

EXILE AND BEYOND—1

The event of the exile

The siege and destruction of Jerusalem and deporting of the people of Judah 586 BC: **2 Kings 24:20b–25:3, 8–12**.

An earlier wave 597 BC: **2 Kings 24:10–17**. The young Ezekiel, later a prophet, was included in this deportation. Note v. 13 ‘as the LORD had foretold’—to which we shall return.

Nebuchadnezzar made an earlier incursion into Judah in 605 BC, after the defeat of Egypt at the battle of Carchemish, at which time Daniel and others were taken to Babylon (see 2 Kings 24:1; 2 Chronicles 36:6; Daniel 1:1).

All this had to do with the southern kingdom of Judah, which was all that was left of the whole nation of Israel at that time. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been defeated and taken into exile 135 years earlier in 721 BC: **2 Kings 17:1–6, 24**.

The human cost of the exile

Rather than just the bare historical facts, consider the horrific human cost of the exile: **2 Chronicles 36:17; Lamentations 1:1–6; 2:11–12, 20–21**. The biblical writers, and the Scriptures they have given us, do not balk at recording the worst that human beings do to each other.

The place of the exile in the biblical record

There is a saying, ‘History is written by the victors’. Victors put a particular slant on their telling of history which highlights the greatness and success of their own people (e.g. earlier histories of the pioneer ‘settlement’ and ‘exploration’ of Australia, before we began hearing more from the defeated first nations peoples of this land). It is remarkable that Israel wrote its history as that of a defeated people, and that this has lasted.

Israel did have its victories. Particularly the exodus under Moses c. 1500 BC: the defeat of Egypt and the release of the Israelite slaves, and their conquest of Canaan. This occupies a prominent position in the biblical record (the books Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua), and is often harked back to (e.g. Isaiah 63:7–14, 800 years later)—though invariably as the sovereign action of God, not of a strong and deserving people.

It could be argued that the exile holds an even more prominent and central place in the biblical record than does the exodus. We will see that the exile was foreshadowed in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. It is the climatic end of the books of Kings and Chronicles. Ezra and Nehemiah depict its aftermath. The ‘major’ prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel relate directly to the exile: Isaiah in the lead-up to it, in anticipation of its impact and meaning (Isaiah was there when the rot set in—see 2 Kings 16:1–9; Isaiah 7; Isaiah was in Jerusalem at the time of the exile of the northern kingdom of Israel, and was shown that Babylon would bring Jerusalem to devastation; see Isaiah 36–39). Jeremiah was in Jerusalem, Daniel and Ezekiel (see Ezekiel 8–11, 24, 33:21–22) in Babylon, at the actual time of the exile, and Esther in its continuation. The ‘minor’ prophets are classified as being either pre-exilic (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah—many of them dealing with issues that led to the exile) and post-exilic (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi—addressing recovery and residual issues).

Thus the exile is a central milestone in the biblical account of God’s dealings with God’s people: **Matthew 1:17**.

God and the exile

Even more remarkable is the conviction that the exile—so devastating to Israel—was the action of Israel's God: **2 Chronicles 36:15–20**; **2 Kings 17:7–23** (Israel); **21:10–15** (Judah, in the time of Manasseh 697–642 BC—not even the later reforms of his grandson Josiah 640–609 could forestall this). See also, very clearly, **Lamentations 2:1–9**; **3:1–18** (then it goes on to speak of the God's 'steadfast love' and 'mercies' that are 'new every morning').

This testifies also that God's own self does not balk at direct personal involvement with the worst of human situations.

Though it may appear that in this action God has broken His covenant relationship with Israel—and in a sense this has happened, on both sides: **Jeremiah 31:32**; **Zechariah 11:10**—God is in fact upholding God's own part according to the actual terms of the covenant: **Leviticus 26:27–33**; **Deuteronomy 28:58–59, 63–66**; **29:22–28**. So convinced was Moses that the people's disobedience would end in this result that he taught the people a song about it, and got them to learn it off by heart: **Deuteronomy 31:27–30**; **32:21–22**. This is clearly an event that disrupts the creation to its very heart.

We know also that this is not the end: **Deuteronomy 30:1–5**; **Leviticus 26:34, 40–45**. See also Ezekiel 36–37; Isaiah 40. Jeremiah was given a specific timeline: **Jeremiah 30:1–3**; **29:10–11**; **25:11–12**. Sure enough, that is what happens: **2 Chronicles 36:20–23**. That was in 538 BC. Not exactly seventy years after 586 (only 48 years) or 597 (59 years) or 605 (67—getting close). Maybe from Babylon's defeat of Nineveh 612 to the fall of Babylon 539 (73 years), or from the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem 586 to its rebuilding 515 (71 years)? Perhaps it is a symbolic or rough round number. Daniel prays to God with regard to Jeremiah's prophecy (a beautiful prayer regarding the exile) and is given an alternative interpretation: **Daniel 9:1–2, 20–24**. Seventy weeks of years (490 years), again a symbolic round number (compare Galatians 4:4), brings us closer to the time of Christ.

This makes the exile not just an Old Testament theme, but a New Testament theme as well—as we shall see in the next session.