

## INTERTESTAMENT

### THE END OF THE OLD TESTAMENT: Part 2

#### The Writing Prophets and the Covenants

The writing prophets of Israel were deeply conscious of the ancient covenant of Moses and its attendant curses for covenant violation. They sternly warned the nation that if its leaders and people did not correct their waywardness, disaster would surely come (Je. 7:1—8:3; Eze. 20:1-



*Bas-relief from the palace of Tiglath-pileser III in Nimrud, showing Israelite prisoners of war headed into exile. (British Museum)*

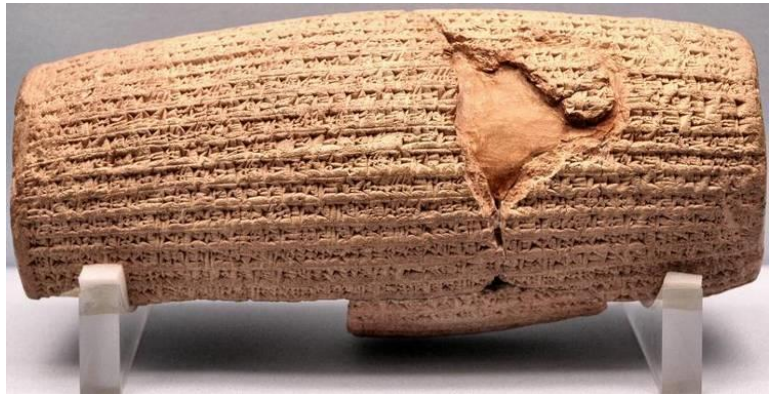
38). Disaster did come! The northern tribes were exiled by the Assyrians in 721 BC (2 Kg. 17:3-41), and the southern nation was exiled by the Babylonians in 586 BC (2 Kg. 25:1-21; Je. 52).

Political disaster was not the last word of the prophets, however. On the other side of exile hope remained for a surviving remnant, and while the curses of the Mosaic covenant had surely been carried out, the hopeful promises in God's

covenants with Abraham and David had not been not cancelled. Jeremiah predicted that the exile would last 70 years (Je. 25:11), and afterward, God would enable the exiled people of Judah to return to their land (Je. 29:10-14). Indeed, a recurring message of the prophets was that return and restoration was equally a covenant promise (Am. 9:14-15; Ho. 3:4-5; Mic. 2:12; 4:6; Is. 11:11-12; Zep. 3:19-20; Je. 23:3; Eze. 11:17).

#### The Return from Babylon and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple

God's promise of repatriation was fulfilled in 539 BC when the Persians conquered Babylon. Cyrus the Great reversed the deportation policies of the Assyrians and Babylonians. In his first year after the fall of Babylon, he issued an edict that the displaced people in his empire were free to return home and rebuild (2 Chr.



*The Cyrus Cylinder offers the Persian version of Cyrus' decree, which says, "I returned to these sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been in ruins for a long time, the images which used to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned them to their habitations." (British Museum)*

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36:22-23; Ezr. 1:1-4). The remnant of Israelites who had been allowed to live in a ghetto in Babylon were among those who immediately took advantage of the emperor's generosity. Under the leadership of the governors Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, along with Joshua the High Priest, and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, many Israelites, "everyone whose heart God had moved," made the long trek back to Jerusalem to begin the rebuilding process (Ezr. 1:5-8; 2:1-2).



*While we have no way of knowing what the reconstructed great altar looked like, archaeologists have excavated a four-horned altar in southern Judah dating to about the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. Perhaps the reconstructed altar looked similar.*

Of first concern to those who returned to Jerusalem was the rebuilding of the temple. They started by reconstructing the great altar, which meant that the morning and evening sacrifices could once again be offered daily (Ezr. 3:1-6). Though they laid the foundation for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, (Ezr. 3:8-11), opposition from local peoples interrupted their work, and for the next 16 years there was a hiatus in which nothing further was accomplished (Ezr. 4:1-5). Two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, finally stirred the people to reengage (Ezr. 5:1-2; 6:15), promising them that this work was the first step toward a great future (Hg. 1:13-15). The spiritual power to accomplish the work would not be due merely to human energy, but rather, would come through the Spirit of God himself (Zec. 4:6). Indeed, the

glory of God that once had filled the ancient tabernacle (Ex. 40:34) and Solomon's temple (1 Kg. 8:10-11) would also fill this 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, so much so, that the glory of the latter would be even greater than the glory of the former (Hg. 2:9). Energized by this vision, the people returned to the work, completing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple in 516 BC, the sixth regnal year of the Persian Emperor, Darius the Great (Ezr. 6:14-15).

### The Coming of Ezra and Nehemiah

Two additional figures must be addressed in the subsequent history of the returned Jews. The first of these was the priest Ezra, who led yet another group of Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem. The introductory clause "after this" (Ezr. 7:1a) covers about half a century, so earlier leaders like Zerubbabel and Joshua were presumably deceased. Ezra, a leader with impeccable credentials, secured permission from the Persian emperor Artaxerxes for the trip (Ezr. 7:12-26). He exemplified the ideal of the teaching priest, leading the people in reforms. The other figure of note was Nehemiah, formerly an attendant to Artaxerxes, who was deeply troubled that the city of Jerusalem remained insecure. He gained permission to go to Jerusalem also, and under his direction, the community was able to rebuild the walls of the city to provide protection (Ne. 6:15-16).

