

Far away in Babylon

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A. Introduction

1. 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in the midst of it...How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?' (Psalm 137:1-2,4).
2. Towards the end of the era of kings, Judah was caught in a nutcracker between Egypt and Babylon and there were Jerusalem politicians favouring one side or the other. Babylon broke the combined Assyrian and Egyptian power at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC in accord with Nahum's prophecy. Judah became a client state. The pro-Egyptian party rebelled and Jehoiakim was deported in 605.
3. Further rebellion led to the destruction of Judah as an independent state. In 587/6 Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, destroyed the walls of Jerusalem and razed the Temple to the ground. Many died by famine and the sword, and all the survivors who possessed status or skill were deported to Babylon, 800 miles across the Arabian desert.
4. The Judah of David and Solomon, the world centre of monotheism, was ruined beyond measure and was reduced to the status of a rural serfdom to a pagan empire. The Kingdom was over and the times of the Gentiles begun. Judah would not be a fully independent state again until 1948, and then it would be secular and without a king – until Jesus returns!
5. Following the fall of Jerusalem, governor Gedaliah was assassinated and many fled to Egypt, forcing Jeremiah to accompany them.
6. The prophets rightly saw this as the judgement of God upon his people because of their stubborn refusal to turn from their sins of idolatry. The warning had long been given.
 - a. Moses had long ago written that disobedience to the covenant would lead to captivity (Leviticus 26:27-35).
 - b. Jeremiah had prophesied the imminence of judgement, pleading with the people to repent (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 27:22).
 - c. The resurgent Babylonian empire became the instrument of God's judgement as part of a divine process of redefining the politics of the Middle East (2 Chronicles 36:20-21).

D. Seventy years of Sabbaths 586–516

1. The Sabbath (to cease) concept is very important in the Bible, and neglect of its observation always brings eventual judgement. God's people had broken the Sabbath ordinance for many years (see Isaiah 58:13-14) and in so doing had betrayed the stewardship trust God

had given them: look after the land and the land will look after you. The period of captivity was a sentence to repay the debt owed to the land.

2. There are three significant aspects to the Sabbath concept.
 - a. A Creation command for humanity. It expresses a godly trust for provision, and an appreciation of creation, and it ensures a renewal of vitality (Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 31:17).
 - b. A Mosaic command to the Israelites. This is the legal day set apart for God and for the people's blessing (Exodus 31:13-17; Deuteronomy 5:12-14). It was never intended to degenerate into a series of religious rules (Mark 2:27).
 - c. The Christian heart experience. This is the state of peaceful faith in the complete saving work of Christ (Hebrews 4:4-11). This Sabbath is the true *shalom*.
3. Jeremiah prophesied the length of the captivity and urged the exiles to settle down for 70 years and make a life for themselves (Jeremiah 29:4-11).

C. The dream-master and the mystic visionary

1. Two prophets dominate the captivity, proving that the word of the Lord is not confined to the geography of God's people in Judah.
2. Daniel is the dream-master, a true believer serving in the occult political courts of Babylon – Daniel 2:27-28. He was deported in 605 BC. Some of his prophecies still influence our culture.
 - a. The fiery furnace – Daniel 3.
 - b. The king cracks up – Daniel 4.
 - c. The writing on the wall – Daniel 5.
 - d. In the lion's den – Daniel 6.
 - e. Empires under God – Daniel 7-8.
 - f. Seventy weeks of years – Daniel 9:24-27.
 - g. Daniel also prophesies far into the future, anticipating the Greek and Roman empires and the triumph of Christ over these empires.
 - h. He will be the prophetic trigger for the restoration of Israel.
3. Ezekiel is the mystic visionary who served among the people who lived by the River Chebar. He was deported in 597 BC. His visionary interpretation of historical events in terms of the heavenly places makes them timelessly applicable. He makes great use of prophetic drama and shocking imagery. He is also a prophet of restoration and hope.
 - a. Wheels within wheels – Ezekiel 1

- b. The four signs – Ezekiel 4-5
- c. The glory departs – Ezekiel 10
- d. The parable of the two prostitutes – Ezekiel 16 & 22
- e. A silent grief – Ezekiel 24
- f. The watchman on the wall – Ezekiel 33
- g. The valley of dry bones – Ezekiel 37
- h. The spiritual temple – Ezekiel 40-48

D. The Dispersion (Diaspora)

1. In wrath, God still remembers mercy. The captivity was painful, but it finally purified the people of God from fertility-cult worship. Shocked by the violence of God, shamed by the knowledge that they alone of all nations had forsaken their God, in exile they repented fully and became from then on faithful custodians of the Law and the promises.
2. The deportation of Israel by the Assyrians (722 BC) and of Judah by the Babylonians (605, 597, 587) and the flight of rebels to Egypt created communities of Jewish exiles who learned how to retain their faith and culture in a pagan world. Those who remained in Babylon became known in time as 'the Jews of the dispersion'. These were the 'scattered seed' of Abraham, taking their monotheism and morality all over the ancient world. Without land or temple, they discovered that their faith was transportable and could survive in any culture. God was, after all, the God of the whole earth!
3. One of the consequences of this was the translation of the Torah into Greek. This was followed by the rest of the Old Testament and became known as the Septuagint (based on a legend that 70 or 72 Jewish scholars were locked in separate rooms and all came up with the same translation). It is often referred to as the LXX and the translation began in Alexandria around 250 BC and was completed by 132 BC. It's impact was the equivalent of translating the Bible from Latin into English.
4. A new order arose during the captivity. These were the scribes, rabbinic teachers of the Word of God. They produced the Mishna (oral law) and the Gemara (accepted traditions) which were added to the Talmud.
5. The identity of the Diaspora centred on the synagogue (meeting place) where they worshipped God and read and expounded the Law. Many Gentiles became proselytes (God-fearers) because of the impressive lifestyle of the Diaspora. A New Testament example is Cornelius at Caesarea (Acts 10:1-8).
6. These colonies paved the way for the universal spread of Christianity. The apostles usually began their ministry in the synagogues, winning converts that seeded new churches. Both Peter and James write to Christians as 'the Dispersion', recognising a similar phenomenon to the post-captivity period taking place—the New-Covenant seed of Abraham was being cast all across the world.