

put in a “dry” cistern where he sank into the mud (38:6), and faced the possibility of execution more than once (26:8–9, 38:4, 15–16).

We have special insight into Jeremiah’s inner life (far more than any other prophet) through the presence of six prayers of lament or complaint included in the book, some to which God responds, but most meet divine silence. For example, in the first prayer, Jeremiah expresses gratitude for the LORD making him aware of plots on his life from people in his own hometown of Anathoth; Jeremiah asks for the LORD’s vengeance on them (11:18–20). On this occasion, the LORD assures Jeremiah that he will punish them for trying to stop Jeremiah’s proclamation of the Word (11:21–23). In his second complaint, however, when Jeremiah charges the LORD with plotting and giving success to the wicked (while affirming his love for his God, 12:1–4), the LORD responds and challenges Jeremiah—his life is going to become much more difficult; in fact, it is already more dangerous than he was aware of because members of his own family are trying to trap him (12:5–6). So, like the coach who cares deeply for his players, the LORD challenges Jeremiah to “suck it up.” This is only the beginning of what Jeremiah has to do for the LORD; he has not seen anything yet, considering what is to come.

Finally, in Jeremiah’s last complaint, he accuses God of forcing him into a task he didn’t want (20:7), giving him messages to which people respond with violence (20:8), and not letting Jeremiah stop (20:9). Meanwhile, people are watching and waiting for a chance to kill Jeremiah (20:10). In this case Jeremiah responds to himself; on the one hand, somehow he knows the LORD is with him and that the LORD will repay these people (20:11–13); but, on the other hand, at times, Jeremiah is not so optimistic and wishes he had never been born (20:14–18).

Sometimes ministry is lived out with great confidence in the LORD, and at other times, we wish we had nothing to do with the work. Contemporary pastors may find a friend who understands them by reading Jeremiah’s laments. In addition to 11:18–20, 12:1–6, and 20:7–18, see:

- 15:15–21: Jeremiah asks the LORD to remember him and act on his behalf against those who torment him; he also complains that while he has been faithful to the harsh ministry God has demanded of him, the LORD has been unreliable. (God tells Jeremiah to return to him for strength.)
- 17:14–18: Jeremiah begs the LORD to save him, his only source of help against those who harass and threaten him.
- 18:18–23: Jeremiah asks the LORD to hear the threats being made against his life—by the very people Jeremiah begged the LORD not to punish. But now, Jeremiah prays, don’t hold back your judgment or overlook any of the things they have done wrong.

The Message

It is already obvious that we cannot clearly distinguish a person from their message. Who a person is and what a person says are not distinct from each other, nor are they only loosely related. The message and the messenger are like the combination of hydrogen and oxygen to form water; they are one, a whole. We see this dynamic in one of Jeremiah’s most famous oracles when the LORD

sends Jeremiah to preach to the people as they enter the temple (most likely during some special festival). The LORD's hope is that the people will hear and change; but, if not, they will bear the responsibility for what happens (26:1–6). The narrative of events surrounding this sermon is in Jeremiah 26, but the content of the sermon is in Jeremiah 7:

Improve your conduct and your actions, and I will dwell with you in this place. Don't trust in lies: "This is the LORD's temple! The LORD's temple! The LORD's temple!" No, if you truly reform your ways and your actions; if you treat each other justly; if you stop taking advantage of the immigrant, orphan, or widow; if you don't shed the blood of the innocent in this place, or go after other gods to your own ruin, only then will I dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave long ago to your ancestors for all time.

And yet you trust in lies that will only hurt you. Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, sacrifice to Baal and go after other gods that you don't know, and then come and stand before me in this temple that bears my name, and say, "We are safe," only to keep on doing all these detestable things? Do you regard this temple, which bears my name, as a hiding place for criminals? I can see what's going on here, declares the LORD. (7:3b–15)

Based on Jeremiah's words, we may safely assume that the people were convinced God would never allow anything to happen to his temple, his own house (7:4, 9–10). Consequently, it did not matter what they did—they were safe as long as the temple stood with them. We are far from the day when Solomon dedicated the temple with a prayer that recognized God cannot possibly be contained in the highest heaven, much less the temple (1 Kgs 8:27).

Jeremiah corrects their assumptions and beliefs on several levels. First, in Israel's history, God has destroyed his own dwelling place because of the sinfulness of his people—at Shiloh where Eli and his corrupt sons lived (7:12, see 1 Sam 2:12–4:18). So their assumption is wrong; God can do just fine without a temple. Second, Jeremiah insists that the LORD wants people who act with justice, instead of people who oppress the vulnerable (7:5–7). But they are smashing the covenant into little pieces—in the way they treat other people and by following other gods (7:9). Third, and consequently, because they will not listen, the LORD is about to "do a Shiloh"—destroy his own house, and send the people into exile (7:13–15).

The content of Jeremiah's "Temple Sermon" is not likely to win many friends. Back in Jeremiah 26, we learn that the religious leaders and people seize Jeremiah and threaten him, saying, "You must die," because he spoke against the temple (26:8–9). A trial immediately convenes: on one side are the priests and prophets who claim, "This man deserves to die for prophesying against this city as you all have heard first hand" (26:11). On the other side, Jeremiah speaks in his own defense, repeating parts of his earlier message and warning that his message is from the LORD. He says they can kill him if they want, but they will be guilty of killing an innocent man, sent by God (26:12–15).

The officials hearing the case recognize Jeremiah doesn't deserve to die (26:16); some speak in Jeremiah's defense, using Micah as a legal precedent—who also said Jerusalem (and the temple) would become a pile of rubble (Mic 3:12). But King Hezekiah did not execute Micah; instead he pled for the LORD's mercy (Jer 26:17–19). This argument and powerful officials with connections in the government save Jeremiah (26:24); but another short story included by the writer demonstrates that during this era, the LORD's prophets are being killed in Judah (26:20–23).

So the saga of the Temple Sermon comes to a close. On the one side, Jeremiah has offended, infuriated, and enraged the religious establishment in Jerusalem. And while Jeremiah may walk away today—courtesy of friends who happened to be at the right place at the right time—Jeremiah will not always be so lucky. Given another chance, the officials will take care of Jeremiah and his mouth. On the other side, God has promised to protect Jeremiah—though he came close to losing his life today. Nowadays, all those people who walk around searching for God's call on their life should take note: when God calls a person into special service, it most often stakes a claim on their whole life—like Jeremiah or the prophet Uriah. (Don't remember him? Look again in 26:20–23). So be careful what you wish for.

Ezekiel

The Man

Ezekiel was also a priest (Ezek 1:3); but, unlike Jeremiah, he was married—though his wife dies in captivity (24:15–27). He demonstrates both the education one would expect of a priest (e.g., ch. 28) and his identification with the upper crust in Jerusalem by his exile into captivity with King Jehoiachin in 598 BCE. Five years later, God calls him to the task of a prophet, most likely

at the age of thirty (593 BCE, 1:1–3; see Table 12:2). It would seem most likely that Ezekiel would have children, given his age and marital status; but, if so, we are never told anything about them.

Ezekiel is an odd man, to say the least. Somehow, whether by messenger or God's Spirit, he keeps up with affairs back in Jerusalem (e.g., 17:15). He sees bizarre things in visions, and he does strange things. For example, he builds a model of Jerusalem and then lies on his left side for 390 days for the guilt of Israel, and then 40 days on his right side for the guilt of Judah. Meanwhile, he also prepares and eats a small portion of food to represent the famine in Jerusalem (4:1–17). But this is only one of many unusual actions: eating a scroll (2:9–3:3); becoming mute, except for when God speaks to him (3:26–27); shaving his hair and beard and

doing odd things with measured portions of his hair (5:1–4); carrying his baggage, as if going into exile (12:1–16); and eating and drinking with fear and shaking (12:17–30). (Jeremiah also did his own share of such **speech-acts**: hiding/burying a used undergarment and retrieving it later [13:1–11], breaking pots [19:1–15], and wearing a yoke [27:1–22], just to mention a few.)

THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL
Chapters 1–24 Oracles, Visions, and Sign-Acts Leading to the fall of Jerusalem
Chapters 25–32 Oracles to the Nations
Chapters 33–48 Oracles of Hope and Restoration: A New Temple for a New Land

Table 12.2. The Book of Ezekiel

These object lessons were most likely performed as street theatre—performing an object lesson in one place, explaining its meaning, and then moving on to another place in town for a repeat performance. It is unlikely that Ezekiel does one or another of these actions constantly—24/7 and only in one place.

Ezekiel's visions are bizarre by any measure: he travels from place to place by the wind lifting him up and carrying him (e.g., 3:12, 11:1, 24), or being picked up by his hair (e.g., 8:3). Nonetheless, his visions are not terribly difficult to unlock if we keep reading. For example, one of Ezekiel's strangest visions comes at the beginning of the book when he sees creatures with wings and an object with a wheel within a wheel (i.e., one wheel facing north to south, the other wheel facing east to west). Interpretations of this object have ranged from a spacecraft to Ezekiel smoking a little too much weed in the desert. A better answer is in the text (and our memory of the ark of the covenant, equivalent to God's throne, from Exod 24). At the end of the vision, Ezekiel sees a throne (1:26) and the one on or above the throne looks a bit human—but is not human; instead, on the throne was "the form of the LORD's glory" (1:28)—in other words, it is the LORD enthroned. Now, working backwards, the throne is carried by winged creatures (1:4–14, 22–25; recall the winged creatures on the ark of the covenant), and alongside these creatures, moving up and down, are wheels that can go in any direction. In essence, Ezekiel sees the LORD enthroned—but this throne is completely free to move at anytime and go anywhere the LORD decides.

Throughout his report of this vision, Ezekiel struggles to find the right words—and can't. More than once he says "it looked something like" (1:4, 26, 27; see also 1:13, 22, 24), not just "like"—because Ezekiel finds it impossible to describe with words what he sees. The image is too elusive, too much of the other world. Artists may be the best interpreters of the text as they turn to postmodern forms and images, without trying to capture an exact photograph of Ezekiel's vision. Ezekiel's words communicate that no human photograph can capture what he saw, because, ultimately, he cannot even describe what he saw.

A little later, the LORD shows Ezekiel the same object again, but it is now in the temple—in the throne room (8:1–4)—where the LORD's throne should be. But other objects for the worship of other gods are also in the room, defiling God's throne (8:5–6). After other visions of sinful practices in the temple (8:7–18), Ezekiel sees the LORD's throne rise up and move toward the door of the temple (9:3). More thick description follows, again suggesting that it is impossible for Ezekiel to describe what he sees. But he does see and understand that God's portable throne continues to move up and outward (10:18–19), until finally:

Then the winged creatures raised their wings. The wheels were next to them, and the glory of Israel's God was above them. The LORD's glory ascended from the middle of the city, and it stopped at the mountain east of the city. (11:22–23)

The LORD has left the temple—and the city—which cannot be good news for anyone still in Jerusalem, but it is good news for those in exile—to know that your God is with you, no matter where you go.

The Message

While Ezekiel also condemns the worship of other gods and how this worship is leading Judah to oppress the vulnerable (chs. 4–24), once a survivor from Jerusalem comes with the news, “The city has fallen!” (33:21), Ezekiel’s message changes (for the most part) to what the people need now: *words of hope*. So we turn to two examples in Ezekiel 37.

Text One. Ezekiel 37:1–14. The first half of Ezekiel 37 is a vision report from a valley of dry bones—in other words, bones that are totally dead with not a single sign of life. The LORD asks Ezekiel a question, “Mortal, can these bones live?” (37:3 NRSV; the literal translation “son of man” simply means “mortal” or “human”). To which Ezekiel has the perfect reply, “LORD God, only you know” (37:3). So the LORD instructs Ezekiel to prophesy—to speak to these dead bones: “I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the LORD” (37:4–6). So Ezekiel begins to speak and the noise is faint, but he continues talking to the bones. He keeps repeating the LORD’s words and the noise starts to get louder and louder. Then he looked to see what was causing the noise—and he saw it:

Toe bone connected to the foot bone
 Foot bone connected to the heel bone
 Heel bone connected to the ankle bone
 Ankle bone connected to the shin bone
 Shin bone connected to the knee bone
 Knee bone connected to the thigh bone
 Thigh bone connected to the hip bone
 Hip bone connected to the back bone
 Back bone connected to the shoulder bone
 Shoulder bone connected to the neck bone
 Neck bone connected to the head bone
 Now hear the word of the LORD.

Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.
 Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.
 Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.
 Now hear the word of the LORD.¹

Bones, clattering and connecting—finding their match—the noise of thousands of bones. Bodies literally reforming, as far as the eye could see.

Now the LORD said, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, human one! Say to the breath, ‘The LORD God proclaims: Come from the four winds, breath! Breathe into these dead bodies and let

¹From the spiritual song “Dem Bones,” lyrics by James Weldon Johnson, 1871–1938. Public domain. Musical arrangements and recordings are available on YouTube by the Delta Rhythm Boys: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYb8Wm6-QfA>, and the Cathedrals Quartet: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLg-v4CS4nQ>.

them live" (37:9). Divinely mandated CPR. Blow into their lungs, fill them up and restart their lives. So Ezekiel spoke, the winds blew, and the valley came to life (37:10).

What does the vision mean? Sorry, but it's not about a literal resurrection of dead bodies; we are in a vision. The LORD explains: the story is about Israel—all of Israel, not just Judah—all who believe they are dead, their bones dried up, without hope (37:11). *No. No! Judgment is not God's final word!* Listen to what Ezekiel is saying (prophesying): I'm bringing Israel back from the grave, gathering the nation scattered all over the world, and bringing the nation back to life (37:12–14). The time for death is over—and "you will know I am the LORD" (37:14).

Text Two. Ezekiel 37:15–28. The second message in Ezekiel 37 is an object lesson that looks something like a magic trick—okay, a cheap magic trick:

See, I hold in my hands two sticks (show the audience). On one stick I am writing: The Stick of Judah (show the audience). On the other stick I am writing: The Stick of Ephraim, Joseph, and all Israel (show the audience, and now move the sticks so that you hold them together in one hand and they look like one stick). Presto! (Now say:) "The LORD God proclaims: 'I'm taking Joseph's stick, which has been in Ephraim's hand, and the tribes of Israel associated with him, and I'm putting it with Judah's stick, and I'm making them into a single stick so that they will be one stick in my hand.'" (37:19)

The object lesson is easy—any four-year-old can do the trick. Even the idea is simple: the LORD will reunite the two nations into one nation. The difficulty is in the doing. How will the LORD combine two nations—that no longer exist, people scattered throughout the Near East—into one nation—that no longer has a place to be a nation?

