

Lesson 26: Sent into Exile

Previously...

After the global Flood, mankind continued in their rebellion against Yahweh. They insisted on building a Kingdom of Man, represented by the Tower of Babel, based on their own ideas and works. God was left out of the picture entirely. The path they chose would lead to eternal death.

In His love, Yahweh called Abraham and from this one man, God built the nation of Israel. Israel would be the Kingdom of God, a kingdom based on grace where God would save man because people cannot save themselves.

God taught the nation of Israel many lessons on who He is and how they are to relate to Him as His children. God’s intention was that Israel would preserve His history and truth and be a blessing to the whole world.

| Pagan Kingdom of Man Based on WORKS Man would save himself through his own ideas | Kingdom of God Based on GRACE God would save man | | |
|--|---|---------------|--|
|  <p>Babel</p> <p>Egypt</p> <p>Canaan</p> <p>God’s restraining hand on the Pagan Kingdom of Man</p> | Election | | |
| |  God chose Abraham | | |
| |  God saved Israel | | |
| |  God built Israel: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Law ▪ National anthem ▪ Temple worship ▪ Feasts & festivals | | |
| |  Conquest and Settlement in the Promised Land | | |
| |  Kings in Israel: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unified kingdom ▪ Divided kingdom | | |
| | Israel and Judah turned against God: Paganised—unbelievers  Brought in man’s ideas  Made the king and state all-powerful  Worshipped idols | Few believers | |

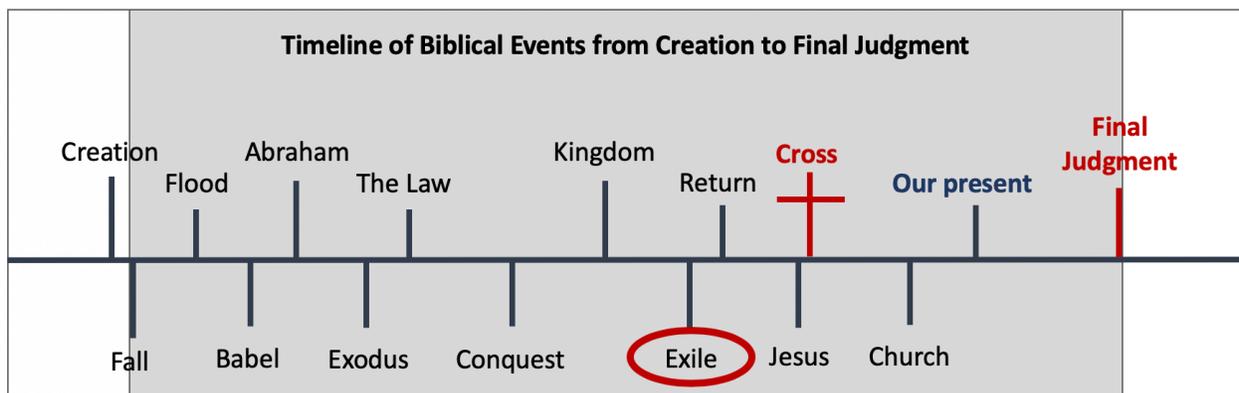
Grey shows paganisation

Unfortunately, the nation of Israel was no different from the rebellious pagans.

- They rebelled against Yahweh from the time God first made them into a nation.
- They rebelled against His Mosaic Law.
- They rebelled when God told them to conquer the promised land of Canaan.
- They rebelled by asking for a human king instead of honouring Yahweh as their king.
- They rebelled by ignoring the prophets God sent to warn them of judgment if they didn't repent.
- They rebelled even when God sent judgment to discipline them.

There were very few believers of God. Most of Israel and Judah turned away from Yahweh. They became paganised, just like the people in the Kingdom of Man.

Finally, just as God had told them, as the last step of the curses for their rebellion, God sent both Israel and Judah into exile.

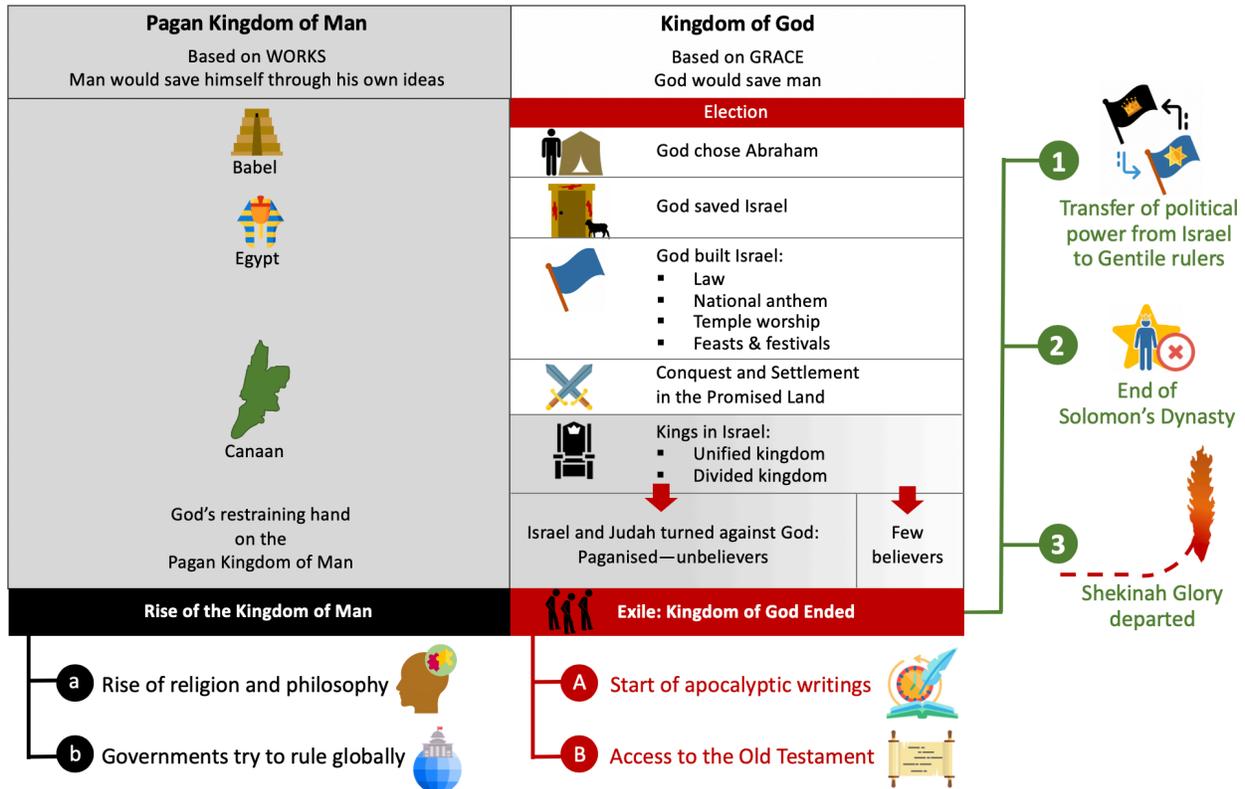


Exile

For years, the nation of Israel had represented the visible Kingdom of God on earth, in contrast to the pagan Kingdom of Man.

But exile marked the end of the Kingdom at this point in history. There was significant change.

- Green circles: Three changes marked the temporary end of the earthly Kingdom of God.
- Red circles: God intervened to help His people in this new season.
- Black circles: The end of the Kingdom of God strengthened the Kingdom of Man.



