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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 21: DOWNFALL AND EXILE

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Read chapters 25 “Lamentations,” 26 “Ezekiel,” 27 “Daniel,” in *Discovering the Bible*.

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read the specific texts as they are cited in the following material.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

After warning his people through his prophets for many years, God finally removed his protection from the nations of ancient Judah and Israel and allowed their enemies to overthrow them. Beginning in approximately 735 BC, the brutally dominant Mesopotamian power of Assyria under the king the Bible calls “Pull” (Tiglath-Pileser III – 745-727 BC) invaded the northern kingdom, captured many of its cities and began to deport the captive Israelites (2 Kings 15:29). The attacks continued until 722 BC when Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel, was finally taken by the Assyrian king, Sargon II, after a three-year siege, and the Israelite population was removed to areas controlled by the Assyrians and their allies the Medes, neighbors of the Persians (2 Kings 17:3-6).

Forcible relocation of conquered peoples was a common practice of the Mesopotamian powers of Assyria and Babylonia, as the populations they captured were unable to continue to resist effectively and also provided a valuable workforce for their captors. Such deportations were not usually complete, at least initially, however. At first the conquering nations would remove members of the royal families – often taking them hostage – and key government officials and military leaders. Later, if necessary, they would remove more of the population – especially the skilled workers and educated classes. Finally, as when Assyria overthrew Samaria, they might take more of the population, leaving only the very poor and uneducated to work the land. The Assyrians then moved people from other areas into the territory of Israel, and they, along with the few remaining people in the land, became the mixed population called in the New Testament “Samaritans.”

Although they destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel, the Assyrians did not conquer the southern kingdom of Judah. Both the Bible and ancient Assyrian texts describe how the Assyrian king Sennacherib (704-681 BC) laid siege to Jerusalem in 701 BC, but God honored the humble attitude of the Jews led by King Hezekiah, and the Assyrian forces withdrew (they claim) after Hezekiah agreed to pay a ransom that included a large amount of gold, silver, ivory, elephant hides, and even the king’s own daughters.

The Bible states that after a large part of the Assyrian army left to fight an approaching Egyptian force that was coming to the aid of Jerusalem, the “angel of the Lord” killed the remaining Assyrian soldiers (2 Kings 19:35). Not surprisingly, the Assyrian records do not mention such a divine decimation of their forces, or even the way they were threatened by the Egyptian forces, but they do brag that Sennacherib trapped Hezekiah, king of Judah, in Jerusalem “like a bird in a cage” – providing clear historical evidence for the biblical story of the siege of Jerusalem (Sennacherib Prism text).

As we saw in the previous units, after Hezekiah’s godly rule the people of Judah returned to their evil ways and ultimately, almost a century after Sennacherib’s unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II overthrew the Assyrian Empire and began to deport many of the Jews to Babylon. In 587 BC he captured Jerusalem and, just as the prophets had warned, the Babylonians looted and destroyed the temple of Solomon along with much of the city, tearing down many of its walls and deporting more of Judah’s inhabitants to Babylonia (Jeremiah 52:16). Once again, we have historical confirmation of these events described in the Bible in the form of Babylonian records written during Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, although it is not known what happened at this time to the ark of the covenant, which contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Some ancient writers say the ark was taken to Babylon, while others claim that it was hidden away by the Jewish priests before the city fell. In any event, the ark was lost, and the era of the First Temple ended.

As for the Jewish captives who were deported to Babylon, we have both biblical and historical records and even archaeological evidence. Although it was a time of deep national mourning and introspection for many, it is clear that the Jewish people began to adapt to captivity and to adopt many aspects of the language and culture of their captors. Almost two hundred inscribed clay tablets have been discovered in modern Iraq (the area of ancient Babylonia) that reveal details of the lives of Jewish deportees who lived at one village called Al-Yahuda, meaning the “village of the Jews.” These tablets pick up the story where the Bible leaves off. They were written by Babylonian scribes on behalf of the Jewish families that lived in the area and show that the exiles and their descendants had adopted the local language and the social and legal traditions of Babylonia a relatively short time after their arrival there. In this respect, the exiled Jews were following the instruction of the prophet Jeremiah in a letter he sent to them from Judah around 597 BC (Jeremiah 29:1-7).



