redeem his people.

For 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 upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone



"Behold, O Lord, for I am in distress, my soul is in tumult, my heart is wrung within me, because I have been very rebellious." (Lam 1: 20)

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 observe my ordinances. You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (Ez 36: 24-28)

The terrible punishment to come was not revenge, but the chastening discipline of a loving Father. And the redemption to come after that would not come because Israel deserved it, but purely because of God's love.

Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good; and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds. It is not for your sake that I will act, says the LORD God; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O Israel. (Ez 36: 31-32)

Through the prophets, God forms his people in the hope of salvation, in the expectation of a new and everlasting Covenant intended for all, to be written on their hearts (cf. Is 2: 2-4; Jer 31: 31-34; Heb 10: 16). The prophets proclaim a radical redemption of the People of God, purification from all their infidelities, a salvation which will include all the nations (cf. Ez 36; Is 49: 5-6; 53: 11). Above all, the poor and humble of the LORD will bear this hope. Such holy women as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Judith, and Esther kept alive the hope of Israel's salvation. The purest figure among them is Mary (cf. Zep 2: 3; Lk 1: 38). (CCC 64)

The Exodus Reversed

When the destruction finally came, it must have seemed as terrible as Jeremiah had predicted. It's hard for us to imagine how destructive war could be in the ancient world. Even though the weapons were primitive by our standards, armies of tens or hundreds of thousands of soldiers could destroy whole provinces so thoroughly that creation really did seem to be undone. For safety, the people might retreat behind the walls of the chief city. Then the enemy would lay siege to the city, and soon the people inside would find themselves starving.

When Nebuchadnezzar finally took Jerusalem, he decided he'd had enough of that rebellious city. He burned down the Temple, the king's palace, and every important house in the city. He took most of the important citizens away to Babylon, leaving a governor to supervise the ones who were left. Jeremiah the prophet was also left with them. According to 2 Maccabees, he managed to hide the Ark of the Covenant when Nebuchadnezzar was making off with the rest of the loot from Jerusalem. The story said that the Ark would not be found again until all the people of Israel were brought back together.



It was also in the writing that the prophet [Jeremiah], having received an oracle, ordered that the tent and the ark should follow with him, and that he went out to the mountain where Moses had gone up and had seen the inheritance of God. And Jeremiah came and found a cave, and he brought there the tent and the ark and the altar of incense, and he sealed up the entrance. Some of those who followed him came up to mark the way, but could not find it. When Jeremiah learned of it, he rebuked them and declared: "The place shall be unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy. And then the LORD will disclose these things, and the glory of the LORD and the cloud will appear, as they were shown in the case of Moses, and as Solomon asked that the place should be specially consecrated." (2 Mc 2: 4-8)

Even then the rebellious spirit of Judah was not quite stamped out. Rebels murdered the governor and all his Jewish followers. The Jews who were left were sure the Babylonians would retaliate, so they made plans to flee to Egypt. Jeremiah warned them not to go, but they accused him of being in league with the Babylonians and went anyway—dragging Jeremiah with them against his will.

So the remnant of Judah went back into exile in Egypt—the ultimate curse that had been predicted in the Book of the Law.

And the LORD will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey which I promised that you should never make again; and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no man will buy you. (Dt 28: 68)

The Babylonian Empire After The Destruction Of Jerusalem

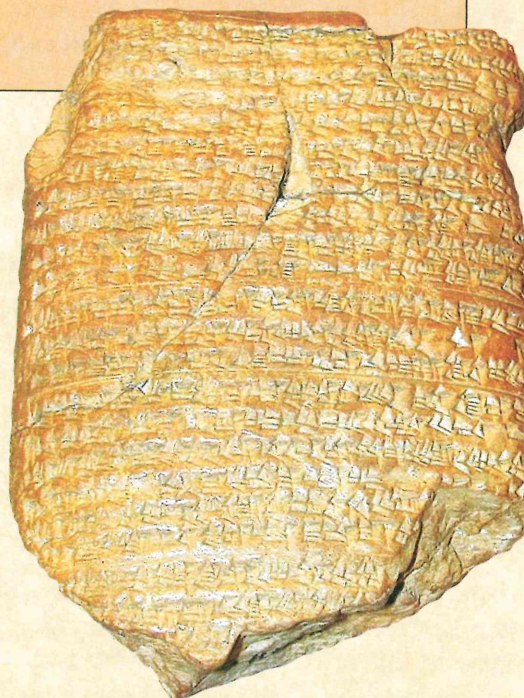


This clay tablet is a part of The Babylonian Chronicle, recording events from 605-594 B.C. The cuneiform text on this tablet describes three main events:

