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Lesson 1

Historical Setting of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther

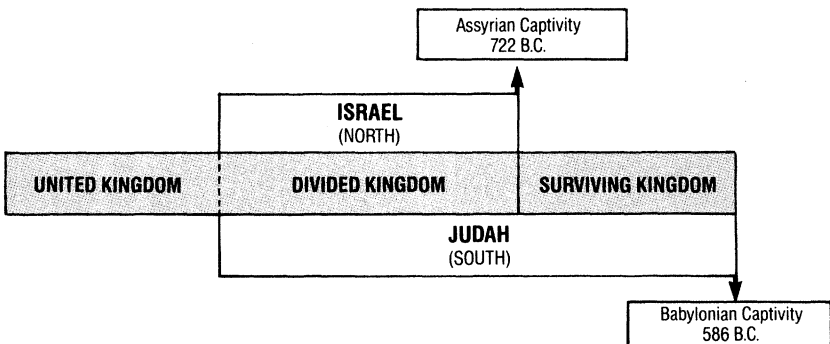
A deeper appreciation and understanding of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are gained from their historical setting. This lesson therefore is devoted to such a background study. As you read the lesson try to visualize places, persons, and events. Master this first lesson and you will feel more at home with the Bible text of the three books to be studied in the lessons that follow.

I. THE TWO CAPTIVITIES

When we speak of “restoration” in Ezra’s day we are referring to the *return* of God’s people to Canaan *from captivity*. That captivity took place in two stages, which are known as the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities (see Chart C).

THE TWO CAPTIVITIES

Chart C



A. Assyrian Captivity (fall of Samaria, 722 B.C., recorded in 2 Kings 17)

Most of the people and rulers of the ten tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel were deported to Assyria and scattered among the inhabitants there. (Locate Assyria on Chart B.) *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* comments on what happened to these people and their offspring in the years that followed:

The ten tribes taken into captivity, sometimes called the Lost Tribes of Israel, must not be thought of as being absorbed by the peoples among whom they settled. Some undoubtedly were, but many others retained their Israelitish religion and traditions. Some became part of the Jewish dispersion, and others very likely returned with the exiles of Judah who had been carried off by Nebuchadnezzar.¹

B. Babylonian Captivity (fall of Jerusalem, 586 B.C., recorded in 2 Kings 25)

The fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. sealed the fate of the two tribes of the southern kingdom, Judah. Nebuchadnezzar was the captor, and Babylon was the place of exile. Second Kings closes with an account of this tragic event in Judah's history. Read this chapter at this time to appreciate the theme of the restoration books.

Note: Unless otherwise stated, the names "Israel" and "Judah," denoting the chosen people of God, will be used interchangeably throughout this manual.

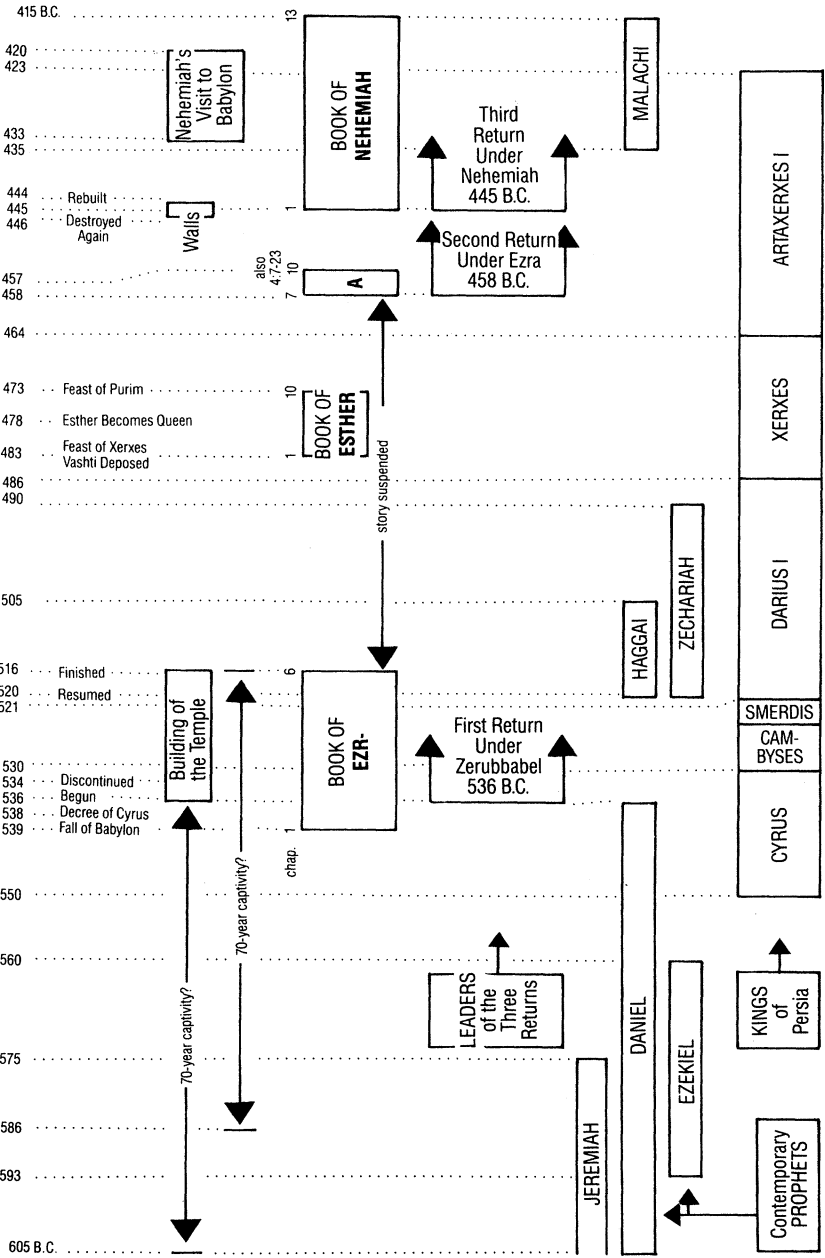
II. DURATION OF THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