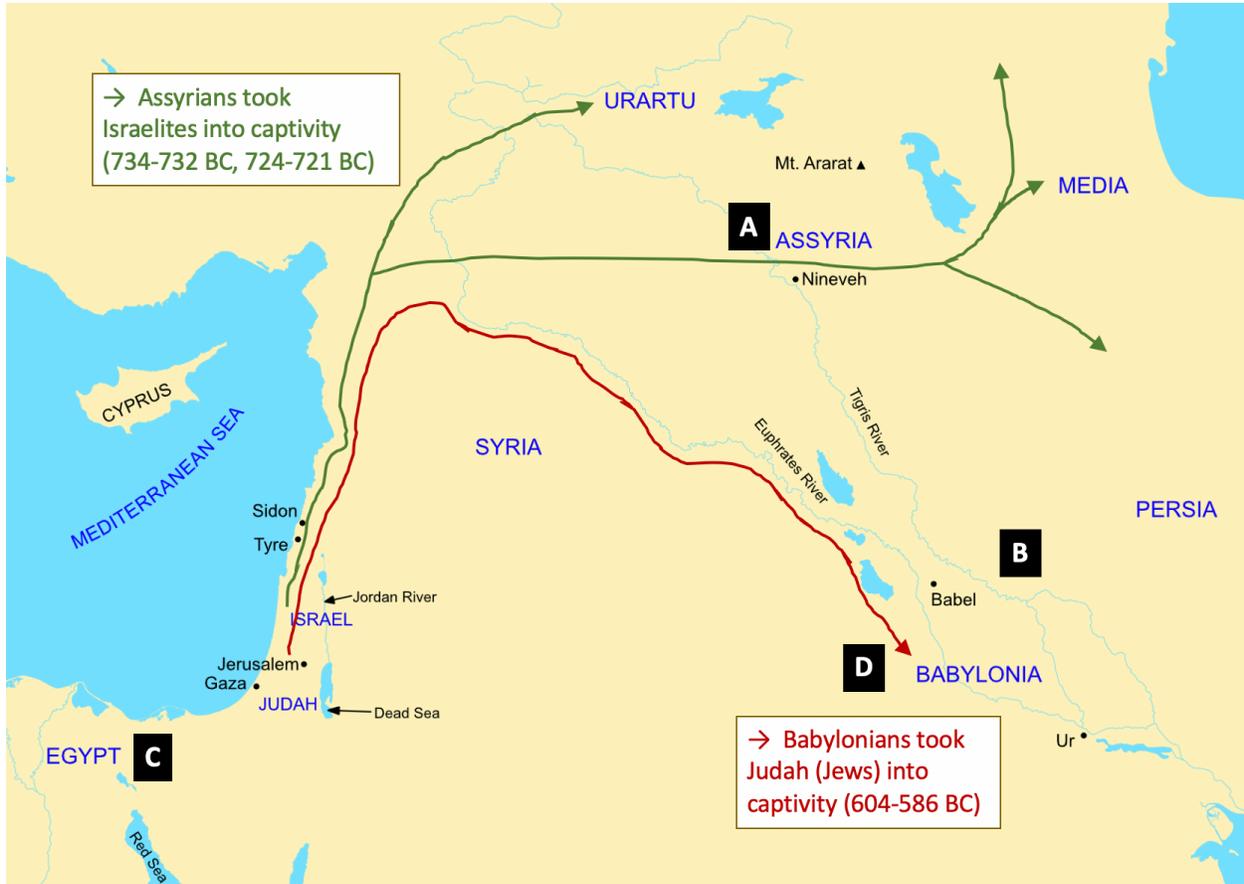
The exile period began in 721 BC when the northern kingdom of Israel was exiled and lasted until 515 BC. How do we know that the Kingdom of God on earth ended temporarily as the exile began? Three major events occurred.





1 Transfer of Political Power from Israel to Gentile Rulers (603 BC)

Prior to 721 BC, the major power was Assyria. They were north of Israel. The other prominent nations were Egypt (south of Israel) and Babylon (east of Israel).



| A | B | C | D |
|--|---|--|---|
| <p>From 734–721 BC, God allowed Assyria to conquer the ten tribes of Israel and send them into captivity in Assyria.</p> | <p>However, in 625 BC, a violent uprising started in southern Assyria. It was led by the Babylonians (also known as the Chaldeans). They decided to battle the Assyrians because the Assyrians were very cruel and violent.</p> | <p>The Assyrians called on their previous enemies, Egypt to come and help them. And they did. However, in 609 BC, the Babylonians defeated both Assyria and Egypt. From three major competing nations, the Babylonians won and they became the controlling superpower of the whole region.</p> | <p>Between 605–603 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon defeated the remaining pockets of resistance and by his second year as king, Nebuchadnezzar became the supreme leader of the ancient world.</p> |

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon didn't trust the Egyptians nor the Jews, so to maintain control and peace, he took the Jews hostage and started exiling them to Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar also started a programme of intentionally destroying Jewish culture (Daniel 1:1–7).

- He transferred Yahweh's temple vessels into pagan temples.

- He started a three-year “re-education” or re-indoctrination programme for all the educated Jewish teenagers who were originally being groomed for future leadership in Judah. The youths would be immersed in Gentile culture and taught the language, literature and principles of Babylon. He wanted to paganise them and spiritually subdue them so they could be controlled and used by the Babylonians.

Early in his political career, Yahweh gave Nebuchadnezzar a vision in a dream which he could not understand. Although he wanted his wise men to interpret the dream, he was very cunning. He knew that the wise men might say rubbish so he demanded that they describe the dream’s details before they interpreted it.

No one could do that, but God told Daniel both the dream and its meaning. And so, Daniel approached the king. Daniel reminded Nebuchadnezzar that it was Yahweh, the God of the Jews, who gave the dream and its interpretation.

Daniel 2:31–45

³¹ “In your vision, Your Majesty, you saw standing before you a huge, shining statue of a man. It was a frightening sight. ³² The head of the statue was made of fine gold. Its chest and arms were silver, its belly and thighs were bronze, ³³ its legs were iron, and its feet were a combination of iron and baked clay.

³⁴ As you watched, a rock was cut from a mountain, but not by human hands. It struck the feet of iron and clay, smashing them to bits.

³⁵ The whole statue was crushed into small pieces of iron, clay, bronze, silver, and gold. Then the wind blew them away without a trace, like chaff on a threshing floor. But the rock that knocked the statue down became a great mountain that covered the whole earth.

³⁶ “That was the dream. Now we will tell the king what it means. ³⁷ Your Majesty, you are the greatest of kings. The God of heaven has given you sovereignty, power, strength, and honor. ³⁸ He has made you the ruler over all the inhabited world and has put even the wild animals and birds under your control. You are the head of gold.

³⁹ “But after your kingdom comes to an end, another kingdom, inferior to yours, will rise to take your place. After that kingdom has fallen, yet a third kingdom, represented by bronze, will rise to rule the world. ⁴⁰ Following that kingdom, there will be a fourth one, as strong as iron. That kingdom will smash and crush all previous empires, just as iron smashes and crushes everything it strikes. ⁴¹ The feet and toes you saw were a combination of iron and baked clay, showing that this kingdom will be divided. Like iron mixed with clay, it will have some of the strength of iron. ⁴² But while some parts of it will be as strong as iron, other parts will be as weak as clay. ⁴³ This mixture of iron and clay also shows that these kingdoms will try to strengthen themselves by forming alliances with each other through intermarriage. But they will not hold together, just as iron and clay do not mix.



44 “During the reigns of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed or conquered. It will crush all these kingdoms into nothingness, and it will stand forever. 45 That is the meaning of the rock cut from the mountain, though not by human hands, that crushed to pieces the statue of iron, bronze, clay, silver, and gold. The great God was showing the king what will happen in the future. The dream is true, and its meaning is certain.”

The dream that Yahweh gave King Nebuchadnezzar was about the transfer of political power from Israel to four Gentile (pagan) kingdoms that would come.

Daniel interpreted a span of history from that day (603 BC) to the final earthly return of the Kingdom of God at the end times. He explained that the statue in the dream represented a series of coming kingdoms. (Daniel 2, 7–8 give details that are summarised here.)

Each successive kingdom is represented by a metal of lesser value but greater strength.

- Metal of lesser value: This shows a decline in value.
- Metal of greater strength: This shows increased military power.



HEAD OF GOLD
Kingdom of Babylon

CHEST & ARMS OF SILVER
Kingdom of Medes and Persians

BELLY & THIGHS OF BRONZE
Kingdom of Ancient Greece

LEGS OF IRON
Kingdom of Ancient Rome

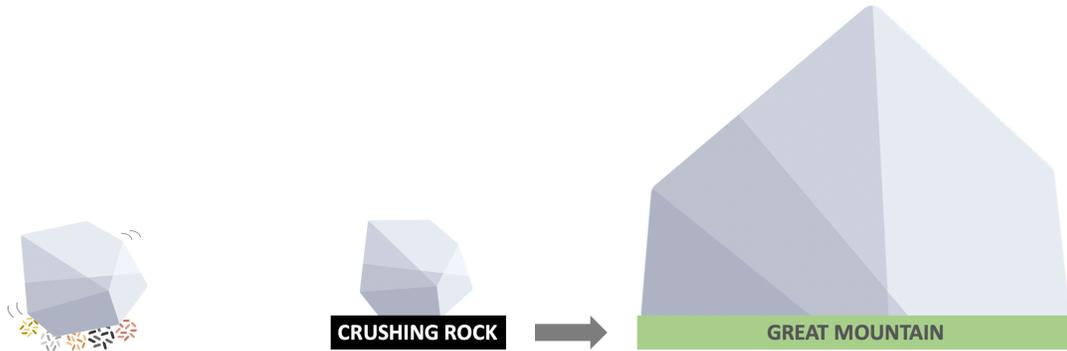
FEET OF IRON AND CLAY
Kingdom of Restored Rome

CRUSHING ROCK
Kingdom of God

However, these kingdoms will finally end when the Kingdom of Man is crushed by a stone. The fact that the stone is not made by human hands means God Himself is doing this.

| Part of the Statue | The Kingdom it Represents | Notes |
|---|---|--|
|  Head of gold | The kingdom of Babylon. | This information pleased Nebuchadnezzar. It was his kingdom which has now passed. |
|  Chest and arms of silver | The co-kingdoms of the Medes and Persians. | This kingdom has passed. (It occurs in the later part of Daniel and the book of Esther.) |
|  Belly and thighs of bronze | The empire of Greece. | This kingdom has passed. It was initially led by Alexander the Great. |
|  The legs of iron | The Roman Empire. | This kingdom was present throughout the time of the New Testament. |
|  The feet of mixed iron and clay | A future kingdom that is some form of revived Roman Empire. | This has not happened yet. It is in the future. |
|  The crushing rock not cut by human hands | This is God’s kingdom, headed by the Messiah. | It comes to smash the Kingdom of Man. This has not yet happened. It is in the future. |

After this crushing stone destroys the statue, it grows to be a mountain that dominates the world.