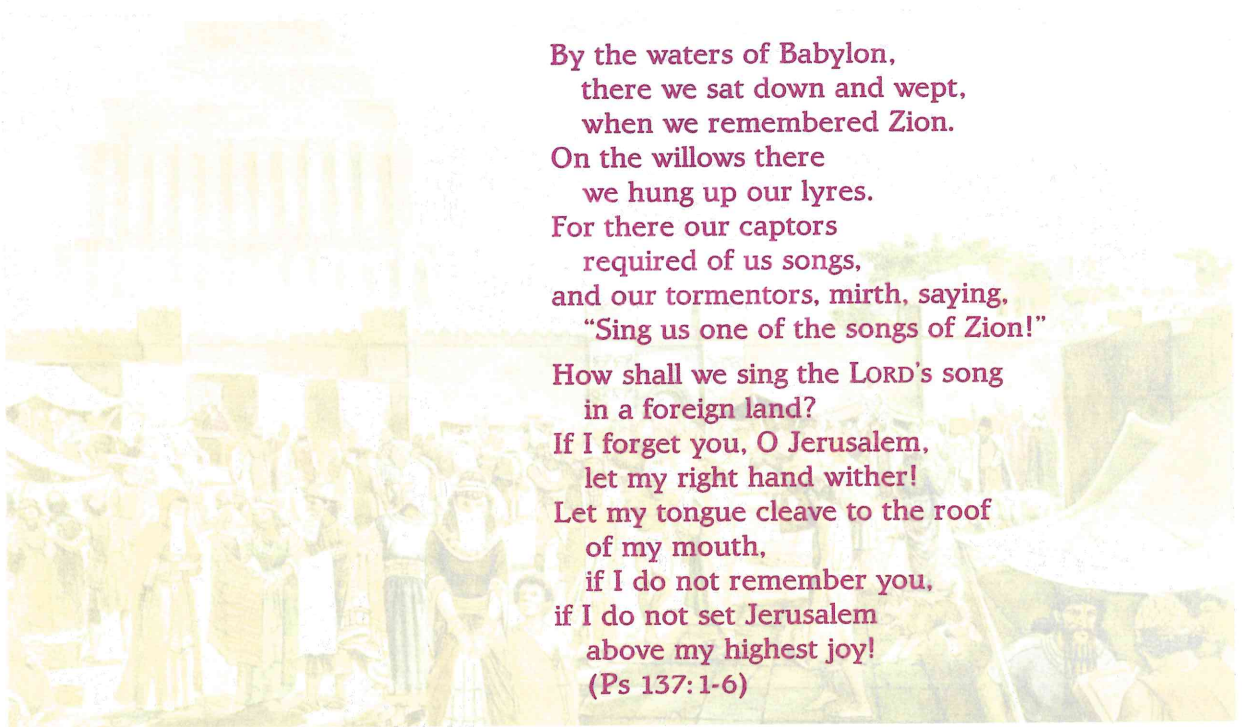
1. The Battle of Carchemish, where Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon defeated Pharaoh Necho of Egypt, 605 B.C.
2. The accession to the throne of Nebuchadnezzar II, the Chaldean.
3. The capture of Jerusalem on the 16th of March, 598 B.C.

This is how the tablet describes the capture of Jerusalem:

"In the seventh month [of Nebuchadnezzar-599 B.C.] in the month Chislev [Nov./Dec.] the king of Babylon assembled his army, and after he had invaded the land of Hatti [Syria/Palestine] he laid siege to the city of Judah. On the second day of the month of Adara [16th of March] he conquered the city and took the king [Jehoiakim] prisoner. He installed in his place a king [Zedekiah] of his own choice, and after he had received rich tribute, he sent [them] forth to Babylon."