The Captivities of Israel and Judah. Image: Adapted from a Legacy image.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

LAMENTATIONS. We looked at Jeremiah's prophetic role and activity before the exile in the last unit of this course. Here we want to briefly comment on the book of Lamentations that the prophet composed in memory of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian forces. Despite its somber subject, Lamentations is a work of literary and poetic skill and helps us understand the traumatic nature of the destruction the Babylonians brought about. Interestingly, the book is typical of a Mesopotamian genre of poems lamenting the downfall of great cities such as the "Lament Over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur," which usually imply that cities rise and fall without ascribing reason or blame for such events. Lamentations, however, places the blame for Jerusalem's demise squarely on the shoulders of the Jewish people for their sins and refusal to heed God's warnings (Lamentations 2; etc.), but does so with great compassion and sadness for what the people had brought upon themselves.

To understand why the Babylonians so thoroughly destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, we must realize that in the ancient world political and religious issues – as we would say, "church and state" – were not separated as they are for us, so capturing the enemy's "god" was just as important as capturing the enemy king, and conquering armies frequently destroyed their enemies' temples and carried away the statues of the gods to take their power for themselves. This is why Lamentations speaks of the temple being completely broken up and torn down as well as the city – "both king and priest" (Lamentations 2:6-7). The book ends with a prayer for restitution that would be promised and confirmed by the prophets who came after Jeremiah.

EZEKIEL, "God's strength" or "God will strengthen," was a priest who became a prophet. He was taken into exile along with some ten thousand Jews who had been sent to Babylonia from Jerusalem in the first wave of deportations in 605 BC (2 Kings 24:14-16). We can see two distinct periods in Ezekiel's ministry. In the first period, from the initial deportation to the final destruction of Jerusalem (c. 598-587 BC), Ezekiel's prophecies centered on denunciations of the people's sins and predictions of impending defeat. In the second period, after the fall of Jerusalem (c. 587-571 BC), the prophet's tone changed, and Ezekiel began to stress God's mercy and forgiveness – thus inspiring hope and strength in the exiles.

The ministry of all the major prophets began with a theophany or vision of God, and Ezekiel's is particularly powerful and describes God as traveling on a wheeled throne or chariot (Ezekiel 1, see Note 1) pulled by beings whose description is very similar to the winged human-headed and animal-headed creatures found in the palace decorations and sculptures of Mesopotamia. In fact, the social and cultural aspects of Ezekiel's Babylonian setting can help us to better understand much of what the prophet wrote. For example, Ezekiel's description of the sinful religious practices of the Israelites is colored heavily by the events of the pagan Babylonian Ishtar festival, and many of the expressions and allusions the prophet uses are to be found in the literature of ancient Babylonia (see Note 2).

Ezekiel is also given complex acting assignments (Ezekiel 4-5; etc.) to portray some of his messages, just as Isaiah (Isaiah 20) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 19) also were, but the stress on the visions Ezekiel received is unique among prophets up to his time, although such visions become increasingly common among prophets from his time forward. Ezekiel's vision of God departing the temple in Jerusalem (Ezekiel 10) was particularly important to the theology of his message, as was his extended vision of a future temple (Ezekiel 40-47) to which God's glory returns. These visions and that of the "valley of dry bones," regarding a future resurrection of God's people (Ezekiel 37:1-14), provided particular hope to the exiled Jews.

DANIEL, “God is my Judge,” was a young Jewish noble who was taken into captivity by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar and trained – as many educated and promising captives were – for service to the king and his successor Belshazzar (Daniel 1:3-5; 5:1). Such preparation enabled the brightest captives to act as scribes, advisors, diplomats, and civil servants of various types. The normal length of time taken to train a scribe was three years, and interestingly this is the length of time Daniel 1:5 tells us was required for Daniel and his friends. Whatever the specific role that was given to Daniel, he distinguished himself in his royal service by his wisdom (see Note 3), his ability to interpret signs (see Note 4), and also his faithfulness to the One God. During this time he began to receive visions from God. Chapters 1-6 of the book of Daniel contain stories about Daniel and his companions, while chapters 7-12 contain his prophetic visions regarding the near, distant, and far distant futures.

As a result of political infighting, the Babylonian Empire began to decline after Nebuchadnezzar’s death, and when the Persian king Cyrus invaded Babylonia in 539 BC he was welcomed by the population of Babylon as a liberating king. Some time later, however, Babylon rebelled, and the city was reconquered by the Persian king Darius (Daniel 5:30-31). The empire established by Cyrus would continue for some two hundred years before being defeated by Alexander the Great, and this and later events are the subjects of the visions of world-ruling empires found in Daniel 7-12. Daniel’s royal service extended for over sixty-five years, but while Ezra 8:2 mentions a priest named Daniel who went from Babylon to Jerusalem with a group that eventually returned with Ezra, it is not known if this was the same Daniel.