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These events were attended by a public reading of the Torah and a celebration of the Festival of Booths (Ne. 8:1ff.). Most important, the ancient covenant was renewed with a solemn promise not to neglect the new house of God, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple (Ne. 9:38—10:39).

### The Post-Exilic Community

The last writings of the Old Testament express a deep desire for another leader like David. The prophets had repeatedly predicted that a faithful leader from the family of David would someday rise to lead the nation (Am. 9:11-12; Ho. 3:4-5; Is. 9:1-7; 16:4b-5; Je. 23:5-8; 30:8-9; 33:14-16; Eze. 34:23-24; 37:24; cf. Ps. 89:19-37; 132; 11-18). David's ancient covenant, in which God had promised a never-ending dynasty and a kingdom that would endure perpetually (2 Sa. 7:5-16; 1 Chr. 17:3-15), fueled this vision so that the final books of the Hebrew Bible (1 and 2 Chronicles) focus on the ideal kingship of David, the temple, and its liturgies and services, along with the roles of the priests and Levites. It attempts to show historically that when the covenant was maintained with a full heart, Yahweh blessed the nation abundantly. When the covenant was compromised by disobedience, the nation suffered under divine retribution. Now, in view of the loss of the Davidic king, the temple, and the land, both the positive and negative role-players in Israel's national history must serve as examples for the future, how to live and how not to live. If the people who returned from exile were to survive their displacement and beleaguered return to the land, they needed a leader like David!

#### THE TERM "JEW"

*The word "Jew" derives from the word Judah, the primary Israelite tribe in the south which was exiled to Babylon. It begins to be used widely in the post-exilic period, whereas earlier, the term "Israelite," which referred to those descended from Jacob, was more common. Today, at least at a popular level, the words "Jew" and "Israelite" are nearly synonymous, but technically, they should be distinguished.*

The last of the writing prophets, Malachi, also weighed in on the future. He saw that the post-exilic community still lived in disillusionment (Mal. 2:13). Many were hostile, even cynical, towards God because of unfulfilled expectations (Mal. 1:2; 2:17; 3:7-8, 13-14). The sins of occultism, adultery, perjury, exploitation, and discrimination once again were rearing their ugly heads (Mal. 3:5; 2:11-12). Priests were failing in their duties of moral instruction (Mal. 2:7-8). The final voice that ends the Old Testament's series of writing prophets culminates with the promise of a coming messenger who would prepare the way of the Lord (Mal. 3:1a). God would indeed come to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, just as Haggai had promised (Mal. 3:1b), but Malachi warned that when God appeared he would come for purification. He posed the question, "Will you be ready for him?" (Mal. 3:2-5). Finally, prior to this climax, God would send Elijah the prophet (Mal. 4:5-6).

### The Diaspora

By the end of the Old Testament, the Jews were now dispersed in various parts of the ancient world. Some had fled to Egypt, and we know of them from the end of the Book of Jeremiah (Je. 41:16—43:7) as well as from recovered texts from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC indicating a community of Jews at a border fortress in Egypt called Elephantine. Many Jews did not return to Jerusalem with the others after the Edict of Cyrus, preferring to continue their newly established lives in the

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*This Jewish marriage contract from the Elephantine documents describes the marriage contract of Ananiah and Tamut on July 3, 449 BC, about the same time as the writing of the Book of Malachi (Brooklyn Museum).*

Persian heartland (they are referred to in the books of Esther and Tobit). Eventually, the scattered Jews migrated north and westward to establish yet other Jewish communities.

### The Exile is Not Over

It is fair to say that the Old Testament ends on an unfinished note. In spite of the fact that there was now a 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple with an active priesthood and the resumption of sacrifice, many of the most cherished hopes for the future still had not been realized. No powerful leader had arisen from David's family. Other expectations had not been fulfilled, such as, the establishment of a new covenant as predicted by Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Je. 31:31-34; Eze. 34:25; 36:24-38; 37:26-28), the reunion of the northern tribes with the south (Eze. 37:15-23), the establishment of Mt. Zion as a place for international worship (Is. 66:18-21; Zec. 14:16-

21), the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-32), and the return of Yahweh's glory to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple (Eze. 43:1-12; Hg. 2:6-9). Indeed, there was a real sense in which the exile was not yet over. The northern tribes had disappeared, assimilated into Assyrian culture, seemingly never to return. Even the Jews in Jerusalem were still under Persian rule as "slaves" to a foreign power (Ne. 9:36-37). Daniel recast the 70 years of exile as 490 years—seventy "sevens" of oppression still to come (Da. 9:2, 24).

## THE DIASPORA: The Jews in the Archaemenid Empire

● Jewish settlements (ca. 450 BC)

● Additional Jewish settlements (after 350 BC)