God was saying to Daniel that the pagan powers all look very big, strong and frightening, but even these unbelieving pagan powers are controlled by Him. One day, all five kingdoms will be crushed.

How did each of the earlier kingdoms end?

- God brought about each kingdom’s destruction through internal weakening.
- Occasionally, God also made direct judgments upon individual rulers. For example:
 - ▶ God judged King Nebuchadnezzar and his successor for their pride. He initiated theirs and the Babylonian kingdom’s downfall (Daniel 4:22–27, 5:18–30).
 - ▶ God also judged the Rome-appointed king of Judea, King Herod Agrippa I (the grandson of Herod the Great who had tried to kill the baby Jesus) for his pride (Acts 12:20–23).

What was God’s purpose in giving Nebuchadnezzar the dream and having Daniel interpret it?

- God was saying that it was He who was allowing all these political changes of power to take place.
- It was He who was allowing His people to be defeated and exiled.

God didn’t transfer power from Israel to the Gentiles earlier because it was not His original intention or plan. In fact, earlier, God told Moses to tell the people this:

Deuteronomy 28:1

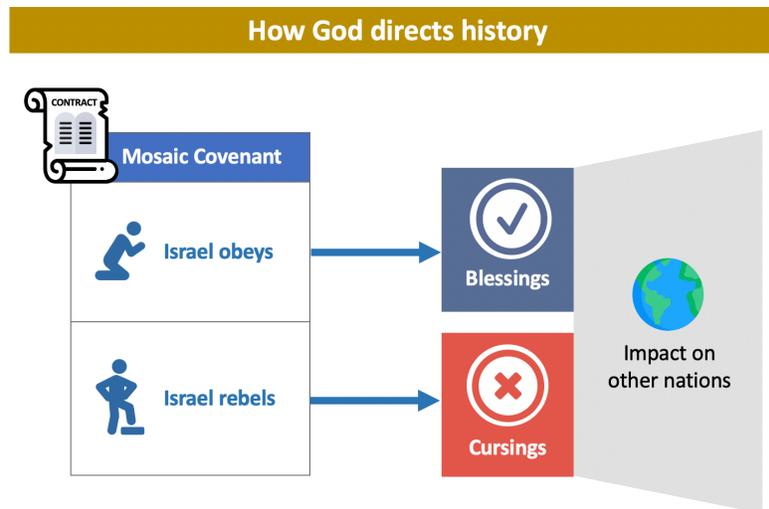
“If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully keep all his commands that I am giving you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the world.”



If Israel had been obedient to Yahweh, He would have made them the supreme political power. No nation, regardless of how big or strong, would have been able to defeat Israel.

But since they rebelled, God was handing over political power of the world to the Gentiles.





God told Israel to submit in defeat to Babylon. In fact, God told the prophet Jeremiah to tell all the kings of the surrounding lands to also submit to Babylon.

Jeremiah 27:4–8

⁴ Give them this message for their masters: ‘This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, the God of Israel, says: ⁵ With my great strength and powerful arm I made the earth and all its people and every animal. I can give these things of mine to anyone I choose. ⁶ Now I will give your countries to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who is my servant. I have put everything, even the wild animals, under his control.

⁷ All the nations will serve him, his son, and his grandson until his time is up. Then many nations and great kings will conquer and rule over Babylon. ⁸ So you must submit to Babylon’s king and serve him; put your neck under Babylon’s yoke! I will punish any nation that refuses to be his slave, says the LORD. I will send war, famine, and disease upon that nation until Babylon has conquered it.

While Israel was a nation, God had restrained the power and influence of the Kingdom of Man. However, God was now allowing their rise in power. He was even allowing pagan nations the freedom to conquer the world! Jesus called this era or age, which stretches from this point till our current day, “the times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24).

Even today, the modern state of Israel could not have come into existence except by Gentile permission. Gentile leaders in the United Nations made a mandate for Israel to be given land and modern Israel was created in 1948.

God told Daniel about this transfer of power because this period would be long and have massive impact on the Jews. Yahweh wanted His people to know what was happening and have long-range hope based on the fact that He is in control of world events and He will fulfil all His covenantal promises.

This transfer of power away from Israel was the first sign that pointed to the end of the visible Kingdom of God on earth. The second was the end of Solomon’s dynasty.

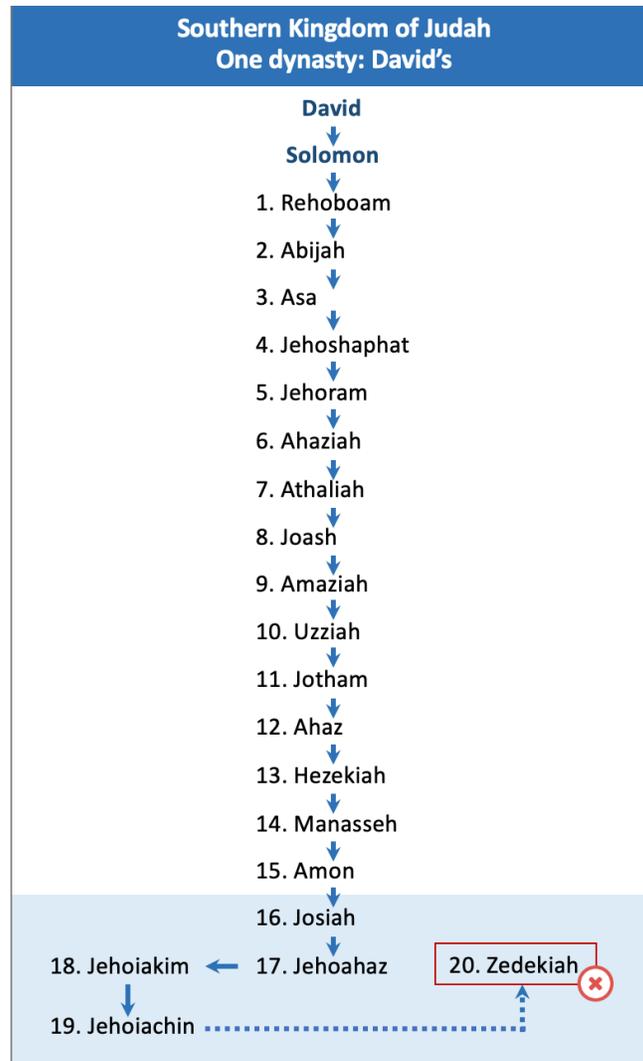
2 End of Solomon's Dynasty (598 BC)



God had told the prophets who ministered during the time of the exile that all this political upheaval was from Him. He told the prophets to tell Judah not to get involved in all the battles, but to submit to Babylon.

But prophets like Jeremiah had a really hard time because the people got angry and refused to listen.

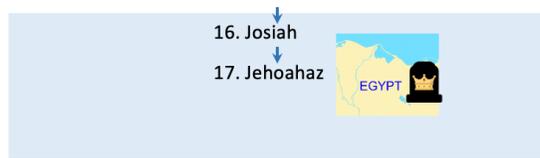
And this was how Solomon's dynasty ended:



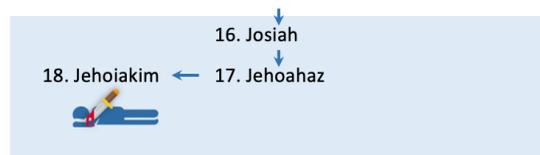
- **Josiah:** Even though Josiah was a godly king, he chose to ignore the prophet's warning not to get involved in the war. He tried to stop Pharaoh Neco from helping the Assyrians war against the Babylonians. So the Egyptians killed him. (2 Chronicles 35:20–24).



- **Jehoahaz** (Josiah's son): He became king after his father's death. But Pharaoh removed him to Egypt where he later died.



