

THE BIG JOURNEY

from Creation to New Creation



Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives painted in 1870 by Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900) (held by The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, USA). David captured Jerusalem in around 1002BC and made it his capital. His son Solomon built his magnificent temple there, just to the north of David's city. The Dome of the Rock, seen clearly in this painting, now stands on the Temple mount.

nine ► From Solomon to the Coming Saviour

Introduction and Questions

Solomon

The accession of **Solomon** (around **970BC**) ushered Israel into a unique period of peace and prosperity. His empire stretched from the upper Euphrates to Egypt's border.

God granted Solomon wisdom; he became "*wiser than all other men*" (1 Kings 4.31). He was the main author of the Book of Proverbs; he inspired the Book of Ecclesiastes. And God gave Solomon phenomenal wealth and fame.

Solomon built a Temple at Jerusalem (see the illustration in the enclosed handout). It was to be "*of great magnificence and fame and splendour in the sight of all the nations*" (1 Chronicles 22.5 NIV). When all was complete, Solomon dedicated it and God's glory-cloud filled it. This marked the pinnacle of Israel's history. God once again had a paradise – the Promised Land - where He lived among His people. In Vaughan Roberts' words: "It looks now as if all the promises of God have been fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come."

Strategically placed at the crossroads of the world, Israel was to be the Kingdom of God in miniature - foreshadowing what God planned for the whole world. The nation was to be, in John Durham's words, "a showcase to the world of how being in covenant with Yahweh changes a people."

But very quickly, it all went wrong again. God had told His people what their kings should be like (Deuteronomy 17.14-20). But Solomon failed to heed. His wives turned his heart from God. He went after idols.

Downgrade

The Lord was angry with Solomon, and so He tore Solomon's kingdom in two after his death. When his son **Rehoboam** succeeded him, ten tribes - under the leadership of **Jeroboam** - revolted and set up their own kingdom (around **930BC**).

Jeroboam's kingdom was called (confusingly) Israel; its capital was firstly Shechem, then Samaria. Rehoboam's kingdom was called Judah; his capital was Jerusalem. He ruled over the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

The northern kingdom Israel ended up in gross idolatry. Dynasty followed dynasty, and king after king walked in Jeroboam's evil ways. But God didn't leave Himself without witness. He sent prophets to them – such as **Elijah** and **Elisha** (active around **870-852BC** and **852-795BC** respectively) **Amos** (around **760BC**) and **Hosea** (around **760-722BC**). **Jonah** (prophesying perhaps around **760BC**) was from Israel, too. But Israel's wickedness continued to the end. Israel was finally extinguished by the **Assyrians** in **722BC**.

Unlike Israel, Judah had some good kings, especially **Hezekiah** (who reigned around **715-687BC**) and **Josiah** (reigned **640-609BC**). **Zephaniah** (who prophesied perhaps around **627BC**) may have encouraged Josiah to follow God.

But most of Judah's kings were bad. Time and time again the nation fell into idolatry. Judah's sins took them beyond the point of no return. But despite their sin, God kept His promise to preserve David's dynasty. Except for a brief interlude, David's dynasty ruled throughout Judah's history.

Assyria's capital, Nineveh, fell in **612BC** – an event foretold by **Nahum** (around **630-612BC**). Babylon was now the Near-Eastern superpower. Under **Nebuchadnezzar II** (**605-562BC**), Babylon secured control of Judah.

Exile and homecoming

As Stephen Dempster says: *"In the prophets God bares his heart, and it is often a broken one."* God's people broke His heart. Over centuries, He sent prophets to rebuke and warn them. From the beginning God warned His people that sin meant expulsion from the land. Israel has gone. Now it's Judah's turn.

Judah's exile to Babylon was a long drawn-out process. It began with Nebuchadnezzar making King **Jehoiakim** his vassal in around **605BC**. A number of deportations occurred – the prophets **Daniel** and **Ezekiel** were among those taken to Babylonia. In **588-586BC**, Nebuchadnezzar besieged and sacked Jerusalem and razed Solomon's beautiful Temple to the ground. **Gedaliah** was placed in charge of the people remaining in Judah. But he was soon assassinated, and many people fled to Egypt, taking **Jeremiah** with them.

Habakkuk, who probably prophesied around **608-605BC**, foretold Judah's fall. **Obadiah** thundered against Edom, perhaps around the time of Jerusalem's destruction – the Edomites may have helped the Babylonians in their campaign.



The Flight of the Prisoners courtesy of The Jewish Museum, New York City

'The Flight of the Prisoners' painted by James Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902) and followers (The Jewish Museum, New York). A depiction of the Fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians.

Jeremiah (prophesying around **627-580BC**) told God's people to make a life for themselves in Babylonia. And they prospered there – a prosperity that may sometimes have been tempered by persecution. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's run-in with Nebuchadnezzar suggests this. And an anti-Jewish undercurrent may be the background for what the Book of Esther records.