The Babylonian Exile



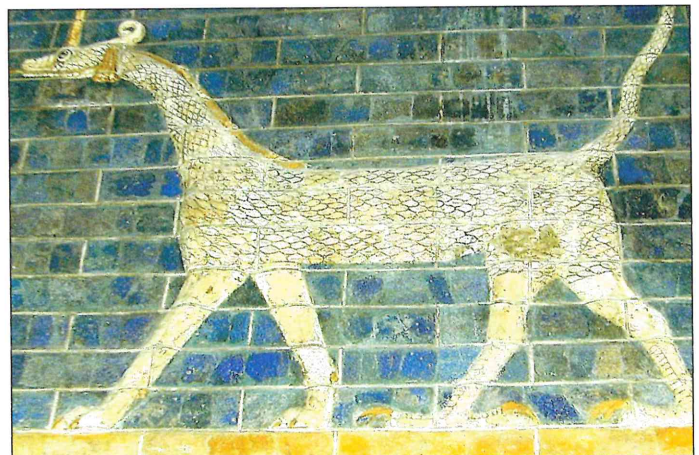
By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors
required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How shall we sing the LORD’s song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cleave to the roof
of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy!
(Ps 137: 1-6)

Jerusalem had meant everything to the people of Judah. It was the beautiful city, the holy city, God’s chosen dwelling out of all the earth. Now the city was burned, and the Promised Land had been taken away. The Temple was gone. How could worship even continue without the Temple?

Babylon was a huge city, a place where Nebuchadnezzar sat among immense palaces and temples and ruled the world, and a place where all the vices of the world were collected in one spot. It was magnificent and terrible and completely foreign.

We can hardly imagine the pain of exile for the people of Judah who had been carried away far to the east. Yet a strange thing was happening. Deprived of everything they had owned, they found themselves remembering God. Surrounded by glorious monuments of paganism, they were beginning to understand the value of what they had lost. They began to remember that they were the chosen people of God.

The result was a flowering of Jewish culture that no one would have expected. Many of the books of the Old Testament were edited in their final forms during the Babylonian Exile. It’s a common saying that history is written by the winners. But the case of the Jews is the stunning exception to that rule. Thrown out of their homes, carried away to foreign slavery, they wrote the history of how their people lost everything. And they knew why they had lost, too: they had been unfaithful to their God.



A dragon from the great Ishtar Gate, part of the lavish redevelopment of Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar II.



"And he said to me, 'Son of man, go, get you to the house of Israel, and speak with my words to them. For you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel.'" (Ez 3: 4-5)

The Prophet Ezekiel was among the Jews deported from Jerusalem to Babylon in 597 B.C. He lived among the captives near the river Chebar. After the destruction of Jerusalem, God used Ezekiel to convey a message of hope and future restoration to the exiles. Ezekiel's portrayal of God as a Good Shepherd who would restore His flock (Ez 34: 11-31) foreshadows the New Testament motif of Christ as the Good Shepherd (Jn 10). In this painting of Ezekiel's vision, Raphael uses the symbols of the New Testament Evangelists: angel, lion, ox, eagle—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John.

Daniel: Heroic Stories Of The Exile

The book of Daniel tells some memorable stories about faithful Jews in the Babylonian Exile, and how they stayed faithful to the True God even when all the powers of paganism were brought against them. Daniel himself was legendary for his wisdom, and he earned a very high position in the Babylonian court. The book begins with Daniel and three other young men of noble Jewish families being picked out to be trained as servants to the king. Daniel refused to break the Jewish dietary laws by eating the king's rich food, eating only vegetables and water. Probably it was the only way he could be sure not to eat meat cooked with the blood or any of the other things faithful Jews had to avoid. Already we see how hard it was to stay faithful to God in a foreign land.

Next comes the story of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, and how Daniel interpreted it. The king had called his wise men and demanded that they not only interpret his dream, but also tell him what it was. "Let the king tell his servants the dream," they answered, "and we will show its interpretation." But that answer didn't satisfy Nebuchadnezzar, who decided to kill all the wise men—including Daniel. Daniel, however, prayed to God, and God showed him what the king had dreamed.

Nebuchadnezzar dreamed that he saw an enormous statue.