Ezekiel explains in staccato sound bytes (with secondary explanation). Almost every phrase beginning with "I will"—the LORD says:

- I will take the Israelites from among the nations (37:21)
- I will gather them (37:21)
- I will bring them to their fertile land (37:21, 25)
- I will make them into a single nation (37:22)
- My servant David will be king over them (37:24, 25, 22)
- I will deliver them from all the places where they sinned (37:23)
- I will cleanse them (37:23)
- I will make a covenant of peace for them (37:26)
- I will set my sanctuary among them forever (37:26)
- I will be their God, and they will be my people (37:27, 23)
- Nations will know that I, the LORD, make Israel holy (37:28)

What the LORD promises to do is not hard to understand; the sentences are short and clear statements of action. In sum, the LORD plans to start all over with his people—bring them back to the

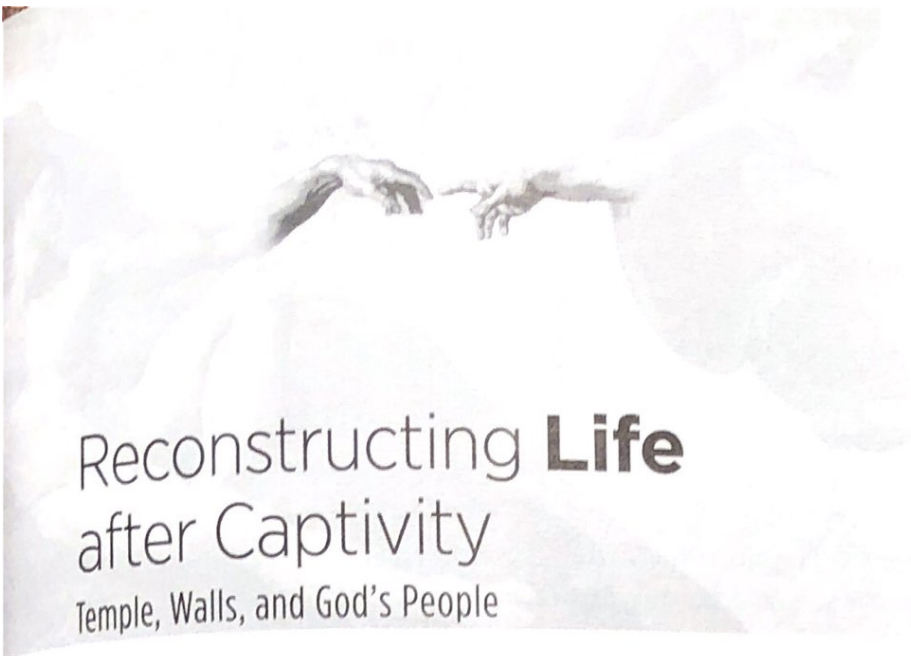
land, unite them, make a covenant with them, set a king over them, make his dwelling place with them, live with them, and be their God—everything God has ever hoped for in this relationship.

Conclusion

We have finally reached the low point for the story of God and God's people in the Old Testament. Exile: loss of home, loss of land, loss of life—what feels like a loss of God. What Moses warned Israel about before she entered the land. He told Israel that the reason God was driving other nations off the promised land and giving it to her was because these nations had become incredibly wicked (see Gen 15:12–16, Lev 18:24–25, Deut 18:9–12). And Moses cautioned the Israelites that if they do what these nations have done—reject the LORD, follow other gods, and become like those nations and their gods: self-centered, violent, corrupt—and even sacrificing their children to the gods. The true God will drive Israel off the land and into captivity (Deut 28:45–68, 29:22–28). Now it has happened. God has evicted the people from the land. It is not what God wanted to do; after every effort to get the people to follow God's ways, and doing everything possible for them, yet still respecting their freedom, they still refused to listen. So, with God's people in Babylon, the LORD weeps for his people.

But judgment is never the LORD's final word; not even in the prophetic books that warned Judah and announced justice. God is not ready to give up on his people, or the world, or God's intentions to bring the world back to his original plan: for humans and animals, humans and the ecosystem, male and female (or human relationships), and humans and God (see Gen 2). Judgment has come, but grace will follow. A new day and a new opportunity.

I wonder if those in Babylon are able to hear Ezekiel's words? Second Isaiah will struggle with getting the people to believe the LORD still cares about them and is really going to take them back home (Isa 40:27; 49:14, 24–25). Ezekiel's words sound wonderful, and we might be ready to shake our heads at Israel again: will these people ever trust God? But before we do, let's reflect on our own experiences in life. Good news can be more difficult to believe than bad news; falling into captivity is a much easier story to live into than living into a narrative of life with the God who made us and loves us. For now, however, we leave these challenges and questions for the voices yet to come in Chapter Thirteen.

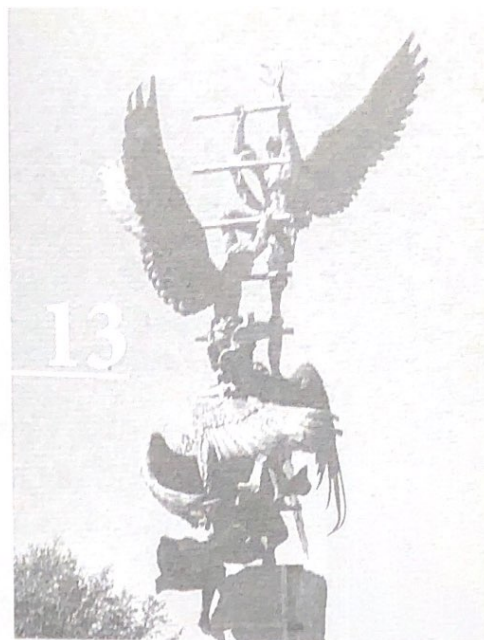


Reconstructing **Life** after Captivity

Temple, Walls, and God's People

It is far too easy for us to say the words “Babylonian exile” and “captivity” without emotional response—without our stomachs twisting in knots, or without our hearts leaping into our throats. But exile, captivity, and forced migration by any name are hardly emotionally neutral events. While it is true that Babylon allowed exiled peoples to live together and establish their own communities (though not true for Assyrian captives, who were scattered throughout the empire), conquest still meant the loss of home and all that was familiar, loss of livelihood, and the likely death of family and friends during the siege or the forced march to Babylon. Regardless of how benevolent the conqueror may be or what term we use to name forced relocation, it still meant a faraway place with a strange language, strange customs, and—most of all—a place that is not home.

During the early days in Babylon, many of Jerusalem's exiles have strong hope that captivity would be brief; the LORD had taught them a lesson, so now they would go home. Some prophets reinforce this false hope by assuring the people to wait just a little while longer and God would act in a mighty way to reverse their captivity (see Jer 28:1–17 and 29:8–32). Jeremiah, however, intervenes with the hard truth from the LORD that exile would last a lifetime or “seventy years” (29:10; seventy years equaled human life expectancy in Ps 90:10). So he writes in a letter to those in Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. Get married and have children . . .” (Jer 29:5–6). Perhaps most difficult, Jeremiah tells those in exile, “Promote



READING ASSIGNMENTS

EZRA 1:1–2:2, 2:68–6:22

NEHEMIAH 1:1–2:20, 4:1–6:19

NEHEMIAH 8:1–9:38

HAGGAI 1–2

ZECHARIAH 1

(RUTH AND ESTHER)

KEY TERMS

Anachronistic: a chronological inconsistency, such as including an object in a story that did not exist until after the historical setting of the story

Diaspora: the scattering of a population outside its homeland

Festival of Booths (also known as *Sukkot* or *Tabernacles*): a celebration of the last harvest of the year (grapes, olives, and nuts), a time to remember and relive life in the wilderness by living in huts or booths

Law of Moses: most likely the Pentateuch or some early form of the Pentateuch

Post-Exilic: refers to the time period after the exile of 587–536 BCE

Second Isaiah: Isaiah 40–55, chapters that address the end of the exile

Second Temple: the temple built by those who returned with Zerubbabel; also, the name given to an era or time period after the construction of this temple

Sin: the name of the Babylonian moon god

Province of Yehud: Persian province, roughly equivalent to the land of the nation of Judah

the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because your future depends on its welfare" (29:7). This was a bitter pill to swallow—pray for the Babylonians, who took you away from your home and life in Jerusalem, and forced you to this place. Instead of defiance or even terrorist actions, Jeremiah and others encourage the captives to accept, support, and, when possible, become part of the government (see the lessons from Dan 1–3).