- **Jehoakim** (Eliakim): Pharaoh replaced Jehoahaz with another son of Josiah, Eliakim, a puppet king whom he renamed Jehoakim. So Judah came under the control of Egypt, the land that God had originally saved the nation of Israel from.
- In 605 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians. He too wanted a puppet king in Judah so he controlled Jehoiakim. But in 601 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar suffered severe military loss against Pharaoh Neco. Taking advantage of this situation, some smaller nations including Judah, led by Jehoiakim, revolted. God punished Jehoiakim for revolting.



- **Jehoaichin**: He was Jehoiakim's son and the next king. (He was also called Jeconiah or Coniah.) But because his father revolted, King Nebuchadnezzar later took Jehoiachin and all the high officials and leading citizens to Babylon. All of them died there.



- **Zedekiah**: In the meantime, Nebuchadnezzar made Zedekiah, another son of Josiah, who was pro-Babylon, governor over those who remained in Judah. However, he too, was later killed.



Jeremiah had earlier prophesied about the end of Solomon's dynasty.

Jeremiah 22:24–30

²⁴ “As surely as I live,” says the LORD, “I will abandon you, Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah. Even if you were the signet ring on my right hand, I would pull you off.

²⁵ I will hand you over to those who seek to kill you, those you so desperately fear—to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and the mighty Babylonian army. ²⁶ I will expel you and your mother from this land, and you will die in a foreign country, not in your native land.

²⁷ You will never again return to the land you yearn for.

²⁸ “Why is this man Jehoiachin like a discarded, broken jar?

Why are he and his children to be exiled to a foreign land?

²⁹ O earth, earth, earth!

Listen to this message from the LORD!

³⁰ This is what the LORD says:

‘Let the record show that this man Jehoiachin was childless.

He is a failure,

for none of his children will succeed him on the throne of David to rule over Judah.’

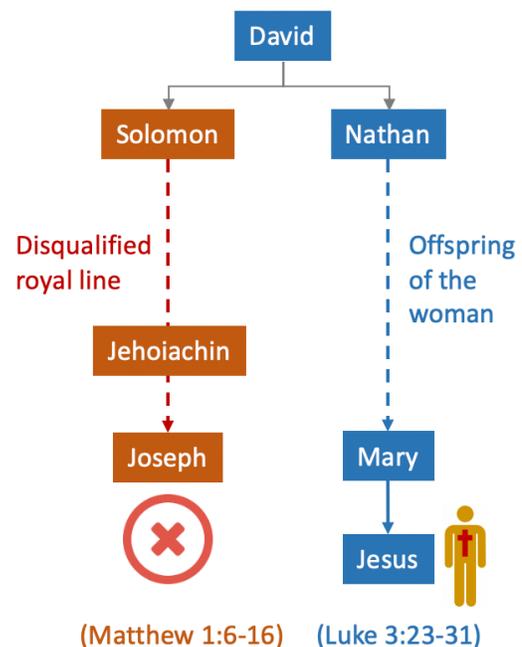
Jehoiachin was childless in the sense that the royal line of Solomon ended with him. Although Jehoiachin did have a son while in captivity, all his descendants were no longer in the royal line. God had disqualified Solomon's dynasty due to rebellion.

But with the end of Solomon's dynasty, did God break his promise and covenant to David about always having a son on the throne? No.

God fulfilled His promise to David via another of his sons, Nathan. And through Nathan's line came Mary, who would become the virgin mother of the promised Saviour that God had spoken about after the Fall in the garden of Eden (the offspring of the woman in Genesis 3:15).

The end of the royal line of Judah based on Solomon's dynasty was the second sign that pointed to the end of the visible Kingdom of God on earth. God cut them off because of their rebellious leaders.

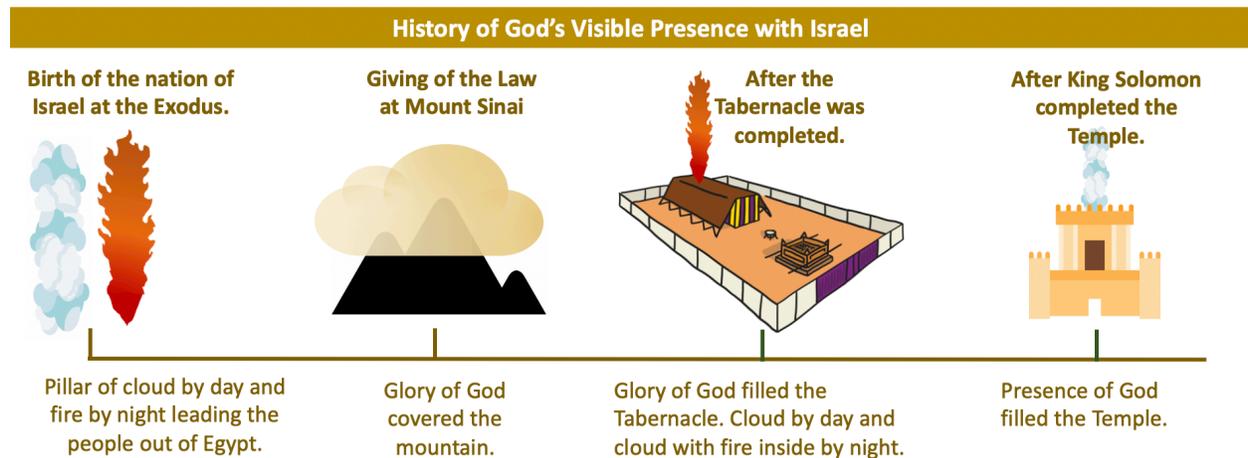
The third sign was the departure of the Shekinah Glory.



3 Departure of the Shekinah Glory (591 BC)

God’s visible presence first appeared publicly at the birth of the nation of Israel when God led the people out of Egypt. It was in the form of a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night.

The Jewish teachers used the phrase “Shekinah Glory” (“Shekinah” is a Hebrew word) to refer to this visible presence. This word does not appear in the Bible, but it means “He caused to dwell”, which refers to the visible presence of Yahweh on earth. This is the history of God’s visible presence as recorded in the Bible.



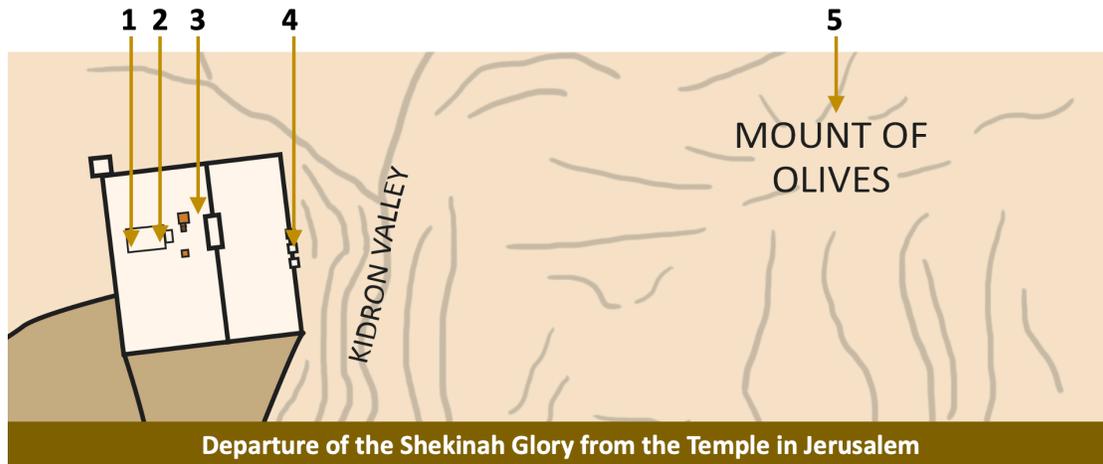
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|---|---|--|--|
| <p>Exodus 13:21 The LORD went ahead of them. He guided them during the day with a pillar of cloud, and he provided light at night with a pillar of fire. This allowed them to travel by day or by night.</p> | <p>Exodus 24:15–17 ¹⁵ Then Moses climbed up the mountain, and the cloud covered it. ¹⁶ And the glory of the LORD settled down on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from inside the cloud. ¹⁷ To the Israelites at the foot of the mountain, the glory of the LORD appeared at the summit like a consuming fire.</p> | <p>Exodus 40:34 Then the cloud covered the Tabernacle, and the glory of the LORD filled the Tabernacle.</p> | <p>2 Chronicles 7:1 When Solomon finished praying, fire flashed down from heaven and burned up the burnt offerings and sacrifices, and the glorious presence of the LORD filled the Temple.</p> |
|---|---|--|--|

Yahweh’s presence remained in the Temple until the year 591 BC when God gave the prophet Ezekiel a vision of the Shekinah Glory departing.