1. The head was gold;
2. the breast and arms silver;
3. the belly and thighs bronze;
4. the legs iron; the feet partly iron and partly clay.
5. Then a rock was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and it struck the statue and broke it in pieces. The stone then became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

Daniel was able to interpret the dream, too:

1. The golden head was Nebuchadnezzar, the greatest of all earthly kings.
2. After him would come a kingdom inferior to Nebuchadnezzar's, as silver is inferior to gold.
3. After that would come a kingdom inferior to the second, as bronze is inferior to silver.
4. Then a fourth kingdom would arise that would crush the first three, as iron breaks everything. But the kingdom would be partly strong and partly brittle, like potter's clay.
5. Finally, God himself would set up a final kingdom which would never be destroyed, but—like the rock—would fill the whole earth.

In other words, Nebuchadnezzar's dream was an outline of future history. Naturally, Nebuchadnezzar was impressed with Daniel's ability to tell him his dream and interpret it, and Daniel became one of Nebuchadnezzar's top ministers.⁴

Daniel tried to tell Nebuchadnezzar that it was God, not Daniel, who was the source of all wisdom. But Nebuchadnezzar didn't grasp the distinction between the True God and false gods. The next story we hear is the famous story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. Nebuchadnezzar had decreed that everyone should bow before a huge idol he had set up, but the three young men—Daniel's companions, who had been brought up in the Babylonian court with him—refused to bow. The penalty was being tossed into a fiery furnace. But when the young men were thrown in, something amazing happened.



Then Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He said to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?" They answered the king, "True, O king." He answered, "But I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods." (Dn 3: 24-25)

Sure enough, the three young men came out of the furnace unhurt. "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego," said Nebuchadnezzar, "who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted him, and set at nought the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God."⁵

Stories like these encouraged the Jews to be faithful to their own God for the half-century they were exiled in Babylon. Though they lived in the capital of the pagan world, the Jews kept their distinct identity and culture. And they never forgot Jerusalem.

The forgetting of the Law and the infidelity to the covenant end in death: it is the Exile, apparently the failure of the promises, which is in fact the mysterious fidelity of the Savior God and the beginning of a promised restoration, but according to the Spirit. The People of God had to suffer this purification (cf. Lk 24: 26). In God's plan, the Exile already stands in the shadow of the Cross, and the Remnant of the poor that returns from the Exile is one of the most transparent prefigurations of the Church. (CCC 710)

SUPPLEMENTARY READING

**Commentary, Introduction to
Chronicles § 4**

**4. The Books of Chronicles in the Light of the
New Testament**

The books of Chronicles end with the divine decree to rebuild the temple of Jerusalem and send the exiles home (cf. 2 Chr 36: 22-23). By the time these books were redacted (the fourth century B.C.), that decree had been put into effect, and the people once again were dwelling in the promised land and worshipping God in the temple in the manner laid down by David, according to these books. The people and its priests are now, therefore, the “successors” of David, and in the temple and its liturgy they discover their true identity and the guarantee of divine protection. Chronicles, therefore, does not make it quite clear that this was a temporary situation and one that would remain so until the Messiah came, the successor of David; although the attention focused on David might seem to imply that outcome. Instead, this history gives the impression that God’s Covenant with David is already being fulfilled, just as it was in the case of those successors of David who were faithful to God. In this sense one must say that there is no dimension of messianic hope in 1 and 2 Chronicles.

However, these books do mark an important stage in the unfolding of divine Revelation which will reach its climax in the New Testament. Perhaps more strongly than anywhere else in the Old Testament, they evidence awareness of the presence of God among his people through the temple of Jerusalem and the institutions connected with it, and the continuity of that presence as long as due worship is offered there. In this sense 1 and 2 Chronicles prepare the way for the Revelation of the New Testament, according to which God has become truly present in the midst of his people and all mankind through the incarnation of his Son Jesus Christ. The teaching contained in Chronicles gives us a better grasp of Jesus’ zeal for the temple (cf. Mt 21: 12-17) and of how he could even identify himself with the temple by describing himself as the definitive dwelling place of God among men (cf. Mt 12: 6; Jn 2: 21). The physical death of Jesus (cf. Jn 2: 18-22), a true sacrifice and an act of worship to the Father, “presaged the destruction of the Temple, which would manifest the dawning of a new age in the history of salvation: ‘The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father’ (Jn 4: 21; cf. Jn 4: 23-24; Mt 27: 51; Heb 9: 11, Acts 21: 22)” (CCC 586). Jesus, then, is the new David who provides in himself the place where people — not just the Jews, but all mankind — truly meet God.



“Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, ‘Put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes.’ Jeremiah did so. Then they drew Jeremiah up with ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.” (Jer 38: 10-13)

VOCABULARY

BABYLON

The great imperial city to which the conquered people of Judah were taken as captives by Nebuchadnezzar.

DANIEL

A great prophet who rose during the Exile. He defied many attempts to force him to worship the pagan gods of Babylon, and in his visions he foresaw the end of Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom.

EXILE

The time the people of Judah spent as captives in Babylon.

GALILEE

A district of Israel whose population was not deported with the rest of the kingdom.

HEZEKIAH

The reforming king of Judah who temporarily returned Judah to the pure worship of God.

ISAIAH

The great prophet who guided the reforms of Hezekiah. His prophecies often refer to the coming of the Messiah.

JEREMIAH

A great prophet who stood up to official persecution to bring God's word to the people of Judah. He saw his people being carried off to captivity in Babylon captivity, but he predicted that God would gather the remnant of his flock from the four corners of the world. He also foresaw a time when God would make a "new covenant" with his people.

JOSIAH

A reforming king of Judah who returned the people to the worship of the True God. During his reign the Book of the Law was found in the Temple, where it might have been hidden during Manasseh's persecutions.

MANASSEH

A king of Judah who destroyed all his father Hezekiah's reforms and persecuted the worshipers of the True God. After many disasters, he repented and turned back to God.

MESSIAH

"Anointed One." The ideal future king of Israel promised by God through the prophets. The Greek translation is "christ."

NAPHTALI

One of the northern tribes in Galilee not deported with the rest of Israel.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR

King of Babylon who finally conquered Judah and carried the best families off to exile in Babylon.

REMNANT

In Isaiah, the small number out of all God's people who will return to Jerusalem after the coming exile. The idea was so important to Isaiah that he named one of his children A-Remnant-Shall-Return.

ZEBULUN

One of the northern tribes in Galilee not deported with the rest of Israel.



A tablet known as The Siloam Inscription, dating from 700 B.C., was discovered in Hezekiah's Tunnel. It marked the point where the two groups of tunnellers, who had started at each end, met in the middle. The inscription describes the drama of the meeting: *"On the day of the piercing through, the stone-cutters struck through each to meet his fellow, axe against axe. Then ran the water from the spring to the pool..."*

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Who were the Samaritans?
2. Who was Hezekiah?
3. Why did Hezekiah destroy Moses' bronze serpent?
4. What is the main theme of Isaiah's prophecy?
5. According to Isaiah, what unlikely place would be made glorious "in the later time"?
6. How did King Manasseh begin his reign?
7. What happened when Manasseh was taken away by the Assyrians?
8. Who was known as the great reformer?
9. What important discovery did the priests make during Josiah's reign?
10. How did Josiah react when he found out Judah was to be punished by God?
11. Who was Zedekiah?
12. Where did the remnant of Judah flee after the leading citizens had been deported to Babylon?
13. When were many books of the Old Testament edited in their final forms?
14. What happened to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. Manasseh became king after his father, the good king Hezekiah, died. Manasseh was a wicked king and quickly reversed all the reforms his father had set in place. He set up pagan altars, defiled the Temple of God, and even persecuted God's faithful. When the Assyrians attacked, why did Manasseh finally turn to God? How did God respond? What sacrament can this story be related to? How does this story show how that sacrament is of great importance?

2. Reread the section explaining Nebuchadnezzar's dream about the statue. One interpretation of this story relates the statue's feet to a person who has many strengths and talents but does not trust in God. In this interpretation, what would the

iron represent? What would the brittle clay represent? There are many people who are very successful in life while at the same time denying the importance of living God's will. How could this story serve as a warning to them?

3. With difficulty, Daniel committed himself to abstain from the rich foods of the king, eating only foods that did not violate the Jewish dietary laws. This was especially difficult to do because he was in a foreign land under pressure to follow their popular beliefs and practices. Describe a time in your life when you were challenged to live up to your religious beliefs and how you handled the situation.

Endnotes

1. 2 Kgs 18: 4.
2. Is 7: 3.
3. 2 Kgs 22: 13.
4. Dn 2.
5. Dn 3: 28.