The End of Exile and the Rise of the Persian Empire

Empires come and empires go; no human empire lasts forever. Back in Mesopotamia, the Babylonian Empire stops expanding after the reign of Nebuchadnezzar (604–562 BCE), and within thirty years, the empire is gone with the wind. The last king of Babylon was Nabonidus (556–539 BCE), a rather odd man and downright strange king. On the one hand, Nabonidus promotes the worship of the moon-god, Sin, and cares little for Marduk, the traditional Babylonian god with traditional Babylonian priests. So let's just say that the priests of Marduk are not big fans of the new king. On the other hand, Nabonidus spends most of his reign in a mysterious

ten-year self-imposed exile in the desert—and no one really knows why. Maybe he is trying to regain his health, or maybe he is out in the desert spending private time with the moon-god. Whatever his reasoning, someone has to actually be king while he is gone—and that task falls to his son, Belshazzar.

Farther to the East, Cyrus the Great begins his own dramatic rise and the world-changing growth of the Persian Empire. Coming to the throne at the age of thirty, Cyrus leads the Persian tribes to a successful revolution against their overlords, the Medes. He spends a few years consolidating his control of this territory before bypassing a fight with Babylon by circling around them to the north and moving west—going as far west as fighting against the Lydians at Sardis—and continuing west until, through war and diplomacy, he controls most of Ionia (modern-day Turkey). Now that the Persians have surrounded Babylon, Cyrus returns for a direct assault against Nabonidus in 539 BCE at Opis (near modern Baghdad), where he defeats the Babylonian troops. The city of Babylon then falls to Cyrus, with little or no fight, in October of 539 BCE; Cyrus then flips the entire Babylonian Empire into the Persian Empire—with extensive additions (see Figure 13.1).

Cyrus was a brilliant politician and statesman, as demonstrated by his treatment of all those people-groups Nebuchadnezzar and other Babylonian kings had exiled to Babylon. Cyrus fosters good will with all these people and their provinces, sending them home with encouragement to rebuild the temples for their gods that had

THE PERSIAN EMPIRE (BCE)	
Cyrus	550–530
Cambyses	530–522
Bardiya	522–522
Darius	522–486
Xerxes	486–465
Artaxerxes	465–425
Xerxes II	425–424
Darius II	424–404
Artaxerxes II	404–358
Artaxerxes III	358–338
Artaxerxes IV	338–336
Darius III	336–330
Artaxerxes V	330–329
ALEXANDER THE GREAT 330–323	

Table 13.1. Kings of the Persian Empire

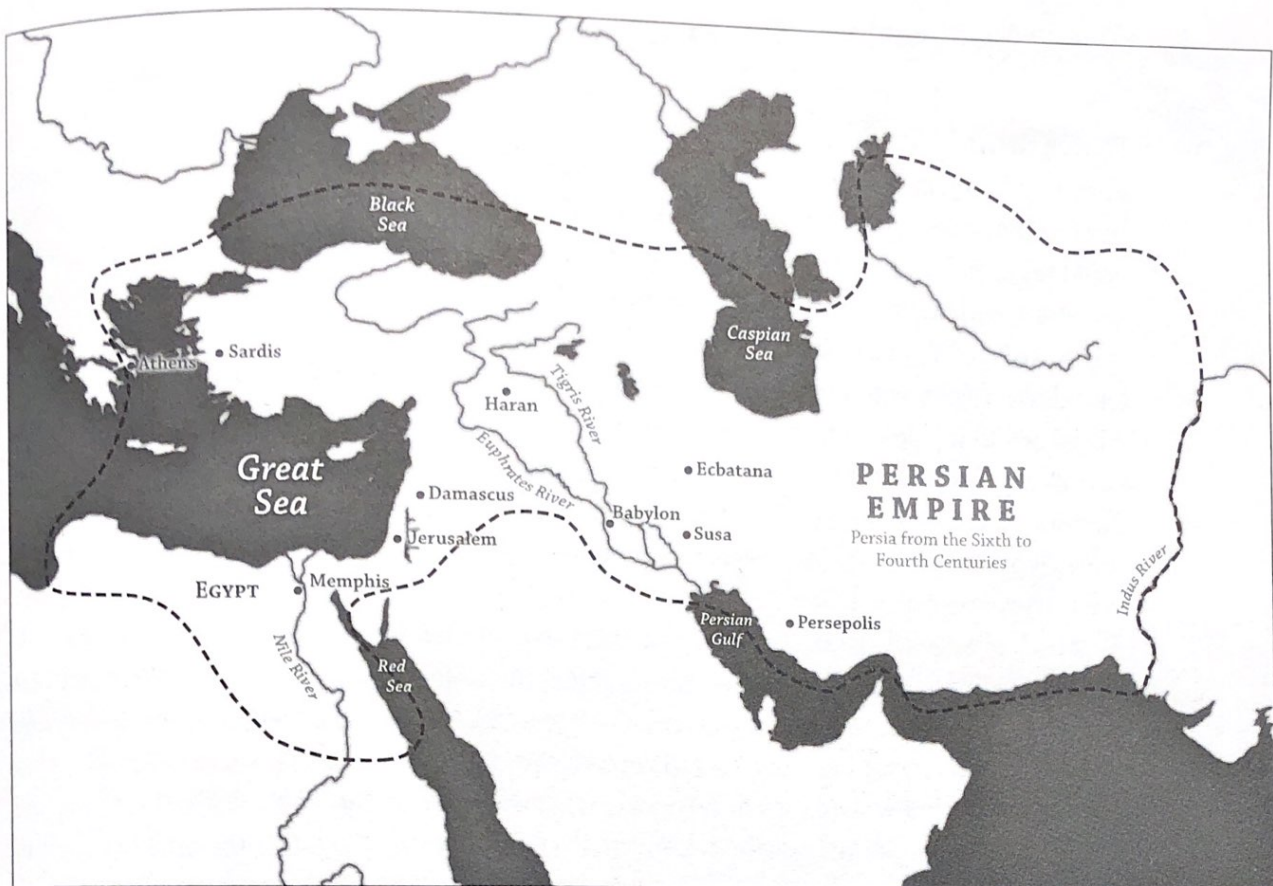


Figure 13.1. Map of the Persian Empire

been destroyed by Babylon. Even more, Cyrus is willing for the Persian Empire to pay the bill for necessary materials. One such decree (or edict), releasing the people of Judah and sending them home to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple, is recorded at the beginning of the Book of Ezra:

Persia's King Cyrus says: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has commanded me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. If there are any of you who are from his people, may their God be with them! They may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. And as for all those who remain in the various places where they are living, let the people of those places supply them with silver and gold, and with goods and livestock, together with spontaneous gifts for God's house in Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:2–4)

To court more favor, Cyrus has the treasure troves of Babylon searched so that items belonging to the Jerusalem temple would also be returned (1:7–11).

The End of Exile

Returning Home?

For those living in Babylonian exile, they could not hope or ask for more: freedom to go home, imperial financial support, and the restoration of sacred objects. Cyrus gave them everything they could hope for, except for one thing: the desire to uproot their families (*again*) from what has become a settled life over the past fifty (from 587 BCE) or sixty years (from 598 BCE). Jeremiah said to build a life in captivity, and so they did—many built a good life, with a solid business or a productive farm with ample water to irrigate from the many rivers of Babylon. So now, it was a hard sell to get people to leave what they have built in order to “return” to a place they may have never seen, other than through the eyes of their parents or grandparents. And frankly, what they describe doesn’t sound all that great: an arid land, dependent on rains that sometimes don’t come. Why exchange what has become a good life in Babylon for a difficult life back in Jerusalem and the province of Yehud?