Ezekiel was the last person in the Old Testament to see the Glory as it moved away from the Jerusalem Temple.

At first, he saw God's Temple being grossly violated with idol worship and cultic rites being performed. Then Ezekiel saw God's Glory start to move.

1. The glowing cloud was originally above the cherubim over the Ark of the Covenant.



2. The Shekinah Glory first moved to the door of the Temple.

Ezekiel 9:3a

Then the glory of the God of Israel rose up from between the cherubim, where it had rested, and moved to the entrance of the Temple.

3. Then it moved to the courtyard. At this stage, Ezekiel saw what appeared to be a sapphire coloured throne above the heads of the cherubim. Underneath the cherubim were whirling wheels.

Ezekiel 10:4–5

⁴ Then the glory of the LORD rose up from above the cherubim and went over to the entrance of the Temple. The Temple was filled with this cloud of glory, and the courtyard glowed brightly with the glory of the LORD. ⁵ The moving wings of the cherubim sounded like the voice of God Almighty and could be heard even in the outer courtyard.

4. The Glory moved to the east gate entrance with the cherubim, who were also leaving.

Ezekiel 10:19

And as I watched, the cherubim flew with their wheels to the east gate of the LORD's Temple. And the glory of the God of Israel hovered above them.

5. God's presence departed from the city of Jerusalem entirely, leaving via the Mount of Olives.

Ezekiel 11:22–23

²² Then the cherubim lifted their wings and rose into the air with their wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel hovered above them. ²³ Then the glory of the LORD went up from the city and stopped above the mountain to the east.

God's presence departed from Jerusalem. At this point, God's relationship with His people changed.

- God was still tied to them by His covenantal promises. He was still going to fulfil them.
- He was still committed to sending His promised Saviour.
- And He still accepted their worship.



- However, God's presence no longer reigned in Jerusalem because they had rejected Him. And in their future, when the people return from exile, God's presence would not be in the Temple. They would no longer be an independent nation under God's guidance.

Still, God assured them He would fulfil His covenant with them.

Leviticus 26:44–45

⁴⁴ “But despite all this, I will not utterly reject or despise them while they are in exile in the land of their enemies. I will not cancel my covenant with them by wiping them out, for I am the LORD their God. ⁴⁵ For their sakes I will remember my ancient covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of all the nations, that I might be their God. I am the LORD.”

Ezekiel was the last person in Old Testament times to see the Shekinah Glory.

However, people in the New Testament times did see the “Glory” return temporarily. It was in the form of the promised Saviour, Jesus!

John 1:14

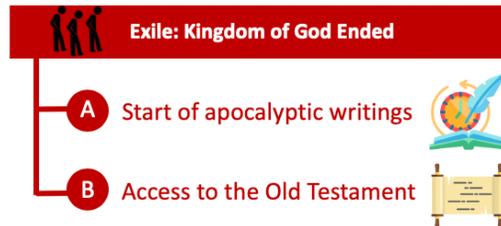
So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

These three signs: (1) the transfer of political power to Gentile rulers, (2) the end of Solomon's dynasty, and (3) the departure of the Shekinah Glory marked the end of the visible Kingdom of God on earth.

However, God did two things to ensure His people would be able to endure the change.

Signs of the end of the visible Kingdom of God on earth





A Start of Apocalyptic Writings

This was a new season of time for God's people that they had not previously experienced.

- First, Yahweh had "left" Israel and believers in the world.
- Second, believers no longer had an unbroken line of prophets to minister to them.

But God didn't leave believers without help.

To enable His people to endure this new period of His "absence", God summarised the future for them with a new type of writing: the apocalyptic writings. The Greek word "apocalypse" means "revealing".



These writings were to give the people hope by revealing to them what was to come. Apocalyptic writings are found in these books:

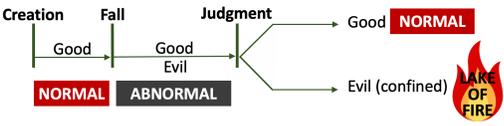
- Old Testament: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah and portions of other books
- New Testament: Matthew 24–25, portions of some of the epistles, Revelation

How is this "revealing-the-end" type of writing different from the other parts of the Bible?

1. They involve **a dream or a vision** that God gives to the writer (for example, Ezekiel 40:1–4).
2. At times, God gives an **interpreter** like an angel to explain the vision (for example, Daniel 9:20–27; Zechariah 1:7–9). The interpretation given is normally about the big picture of what is going to happen rather than all the small details.
3. All the events in the visions take place some time in the **far future** (for example, in Ezekiel 40–48, God gave Ezekiel a vision of the new Temple for Israel during the return of God's Kingdom, but this Temple has not even been built yet!)
4. The visions contain **new information** that God had not previously shared.
5. The visions often contain strange **symbols and images** that represent actual people, places and events.
6. The visions and dreams are about upcoming, important events in **human history**.



These apocalyptic writings were to give believers hope and assurance that God was still sovereignly directing the world. God was equipping believers so they could endure the coming difficult times. It is different from the other writings by the prophets. For example:

| | Apocalyptic literature | Books of the Prophets |
|---|--|-----------------------|
| <p>Purpose</p> <p>It is to assure believers. Even though the Kingdom of Man looks like it is “winning” now, God wants people to know that the Kingdom of God will definitely win in the end:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evil, pain, suffering will come to an end • God will bring final judgment on the world • God will establish His Kingdom forever. <p>This is to give believers long-term hope and encouragement especially when they have to live in pagan nations.</p>  | <p>Dual-Track Message of the Prophets</p> <p>1</p> <p>Curses</p>  <p>Tell people that they broke the Mosaic Covenant and God is sending curses against them.</p> <p>This is to encourage the people to repent and turn to God again.</p> <p>2</p> <p>Promises</p>  <p>Remind people that all of God's Abrahamic Covenant promises will come true in the future Kingdom of God.</p> <p>This is to give them hope in the midst of all their suffering and hard times.</p> | |
| <p>Who will it affect</p> <p>The message directly affects all mankind and every nation in the world, both believers and unbelievers.</p>  | <p>The message directly affects the nation of Israel.</p>  <p>Only a few are meant for unbelieving nations (for example, the prophet Nahum talks about Nineveh, a Babylonian city).</p> | |
| <p>When it will happen</p> <p>This is the final judgment of God on the whole world.</p>  | <p>Some time in Israel's future.</p>  | |

How should we understand apocalyptic writings?

Here are some principles to help us understand apocalyptic writings.

1. Understand the accordion effect

There is an accordion effect in the apocalyptic writings. Even though events mentioned in the same Bible passage may seem to happen immediately one after the other, in reality these events may be separated by great lengths of time.

For example, the following passage talks about the promised Saviour, Jesus.

However, these four verses refer to two time periods thousands of years apart. When Jesus quoted from Isaiah, He stopped in mid-verse because His first coming was only to fulfil the first half of Isaiah's prophecy!

Isaiah 61:1–4

- 1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me,
for the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted
and to proclaim that captives will be released
and prisoners will be freed.
- 2 He has sent me to tell those who mourn
that the time of the LORD's favor has come,

[He will return to fulfil the rest at His second coming.]

and with it, the day of God's anger against their enemies.

- 3 To all who mourn in Israel,
he will give a crown of beauty for ashes,
a joyous blessing instead of mourning,
festive praise instead of despair.
In their righteousness, they will be like great oaks
that the LORD has planted for his own glory.
- 4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins,
repairing cities destroyed long ago.
They will revive them,
though they have been deserted for many generations.

Accordion Effect



Events that the Bible talks about may seem like it will happen in the very near future...



...but they may actually be referring to a very much longer period of time.

This refers to the first coming of Jesus.



Jesus Himself quoted this passage when He spoke about Himself in the synagogue (Jewish place of worship) in Luke 4:16–21.

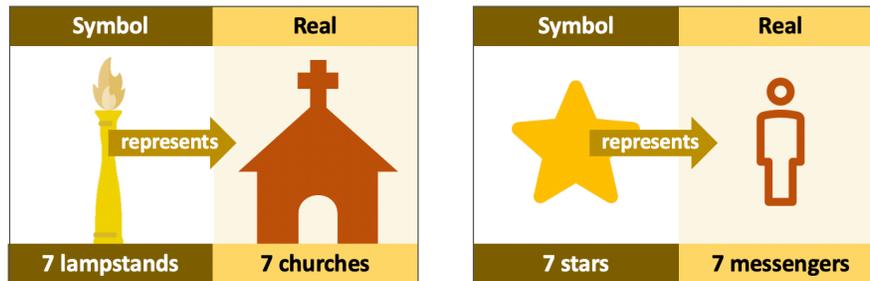
This refers to the second coming of Jesus.



This will happen in the future when Jesus comes to set up His Kingdom on earth.