Strangely, the book of Daniel occasionally has Daniel speaking in the first person, though the narratives mainly discuss him in the third person using his Hebrew name Daniel or the name given to him by the Babylonians, Beltshazzar (“May [the god] Bel protect his life”). Also, while Daniel 1:1 - 2:3 and 8:1 - 12:13 are written in Hebrew, Daniel 2:4 - 7:28 is written in Aramaic, the language most used in Babylonia. The book also uses many expressions that show its Babylonian and Persian background. For example, the divine title “God of heaven” (Daniel 2:19) was a popular title used for several gods in the sixth century BC, and one which the Jews in Babylon found acceptable to use for God. In the same way, Nebuchadnezzar’s declaration that the figure he saw in the furnace with Daniel’s friends was like “the Son of God” (Daniel 3:25 KJV) is literally a “son of the gods,” a common Babylonian expression for a supernatural being. Although the book of Daniel has some puzzling aspects, its authentic setting in its time and place are clear.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The story of the fall of Israel and Judah – God’s “chosen” people – and their subsequent captivities is one that raises several theological questions. People sometimes ask how a good and kind God could punish cities and nations by bringing the kind of destruction upon them that Jerusalem experienced. The truth is that God usually does not bring such things, but people bring them on themselves. The relatively small nation of ancient Israel always existed between greater powers that threatened its existence through most of its history. God graciously protected the people of Israel from their aggressive neighbors for centuries, but when his people began to rebel against him and completely ignored his warnings, he finally removed the protection he had promised to give if they would be obedient. At that point Israel and Judah became just like the nations around them in being unprotected from war, captivity, and exile.

People also sometimes claim that the destruction of Judah and its kingship shows that God broke his promise to David that he would always have a descendant on his throne forever (2 Samuel 7:16, 1 Chronicles 17:11-12). However, there were conditional and unconditional parts to that promise. When God told David that he would establish his throne forever, he also stipulated that if his son sinned, he

would “punish him with a rod wielded by men” (2 Samuel 7:14). The stipulation referred not only to David’s son Solomon, but also to David’s later descendants who became king. As we have seen, God’s warning came true when Solomon was punished by having his kingdom fragmented, and later rulers were punished when God allowed Judah and Israel’s enemies to attack and eventually carry them into exile. But the prophetic books we have looked at make it clear that the end of Judah’s kingship was not the result of God’s failing to keep his promises, but a necessary manifestation of God’s justice. Despite his people’s failures, God maintained his determination to guide history in order to fulfill his promises: David’s male descendants continued down through the centuries to Jesus, as the New Testament Gospels show (Matthew 1:1-17, Luke 3:23–38), and Jesus would qualify through obedience to become the perfect King in whom God’s promises to David could be fulfilled (Luke 1:32-33).

The later prophets – especially Jeremiah – also reframed ancient Judah’s understanding of God’s true desires for his people. Rather than being content with the outward religious rituals that his people had begun to rely on, God showed through Jeremiah that true religion is inward in character and not based on any temple or physical ritual (Jeremiah 31:33). Although they did not listen when Jeremiah offered this truth, as the exile progressed the people of Judah came to understand and appreciate it. Daniel built on this concept when he stressed that our relationship with God is made possible by his grace, not our own religious works: “We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy” (Daniel 9:18). As we will see in the next unit, when the Jews were finally able to return to their homeland, these understandings began to revolutionize their religion and to set the stage for the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament.

* Note 1: What many translations call the “eyes” seen by Ezekiel on the wheels beneath the throne of God refer to oval shaped precious stones that were often set into royal thrones (see also Ezekiel 10:9).

*Note 2: For example, Ezekiel uses images and ideas from the Mesopotamian poem “Erra and Ishum,” a graphic story of warfare, that was extant in Babylonia before and during the time of the Jewish exile.

* Note 3: The Book of Ezekiel mentions a Daniel renowned for his wisdom (Ezekiel 14:14, 20; 28:3), but it is not known if this is the same individual as the Daniel of the biblical book of that name.

* Note 4: The inscription that appeared on the wall of the king’s palace: *mene, mene, tekel, parsin* (Daniel 5:25), was difficult for the king’s wise men to interpret because each word is both a noun and a verb, so the four words could be interpreted different ways. Daniel skillfully interpreted each word – in some cases with both meanings – to give the explanation he did.

REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

1. Which kings of which nations overthrew Israel and Judah and at what approximate dates?
2. Why did the Babylonians so thoroughly destroy the temple of God in Jerusalem?
3. What are the themes of the two stages of Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry?

Looking Below the Surface: Why might the major prophets have “acted out” some of their messages?

Everyday Applications: What might Israel’s exile teach us about events in our own lives?

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