Much of Second Isaiah is spent in an effort to convince those in exile that the LORD’s faithful love is at work in current events. For example, the LORD calls Cyrus his “shepherd” and his “anointed one” (44:28, 45:1; both royal terms) who has the LORD’s support to conquer nations and set captives free, including Babylon and captives from Jerusalem (45:13; see also 41:1–2), even if Cyrus doesn’t know the LORD or recognize what the LORD is doing (45:6). Consequently, the prophet must persuade the people that their God still loves them and that the time has come to go home. His task, however, is not easy. We hear the doubts of those in exile expressed through the words of the prophet:

Why do you say, Jacob,
and declare, Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD
my God ignores my predicament”? (40:27)

But Zion says, “The LORD has abandoned me;
my Lord has forgotten me.” (49:14)

Their concerns seem legitimate to me: after all these years in exile, why would they believe God loves them? And why should they get their hopes up that God has decided to do something now to send them home, when God hasn’t done anything for fifty years or more? I think God understands too, because the response to these tough questions from the people is gentle, patient, and also firm.

Don’t you know? Haven’t you heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the creator of the ends of the earth.
He doesn’t grow tired or weary.

His understanding is beyond human reach,
giving power to the tired
and reviving the exhausted.
Youths will become tired and weary,
young men will certainly stumble;
but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength;
they will fly up on wings like eagles;
they will run and not be tired;
they will walk and not be weary. (40:28–31)

And in response to their concern that the LORD has forgotten them:

Can a woman forget her nursing child,
fail to pity the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
but I won't forget you.
Look, on my palms I've inscribed you;
your walls are before me continually.
Your builders come quickly;
those who destroy and demolish you will depart from you.
Look up all around and see:
they are all gathered;
they come to you.
As surely as I live, says the LORD,
you will put them all on like ornaments,
bind them on like a bride. (49:15–18)

God has never stopped loving her people, and cannot forget them any more than a nursing mother can forget her baby (yes, it takes more than male imagery to describe Israel's God, see Num 11:12, Hos 11:1–4). And the LORD will never get tired, but will provide strength for the journey home (see also 44:8–16 and 51:12–16).

Convincing the people of the LORD's faithful love is the foundational message in Second Isaiah; everything else depends on their knowing God still cares about them. Then, to convince the people the time has come to go home, the prophet describes what the LORD is doing all over the ancient Near East:

I am the LORD your God,
the holy one of Israel, your savior.
I have given Egypt as your ransom,
Cush and Seba in your place.

Because you are precious in my eyes,
you are honored, and I love you.
I give people in your place,
and nations in exchange for your life.

Don't fear,
I am with you.
From the east I'll bring your children;
from the west I'll gather you.
I'll say to the north, "Give them back!"
and to the south, "Don't detain them."
Bring my sons from far away,
and my daughters from the end of the earth,
everyone who is called by my name
and whom I created for my glory,
whom I have formed and made. (43:3-7)

The LORD God says:
Look, I will raise my hand to the nations,
and to the peoples I will lift up my signal.
They will bring your sons in their arms,
and will carry your daughters on their shoulders.
Kings will be your attendants,
and their queens your nursemaids.
With faces to the ground they will bow down to you;
they will lick the dust from your feet.
You will know that I am the LORD;
the one who hopes in me won't be ashamed.
Can loot be taken from warriors?
Can a tyrant's captives escape?

The LORD says:
Even the captives of warriors will be taken,
and the tyrant's loot will escape.
I myself will oppose those who oppose you,
and I myself will save your children.
(49:22-25, emphasis mine; these are the words of the captives)

The LORD is paying the ransom for his people and gathering them from wherever they may have been taken (see also 43:14-21). The LORD is also returning to Jerusalem (40:1-11), a city that will be resettled (44:23-28), and where he will reign (52:7-10). Another contributing factor in the people's struggle to believe the LORD will do what he claims is easy for us to overlook: Israel and other nations in the ancient Near East believed that nations at war engaged not only in human

battle, but in conflict between their gods. So, when Babylon came and defeated Israel, the greater defeat was that of Marduk (god of Babylon) over Yahweh (God of Israel). Marduk even came onto Yahweh's turf and took Yahweh down on his home court. So, in view of that big-time loss at home, how are the people to believe that Yahweh will be able to come onto Marduk's turf and defeat him? This concern is behind the words cited above, "Can loot be taken from warriors? Can a tyrant's captives escape?" (49:24), to which the prophet said, *Yes, it will happen and it will be done*. Yahweh is able to do what he claims.

So, in view of these affirmations and what the LORD will do, the LORD calls his people to come home:

Go out from Babylon;

flee from the Chaldeans!

Report this with a loud shout, proclaim it;

broadcast it out to the end of the earth.

Say, "The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!" (48:20)

Depart! Depart! Go out from there!

Unclean! Don't touch!

Get out of that place; purify yourselves,

carriers of the LORD's equipment!

You won't go out in a rush,

nor will you run away,

because the one going before you is the LORD;

Your rear guard is the God of Israel. (52:11-12; see also 43:1-7)

You may already have noticed that the prophet reframes their return in terms of a second exodus, repeating the journey to the land their ancestors made centuries before. Now, the prophet stresses new and stronger faithfulness among the people (see 51:10-11).

Despite the efforts of Second Isaiah (and others), and while a fair number of people are ready to go home, not everyone is eager to sign up for tickets. Truth be told, the conditions back in the old homeland are tough—perhaps not exactly as advertised in the travel brochure. To start, Jerusalem is not the capital of anything, for the simple reason that the city is mostly ruins—the temple, the king's palace, and especially the protective wall around the city; these ruins await reconstruction by those who return. So, instead of Jerusalem, the Persians choose Mizpah, a city seven miles north of Jerusalem, as the capital city for the province of Yehud. The fact that the people are not going back to the kingdom of Judah is another big change for those returning. The nation no longer exists, nor does a king for the nation. So, whatever their hopes may have been for a future nation and a restored king from the line of David may have been (like their leader, Zerubbabel, from the line of David), the people who take a ticket go back to the province of Yehud—not the nation of Judah. And as they come back, they not only face rebuilding their homes, farms, and/or businesses, they also face major reconstruction projects for the city and Yahweh.

Project I: Rebuilding the Temple

The first wave of captives return to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel (appointed governor after Sheshbazzar, see Ezra 1:8, 11; 5:14–16; Hag 1:1), and Jeshua (or Joshua, the high priest, see Hag 1:1), and others—all for the explicit purpose of rebuilding the temple of the LORD (Ezra 1:2–5). And they begin this work soon after their arrival by setting up the LORD's altar (3:2–3) in time for the **Festival of Booths** (3:4). A few months later, the builders lay the foundation (3:8) in a ceremony that brings together the priests, the Levites, and many of the people who have returned.

Naturally, when the builders lay the foundation, there is great joy and shouts of praise, singing with a responsive line: “He is good, his graciousness for Israel lasts forever” (3:11; compare to Ps 136). But at the same time, those “old priests and Levites and heads of families, who had seen the first house, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this house” (3:12). The people expressed praise and profound sorrow all at the same time, so much and so loud that the writer adds, “No one could distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping” (3:13). What would prompt the old-timers to weep so loudly while the younger generation could only celebrate?