2. Limit the interpretation

- Apocalyptic writings should be understood in its plain meaning and in its proper context.
- Symbols and signs point to specific people, places and events. For example, in Revelation 1:12–20, the seven lampstands represent the seven churches and the seven stars are the angels (messengers) of the seven churches.



- Some apocalyptic writings also come with an interpreting angel who explains the vision. In these cases, we should base our understanding on the angel’s explanation. Sometimes, in our curiosity, we try to interpret more than what the angel explained and we end up with all kinds of different things that God never intended.



3. Draw on information from the covenants and the Old Testament

God directs history based on the covenant promises He made. Things that happen at the end of world history will fulfil the promises that God made to Abraham, David and Israel.

If we understand the covenants, we will better understand what God is doing at the end of history to fulfil them.

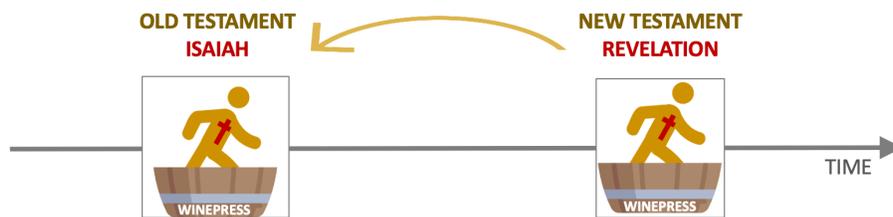


In addition, to understand apocalyptic writings, we need to have a good grasp of the Old Testament. God used the Old Testament to teach people:

- many things about Himself
- how He relates to mankind and
- how He works.

Who is this in royal robes,
 marching in his great strength?
 "It is I, the LORD, announcing your salvation!
 It is I, the LORD, who has the power to save!"
 2 Why are your clothes so red,
 as if you have been treading out grapes?
 3 "I have been treading the winepress alone;
 no one was there to help me.
 In my anger I have trampled my enemies
as if they were grapes.
 In my fury I have trampled my foes.
 Their blood has stained my clothes.

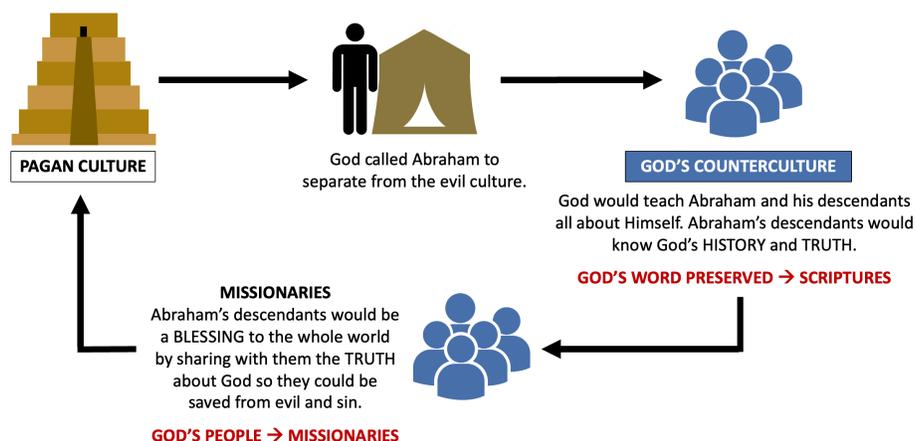
Understanding Isaiah helps us recognise immediately that Jesus is Yahweh, and in Revelation, He is the righteous Judge delivering punishment to rebellious people.



The apocalyptic writings were not the only thing God left with His people to help them persevere through the coming centuries. God ensured the people had His Word, the Old Testament. This too, would give them hope.

B Access to the Old Testament

God's purpose for Abraham and his family was that they would (i) record His history and truth and preserve it in the form of Scriptures, and then (ii) go to all the world bringing these truths to the pagan culture.



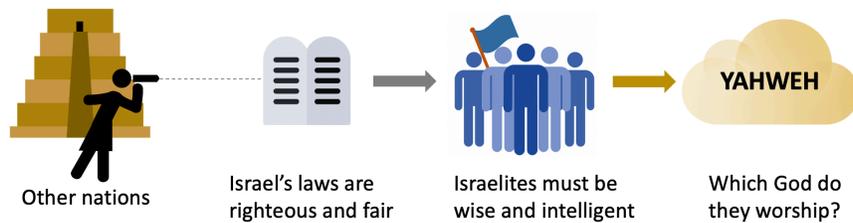
Despite Israel’s rebellion that led to the nation’s collapse, God was still able to achieve His goal.

Through the Jews, right from their early days, God gave other nations access to His history and truth. How? For example:

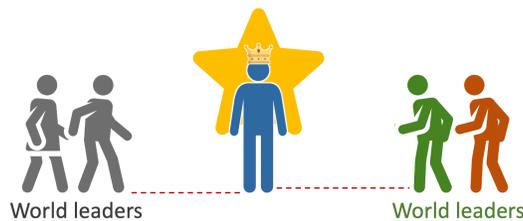
- When Israel was in Egypt, the Egyptians had good knowledge of the people of God and their beliefs. Both Joseph and Moses were Israelites with great influence among the Egyptians, so the Egyptians would have observed and been exposed to Yahweh.



- After Mount Sinai, every nation who had business with Israel would have encountered their God-given Law which emphasised economic freedom, private property and fair court systems. They would have also learnt of God’s contract with His people, something that no other nation has ever had.



- When human kings started to rule Israel, the other nations were influenced and impressed by God’s people. International leaders came from around the world to speak to Solomon and learn from his wisdom.



Even though the exile was to punish and discipline His rebellious people, ironically, in His sovereignty, God also used the exile to spread His Scriptures all over the entire world! How?

The exile scattered the Jews all over the world, but they were carrying with them the Old Testament Scriptures containing the message of how mankind can be reconciled with the Creator-God!



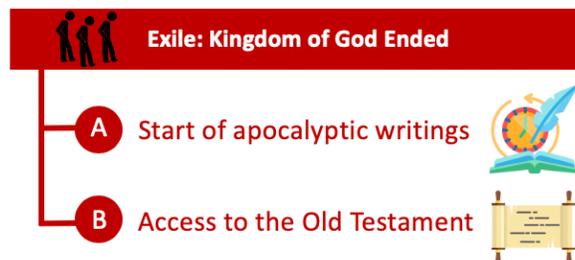
In fact, Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote that by his time (the first century AD) Jews had lived in every part of the earth starting from a long time ago!

So each pagan nation had access to God's truth through the Jews!

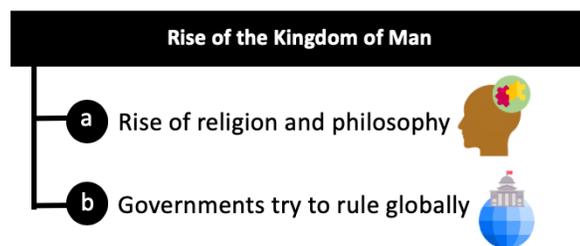
God's will is never thwarted. It is always accomplished with or without man's cooperation.

[Note: At the end of the Tribulation period when God wants to evangelise the entire human race quickly, the Bible tells us that 144,000 believing Jews will do the job. These believing Jews had been scattered and had lived for generations in different cultures and nations all around the world. They are citizens of their host nations, they know the language and they know God and the Bible. They are the missionaries who will bring the message of the gospel to the whole world. We will study this in a later lesson.]

Even though the Kingdom of God had ended on earth and God lifted His protective hand from Israel, God didn't leave His people stranded. He provided apocalyptic writings so believers would know the future and have hope. God also ensured His Old Testament was accessible to people all over the world.