Before Judah was taken captive, Jeremiah had prophesied that the duration of exile would be seventy years² (read Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10; 2 Chron. 36:21). The exile began with Nebuchadnezzar's first invasion of Judah in 605 B.C. (2 Chron. 36:2-7) and ended with the first return of the Jews to Canaan in 536 B.C.³ (Ezra 1). See Chart D.⁴

1. Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, p. 147.
2. The number 70 may have been a round number, as is often the case in Scripture.
3. If Jeremiah's prophecy is interpreted from an ecclesiastical standpoint, with the Temple as the key object, then the 70-year period extended from the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C. to the year of completion of its reconstruction, which was 516 B.C.
4. Most of the dates of Chart D are those of John C. Whitcomb's chart in *Old Testament Kings and Prophets*.

Chart D

HISTORICAL SETTING OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH-ESTHER



III. CONTEMPORARY RULERS

The Jews in exile in Babylonia were subject to the kings of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, such as Nebuchadnezzar. When Cyrus king of Persia overthrew Babylon in 539 B.C., the rule of Babylonia was transferred to the Persian Empire. Cyrus's policy of liberation for the exiles in Babylonia brought about the first return of Jewish exiles to the land of their fathers. Observe on Chart D the names of the Persian kings who succeeded Cyrus. The names *Darius* and *Artaxerxes* appear frequently in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (observe this in an exhaustive Bible concordance).

IV. LEADERS OF THE RESTORATION

The three key leaders of the returning Jews were Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Zerubbabel and Nehemiah were appointed by Cyrus and Artaxerxes, respectively, as governors of the Jewish returnees. Ezra was a leading priest of the Jews who not only was leader of the second return but also was a co-worker with Nehemiah on the third. Locate the names of Zerubbabel,⁵ Ezra, and Nehemiah on Chart D. Note also the dates associated with each of the three returns to Judah:

536 B.C.	First return—under Zerubbabel
458 B.C.	Second return—under Ezra
445 B.C.	Third return—under Nehemiah ⁶

The preaching and teaching ministries of three prophets during the restoration period should not be overlooked. Observe on Chart D when Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi ministered. Read Ezra 5:1 and 6:14 for brief but important mention of the influence of Haggai and Zechariah. The name *Malachi* does not appear in these or any other historical books. Observe on the chart that most of Malachi's ministry took place during Nehemiah's return visit to Babylon. Those were years of backsliding on the part of the Jews in Canaan, when the first spiritual zeal had subsided. Hence the message of Malachi was mainly about sin and its judgment.

The prophet Daniel went into exile with the first contingent of Jews in 605 B.C. and was ministering in Babylon in the service of Darius the Mede (who was made king of Babylon by Cyrus; Dan. 5:31; 9:1) when the exiles received permission to return (cf. Dan. 1:21; 6:28). Though aged Daniel did not return to Jerusalem with the exiles, he supported the project in spirit (see Dan. 9:1ff.).

5. Zerubbabel is probably the Sheshbazzar referred to in Ezra 1:8, 11.

6. Fix in your mind the other dates and events cited on the chart.

V. COVERAGE OF THE BIBLE BOOKS

Observe on Chart D the periods covered by each of the three books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Note the suspension of the story of Ezra for a number of years. Note also that Esther chronologically fits between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra, during the reign of Xerxes.

VI. IMPORTANCE OF THE RESTORATION FOR THE JEWS AND THE WORLD

The restoration was important for various reasons. For Israel, it showed that God had not forgotten His promise to Abraham concerning the land of Canaan (e.g., read Gen. 13:15 and note the strength of the phrase “for ever”). Hence the *relocation* of a returning remnant. Hope for a missionary outreach to Gentiles was stirred up in the *revival* of true worship, for a key mission of Israel was to show pagan nations of the world what true worship of the true God was. And then, the restoration was directly related to the life and ministry of the coming Messiah, in the *renewal* of the messianic promises. For example, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Zion were some of the geographical places woven into the promises concerning Jesus’ coming. In about four hundred years Jesus would be born of the seed of David in Bethlehem, *not* in Babylon. The Holy Land of promise, *not* a land of captivity, was where His people would be dwelling when He would come unto them, “his own” (John 1:11).

* * *

SOME REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Name the two captivities of God’s people in Old Testament times.

Identify the captive groups, the captors, dates, and places of exile.

2. Name one major prophet who foretold coming captivity for Judah.

3. How long was the Babylonian captivity?

What are two possible interpretations as to when the period began and ended?

4. How many main returns to Canaan were there?

Name the Jewish leaders and dates of each return.

5. Below are listed the major Persian kings from 550 to 423 B.C. See how much you can recall of Chart D as you record in the space below such things as names of leaders and prophets, events, and the periods covered by the three books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

550 B.C.	530	521	486	464	423 B.C.
CYRUS			DARIUS I	XERXES	ARTAXERXES I

6. What are some of the big truths taught about God and about man from each of the two crucial events in Israel's history shown below? Ponder this carefully, and record your answers:

The Captivities		The Restoration
Truths about God		
Truths about man		