Soon after the foundation is laid, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the heads of the families are faced with a critical issue, set within an offer from those people living in what was once northern Israel: let us help with the building of the temple. The rationale of the locals is easy to follow: we have been worshipping the LORD since the Assyrians relocated us to this land (4:1–2). At issue, however, is a far greater matter: the identity of the LORD's people. Now that the LORD's people are spread throughout the world (the **Diaspora**), how are they to be identified or distinguished from others? The answer, which will be up in the air for some time, begins here: those who stayed in the north and intermarried with non-Israelites are not accepted as part of the LORD's people. So the answer to their offer to help is a firm and sharp *no*: “You'll have no part with us in building a house for our God. We alone will build because the LORD, the God of Israel, and Persia's King Cyrus commanded us” (4:3). And it's no surprise that their offer to help turns into active opposition—and that successful opposition shuts down work on the temple for sixteen years (4:24).¹

For sixteen years, the people, who came back for a single purpose, did everything except what they came back to do. They tend to their own estates, build or rebuild their own homes, and start businesses or re-cultivate fields that were left vacant for years; there is plenty of work to be done. But they are already falling into the same pattern of life, or set of priorities, that led to the fall of the nation and captivity. And this is the message the prophet Haggai brings to the people, to startle them back to their senses.

¹The chronology of the letters in Ezra 4:6–23 is notoriously difficult for interpreters. Ezra 4:8–6:18 is in Aramaic rather than Hebrew.

Project I and the Prophets

The Book of Haggai presents itself as a record of four oracles Haggai brought to the people in the province of Judah, during the second year of King Darius (ca. 520 BCE):

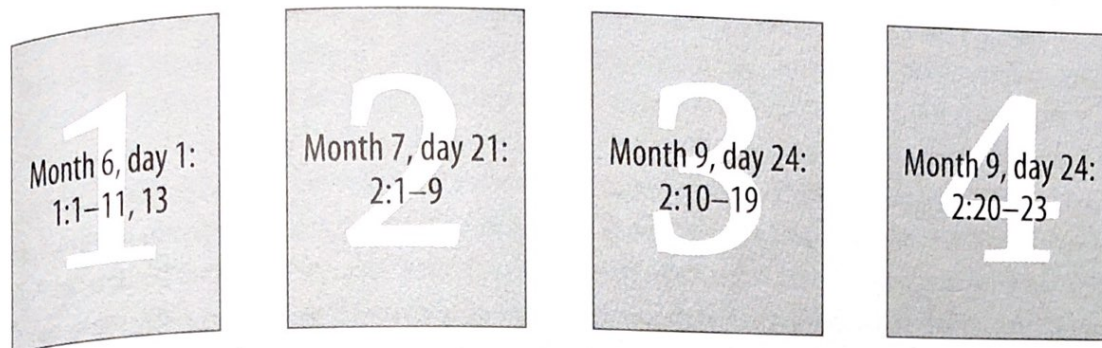


Figure 13.2. Haggai's Oracles

The first of the oracles challenges the attitudes just mentioned above. The people could always find a reason to say “The time hasn’t come” to work on the temple (1:2). Perhaps one primary reason was the harsh economic conditions (1:6, 9), including, or perhaps stemming from, a drought (1:10, 11). Haggai explains that the cause of the drought and bad economy is the attitude of the people, putting their own interests above the LORD’s interest (rebuilding the temple).

Haggai is one of only a few Hebrew prophets that may be regarded as “successful” in the sense that the people listen and respond (1:12–15), kick-starting the temple project that had been dormant for sixteen years. The prophet Zechariah also works during this era to encourage the rebuilding of the temple. He initially warns the people that they are moving back in the direction of their ancestors (Zech 1:1–6). Except for a passionate oracle in 8:1–23, the Book of Zechariah is a tough nut to crack: eight vision reports in 1:7–6:8, another difficult text in 6:9–15, and then chapters 9–14 appear to address a different time period and different interests.

The prophets, however, succeeds in getting the people back to work on the temple, and keeping them on the job when they become discouraged (see Haggai 2:1–9). Consequently, after a sixteen-year layoff, once back on the job, the people complete the work in the sixth year of Darius (Ezra 6:15), four years after Haggai first spoke on behalf of the LORD (Haggai 1:1). The new temple, what scholars and interpreters refer to as the “**Second Temple**,” is dedicated with a joy-filled celebration (Ezra 6:16–18). One crucial element to life back in Jerusalem has been restored. Nehemiah will tackle the second.

Project II : The Walls of Jerusalem

Nehemiah was one of many exiles whose family had chosen not to return to Jerusalem with any of the early waves. Instead, Nehemiah had worked his way to an important position in the Persian government: cupbearer to the king (Neh 2:1). His story begins at the winter palace of Susa in

the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (ca. 445 BCE), approximately seventy years after the temple was rebuilt, and one hundred and forty years since Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem (586 BCE).²

Nehemiah's story is plain enough that it requires no rehearsal in this chapter. Instead, we will focus our attention on key features in the narrative. For example, when Nehemiah hears the news about the condition of Jerusalem, especially its walls and gates, he breaks into tears as if he never knew about the conquest (but he had to have known)—weeping, mourning, and praying for days (1:4). In response to the news, he confesses the sins of the people of the LORD—his people, and so his sin too: sins “which we have committed against you. Both I and my family have sinned. We have wronged you greatly” (1:6–7). Then, Nehemiah takes his life in his own hands by allowing himself to appear sad in the presence of the king; *it is a dangerous thing to rain on the king's parade—he could lose his head over this*, a risk he recognizes when he prays to the LORD for success “in the presence of this man” (1:11). No one in Jerusalem or in the province of Judah, or anyone else in the Diaspora, has the level of concern for Jerusalem, its walls, and its people as does Nehemiah—a man who is a thousand miles away and 140 years after the event. How are we to account for this feature of the story?

Second, prayer plays an important role in Nehemiah's story—not just the presence of prayer, but its variety:

- Long prayers that speak of Israel's history: 1:5–11, 9:5–37
- An unspoken prayer of the heart, content not reported: 2:4 (in the presence of the king)
- A report of prayer in a certain circumstance, but without reporting the content: 4:9 (regarding the threat of opponents)
- Words directed to God in the narrative, but not identified as prayer: 4:4–5 (about enemies); 6:9 (for strength against opposition); 6:14 (about enemies); 5:19, 13:14, 22, 29, 31 (“Remember what I have . . .”)

It is easy to conclude that prayer was an important part of Nehemiah's life and the story of rebuilding the walls. We also see that prayer takes more than one form: sometimes spoken words, sometimes silent prayers of the heart, and sometimes just a sentence or two tossed toward heaven. To push a little further into these prayers, Nehemiah prays most often (in one form or another) when he faces some form of opposition (2:4, 4:4–5, 4:9, 6:9, 6:14); and in this situation, he often prays that the LORD will remember his efforts to do the right thing when it was not easy (5:19; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). The longest prayer is ultimately a prayer of confession, retelling Israel's story as a means of acknowledging “our” consistent failures to be what the LORD called “us” to be.

A third motif, primarily present in the chapters that recount building the wall, is opposition and how Nehemiah deals with potential or real threats (outlined in Table 13:2, below). It begins in Susa with Nehemiah's concern for the reaction of the king; he prays and he has already thought

²Difficult chronological problems exist in the order and dating of Nehemiah (rebuilding walls) and Zerubbabel (rebuilding the temple). I take a common viewpoint here, but recognize that other strong options exist. See “For Further Reading” at the end of this chapter.

through a possible plan for the project so that he is ready when the king asks, "What is it you need?" (2:4). In the same way, when Nehemiah arrives at Jerusalem, he takes three nights to study the problem alone, before he begins calling people to the work (2:11–18).

