

October–November 2021

Historical Setting for Jeremiah and Ezekiel

For a full introduction to the historical situation at the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, I would recommend that you consult the introduction to those prophets in any good study bible. The story is complex and full of names that are often difficult for us to keep straight. It is also riveting. On the international stage, the oppressive Assyrian empire was coming to an end, the Egyptians were meddling in Palestine, and the Babylonian empire was overshadowing all. The Jews were restless to overthrow the foreign oppressors and were ripe for rebellion and revolution. Jeremiah tried to dissuade them. But they did not listen. Babylon responded in 597 BC by deporting the royal family, and many of the leading citizens, including Ezekiel, to Babylon. Within ten years an unthinkable catastrophe happened. The Babylonians finally put an end to this rebellious nation. In 587 BC they conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and sent all but a few of the people into exile.

Israel should have ceased to exist as a people. It is remarkable that this was not the end of their story. The prophets were clear: the people were sent into exile because they had broken the covenant. They had oppressed the poor and lowly; their worship of the Lord was external show without an internal reality. They worshiped other gods, which, as Hosea had said, was like adultery. They had presumed in their pride that God would never destroy Jerusalem or the Temple because he dwelt there. As a result, the Lord did abandon the Temple, in which they had placed an almost superstitious trust. Yet in spite of it all, God was going to be faithful to his covenant and to his promises.

Because of this, the prophets also promised that the exile would end one day, and a remnant would return. The prophets used a complex set of images, symbols, metaphors, and promises to describe what the end of exile would be like. The recurring themes included a return of a remnant to the land, the rebuilding of their cities, the rebuilding of the Temple. The promises included the belief that one day the glory of the Lord would again fill the Temple. The promises foretold the return of David as their king, the defeat of their enemies, the restoration of creation itself. That day would be so incredible that it could only be described with the most remarkable of metaphors, like the cure of an incurable wound, the restoration of virginity once lost, or a valley of dry bones coming back to life when the Spirit of the Lord blew breath into them.

Those metaphors became prophetic descriptions of the most central of all human events, the Incarnation. The long-awaited end of exile, the day of the Lord dawned in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. With Jesus' triumphant arrival into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Yahweh would return to Jerusalem—not into a physical temple building, but **as** the New Temple. It would be the return of David's son as king. And he was to mount the most unlikely throne of all time—the cross. At the last supper he would institute the new covenant. All the wonderful restoration metaphors would be fulfilled in Jesus' resurrection, and indeed, in our own resurrection one day.