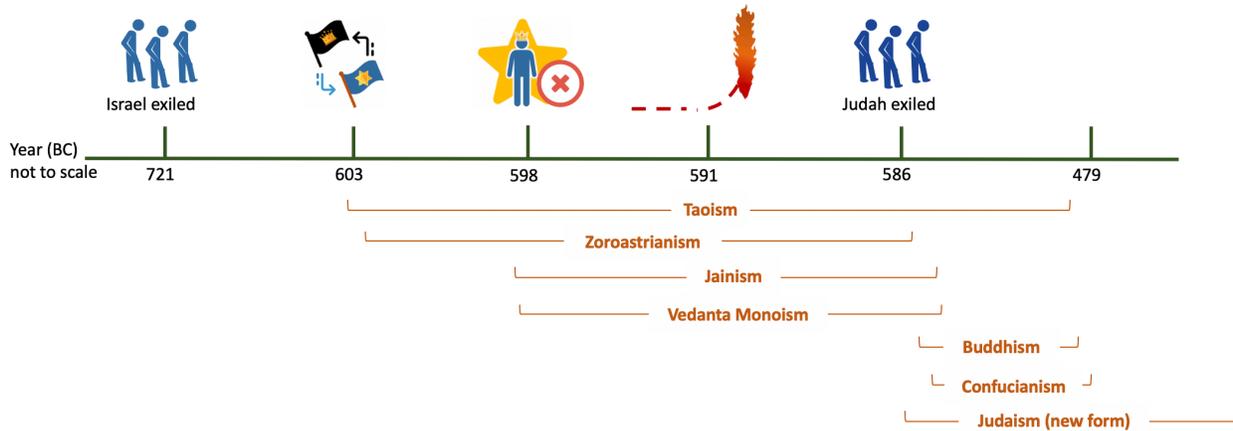
However, at this same time, God also lifted His restraining hand over the Kingdom of Man. So now the Kingdom of Man increased in power and influence.



a Rise of Religion and Philosophy

During and after the time of Babel, pagan religions were a corrupted form of Noah’s beliefs. They had gods and believed in the supernatural. They also mixed pieces of God’s truth with falsehoods. These religions remained fairly stable between the Call of Abraham and the exile period.

But suddenly, everything changed at the Exile. Within 70 years, seven new world religions burst into the world.

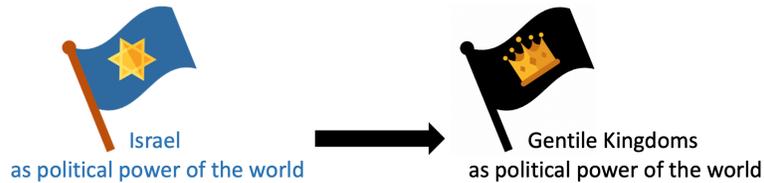


| New Religion | Date | Origin (Founder) | Comments |
|-----------------------|---|--|--|
| 1. Taoism | 604–517 BC | China (Lao-Tzu) | The ideal state is living in harmony with the Tao, where Tao or god <i>is</i> the creation (continuity of being idea). |
| 2. Zoroastrianism | 600–583 BC | Persia (Zoroaster) | Focus on doing good because man is saved by good works. |
| 3. Jainism | 599–527 BC | India (Mahavira Vardhamana) | Focus on doing good because man is saved by good works. |
| 4. Vedanta Monism | 599–527 BC | India (Hindu reformers and Upanishads) | Man can save himself by attaining the ideal state: when he gets out of the cycle of rebirth. |
| 5. Buddhism | 560–480 BC | India (Gautama, the Buddha) | Man can save himself by attaining the ideal state: when he has no more desire and suffering. |
| 6. Confucianism | 551–479 BC | China (Confucius) | Focus on doing good because man is saved by good works. |
| 7. Legalistic Judaism | This is different from the Old Testament worship of Yahweh. Judaism never recovered from the exile. The people started getting hardened and later, their beliefs became the Pharisee movement in the New Testament. | | Focus on doing good because man is saved by good works. |

While they are different in their details, a key feature with all of them is that mankind plays a much more important role in saving themselves.

During the Exile, there were two transfers of power:

- Political world: Transfer of political power from Israel to the Gentiles.



- Spiritual world: Transfer of religious focus from “god as saviour” to “man as saviour”.



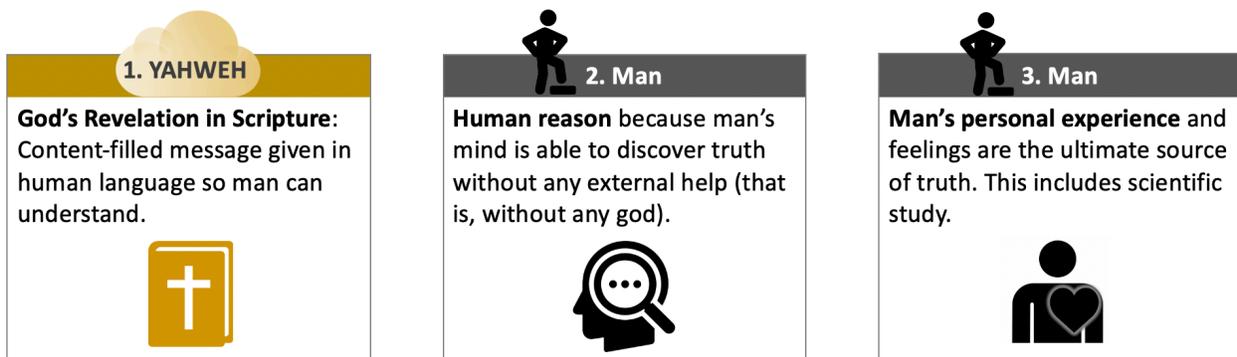
Philosophy

A new way of thinking known as philosophy also arose during this period. Certain Greek thinkers began for the first time to think that without any help from God, they could come up with universal truths about nature and life. They didn't need God to reveal any truth or information about the world.

These thinkers rejected God as the ultimate authority and source of truth and instead relied on their own minds. They made man's thinking and reasoning the ultimate authority in making decisions and determining right from wrong.

There are basically only three sources of truth:

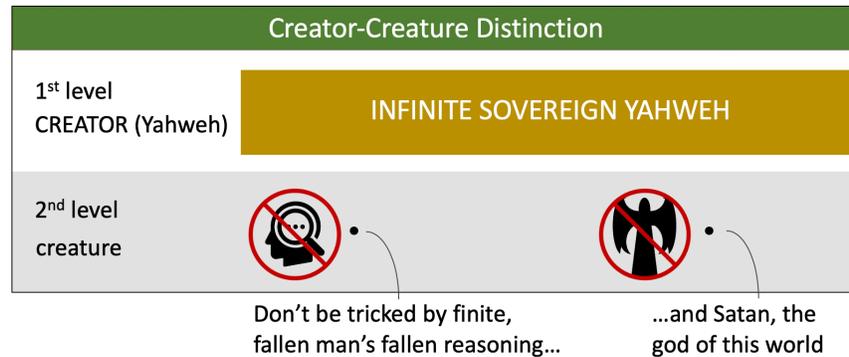
Sources of Truth



Centuries later, Paul in Athens encountered various competing philosophies and challenged these philosophers' ways of thinking and their inconsistent reasoning (Acts 17:18–32). He warned believers against thinking like these philosophers who could argue persuasively but whose reasoning was not rooted in God's truth.

Colossians 2:8

Don't let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers of this world, rather than from Christ.



Nevertheless, their teachings travelled far and wide and continue to impact the thinking of modern pagans today.

Some of these beliefs also had severe impact on how people understand the Bible. For example, Greek philosophers believe that all matter is evil. Only spiritual things can be good. The source or foundation of this idea is man's own thinking. And these man-made beliefs started being mixed in with the interpretation of the Bible.

The rise of the Kingdom of Man during the period when the Kingdom of God disappeared is not a coincidence. During the exile period, God had stopped restraining the pagan world, allowing it to explode in power and influence. Knowing that God has lifted His hand of restraint on the pagan world warns us that we must cautiously evaluate every new idea or philosophy that emerges.

b

Governments try to rule globally

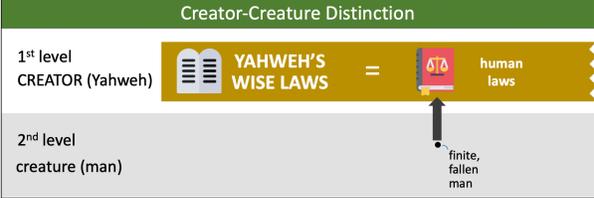


Another impact of the Exile was that pagan governments would try to dominate the world by imposing their own cultures and beliefs on weaker nations (imperialism).

When God's hand was on Israel, He prevented this from happening. But when He lifted His hand, the kingdoms of the world increased in their efforts to rule the world.

Many of them also tried to make themselves or their ideas "gods" while continuing to ignore Yahweh.