Prayer and strategic planning are also Nehemiah's responses to the direct threats to stop the construction by attacks on the workers: "So we prayed to our God and set a guard as protection against them day and night" (4:8). And as the threats against the people intensify (4:10–12), so does the strategic planning (4:13–23). The same is true when the threats are against Nehemiah. When enemies try to draw Nehemiah away from the work to kill him (6:1–5), or try to discredit him by false accusations (6:6–7), Nehemiah exercises discernment: he refuses to be lured into the trap or react to their slander, and he prays for God's strength (6:8–9). Even when the threat comes from within, when a person who should be supportive of the work tries to trap Nehemiah in a compromising situation (taking refuge inside the temple, 6:10), Nehemiah sees through the trap (6:11–13) and prays (6:14).

Prayer is obviously important to Nehemiah, but prayer alone is not enough. Nehemiah prays *and* he does his own work of strategic planning, making himself fully aware of all the facts before he acts. He does not pray and leave everything up to God—he prepares himself and he goes to work. Nor does Nehemiah try to do anything without prayer. Too often believers do one or the other, but not both. Prayer without our best efforts is unlikely to succeed, just as our best efforts without prayer are apt to fail.

Finally, Nehemiah also faces internal opposition: first, not everyone is willing to help work (3:5); second, financial pressures and oppressive practices by the rich against the poor threaten to shut the project down (ch. 5); and third, some insiders are connected to the external opponents by marriage and give the opponents inside information about Nehemiah's actions and plans (6:17–18). And yet, despite the opposition, both internal and external, Nehemiah keeps the work moving ahead. He ignores those who will not help, fights against—and resolves—oppressive financial practices, recognizes who he cannot trust, and ignores threatening letters. Nehemiah is a man who knows the task that God has given him to do, so he will not allow anything or anyone to stop him. He has a rare trait that we call *conviction*.

And so the wall is finished—in *fifty-two days* (6:15), after waiting for 140 years. *Amazing and sad*. Amazing that the people came together and did the work in only fifty-two days; sad because Jerusalem's walls have been in a state of disrepair for all these years without anyone stepping out to do something. Nonetheless, two of the three things destroyed in the conquest have now been rebuilt: the temple and the city walls. The third—the last, most difficult, and most important—is *the people*.

OPPOSITION TO THE WALLS

1. Verbal assaults (2:19, 4:1–3)
2. Threat of physical attack (4:7–8, 11–12)
3. Take out the leader:
 - ☒ Attempted assassination (6:1–4)
 - ☒ Attempted false accusations (6:5–9)
 - ☒ Attempted character assassination (6:10–14)

Table 13.2. Opposition to Building the Walls

Texts in Conversation

After the revival of Nehemiah 8–10, we come upon a story that takes us back to the “ban” of the DH. This time, however, the key point is not total annihilation, but the prohibition of marriage to anyone outside the lines of Israel (Deut 7:3; Josh 23:12–13). Of course, just who constitutes the people of God is a hot-button topic for Ezra, Nehemiah, and the community returned from exile. In Joshua’s time, identity was fairly easy: an Israelite was a hereditary descendant of one of the tribes. Now, in the **post-exilic** community, identity begins to be determined by Torah obedience, not ethnicity (or so I thought).

Nehemiah 13 reports a time when Nehemiah becomes aware of Jews in the province of Judah marrying foreigners: Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab (13:23). And Nehemiah goes a bit, well, you decide . . . “So I scolded them and cursed them, and beat some of them, and pulled out their hair” (13:25). He reminds them that this practice led Solomon into sin and Israel to go down a long slippery slope that led to the exile. So he makes them swear that they will not obtain wives for their sons or give their daughters to anyone who is a foreigner.

The same issue comes up in Ezra 9–10 and, though hard to believe, makes Nehemiah’s response look like a slap on the wrist. Upon Ezra’s arrival to Jerusalem, the leaders report to Ezra the problem of marriage with Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites (9:1–2). Ezra tears his robe, pulls his hair, and sits down “in shock” (9:3–4). He prays that evening, ashamed that the LORD has given them another chance and they are already doing what started the whole problem before (9:5–15). During his prayer, a large crowd gathers and an idea is hatched to deal with the problem: all the men would “send away” (divorce) their foreign wives, sending them and any children they may have away with them (10:2–3). Ezra seizes the moment and makes the men swear to the deal (10:5). To make a longer story come to an end: they do it. Ezra leads a task-force to enforce the policy: men divorce their wives and send them away, including their children (10:7–14).

We need to be careful not to read twenty-first century family values and practices into what is happening in these books. Even so, it will be difficult for anyone who has been touched by divorce not to react in horror. We could stop here and begin asking our questions, not the least being, *Is this the right thing to do? Does God approve? Do two wrongs make a right?* But before we begin a vigorous discussion, we need to include other voices from Scripture. So, to begin, read the short book of Ruth—a story about a family who escapes famine in Bethlehem by moving to Moab, where both sons marry Moabite women. After the father and both sons die, Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth, return to Bethlehem. You can read the rest of the story and be ready for discussion. You also need to read the story of Esther, a voice from the exile—a Jewish woman who does what she must in order to save all Jewish people, including marry the Persian king (not an Israelite), and having a relative who says, “Maybe it

was for a moment like this that you came to be part of the royal family" (Esther 4:14). Once you have read these stories, return to the following "starter" discussion questions:

1. What attitudes do each of the texts have toward marriage to non-Jews?
2. Does God approve of the decision made in Ezra?
3. Do you give stronger weight to any one, or perhaps more, of the texts? If so, why?
4. If you do not give stronger weight to any of the texts, how do you resolve the different voices?

Now, continue the discussion: What questions do these texts raise for you?

Project III: Rebuilding Life in Jerusalem

During the conquest of 586 BCE, Babylon killed high-ranking political officials, religious leaders (e.g., the high priest), and military commanders (2 Kgs 25:18–21). They exiled others left in the city (25:11) and left only the poorest of the poor to tend the land (25:12). Rebuilding life in Jerusalem is a far more complex issue than rebuilding the temple or city walls, if, for no other reason, than not everyone has the same experience during, or after, the conquest. Consequently, in this section, our analysis is forced into generalities rather than specifics.

Restoring or rebuilding life in Jerusalem begins with the physical return of the former Judeans to Jerusalem. The first wave of residents return with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2) and others come with Ezra (7:1–10 and 7:11–8:36). And although not documented in the biblical text, we can be certain that other waves of people continue to come at other times and from other places (e.g., Neh 2:7–11). During this time, as more and more people come back, an issue concerning leadership in the land develops. As we recall, Babylon exiled the leaders—the upper crust of Israelite society—and they left the poor behind to tend the land. Of course, those left behind did not wait fifty years for new leadership; they developed and recognized their own leaders. But when those exiled return, well—they are used to being the leaders and assume they will be leaders in the old homeland, an assumption not shared by those who have become leaders in their absence. But as we read Ezra and Nehemiah, we can see that those who return are the ones winning this debate and taking key leadership positions. By the time the walls are finished, however, few of those who return live in the city of Jerusalem (Neh 7:4). Most live in their own towns and villages outside of Jerusalem (7:6).

So a second step in restoring life in Jerusalem, beyond bringing people back to the land, was a lottery to select one out of every ten in the province who will move into Jerusalem (see 11:1–12:26). But even when Jerusalem is repopulated, there is still more to be done—a third step of restoring life at a deeper and more significant level. Rebuilding life with God—a *revival*. This is the story of Nehemiah 8–10.

What creates new life with God? It is possible that if we asked ten different people to provide an answer, we would receive ten different answers. In our own era, based on what most churches emphasize in their Sunday assemblies, our answer to what creates new life with God would most likely include dynamic worship with good music, a young “with-it” or stylish pastor/preacher who communicates with an interesting conversational style, and other common practices such as discipleship/small groups, serious Bible study, and prayer.