But God had His hand firmly on the events of history. One day, God would bring His people back to the Promised Land. Babylon was seized by the **Persians** in **539BC**. The Persian Empire was now the Near Eastern superpower. The new ruler, **Cyrus**, issued a decree encouraging the Jews and other displaced peoples to return to their homeland. Many Jews made the long journey back to Judah. In **537BC**, work on the Temple began. Encouraged by **Haggai** and **Zechariah**, it was finished in around **516BC**.

Artaxerxes I (**464-423BC**) sent two key people back to Judea. In **458BC** he sent **Ezra**. One of his goals was to teach God's Law to Israel. He succeeds brilliantly. God's word began to be studied in a way it hadn't before. In **445BC** Artaxerxes despatched **Nehemiah**. He oversaw the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls.

Visions of glory



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But the return wasn't the glorious restoration that God's people doubtless hoped for. Judah remained under Persian control. No Davidic king ruled them. And the people still backslid. It's almost as if God's people were still in exile.

But this isn't the end of the story. Woven throughout their rebukes and warnings to God's people and to the nations around, God's prophets unveiled an astounding vision of future glory. There would be a new Exodus, a restored Land, and victory over all their enemies. There'd be a new Jerusalem and a new Temple. A new King of David's dynasty would reign – His everlasting rule would encompass the whole Earth. And God was going to live among His people. He would be their God and they would be His people. **God living in His paradise with His beloved people** - here's the fulfilment of all that God's been working towards.

But how were all these wonderful things going to come about? It was sin that deprived God's people of the Promised Land. Even after the return from exile, God's people were still sinning. Sin must be fully and finally dealt with – or none of these blessings that the prophets foretold could ever happen.

And that's what God planned to do. He'd cleanse and purify His people. He'd give His people a new heart; He'd put His Spirit within them; He'd *"pour out"* His *"Spirit on all flesh"* (Joel 2.28). He'd write His law on His people's hearts.

How was this going to happen? The promised King would do it. Daniel called Him *"Messiah"* or *"an anointed one"* (Daniel 9.25-26 NKJV and ESV respectively). He'd deal with all sin for all time. We first learn about the Messiah in Genesis. We learn more and more about Him as we progress through the Old Testament. The Messiah would save God's people, defeat their enemies, and rule the world in righteousness and justice. The Greek translation for *māshîach* is Christ (Greek *christos*). The Messiah is Jesus Christ.

Between the testaments

In the centuries before Jesus's coming, several great powers successively dominated the Promised Land - the **Assyrian**, then the **Babylonian**, then the

Persian empires. The Persian Empire fell to the **Greek, Alexander the Great**. He died in **323BC**; his empire was divided among his generals, two of whom were Ptolemy and Seleucus. For most of the time from **320BC** till **198BC**, Judea was ruled by the **Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt**. From **198BC** the **Seleucid dynasty of Syria** took control. A heroic Jewish resistance campaign (the **Maccabean revolt**) gave the Jews around 80 years of relative independence from **142BC** until the **Roman** general **Pompey** took Jerusalem in **63BC**.

God showed faithful **Daniel** about this succession of empires – first as Nebuchadnezzar’s dream about a towering image (Daniel 2), then as horrific and terrifying beasts in Daniel 7. But in the end, dominion is given to the Son of Man and to God’s people. Here in visionary form, we see the coming of God’s Kingdom and His victory over the Satanically-inspired world powers.

And through these centuries before Jesus’s birth, God was working in His people and preparing the stage of history for the next step of His redemptive plan. As well as the exile to Babylonia, many Jews settled in other Gentile lands - Acts 2.8-11 shows just how widely they had dispersed. Jews began to meet for prayer and Scripture study at ‘synagogues’. And especially thanks to Ezra, the Scriptures were established as the basis for the life of God’s people.



Image © Judae1 / Juda S. Engelmayr : Wikimedia (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Jews began to meet for prayer and Scripture study at ‘synagogues’. The photograph shows the bimah (the table from which the Torah is read aloud) in use at the historic Bialystoker Synagogue in New York.

Bible passages and questions

- ❗ Read **Genesis 12.1-3, 15.18, 1 Kings 4.20-25, 29-34**. How did God fulfil His promises to Abraham through Solomon?
- ❗ Read **Matthew 1.1-16, Ezekiel 37.24-28, Luke 1.31-33, Acts 15.13-17, Romans 1.3**. How did God keep His promise in **2 Samuel 7.12-13,16** about David’s dynasty and kingdom?
- ❗ Read **1 Kings 6.1, 14-36, 7.15-29, 8.10-11**. How does the Temple link back to the Garden of Eden? Why are they linked?
- ❗ Read **Deuteronomy 17.14-20, 1 Kings 10.14-15,26-29, 11.1-8**. How did Solomon go wrong? What lessons can we ourselves learn from this?
- ❗ Read **Deuteronomy 28.15,63-68, 2 Kings 17.6-23, 25.1-21**. How does the Exile connect with what we read in **Genesis 3.23-24**?
- ❗ Read **Isaiah 11.10-16, 43.14-44.5, Jeremiah 23.7-8, 31.31-34, Ezekiel 36.24-28,33-36, Joel 2.28-29**. God cast His people out of the land because of sin. But the prophets said they would return – in other words, there would be another Exodus. When was this to take place? And how would God do this?

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