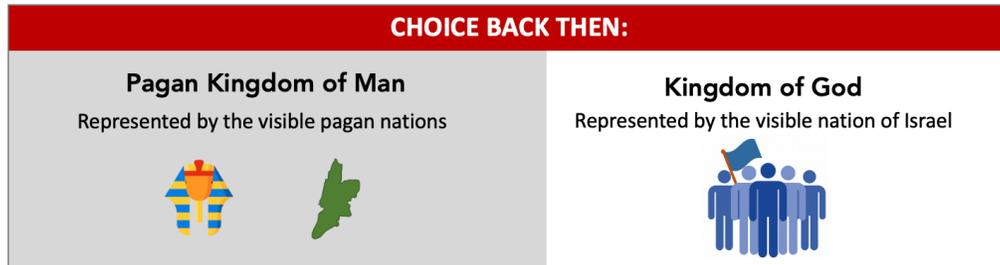
For example:

| Part of the Statue — Kingdom Represented | Access to God's Truth | Notes |
|--|---|--|
|  <p>Head of gold: The kingdom of Babylon</p> | <p>With God's help, Daniel interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar's dream and told him about Yahweh.</p> | <p>King Nebuchadnezzar made himself into a god. (Daniel 3–4)</p>  |
|  <p>Chest and arms of silver: The co-kingdoms of the Medes and Persians</p> | <p>There were many Persian Jews bearing witness that Yahweh is God of all, including Daniel and Esther.</p> | <p>The Medo-Persians made the statutes of human laws equal to god-given unchangeable commands. (Daniel 6, Esther 3–8)</p>  <p>The diagram, titled "Creator-Creature Distinction", shows two levels. The 1st level is "CREATOR (Yahweh)" with a book icon labeled "YAHWEH'S WISE LAWS". The 2nd level is "creature (man)" with a person icon labeled "finite, fallen man". An equals sign "=" is between the two levels, and an arrow points from the 2nd level up to the 1st level, with the text "human laws" next to the arrow.</p> |
|  <p>Belly and thighs of bronze: The empire of Greece</p> | <p>There were many Jews living as citizens in Greek cities, providing access to information on Yahweh.</p> | <p>The Greeks set up a government system that allowed a Syrian, Antiochus Epiphanes, to reign. He was a very successful politician and convincing speaker, but also the most God-hating, satanic leader of the ancient world. He pushed reconciliation of all parts of society under the idea of "universal values" where everyone's view is great. But actually he was the one making up the standards. He hated the Jews because they lived by God's standards, not his. He is also a picture of the Antichrist. (Daniel 8).</p>  |
|  <p>The legs of iron: The Roman Empire</p> | <p>Jewish families and early Christians were living among the Romans, sharing Yahweh's truth.</p> | <p>The Romans worshipped their emperor as a god. (Acts 12:20–24)</p>  |

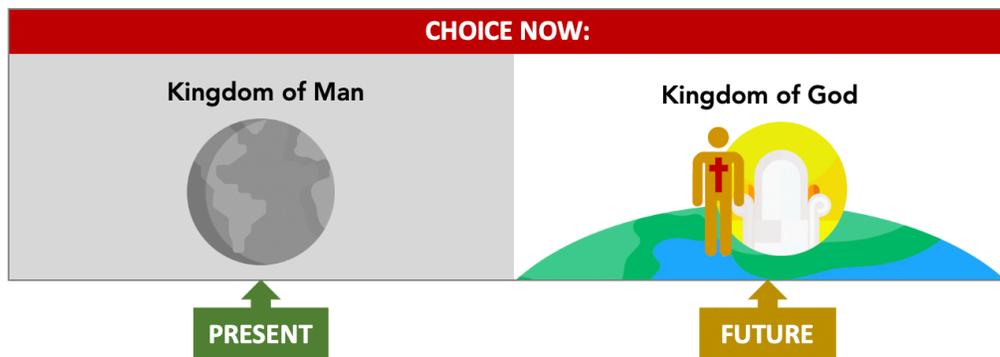
The leaders and citizens of the four pagan kingdoms had access to God's truth and had the option of worshipping Yahweh. But many continued in their open rebellion against God.

Which Kingdom are We in?

From the time of Moses right until Ezekiel, mankind could choose between two physical and visible kingdoms on earth.



For us, there is currently only one physical kingdom present—the Kingdom of Man. The Kingdom of God is currently not restored (though we wait for it to arrive).



The Bible makes it clear that we cannot belong to both kingdoms. We must choose between the present Kingdom of Man or the future returning Kingdom of God.

While we may be living in the Kingdom of Man now, the reality is that as believers in Christ, we are citizens of the yet-to-return Kingdom of God and so our loyalties are with Yahweh.

If we declare our loyalty to God, then we must realise that we become enemies of the pagan kingdom. Though we have to live in it, we are not to be loyal to their pagan, anti-God ideas.

God, in His sovereign will and planning, expects us to keep on living in this kingdom as pilgrims and travellers. We are the bearers of His truth, just as Jews were taking God's Word everywhere. This is the job of believers today, and we can only be successful if we are actually living among the people in the Kingdom of Man.

These were Jesus' instructions:

Matthew 28:19–20

¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. ²⁰ Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Notice He didn't ask us to work towards bringing back the Kingdom of God. His Kingdom, which in Nebuchadnezzar's vision is “the rock not cut by human hands”, is something He will personally bring back.

God's Kingdom returns not by human effort, nor by church effort, nor even by Christian effort, but by Yahweh's.



CRUSHING ROCK
Kingdom of God

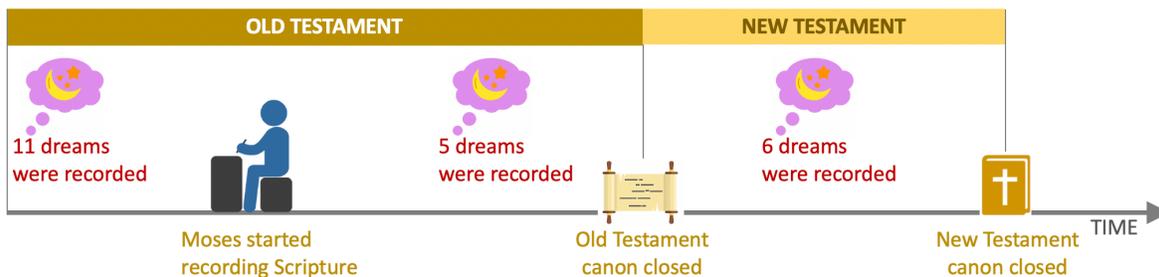
There will be occasions during our time in this pagan kingdom that we feel lost or defeated. But God has already explained to us how history will end and how He continues to sovereignly direct it. Let us not lose heart but learn God's Word even more. The better we know the apocalyptic writings, the surer our hope and faith will become.

Does God still speak to people in dreams?

In history, God used dreams as a tool of revelation and these were put into the Bible as the Word of God. In other words, God Himself validated and confirmed that He had given the dreams and they were given for a purpose.



There are a total of 22 dreams mentioned in the Bible.



In the Old Testament, there are only 16 dreams recorded. Eleven of them occurred before God gave Moses the Law, meaning before Scripture was written down. This tells us that dreams were less and less necessary after people had God's Word and the full canon of Scripture available.

The New Testament mentions six, all before the canon was closed.

Today, we must bear in mind that the Bible is complete. God has revealed all that we need to know. He has even revealed quite a bit of future information to give us a long-range hope. At the close of the book of Revelation, God warned people not to add any more revelation because He had issued all that He had to share with mankind.

Revelation 22:18–19

¹⁸ And I solemnly declare to everyone who hears the words of prophecy written in this book: If anyone adds anything to what is written here, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book. ¹⁹ And if anyone removes any of the words from this book of prophecy, God will remove that person’s share in the tree of life and in the holy city that are described in this book.



Therefore, we know there will be no more additional information from God about the future of the world because He has revealed all that He wanted to share.

God may still work a miracle and communicate to us in a dream if He chooses to. The dream may pertain to us personally or even draw unbelievers to seek Him out.

However, we need to remember that any dream or vision or “still small voice” cannot be about where the world is headed.

Also, we should not expect that dreams are the normal way God wants to communicate with us. God chose language and the Bible. He communicates a great amount of information and content in that way.

Ultimately, all dreams have to come under the authority of the Word of God. If what we dream or see in a vision does not line up with Scripture, then we must disregard the dream, in the same way that God instructed Israel to disregard the words of false prophets (Deuteronomy 13:3).

If our dream or vision does not contradict God’s Word, we should still go to God in prayer, asking Him to confirm what we saw and to clarify its meaning. And most importantly, we need to ask what He wants us to do with the dream or vision.



Discussion Questions

Discuss the following questions as a group or use them for personal reflection.

1. Why do you think God has put so much apocalyptic writing in the Bible? What is your attitude toward it? How does knowing how world history ends help our faith and our daily lives? What impact should knowing the conclusion of human history have on how we live each day?
2. We have seen how Yahweh is orchestrating world history with Israel as the key player. Knowing that there is a purpose and reason for the unfolding of world events, how should we be thinking and responding to what is happening in the world today?
3. The pagan world is creating new philosophies with each passing generation. How do we evaluate each new idea? How do we get to the root, or foundation, or basic premise of the idea and compare that with God's Word? How does knowing that God has lifted His hand of restraint on the pagan world help us evaluate these new religions or philosophies?



Pre-reading for next lesson: Daniel 1–6

Endnotes

Page 5: The illustration "Nebuchadnezzar's Statue" by Dylan Kwok.

Page 13: The map "Shekinah Glory Leaving" by Dylan Kwok.