In the revival of Ezra/Nehemiah, the renewal of life with God begins with the Word of God. As the people gather in Jerusalem, Ezra brings out “the Instruction scroll from Moses” (8:1; “the book of the **Law of Moses**” NRSV, the first time this phrase is used in Scripture). When Ezra opens the scroll, all the people stand up (8:5) and he reads “to men and women and anyone who could understand what they heard” (8:2). He also reads for a long time—from early morning to mid-day with everyone listening attentively (8:3). Levites mix in with the crowd so that if someone has trouble understanding what Ezra reads, the Levites can help explain what the text means (8:7–8). While Ezra continues to read from the scroll every day for seven days (8:18), on the second day, Ezra also appears to give a more in-depth study of Scripture to leaders of families, priests, and Levites. As they study, they learn about the Festival of Booths, which was to be observed during the seventh month—and it was the seventh month (7:73b–8:2). So they immediately spread the word for what the people should do to observe the Festival (8:13–17).

Reconstructing the lives of the people toward life with God begins with hearing the Word of God. And although sorrow is a natural reaction when a person first learns God’s way for his or her life, especially when that person has not been obedient (8:9–11), the spiritual leaders—Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites—encourage the people not to weep or be sad when they hear God’s Word (8:9), but to celebrate with good food and drink, sharing with those who do not have anything ready or with them (8:10). The occasion of hearing and understanding the Word of God with the intent to obey is reason for a party—a celebration (8:11–12).

Just as the LORD’s instruction called for celebration (8:10), on the twenty-fourth day of the same seventh month, it also called for a day self-denial, confession, worship, and hearing the Word of the LORD (9:1–3). On this day, Ezra³ offers the longest recorded prayer in the Bible (outside the Book of Psalms), which is outlined below in Table 13:3. The first major section of his prayer is a rehearsal of the LORD’s faithfulness to Israel, and Israel’s unfaithfulness to the LORD (9:9–31). The second section then appeals for mercy (9:32–37). At this point, the formal prayer turns into a covenant renewal ceremony, with family leaders signing a document that pledges their allegiance to the LORD (9:38–10:39).

³The Hebrew text lacks the phrase “And Ezra said” at the beginning of 9:6; the Greek text, however, includes these words.

EZRA'S PRAYER	
What <i>The LORD</i> has done or does:	Israel's response:
You delivered Israel from Egypt (9:9–11)	
You guided Israel through the wilderness (9:12)	
You made a covenant with us at Sinai (9:13–14)	
You fed us manna and provided water from the rock (9:15)	
	We did not obey, did not remember the LORD's miracles, wanted to return to Egypt (9:16–17)
You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love (9:17)	
	We cast an image of a calf to worship (9:18)
You did not forsake them, but led them, fed them, and gave them water for forty years (9:19–21)	
The conquest of a good land and descendants like the stars of heaven (9:23–25)	
	Disobedient: we killed your prophets (9:26)
You handed them over to their enemies, but when they cried out you rescued them—over and over again (9:27–28)	
You warned them in order to turn them back (9:29)	
	But we did not obey but were stubborn and turned away from you (9:29)
You were patient with them many years: you warned them through your prophets, in your mercy you would not destroy them (9:30)	
	We would not listen (9:30)
An appeal to God for mercy:	
You, LORD—please do not overlook all the hardship that has come upon us since the time of Assyria until today (9:31–32)	
You have been just (9:33)	
	We have not kept the covenant (9:33–34)
Even with all the good things you gave (9:35)	
	We did not serve you (9:35)
	So now—we are slaves in the land you gave our ancestors; the rich yield of the land goes to the kings you set over us because of our sins (9:36–37)
	We are in great distress (9:37)

Table 13.3. Ezra's Prayer

Conclusion

While many biblical books from the Old Testament have not yet been set in the final form that we see in our Bibles, the storyline cast by the Old Testament is very near its end. The prophet Malachi will address a post-exilic audience during the Persian era, but its specific date is difficult to determine. Two other books, Esther and Daniel, meet fiercely divided opinions over the date of their authorship and historicity. Many scholars regard the stories in the Book of Daniel and Esther as fictitious legends, not historical events. Some identify the date of composition for Daniel 7–12 as happening during the era of the persecution of Jews during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (168–164 BCE), with chapters 1–6 possibly coming from an earlier time during the post-exilic Persian era. Some suggest that Esther originates in the very late Persian era or early Hellenistic period. Others, however, not only date each book according to the events described in the texts, but accept each as reporting factual history: Daniel (as a whole) during the lifetime of its namesake in the Babylonian exile, and Esther earlier in the Persian era (Ahasuerus = either Xerxes I or Artaxerxes I or II; between 486–358 BCE).

We want to close this chapter with an issue we raised earlier: how to identify the LORD's people, without the benefit of dedicated lands or national allegiance. The course of decisions in the post-exilic era came to recognize who belonged and who did not based on their obedience to Torah. So, no matter where a person might live, in the Diaspora or back in the land, Torah obedience determined their true identity. Later, as they develop their unique shape and then encounter and fight against Hellenism, this religious group will be called *Judaism* and individual members called *Jews*. Consequently, to speak of Jews prior to the exile is **anachronistic**; before the exile, those who followed the LORD and Torah were Israelites. While a study of Judaism is an excellent topic, it moves far beyond the historical confines of this introduction.

sages and Singers

Israel's Wisdom and Lyrical Literature

14



We have reached the narrative end of the Old Testament, as told by the Books of Genesis through Ezra, into which we may fit the origins of the prophetic texts of Isaiah through Malachi. Now, the only genres we have yet to explore are the **lyrical** books (Psalms, Song of Songs, and Lamentations) and the various voices of the **sages** (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job). Most of the songs in Psalms and Song of Songs are ahistorical—lacking any tether to Israel's history (other than their superscriptions, e.g., Ps 13, 88, 139)—while several notable exceptions interlock the Book of Psalms within Israel's walk with God (e.g., 2, 89, 136). Here we will momentarily set the psalms aside for full treatment in our next and final chapter.

The Wisdom Books

The wisdom books break all ties to Israel's story—with the lone exception of two or three verses out of the whole—and take on a universal perspective and flavor. These books are tangible proof that more than one way of understanding life with God existed in Israel. In fact, we overhear a conversation in the Book of Jeremiah that affirms the existence of at least three perspectives or orthodoxies: the priests, the prophets, and the sages (18:18). A brief reconsideration of the priests and prophets will be a helpful starting point for introducing the sages.

Priests, along with Levites, were the keepers of **Torah** and the temple. Their perspective on life with God valued worship, sacrifice, purity, and a life of holiness. For direction in all these matters, they

READING ASSIGNMENTS:

PROVERBS 1–9

JOB 1–2, 3–5, 38–42

ECCLESIASTES 1–3, 11–12

SONG OF SONGS 1–8

(OR 1–2, 4–5, 8)

LAMENTATIONS 1–5 (OR 3)

KEY TERMS

Acrostic: a Hebrew poem that begins each line with the next letter of the alphabet, from the first letter (*aleph*) to the last (*tav*)

Book of the Twelve: the books of the Hebrew Bible, elsewhere recognized as the minor prophets

Former Prophets: the Books of Joshua through 2 Kings, equivalent to the DH

Holiness Code: instruction for living in God's presence, found in Leviticus 16–26

Latter Prophets: the Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Book of the Twelve

Lyrical: song or songlike poetry

Sage: a wise person

Orthodoxy/Orthodoxies: adherence to accepted religious norms, holding a correct view of life with God

Torah: the Books of Genesis through Deuteronomy

Wasf: a love poem that describes the lover's body from head to feet or feet to head, sometimes concluding on an object of great interest